

SELF CARE for the holidays

Workbook

Lovingly created by
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overcoming sexual abuse

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Contents

1 Thrival Mode
2 Boundaries
3 Recharging
4 Grieving
5 Redeeming the Season



There were holidays past when I felt sad and angry that the holidays couldn't be what I wanted them to be. I wanted to hit fast forward on the calendar until January. The dark days of healing consumed all my energy and the last thing I wanted to do was celebrate or put a fake smile on my face to attend a friend's holiday party.

Then for 6 or 7 years, that all changed. I planned the holidays in a variety of ways and I didn't consider them painful or stressful anymore. They became something I looked forward to.

Then a few years ago, our family as we knew it fell apart. My daughter-in-law left my son and made a lot of accusations about me and my son as an excuse to keep the kids away from us. I didn't know if I'd see my grandkids for the holidays or when I'd see them again. I'd been out of the family drama club for years and thought I was done with. There I was getting started with a new season of it.

During that time, I was sharing my pain and fear with a friend, who was also struggling through some issues. She's usually a very positive person but she was very discouraged and tired. She said, "What's it all for anyway?"

I understood that feeling. There's struggles throughout the healing journey and all through life. And when you're in a struggle it can seem like that's all there is.

But when my friend said that, I realized I was putting my hope in a struggle-free existence. As though I'd reach some point when I'd be above it all. And I also realized that wasn't realistic. And that I needed to grieve that. It was a loss to me—that idealized life.

But just because there's a struggle, doesn't mean life can't be good right along side of that. So I decided I was going to enjoy those good things. Get all the juicy goodness out of each day. To both receive and create the joyful moments.

I'd been living with that intention for awhile but that day, I made a decision to be intentional about it daily. And it's made a big difference.

What if the way to thrive through this season isn't to avoid what you don't want but to pursue what you do want?

One day I was enjoying my lunch on my back patio. My husband, Don, had just cleaned out the fountain so I was enjoying the trickling water while I imagined what kind of flowers I wanted to plant. As I was savoring moment, a fly started hovering around me.

Do you think I was able to enjoy all of that anymore? No! I was too busy swatting it away from me and my lunch.

That's where I used to live—positioned for the next challenge or attack. And that made it very hard to see anything but whatever might be coming at me.

My childhood abuse revealed my low position in my family. When the brain perceives a lower place in your social hierarchy, it protects us by limiting serotonin levels. Serotonin helps us have a good mood and sleep well. A lack of serotonin leads to hyperarousal. I needed to be on alert to know when danger was coming because the bottom of the social hierarchy is a threatening place to live. But hyperarousal leads to chronic stress and energy depletion. From that place of decreased energy, I could only focus on short term survival rather than future or long term success.

In survival mode, we live defensively. To survive, our brain is programmed to look for what's wrong. We're constantly scanning for the next attack and lose sight of pleasant, enjoyable things.

On a cellular level, there are 2 classes: growth and protection. Our cells move toward nutrients and away from toxins. Our cells see the environment and interprets it as good and healthy or toxic and dangerous. It's not necessarily the true environment but how the cell interprets it—its perception. So if the cell constantly perceives the environment as toxic, it stays in protection and doesn't get the nutrients it needs.

We are a collection of cells and the same applies to us. Survival mode is reacting and running from harm while growth mode is creative and pursuing good.

Back to my question:
What if the way to thrive through this season isn't to avoid what you don't want but to pursue what you do want?

If you're going into this holiday season in protection mode, you're going to be closed to good things too.

So set good boundaries to protect yourself from potential harm (which we'll talk more about in the next lesson) but then put your focus on pursuing things that delight and nurture you.

In survival mode, we imagine the possibilities of what can go wrong

In thrival mode, we imagine the possibilities of what can go well.

Shifting into Thrival Mode

Intention

Intentions are a powerful way to be the creator of your day rather than a reactor. An intention is a **plan with emotion attached to it.** What will it feel like when you're living in that moment? Imagine yourself already there and feel it.

Start your day in intention—what do I want the day to be? That activates your frontal lobe, which is responsible for ideas, creative imagining, problem solving, planning).

Serotonin Levels

Serotonin acts as a mood stabilizer and helps healthy sleeping patterns. You can increase your serotonin levels by **eating foods high in tryptophan**:

- turkey
- nuts and seeds
- salmon
- tofu
- cheese
- egg yolk

Get regular sun exposure--20 minutes per day if possible. The energy from the sun activates your pineal gland. Your pineal gland is responsible for producing serotonin and melatonin.

