

UNLOCKING *Loneliness*



PART 1:
WHY WE FEEL LIKE WE DON'T BELONG
7 DAY REFLECTION GUIDE

Overwhelming.

I can't think of a word that is more fitting for this single parenting season.

There's so much we carry: Discipline. Laundry. Homework. Groceries. Work projects. Therapy appointments. After school activities. Teacher meetings.

(And that's when things are going as planned.)

But feeling overwhelmed isn't just the by-product of having too many responsibilities. It's the sense that emotionally you are barely hanging on, constantly at the brink of a breakdown.

Somehow, you survive – yet the relief is incomplete. You know it's only a matter of time before the waves come crashing again.

Each of us as a **physical response to stress and trauma** that gets engaged- “triggered”- when we face something that feels threatening.

What does this have to do with loneliness?

Relationships can cause us a lot of stress. And when that stress response gets triggered, we tend to react in ways that cause us to **move toward unhealthy relationships** and **away from healthy ones.**

And that's what's at the core of feeling lonely.

Once you are able to identify your physical reactions to stress, you can begin to observe how your patterns of dealing with anxiety might actually be keeping you **stuck in situations that cause you to feel overlooked, misunderstood, rejected, or insignificant.**

(And keeping you stuck in patterns of **boundary breaking** or **wall building**).

The good news is once you understand those patterns, **you can change them.**

But addressing loneliness doesn't actually start with managing your external relationships; it begins with **overcoming the overwhelm that is underneath your loneliness to develop new patterns that support and attract healthy connections.**

Therapy is a helpful tool when it comes to identifying and working through trauma and triggers, and our resources are not designed to provide or replace therapy.

That being said, therapy is only one part of the equation, because it is not designed to address your spiritual wounds. God made each of us in three parts- body, soul, and spirit. Your transformation will be incomplete without the spiritual healing that ushers in God's restorative and redemptive peace- **His shalom.**

Have you ever reacted to a situation in a way that just didn't seem to match the circumstances? Like maybe you overreacted to something small, or under reacted to something really big?

When this happens, you've experienced a trigger. Your stress style quickly engages, and you may move in one of two directions:

1 **If your stress style is Stuck On,** your emotions rise to the surface quickly. You feel the need to address the situation immediately, whether that's fighting back (even if only in your mind) or escaping into another behavior or activity. You may feel energized, activated, or agitated.

If your stress style is Stuck Off, you may feel overwhelmed but may not know exactly what you're feeling or what to do. You may find yourself becoming numb and shutdown, and may even feel a distance between yourself and your body. You may feel exhausted or frozen in place.

Whatever your style, what's affecting you isn't so much the thing, **but the thing beneath the thing.** The thing beneath the thing is often pain you've suffered in the past, whether something that seems big or small. Either way, it would be considered a trauma.

Sometimes, the thing beneath the thing isn't super clear and we don't know where to begin searching. It may be something we've pushed away, minimized, or forgotten. Other times, we know precisely what the trauma is and we're afraid to go digging. Both are completely understandable responses; **often the pain occurs when we don't have the tools to deal with it.** But until we have those tools, the pain remains, beneath the surface.

And we find ourselves pretty **overwhelmed and isolated** in the meantime. This is what creates that feeling that says, "Does anyone really see me? Does anyone even care?"

But with a new set of tools, you can more confidently **confront the pain of your past, find safety in the present, move forward into the future** you were made for.

In this lesson, we'll focus on developing the **new tools** you'll need to **overcome overwhelm, confront the causes of your loneliness,** and **establish healthy relationships** in the future.

**WHICH DO YOU GENERALLY MOVE TOWARDS –
FEELING STUCK ON OR STUCK OFF?**

**HOW DO YOU TEND TO REACT WHEN FACED WITH
SOMETHING TRIGGERING OR PAINFUL?**

PAUSE & REFLECT.

Our overwhelm is rooted in **emotional damage** we've suffered in this life, called trauma. This often begins in childhood, when a child is abused, abandoned, or raised by a caregiver who doesn't consistently meet their emotional & physical needs. It can also occur when a parent becomes very ill, or dies.

