

The background is an abstract painting with vibrant, swirling colors including pinks, oranges, blues, and yellows. In the center, there is a dark, vertical, brushstroke-like shape that resembles a silhouette of a person or a tree. The overall style is expressive and emotional.

Beyond SURVIVING

The Final Stage in Recovery from Sexual Abuse

by RACHEL GRANT
Sexual Abuse Recovery Coach
M.A. Counseling Psychology

Beyond Surviving

The Final Stage in Recovery from Sexual Abuse - Excerpt

Copyright © 2012 by Rachel Grant.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping or by any information storage retrieval system without the written permission of the publisher except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

Because of the dynamic nature of the Internet, any web addresses or links contained in this book may have changed since publication and may no longer be valid. The views expressed in this work are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the publisher, and the publisher hereby disclaims any responsibility for them.

Any people depicted in stock imagery provided by Thinkstock are models, and such images are being used for illustrative purposes only.

**Dedicated to all of my
Beyond Survivors
past, present, and future**

"There is only one thing that will train the human mind, and that is the voluntary use of the mind by the man himself. You may aid him, you may guide him, you may suggest to him, and above all, you may inspire him, but the only thing worth having is that which he gets by his own exertions, and what he gets is in direct proportion to what he puts into it."

—Dr. A. Lawrence Lowell, Harvard

Welcome

Welcome to Beyond Surviving! I first want to acknowledge you for making the choice to begin this journey of recovery. I personally know how difficult and confronting it can be to look at the areas of your life that, sometimes, you wish you could pretend weren't there. By simply admitting "I need this," you have already taken a huge step toward freedom. Before we get started, I want to share with you a bit of my story and how Beyond Surviving came to be.

I grew up in a fairly small town in Oklahoma, and when I was five years old, my grandfather came to live with my family. I often helped my mom and dad take care of him. I would do simple little things like taking him a bowl of cereal, keeping him company, or reading to him. He was a friend and a quiet companion, up until the day he began abusing me when I was ten years old.

Fortunately, when my parents discovered what was happening, they immediately removed him from our home. Not so fortunately, they weren't quite sure how to support me and help me make sense of what had happened.

My teen years were, as I am sure many of you can relate to, difficult and full of fears about my self-worth and value. I was also confused about relationships and intimacy and felt very alone much of the time, like no one could really understand me.

During my early twenties, I decided enough was enough and began doing all of the things we usually do when we want to get over something—talking to friends, seeing a therapist, reading books. By my late twenties, I was better but was still going around and around the same mountain of self-doubt, anger, acting out, and nonexistent boundaries.

I remember very distinctly the day in 2005 when the thought occurred to me, "I don't want to just survive my life, I want to live it!" That thought stirred something deep inside of me, and I set out to discover how I could live a powerful, authentic life free from the burdens and patterns of thought and behavior that result from abuse.

Welcome

So, I began reading, talking with others who had been abused, and reflecting on what lessons had really made a difference in my recovery up to that point. I realized that I had come to understand the abuse as an experience, that I had drawn the connections between the abuse and my current behavior—for example, I could explain *why* I didn't trust others. However, there was one critical question that was not being answered by any of the books, therapists, or friends: "So, *what* do I do about it?!"

Beyond Surviving is my answer to that question. It is the culmination of everything I have learned along the way either by experience or through completing my master's in counseling psychology.

I am extremely honored to share my story and to be a part of your journey, and I know there are great things in store for us!

The Philosophy of Beyond Surviving

In the world of recovery, there has been a shift from using the word “victim” to “survivor” when describing those who have been abused. This shift shows up in all areas of abuse: domestic violence, rape, sexual abuse, and physical abuse.

This new label was chosen in order to convey strength, to empower, and to embolden us as we begin the journey of recovery. The intent was also to distinguish between the moment of the abuse (victim) and that of the present existence and experience (survivor).

Moving from victim to survivor is an important step in recovery. During this phase, we reflect upon the experience, actively engage in facing and owning what happened, and recognize the connections between the abuse and the way we feel, think, or behave. However, this recognition and sense of empowerment is not enough. While “survivor” is a much better label than “victim,” it does not go far enough in framing an identity that leads to a thriving and powerful life.

Imagine with me for a moment that our abuse experience has left a scrape on our knee, like one we might get by falling down on a concrete sidewalk. This scrape, for many of us, remains unhealed for years and years. At times, we may bandage and tend to the wound, but we never fully recover. Worse, we come to believe it never can be healed.