Circadian Rhythm

The systems that mediate negative emotion are tightly tied to your circadian rhythms. Your circadian rhythm is your 24 hour internal body clock that tells you when to sleep, wake up, eat and many other functions in your body.

To maintain your circadian rhythm, practice as much routine as possible. Avoid erratic eating and sleeping. It's especially important to wake up at same time everyday.

Also aim for stability by avoiding internal chaos. Internal chaos is increased by unstable blood sugar levels so limit simple carbohydrates and sugars and eat a fat and protein heavy breakfast as soon as possible after waking up.

Power Positions

Physiology (the way you move and position your body) impacts your emotions more quickly and effectively than your thinking. To improve your mood, improve your posture.

Power positions are ones that are upward and outward: head and shoulders back, smiling, etc. while powerless positions are ones that are downward in a protective stance.

What do you want in this season?

What are a few things you intend to pursue this holiday season?

How would you like to feel in this season?

What will help you experience those things and feel that way?

What do you want in this season?

This is my list as an example:

What are a few things you intend to pursue this holiday season?

- to *slow down enough to be present in the delicious moments*
- *to invite my family into the nurturing space I've created*

How would you like to feel in this season?

- *peaceful*
- *expansive*
- *loving*

What will help you experience those things and feel that way?

- *editing my to do list and deciding what can be eliminated or postponed*
- *allowing for margin in my schedule*
- *planning ahead*
- *managing my expectations*
- *communicating my needs and desires to my family*
- *being open to the plans changing*
- *being alert to new and improved experiences*

Create a menu of what feels like good self care to you. You might list foods that are nourishing, hobbies you like, ways you like to take care of your body, people you like to spend time with, practices that refresh your mind, etc.

Self Care Menu



In the first lesson I shared that in survival mode, we live defensively. To survive, our brain is programmed to look for what's wrong. We're always scanning for what might attack us. And that's where our focus and energy go. We lose sight of pleasant, enjoyable things.

But emphasizing that isn't about pretending everything will be fine if we focus on what's good. And that's not to claim there aren't very real threats to our peace, safety, security and sanity. There's a place for protection mode. That's why protection mode a part of how our cells behave.

An empowered way to live is to incorporate both protection mode and growth mode with the intention to mostly live in growth mode. So how do you incorporate both?

You can do that by recognizing potential harm, setting boundaries to protect yourself and then safely going back to growth mode.

Steps to setting boundaries

Acceptance
Acceptance is the first part of setting boundaries. I don't mean tolerating; actually just the opposite. Accept the reality of the situation. Accept people for who they show you they are. People define and declare who they are through their actions. Accept that as the current reality and respond accordingly.

Acceptance means not waiting and hoping for someone to change while tolerating their bad treatment. Accept that you can never change someone else. Accept that you are the one who needs to make some shifts instead of expecting or waiting for others to change. If they do change in the future, you can adjust your boundaries then.

This is what not accepting sounds like:
“I shouldn’t be the family scapegoat. I didn’t do anything wrong. I only spoke the truth.”

Yes, it's completely true that you shouldn't be the family scapegoat. And it's not wrong to speak the truth. And it's not fair to be judged like that. But this is a disempowering approach. You don't have any control over other people. So acceptance would mean accepting that dysfunctional families have dysfunctional ways of acting. When you accept that instead of fighting against that reality, you're in a better position to protect yourself from the dysfunction.

Another one is: *"They shouldn’t expect me to do all the planning, cooking and gift buying."*

Wishing people were different doesn’t actually make them different. Expecting other people to live up to your (even very reasonable) standards doesn’t improve your situation. Sitting in disbelief about your situation leaves you powerless to change it. One thing I started listening for in myself is when I'm complaining. That's usually my cue that I'm not acknowledging my power and instead, waiting for another person to change things for me.

When our boundaries are violated, the healthy and normal reaction is anger. That anger is a signal to do something. You are the one to take action and complaining isn't taking action. If you do complain, don't stay there. Use it as a way to sort out what you do and don't want and from there to decide what action to take.

Assume

Assume the identity, role, or position of the type of person who has the ability to change the situation. We often look to someone else to improve things for us as though we don't have influence or impact. That's part of survival mode and was a necessary position to survive in an abusive situation. Unfortunately, it becomes a habit and it's hard to break.