Children are vulnerable, made to be protected from harm. But when trauma comes to us via our families, it's where we first sense that **things aren't as they should be, and that we don't belong.**

2

And truly, things in this world are not as they should be. God created humans to enjoy eternity with Him and each other, forever covered in peace, wholeness, beauty, and harmony – **in shalom.**

But that was all shattered when Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden tree.

Ever notice the name of that tree? It was referred to as “**the tree of the knowledge of good and evil**” (Genesis 2). That means prior to eating of this tree, mankind **didn't have knowledge of evil** because **we were not created to know of or experience it.**

Spiritually speaking, trauma is the suffering of knowing and experiencing evil in a world we were not created for – where we don't belong.

So then why are we here? After eating of the forbidden tree, Adam and Eve were sent away from the Garden. However, **the reason for their exile** is probably very different than what you've been told.

Genesis 3:22-24 tells of a second tree in the garden: **the Tree of Life**. God says in this passage, man “must not be allowed to reach out his hand & take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.” When humans acquired knowledge of sin & evil, **separation from God also occurred resulting in physical & spiritual death**. If Adam & Eve were to eat of the Tree of Life, they'd remain in their fallen, separated state **forever**.

God did not want that for His beloved children. In His **mercy**, He sent them away and ordained that Jesus would repair the damage sin had created, by His death and resurrection. **He would become the way back home, back to perfect shalom.**

But we don't have to wait til eternity to live in that victory. Jesus also sent the Holy Spirit, that we could **experience being present with God**, that we could have a sense that we belong with Him-
where we are, as we are.

While we are still here in this life, we are sojourners in a strange land, daily assaulted by the evil we've inherited. Recovering from trauma is a fight against that evil, to reclaim our sense of home and shalom.

**HAVE YOU SENSED THAT YOU DON'T QUITE FIT? THAT
YOU DON'T BELONG?**

**IF SO, WHEN DID THIS FEELING START? HOW HAS IT
IMPACTED THE WAY YOU BELIEVE GOD SEES YOU?**

PAUSE & REFLECT.

Triggering events are a reminder of the soul violence you've already endured, and can cause you to feel extremely vulnerable and violated in the present.

Sometimes the trigger comes from interacting with another person, but sometimes it can be something else, like a specific sound or a smell.

Triggers often cause us to feel a sudden wave of shame, fear, and condemnation.

When you experience a trigger, the emotions you experience are not sinful – they are an alert that your heart needs tending to.

3

However, our reactions to these triggered emotions often end up deepening our pain and shame. Whether it's performing, people pleasing, fighting, isolating, or medicating, our reactions keep us stuck in a cycle of pain and hopelessness, and create distance between ourselves and God, and ourselves and others.

Many times, the things we do in our hurt, hurt us.

No one has to teach us how to react; our reactions are born out of our flesh – our human way of doing things.

But Romans 8:6 says, “The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life & peace.” Our reactions may have helped us to survive in the past, when we didn’t have tools to handle the wrongs inflicted upon us. But because they are governed by the flesh, ultimately they can’t bring us peace. It’s no wonder then that after all this time we’d find ourselves overwhelmed, depleted, and defeated. **Our reactions cannot lead us to life, only death.**

"But the Spirit is life & peace." Through Jesus's death and resurrection, God desires to restore our life & peace- not only in eternity but in this life too. He wants to give you more than was taken from you.

The first step in accessing that peace is in **moving beyond reacting** and instead **learning to respond**. What’s the difference?

Reactions are like reflexes- they just seem to happen without even thinking about them. Reactions seem to give us relief or a sense of control in the moment, but the root cause continues to go unattended. **Ultimately they rob us of lasting peace.**

That's where learning to respond comes in. **Responses** are rooted in the peace of God, available to us by experiencing the presence of the Holy Spirit. Responses allow us to experience God's peace and compassion in the middle of the chaos, and teach us to extend that compassion to ourselves.

With practice, those triggering events will no longer signal dread; they will actually become associated with retreating to God's peace.

Repetitions are not signs of failure; like working out at the gym, each time we practice responding, we get better and stronger. And eventually, we can discover what it means to be safe with Him, which helps us discover safety with other people.

Learning to move from reactions to responses is something that God initiates, and then gives us the power to carry out. You're not doing this all on your own. In the next several sections, we'll discuss how to see your triggers as cues, and how to start making them work for you instead of against you.