Now, in the case of a scrape, the skin does eventually heal and leave a scar. We look at our knee, see the scar, and remember that day when we were wounded. Yet we do not feel all of the pain or other emotions that occurred at the moment we were hurt. Nor do we continue to compensate for the wound by changing our behavior, such as not fully bending our knee for fear of reopening the wound.

I strongly believe that the wounds of abuse can be healed and looked back upon in this same way. We can see the scar that was created, but do not feel the pain, need to compensate for, or constantly re-bandage the wound. However, this requires another shift, from survivor to beyond surviving. For that reason, I use the term “beyond survivor” to describe myself, and it is my hope that you will come to describe yourself this way as well.

With this simple shift in language and labeling, the objectives and goals of recovery shift as well. My aim is to support you in reaching a place where you no longer feel it is necessary to manage behaviors or cope with thoughts and feelings that have resulted from abuse. Rather, you will gain insights and skills that make it possible for you to live an abundant, powerful life that is no longer mired in the past. **You will see the scar, but you will no longer feel wounded.**

Let's get started!

Foundation 1

Believing Healing Is Possible

But I've tried to get over this before! Shouldn't I be better already? I know other people have healed, why can't I?

Often the first hurdle to jump over in this journey is to put to rest (or at least put on mute for a while) your inner critic and doubter. I know you've been to therapy, I know you've read books, I know you've tried just about everything under the sun and you are still running in circles. Or maybe you are just now admitting to yourself that the abuse happened and that you need to deal with it. Either way, there is likely a part of you that is wondering if this is really going to work.

I invite you to embrace your inner skeptic—you should, after all, be determining if this is working or not—but by no means give your skeptic the center stage. For a while, allow yourself to embrace this as an adventure, an exploration. **Be curious, check things out**, and try not to stress about end results. We each have to walk our own path of recovery. Sometimes, it takes just one experience to make everything fall into place. Sometimes, it is a variety of experiences.

For me, I tried all sorts of books, therapies, and groups. The ideas that I will share here are those that made all the difference for me. Perhaps this will be the last guidebook you ever do on this topic, or, maybe, it is just another step in the right direction. Regardless, be open to the journey and remember there is a lot to learn from tortoises.

Lessons from a Tortoise

"Adults are always asking kids what they want to be when they grow up, because they are looking for ideas."

— Paula Poundstone

How fabulous is that! I know I am still wondering about what I will be when I grow up, and I know many of the folks around me are thinking about this, too.

For me there are the added questions of "Is it too late?" and "Shouldn't I have accomplished more by now?" I took a bit more time than most to finish my undergraduate studies. Then I spent some time roaming the halls of an elementary school trying my hand at teaching, all while learning a lot about myself.

When I moved to California, I focused on child development (and napping) as a nanny before turning my attention to psychology and coaching. Each stage of my life has in some way built upon the previous one. Most days, I appreciate my wiggly journey. Some days, I agonize about it, because I feel that I am many paces behind those who followed the straight and narrow.

When we feel the pressure to make our mark, crave the pride of achievement, desire to experience ourselves at our best, or want more than anything to be fully recovered, our first point of reference for measuring where we stand is often what others are doing or have done. **Is there real value in this exercise of comparison? It depends on what our ultimate goal is.**

I see at least two possible outcomes from engaging in this sort of reflection. If our goal (though possibly an unconscious one) is to reinforce negative ideas we have about ourselves as being less than, incapable, flawed, etc., comparing ourselves to others is like a gateway drug to self-deprecation. There can be real value in seeing how we measure up to others. But if we cannot compare ourselves to others without becoming depressed, exasperated, defeated, and pitiful, then this is not a healthy choice for us.

However, if our goal is to do something about our current situation and to move forward despite time, age, or circumstances, then it is possible to be inspired, motivated, encouraged, and educated as a result of comparing ourselves with others who have acquired that which we desire. In other words, through curiosity and study of their straight journey, we may add some arrow-like qualities to our own paths.

In my case, I can look to a coach who is my age, has my education, but is much further along, and think to myself, "Damn it, see, if only I hadn't ...," or I can look to see how this person got to where she is and learn—and perhaps learn quickly!