The most powerful way to change a habit is by changing your self-identity--what you believe about yourself. Ask yourself, "Who would I need to be right now to change this?" Be that person.

When I started healing, I saw myself as weak and scared. I had plenty of experience that "proved" that's who I was. But I started to imagine myself like Indiana Jones, who loved adventure, exploration and discoveries. He didn't let fear stop him. As I owned those desires and qualities (which were already in me), the more empowered I became.

Who would embody the qualities you need to make the changes you want? It can be an historical figure, a fictional character or someone you admire.

Who would I need to be right now to change this?

Next ask yourself, "What action would someone take right now who had permission and power to change things?" Do that.

What action would someone take right now who had permission and power to change things?

Affirm

There’s so much self doubt when it comes to setting boundaries. We get very used to being pushed around and placating and pleasing that when we finally do stand up for ourselves, it feels like we're breaking the rules. So much of boundary work is the internal work to really believe you own your own boundaries. It doesn't mean anything if I communicate a boundary but I'm not firm in it. That's not really a boundary since boundaries aren't about the other person making a change; they are about me making a change.

Boundaries can't be just words; there has to be conviction and action behind the words. I’ve found that people respect my boundaries now that I know I have a right to them. There's something in my voice and heart that communicate that I will back up what I say.

A general affirmation would be something like, "I'm responsible for me and my emotions; other people are responsible for their emotions."

Here's a look at a more specific way to affirm to yourself that you have a right to your boundaries. To do this, there are a few things to examine first.

If someone asks: *“Why can’t you just let it go and join us without making a big stink about Uncle Joe being there?”*

When I used to hear something like that, my immediate response was shame. My reaction would either be to reluctantly comply or I'd come up with some excuse/defense.

Now I slow down and examine:

- What do I hear them saying about my intentions/desires/feelings/actions?
- What are they truly asking of me?
- Are they asking me to deny my experience?
- Is there a reciprocal compromise or am I the only one being asked to sacrifice what I want?

An example:

- I hear them saying that I'm being selfish. Everyone just wants to have a nice time together and I'm ruining that. I'm also hearing that their needs and desires are more important than mine.
- They are asking me to compromise my emotional wellbeing.
- They are asking me to deny my experience that Uncle Joe is abusive.

An affirmation in this situation might be: *"Their desire to have everyone together for the holiday is not more important than my desire to feel safe. It's not selfish to protect myself from emotional harm; it's actually healthy and responsible. I'm responsible for my safety and emotional wellbeing, not theirs. It will not cause anyone harm for them to be disappointed. I refuse to take on the role of making anyone else happy."*

Affirm your right to choose your experience and your right to decide how to participate. You have a right to protect your peace.

Adjust

Refer to your pursuit list from the last lesson: What do I want from this holiday season? What do I want it to feel like?

Using your list, what is in conflict with your pursuits? What might prevent you from realizing those things? What internal or external objections are you likely to hear? What are the potential obstacles to your desires and pursuits?

Potential Obstacles:

What are some ways you can use your boundaries to overcome the obstacles?

Boundaries:

Assert
Assert what you want and express those as boundaries: This formula is a reminder that it's not another person's responsibility to guard your boundaries; it's your responsibility. You can't control other people but you can control what you do if they don't honor your boundaries.

When you do_____, I feel _____.
I would like_____.
If you continue_____, I will care for myself by _____.

Assess
After communicating boundaries, it can be helpful to assess the other person's response and your feelings and experience. Do boundaries need to be moved back further or should they be moved closer? Can they be removed after a time? Boundaries are meant to be flexible to adjust to your needs.

Boundaries to consider if you're going to be with people who have crossed your boundaries before (especially for holiday functions):

- Decide your boundaries ahead of time.
- Affirm your right to your boundaries prior to being with them. And affirm your value ahead of time too. Spend time with people who love and respect you.
- Take an ally with you to ground you to the present so you don’t get pulled into old childhood roles. A friend's presence might make it more likely that others will treat you better and if they don't, to have a witness to confirm to you what happened and to affirm your right to keep yourself safe.
- Have an escape plan. Make sure you have transportation and aren't dependent on others to leave.
- Have a plan for what strategies to use if you are triggered. Know what coping methods you'll use, or more importantly, NOT use.
- Have a nurturing back up plan in case you need to leave early with food available and plan some comforting or empowering activities.