**DO YOU JUDGE OR SHAME YOURSELF FOR HAVING
DIFFICULT EMOTIONS?**

**HOW HAVE YOUR REACTIONS WORSENERD YOUR
ANXIETY AND IMPACTED YOUR RELATIONSHIPS?**

PAUSE & REFLECT.

We often grow up with or are taught this idea that our feelings are bad- that somehow it's more spiritual not to have them.

But God created our emotions to alert us to times when we need help, and to discover just how kind He is when we turn to Him when we are in need.

Philippians 4:6-7 says, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

This passage explains that we can offer our triggered anxieties to God, and that in their place He promises to give us unexplainable peace.

However, opening your heart to God and trusting Him with the outcomes of your life isn't the easiest thing when you've been wounded. Trauma interferes with our relationship with God because it distorts our understanding of who He is and who we are to Him. Because of what we've been told or what we've experienced, we may feel that He is distant, disappointed, or disinterested.

4

As a result, we become distrustful and fearful of the only One who truly knows us and loves us just as we are.

Isn't that just like the devil to keep us away from the heart of the Healer, when we need Him most.

But the truth is God already knows how we feel. He knows when we are afraid to trust Him, and He walks patiently with us through the things we are angry about or don't understand. He desires to nurture your wounds, and to cover you completely in peace.

Psalm 61:2-3 says, "When my heart is overwhelmed; Lead me to the rock that is higher than I. For You have been a shelter for me, a strong tower from the enemy."

Slowing down to retreat into God's presence in the middle of a triggered moment gives us that sense that we are not alone- that we are protected and sheltered. And He can use something as simple as your breath to help you get started.

Both the Old Testament Hebrew and New Testament Greek words for the Holy Spirit ("ruach" and "pnuema") actually mean "breath." **That means the Spirit of God can be understood as the Breath of God.**

What's more, the book of Genesis says **God created man from the dust by breathing into him the "breath of life"** (Genesis 2:7). God's very breath animates our body and our spirit, and we can become aware of His presence with us by paying attention to His breath inside us.

He is as close as your every breath.

PRACTICE

Stop what you are doing and **pay attention to the breath of life within you.**

Breathe deeply and slowly, **acknowledging God's presence within each life-giving breath.** Call to mind that it is the Spirit of life and peace within you and around you, surrounding you with comfort and strength.

Practice breathing in this way when you are not feeling triggered. That way, when the overwhelm comes, you'll already know how to retreat into the covering of God's closeness.

**HOW DOES IT FEEL TO KNOW THAT GOD IS AS CLOSE AS
YOUR BREATH?**

PAUSE & REFLECT.

Another way the enemy assaults your peace is in your thought life. Whether you are stuck on or stuck off, your mind is a battlefield where lies, intrusive thoughts, nightmares, and painful memories wage war against your soul.

It's frightening when the war we fight is inside.

Romans 12:2 says, "Let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think." As someone who has spent a lifetime catastrophizing and overthinking,

I wondered if such a thing was even possible for me. And even if it was, where was I even supposed to begin?

I'm thinking maybe you can relate.

2 Timothy 3:16 says "all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness."

There's that word again – breathed.

The next way we can connect to the Spirit of life and peace is through meditating upon Scripture and letting it shift our thoughts. We don't have to make up our own mantras or affirmations to change our thoughts; God has already given us the Words of Life to do that work for us.

5

His Word teaches us the truth. It is a reproof against the lies of the devil. It lovingly corrects our understanding of who God is and who we are to Him. It trains us to go a new way, the way of peace.

PRACTICE:

Next time you find anxious thoughts overtaking you, begin connecting to God through your breath, as we covered in the last practice. **Once you have a steady breathing rhythm, consider reciting a short Scripture passage** to shift your awareness to the presence of God with you.

In addition, **you can also create a breath prayer to have at the ready.** It's simple: recite half of the verse on your inhale, and the other half on the exhale. For example:

INHALE: God will not desert me.
EXHALE: God will not abandon me.
From Deuteronomy 31:8

And if you really don't know what to say, speak the beautiful name of Jesus.

**WHAT SCRIPTURE VERSES REMIND YOU THAT GOD IS
PRESENT WITH YOU?**

PAUSE & REFLECT.