Likewise, we can keep ourselves in a loop of comparing where we are in our journey of recovery relative to others, lamenting that we aren't fully recovered yet, or we can set about doing the work and learning from those who have gone before us.

We only have one life journey. Whether it be a wiggly one or a straight and narrow one, it is ours. So, for all of my wiggly friends out there, move, be active, learn, and don't allow yourself to be distracted by self-deprecating thoughts.

Just as we might discover who we want to be when we grow up from kids, we also do well to remember the lesson of the age-old Aesop fable *The Tortoise and the Hare*. **It's not how quickly you can get to where you want to be, it is whether you get there at all.**

Reflection

How open are you to the possibility of healing?

What gets in the way of you believing you can heal?

How do you compare yourself to others?

Foundation 2

Trauma Is Not a Competition!

"... a man's suffering is similar to the behavior of gas. If a certain quantity of gas is pumped into an empty chamber, it will fill the chamber completely and evenly, no matter how big the chamber. Thus suffering completely fills the human soul and conscious mind, no matter whether the suffering is great or little. Therefore the 'size' of human suffering is absolutely relative."

—Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*

In working with people who have been abused, it is very common to hear minimizing statements such as "It only happened once" or "I know others have suffered worse things."

There is a very real psychological purpose behind minimization—it prevents us from being overwhelmed by the experience and the thoughts and feelings that come along as a result. However, as we reach the place where simply suppressing or managing the effects of the abuse is no longer satisfying, these minimizations need to drop away.

Trauma is not a competition! You don't get fewer points for being abused once as opposed to many times. As Frankl says, suffering, be it great or little, has a way of filling our minds and hearts to capacity ... taking over our thoughts and guiding our behavior.

Rather than trying to escape the impact of the abuse through minimization, we need to take the time to fully acknowledge the extent to which we have been changed or hurt and to what extent that experience is interfering with our relationships and ability to have a life that we love in the present moment.

In doing so, we will be able to deal with the areas of our life that have been impacted rather than remaining stuck, hurt, or angry because we continue to believe that our hurt wasn't "great" enough to justify giving it our attention, to warrant reflection, or, even, to complete this guidebook.

Reflection

In what ways or what areas of life do you feel stuck?

What have you been minimizing and ignoring that you wish you could instead acknowledge and heal?

Foundation 3

What's to Gain?

When we experience abuse, two things are usually occurring. We gain irrational beliefs, pain, anger, distrust ... and we lose a relationship, security, freedom, energy, joy. Recovery is about the journey of bringing back to life all of those things that were lost, deadened, beaten out of you—but not destroyed—as a result of the abuse.

A common thread that ties us to each other as survivors of abuse is the desire to stop certain thoughts or behaviors. We are often focused on what we want to “cut out” rather than what we want to “add in” when we initially start the journey of recovery.

However, I encourage you to spend time reflecting on what it is you would like to “get back” that was lost as a result of the abuse. Knowing what you want to “add in” will get you much further along than focusing on what it is you want to “cut out.”

Why is that? **Starting a behavior is much easier than stopping a behavior!** If we think of a behavior or thought as something we have to “stop,” we struggle more. I think being told or telling ourselves to “stop” just triggers our inner two-year-olds, and we stubbornly refuse to cooperate.

For example, one client wanted to stop feeling extreme anger every time her boyfriend failed her in some way. As we worked together, we discovered that one of the things she had lost as a result of childhood abuse was the ability to trust that she could depend on others. We shifted away from talking about how to stop being angry and instead focused on what she would need to start thinking or doing in order to trust others. She learned new communication skills. She started looking for times when the boyfriend came through rather than focusing only on the mistakes (which were actually few and far between). She also started to challenge the belief that others would always let her down.

After two months, she was able to respond to being let down or disappointed in a healthy way minus the excessive anger. For example, rather than blowing up when her boyfriend did not come

through for her, she would use breathing techniques to calm her body and mind, journal about how she felt in the situation, and then communicate to him the impact his choice had on her and explore options to avoid a similar situation in the future.

As I was thinking about this, I came across this acronym for people who want to stop smoking:

- S** = Set a quit date.
- T** = Tell family, friends, and co-workers that you plan to quit.
- A** = Anticipate and plan for the challenges you will face while quitting.
- R** = Remove cigarettes and other tobacco products from your home, car, and work.
- T** = Talk to your doctor about getting help to quit.