One way I've grown in boundaries is by making assertive statements to myself throughout the day. Talking to myself using assertive statements has helped me decide my boundaries and helped me form a new identity around boundaries.

"I'm someone who will not allow myself to..." This is who I am. I AM a person who... This is more than an action, this is an identity.

What are your assertive statements about the kind of person you are?

I am...

What boundaries will protect your desires and needs?

Make a list of your boundaries: Make clear statements about what you intend to do vs. what you will not do. Some examples:

- I will not contort myself to fit other's expectations.
- I will not expose myself to critical comments.
- I will walk away from responsibilities that don’t belong to me.
- I will protect myself from doing more than I have the time, energy and willingness to do.

I will...

I will not...



When Don and I lived in Los Angeles, neither of us cared much if we celebrated Thanksgiving. We aren't really into cooking so it seemed like a lot of work.

But when we moved back to Arizona, where our sons and grandchildren live, we had new priorities. We started figuring out how the holiday could work for us in a low-pressure way.

To honor that, we've had a variety of holiday experiences. For several years, we picked up take out from a Jewish deli and had a picnic at the park. It's easy, no pressure, minimal mess and maximum enjoyment.

When we had a family crisis a few years ago, our family decided that Thanksgiving called for more tradition than usual. My daughter and her husband deciding to join us from L.A.

Working from my self care plan I laid out in previous lessons, I thought I was covered. But I made a big self care mistake, which I'll save for a little later. But I did a lot of things right:

- I prioritized
- I communicated my needs and desires to my family (we all did)
- I managed my expectations—not perfection
- I delegated
- I planned ahead
- I allowed for margin in my schedule
- I stayed open to the plans changing, which they did!
- I was alert to new and improved experiences

So we planned the event together, deciding the dishes (family favorites and new ones) and activities (card games and some board games). We divided the responsibilities according to our strengths. Bethany's husband, Danny, and my husband, Don, played with the kids. Bethany and my son, David, did most of the cooking and I did the clean up.

With my self care plan in place, I figured it would be the best holiday ever.

Here’s how things went wrong:

We had just moved during the summer into a house that was double the square footage. And that meant there were rooms to fill. For most of my adult life, I had an interior design business. I’ve been decorating all my life, well, since I was 16 and it’s quite a passion. Plus, beauty and order are high values for me. For my mental and emotional health, I need those things.

Added to that, it was Bethany's and Danny’s first visit to our house and I really wanted everything to look nice. But my self care plan meant that was a low priority in favor of enjoying everyone here so I needed to plan ahead.

So I spent the months before the holiday filling up the rooms. I mix antiques with classic modern décor and for my budget, that involves a lot of refinishing the vintage furniture. Unfortunately, I expected to go much faster. Even a few year later, I'm still working on it.

So the Monday before Thanksgiving, I was a bit behind in my to do list so I eliminated some decorating tasks and pushed some other things to the next day. I wasn't too worried.

We thought the kids were coming from their mom's house on Wednesday evening but they came on Tuesday evening. We were happy to have them sooner but that meant I had to change my plans again.

I needed to cross off more things from the list, which was disappointing. But with the extra time with the kids, I decided it would be fun to prepare with them. So my son took the two older kids with him on Wednesday and I took the younger ones with me to three stores for the supplies we needed. No problem. I was up for it. And it was fun and I did great--that day.

But I'm an introvert and I recharge by having time alone. By the time Bethany and Danny arrived and with each passing day of holiday activities, I had lower and lower energy levels. In total, it was five days of no time alone, which is why at the end of it, I just wanted everyone to leave.

The misstep I took was:

Though I'd scheduled some alone time to rest before everyone came, I missed that. When that didn't happen, I could have gone to bed early or taken a nap or just taken a break alone in my bedroom.

But I participated in all the games and conversations. I was afraid of missing out. I wanted to do it all but I couldn't afford it. I didn't have the energy. he irony is that I was there for everything but I wasn't really present for anything. I was too tired to engage in a way that felt connected.

I was in a “conserve energy mode”. When my energy is low, I fear not having enough, not being enough and it feels like I’m drowning. I go into survival mode. I'm more prone to being impatient, angry, and controlling. So I really need to manage my energy levels and I didn't do that.

During the holidays, we tend to say yes to more things and no to fewer things. So we have more energy going out and less energy coming in. Crowds, houses full of people, busy schedules, disruptions to routines...

And it’s not just doing more that uses more energy, it’s the type of energy we’re exposed to that is draining. There's the pressure to overspend, over socialize and overeat. We end up over-extended physically, emotionally, mentally and financially.

Then there’s often the added depletion of being exposed to more boundary violations with dysfunctional or abusive family members. Even anticipating or witnessing conflict can be exhausting.

And that can mean you need an energy detox--not just a recharge. When you're not just low on energy, but you're feeling icky on top of it, you need a shift.

What are the things coming up that are likely to drain your energy?

When I need to quickly shift my energy, water is a fast way to do that. Drinking water, taking a shower or bath, sitting by a fountain all help to cleanse the bad feeling energy.

If you're going to be expending huge amounts of energy, what can you do to build yourself up ahead of time and again? Go back to your self care menu and do something on that list. Monitor your energy. What gives you energy? What drains your energy?

Set alarms on your phone to monitor what you're feeling and energy levels. How does your body feel? What do you need? Adjust as needed. It's much easier to recharge your energy before you're completely drained.

Considering the way you recharge, what are some specific things you will do that will energize you?



Last Christmas didn't go as planned. I'd been gearing up for one of those all-out holidays—stockings hung by the chimney with care and a whole lot of cedar garland everywhere. I had about as much Christmas spirit as I've ever felt!

I'd been anticipating my daughter and son-in-law visiting from Los Angeles and imagining how delighted they'd be with the decked out holiday house. My son-in-law is Jewish but always wanted to celebrate Christmas. When he started dating Bethany, he brought child-like wonder to our family celebrations since everything was new to him.

A few days before Bethany and Danny were to arrive, they changed their plans. It was for a fabulous reason—they made an offer on their first house and their offer was accepted. There were inspections to arrange and documents to prepare so they felt too conflicted to be 400 miles away from home.

So the family event of the century (I tend to exaggerate when I’m disappointed!) was cancelled. While I outwardly affirmed their wise decision not to join us, I was pouting inside.

I've experienced a lot of pain around the holidays over the years and though this was relatively minor (it never feels minor in the moment), it was still a loss that needed to be acknowledged and expressed. Without the grief, there's no moving on. The next loss that comes along just calls to mind the previous losses and they are compounded.

I shared in the first lesson how to increase serotonin and feel better. I know a lot more tools for feeling better but I don't use and teach them to avoid unpleasantness or discomfort. That's just more dissociation! Covering up sadness with a positive attitude or with distractions or denial doesn't work in the long term.

When we don't allow for pain, it multiplies through:

- unhealthy coping methods
- stifled emotions
- physical pain or illness
- lack of emotional intimacy

Thankfully, I'd learned that lesson already so when I got the news from Bethany, I made space for my pain. I knew I'd make the best of our holiday and it would likely be very nice but I had to do the pain work before moving on.

As I did that, I saw there was more to my pain than just what I saw on the surface. I was also grieving another step of independence for my youngest child. The very grown-up step of buying a house brought up fear of losing her. So I grieved some more and that’s okay. Storing sadness inside me doesn't bring me any closer to my daughter so I’m glad to free myself of a little more of it.

Sitting with my emotions allowed my expectations to reorient. I didn't have to force feeling good, which is what I would have had to do if I'd tried to force my pain down. I just naturally moved into feeling more hopeful and positive about the new plans as I released the pain. The route to feeling good is to let yourself feel bad.

Denying my pain

It wasn't always that way for me. Early in my healing process, I had a lot of things I'd bottled up. One year as the holidays approached, I felt restless and annoyed. I was a few years into my healing and had figured out some ways to make this difficult season more manageable. But I seemed to be feeling worse this time, not better.

Then I remembered something that happened several years before my parents and I became estranged. I'd just separated from my abusive husband the month before so I hadn't put too much thought into how the divorce would impact the holidays. It was a surprise to me when my parents told me they planned to spend Thanksgiving with my soon-to-be ex-husband and his new girlfriend.

I really struggled with that—not in an "acknowledging this is a hurtful situation" way but in a "I'm bad for feeling hurt by this" way. I told myself I should be glad everybody loved each other and that my parents continued to be on friendly terms with my ex. I told myself I was selfish for wanting my parents with me and reminded myself that they were free to choose where they wanted to go. Yes, they were free to choose but it was okay that I have feelings about that.

As that memory came up, I saw that my pain was even deeper than just that Thanksgiving. It went back to all the holidays and family events before that. I saw how my parents strengthened my husband's control over me all those years. When I cried to my dad that I didn't like how my husband treated me, and my dad assured me my husband loved me and asked me where I'd find another one like him.