START! While the outcome is ending the behavior of smoking, the path to getting there is to start. This same premise applies to our journey of recovery. Focusing on what needs to be added in rather than what needs to be cut out gives us the perspective and the motivation needed to experience real transformation.

Reflection

Can you think of at least one thing you would like to “get back” that the experience of abuse has taken away? What would you like to “bring back to life”? What would be present in your life if you were living instead of surviving?

When the journey gets hard, come back to this list to remind yourself what you are fighting for, what is to gain by doing the work of recovery.

Foundation 4

Integrity and Boundaries

A person of his/her/their word: *someone you can trust because you know they will do what they say they will do*

—Cambridge Idioms Dictionary

In the world of recovery, we hear a lot about improving our self-esteem, getting over shame and guilt, forgiving, and a myriad of other areas that are affected by abuse (and, to be sure, we are going to talk a lot about them in this guidebook). Yet the one area I have noticed doesn't get addressed often is the impact of abuse on our ability to live honest, integrous lives.

In the very moment that our trust is violated and we are abused, we have to make a decision. Will we tell or will we cover it up? Most of us, because we are young when the abuse occurs, do not even make this decision in a deeply insightful way. We simply know something about what happened is bad and wrong, and we get in trouble for doing bad and wrong things, so we do not tell.

Then we sit down to breakfast with this huge thing happening that we can't speak about. When asked if anything is wrong, we say, "I need more butter on my pancakes." When someone asks, "How did you get that bruise," we say, "I fell down." Soon, we tell little lies out of habit rather than necessity. This causes a disconnection between what we say and what we are experiencing. We become liars.

Later on, this shows up as an inability to speak up for ourselves, ask for what we need, or honestly communicate what we think or feel about a situation. We feel compelled to conceal, to hide our genuine thoughts, feelings, and, ultimately, ourselves.

As our word, in the sense of a promise, becomes more and more degraded over time, our ability to set and keep boundaries also suffers. We perhaps struggle to say "no," or when we do, find ourselves caving in time and time again. We make commitments that we don't follow through on. We lose all

sense that our promises—to ourselves or others—matter at all. The ultimate outcome being that we fail to set and keep boundaries, which leads us to feel guilty, ashamed, or inadequate.

In order to reach a place where we are able to express ourselves authentically and set and keep boundaries, we must restore integrity in our lives. We will start by embracing a very simple definition of integrity—**saying what you mean, and meaning what you say**—then following through with action to see to it that what you have given your word to comes to fruition. For example, don't say "I hate you, I'm never going to talk to you again" if you don't mean it. If you do mean it, then do it! Don't say "We should get together for lunch sometime" unless you mean it. If you do mean it, then send an email or make a call to actually get a date on the calendar.

A word of caution: Our focus on keeping our word (promises) should not become rigid in its practice nor a tool for judging or scolding ourselves or others. Compassion should always underlie our use of any of the techniques or skills shared throughout this guidebook. In other words, when our friend arrives late for dinner, this is not an opportunity to call into question their integrity or character. Likewise, when we break our promises, rather than judging or scolding ourselves, we should get curious about what got in the way of our keeping our word—use it as an opportunity to learn.

As you will discover later, language and what we say is extremely powerful. For too long, we may have been disconnected from our voice. Our language has become a tool for hiding and deception rather than for asking for what we need, setting clear boundaries, or communicating powerfully. So, before we go any further, I want you to consider deeply what you are about to give your word to.

Reflection

Spend some time reflecting on how you are currently using your word. In what areas of life do you notice that you do not say what you mean, mean what you say, or follow through?

If you had to hide or cover up the abuse, what was it like for you to have to keep the abuse secret?

Today, I am giving my word to ...

Homework

Pay attention to how you are using your word this week. Are you saying “yes” but mean “maybe” or “no”? How often is your word aligned with your actions? What excuses do you turn to when you break your promises?

Want to go further in your journey of recovery?

Purchase the paperback or Kindle version to explore the following topics:

- Part 2: Rewiring the Brain
- Part 3 : Asking for Support
- Part 4 : Defining the Abuse & Outcomes
- Part 5 : Identifying & Challenging False Beliefs
- Part 6 : Emotions
- Part 7 : Sharing Your Story
- Part 8 : Relationships
- Part 9 : Moving On

[Buy Now!](#)

If you are interested in other free resources ----- [click here.](#)

Contact me at coach@rachelgrantcoaching.com or 415-484-5682.