Whenever my parents invited us to their house, my husband would pick on me so by the time we arrived, I was upset. He would continue his verbal attacks and if I reacted at all, he'd tell me I couldn't take a joke. My parents blamed me for overreacting and for ruining the nice family gathering. Whatever my husband did, I was making a big deal out of nothing.

The "making a big deal out of nothing" accusation stuck with me. I was to blame for calling attention to it or for feeling it was bad in the first place. I misunderstood or interpreted it wrong. I dismissed the abuse and my pain the same way my parents and ex-husband did. I dismissed myself.

No wonder the pain was coming up. I hadn't acknowledge the pain and loss and I didn't have compassion for my experience. Actually, the opposite--I judged myself for it.

So many of us are frustrated because we're trying to be happy when grief is waiting to be expressed. Grief moves us through the pain and transforms our experience.

Through grief, we surrender our attempt to control the past or the emotions associated with the past. Grief is releasing the demand that the past be any different than it was. Through the process of grieving, we can still desire something we lost, yet be open to other possibilities.

Resisting the pain

If you're like me, you learned from your childhood abuse and neglect that pain is intolerable. It was intolerable then because you were stuck with it alone. There was no stopping it and there was no comfort for it. Since you were abandoned, you abandoned yourself through dissociation. You learned not to even be there for yourself. That's why pain is so amplified.

Dissociation in childhood was a powerful tool that kept you going. Great job! But now that tool is holding you back and making your life less livable. You don't need to avoid pain anymore. Though your brain will tell you that pain will kill you, that's a leftover message from childhood, when it was life threatening to be left alone with your pain.

Make a place in your life for pain!!! Like it or not (NOT!), pain is a part of life. Pain is supposed to feel unpleasant so we're prompted to do something about it. What if we use this pain, which is meant to serve us, in a more conscious way? What if instead of avoiding pain, we ask what it is telling us to change?

Making a space for pain

So if you're habitually escaping your pain, you can start by tolerating it for a very short time. Try five minutes. Say to yourself, "Pain feels bad but it won't actually harm me. I'm still okay. This is just a feeling. It's not dangerous."

"Pain feels bad but it won't actually harm me. I'm still okay. This is just a feeling. It's not dangerous."

Tap into compassion for the small child you used to be. Isn't it sad he or she was left all alone with that huge pain? Will you sit with him or her and offer your compassion? Put your hand on your arm, chest or stomach and say, "You're not alone now. I'm here. It's okay to be sad (or whatever else you feel)."

Put your hand on your arm, chest or stomach and say, "You're not alone now. I'm here. It's okay to be sad (or whatever else you feel)."

What is the loss? Take inventory of your loss--not only the material loss but the hope, expectation and the potential or imagined outcome. Does this loss remind you of anything? Feel whatever comes up. Talk with a friend or journal about your feelings to explore what's under the surface.

I'm feeling the loss of...

I’m not suggesting grief is a once and you’re done task. Grieving is a process with its own timing and intensity. So if you’re feeling grief this holiday season, take the time to lean into the pain.

Honor your past and all you went through. See the shattered places in your heart and don’t look away when you feel uncomfortable. Sit with yourself. Be the person you needed when you were hurt the deepest.

This isn’t easy. If you’re in that place, I’m so sorry you’re hurting. Give yourself the gift of grief. If you need some loving support, email me.



Redeeming the Season

5

In the previous lesson, I shared about my first Thanksgiving after my divorce. The first Christmas after my divorce was much better. My children (who were 18 and 19 then) were starting to wake up to the family dynamics they'd grown up with and also started to turn away from it. My son had originally chosen to live with his dad but a few months later, asked if he could live with Bethany and me. And Bethany had just disclosed her sexual abuse to me. We were all getting closer.

Together we decided to get away from the family for Christmas so we went to Disneyland. As I look back, I recognize two things:

- It wasn't a traditional way to celebrate so we weren't as likely to compare it to other holidays. There were times when we forgot it was Christmas and could relax into the time together.
- Disneyland gave us the comfort of knowing what to expect since we'd all had good experiences there. The certainty gave us some stability.

It wasn’t the silly carefree adventure that other Disney trips have been. But it was very nice and we bonded even more.

I tried for years to fulfill tradition's expectations in an effort to grasp something I’d never have. I worked to create a sense of belonging and shared experience. But I was romanticizing the past and trying to recreate something that never really did exist.

That Disney holiday opened me to new ideas about the holidays and what to expect from them. Many of the old traditions represented the way I blindly followed what was dictated. Since walking away from abuse, I’ve also walked away from traditions that feel as oppressive.

Traditions can be a wonderful thing. But in creating a life that is truly my own--that serves and nurtures me--I have two rules about the holidays (and really every day of the year):

- No obligation: I don’t have to do anything according to a predetermined plan. And really, I don’t have to do anything period.
- No expectations: I don’t expect others to do anything according to how we did it before. There's no rule that we have to get together at all or that we have to fulfill any “assigned” role. But to get here, I had to let go of attachments and identities that weren't serving me.

Do I occasionally feel guilt or fear of disappointing someone? Yes, but I talk myself through it and assure myself I’m taking too much responsibility for another person’s feelings.

Is it disappointing when my close family members don’t want to celebrate the way I do? Sure, but I’d much rather have a family that stands for freedom and supports individual choice.

This isn’t about throwing away tradition. There are traditions that I love, like my grandkids decorating my Christmas tree.

This is about questioning how things have been done in the past and opening up to new ideas. It’s about not being tied to how things have been done before. It’s about being free to own the moment as mine instead of it being established by the me of the past or by someone else at an earlier time.

So if a tradition feels good to you, keep it, but if it feels like an obligation or a rut, ditch it or change it. I’ve experimented with ways to experience the holidays that felt good to me.

That means different years, I do different things.

Neither of my top two Christmases was a “traditional” way to celebrate. They didn’t include the two things I used to think were mandatory for holidays, which are cooking and decorating:

- Christmas without my kids or grandkids (or even talking with them): Don and I were invited to housesit for a friend in Malibu. We didn't have money for gifts, we didn't have cell phone reception so we couldn't talk to anyone. And it was glorious. I read Jane Eyre and stayed in my pajamas.
- Christmas with my kids and grandkids: A couple years ago, Don and I and my kids and grandkids went to Durango for Christmas. The kids had never seen snow and it was amazing to experience that with them. A highlight was meeting another large family staying in the hotel and joining them for Karaoke in the hotel dining area on Christmas Day.

Both of those holidays were special because of the little things. Getting out of the norm meant there wasn’t anything to compare them to and I could be more open to what could be, not what it "should" be or what it had been.

You can do the holidays on your terms: Rather than being led by to-do lists or things you feel you "should" do, you can get quiet with yourself and ask what serves you and what doesn't. When you listen to–and put your faith in this voice–you create new rhythms. New possibilities.

And what if slowing down and listening to what you want and need allows you to hear and feel deeper levels of pain? Give yourself the gift of releasing it. I don't mean a flippant let it go. I mean take the time to feel it. Sit with yourself and be there in it like you're comforting a good friend.

Set yourself free from carrying those old wounds around with you. Let yourself start fresh for the new year. You can only have something new by making space for it. Imagine what the coming year can be if all the energy you used avoiding pain could be directed toward what you really want.

The season doesn't have to be happy and it doesn't have to be depressing. It doesn't have to be like the past and it doesn't have to be like how other people do it. There might be painful things to face and there will be good things to enjoy. It's a short season but it's a part of your life. Live in it.

You don't have to do this alone.

For additional support through the holidays or in healing from abuse, I'm available for private coaching.

In the past month, I've helped clients work through painful memories, strengthen close relationships, set boundaries, speak their truth and structure a confrontation.

Here's what one of my clients shared...

"I am happy to have found Christina...I've received more help from her in such a short time than years of trying different approaches. She is kind and gentle in the healing process and a breath of fresh air. The sessions are practical and helpful and I feel refreshed when finished. My family has noticed so much progress in me."

If you're not familiar with how transformational coaching can be, email me today to schedule a complimentary discovery session to see for yourself. Or check out this link for more information: Flourish Coaching

I'm honored to walk alongside courageous people ready to do the work necessary to go from surviving to flourishing.

All my best,
Christina Enevoldsen
Christina@overcomingsexualabuse.com



As a survivor of incest, sex trafficking and a 21-year long abusive marriage (now remarried to an emotionally healthy, loving and supportive man), I bring personal experience, empathy, and insight as well as professional training to help childhood sexual abuse survivors thrive.

I'm a Strategic Interventionist and Certified Professional Life Coach with a specialty Life Story certification.