Sometimes, you may struggle to sense God's presence, or have trouble fixing your thoughts on Scripture. If that's the case, there's nothing wrong with you – learning new rhythms takes time and practice!

But even if you are able to do these things, you might still crave a physical comforting experience, like being able to receive a hug or a thoughtful gesture.

6 The Bible says God created us in three parts – **each of us is a spirit with a soul** (which includes your mind & emotions) in a body. So far, we have discussed ways to overcome overwhelm and access peace through your spirit and your mind, but we can't leave the body out of the equation.

God employs His creation to give us the opportunity to experience Him through our bodies, via our senses. Romans 1:20 says, “For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature.” Through the things we can touch, smell, see, hear, and feel, **God shows us what He is like in ways that go beyond what our minds can grasp.**

In addition to that, **God has given you specific preferences** that allow you to enjoy the world in a way that is unique. He will use these preferences to surprise you with delight, and to let you know that He is there and thinking specifically of you.

PRACTICE:

When you find yourself overwhelmed, **experiencing delight and comfort in your senses** is another way to find refuge in God's goodness. It's another way **He reveals Himself to you through what He has created, both in you and around you.**

NOTE:

If your stress style is Stuck On, you may find it helpful to consider preferences that are **calming.**

if your stress style is Stuck Off, you may find it helpful to consider preferences that are **stimulating.**

PREFERENCES TO CONSIDER:

WRAPPING yourself in a weighted blanket, or giving yourself a hug (I know it sounds crazy, but it works!)

DABBING on scented oils or lotions. Determine if you prefer a calming scent like vanilla or lavender, or an invigorating scent like citrus or spice.

PLAYING soothing sounds or listening to worship music.

INTEGRATING movement. Do you prefer the calm of a good stretch? Or would it help to get moving and take a walk or dance?

EXPERIMENTING with hot and cold. Would you prefer to take a warm shower? Or does blasting cold air on your face feel better?

When the overwhelm passes, **notice how you're feeling and how the feelings have changed.** Consider offering a word of thanks to God for His nearness, and take delight in the progress you've made together.

WHAT PREFERENCES DO YOU HAVE THAT WOULD BRING DELIGHT TO YOUR SENSES IN A MOMENT OF STRESS?

CONSIDER CREATING A BASKET WHERE YOU CAN HAVE SOME OF YOUR PREFERRED ITEMS READY FOR A TIME WHEN YOU FEEL TRIGGERED OR OVERWHELMED.

PAUSE & REFLECT.

As I mentioned at the outset, **having the right tools is essential to doing the deep work of healing.** When our emotions overwhelm us, it can be hard to think, function, and make progress.

But **tending to our emotions**, rather than running from them (or letting them run us) **allows us to experience the peace and safety of God in our woundedness.**

The Lord is gentle with us; Psalm 147:3 says “He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.” Learning to be gentle with yourself when you feel overwhelmed is the first step in healing the soul damage you’ve incurred, and prepares you for the work ahead as you discover the thing beneath the thing.

Studies have shown that talking through past trauma can often be re-traumatizing, but that new, positive experiences have more healing power. Notice that in this lesson we haven’t talked at all about uncovering the thing beneath the thing, but rather how to have new, positive experiences with God whenever you face a trigger.

Experiencing what it is to be **safe and held by God in the present** will give you **precisely what you need** to feel that same sense of security **when it is time to work through what is in the past.**

7

You can be at ease – these are signs you are ready for a **deeper level of healing** that will **strengthen and deepen** that sense of peace longterm. As you gain confidence and strength, the Holy Spirit will allow things that you'd forgotten about or dealt with previously to come back to the surface. He does this to show you places where you are still in need of freedom, and **God will be the one to deliver you** as you rest in Him.

And as you are carried more deeply into the peace of God, you'll find your soul, body, and spirit renewed. **It does get easier.** And with time, you may even yourself daring to believe that this is not all that there is – **that you were made for more.**

**HOW HAS YOUR AWARENESS OF YOUR REACTIONS
CHANGED?**

**HOW HAS YOUR AWARENESS OF GOD'S PRESENCE
CHANGED?**

**HOW HAS YOUR ABILITY TO RESPOND TO OVERWHELM
CHANGED?**

PAUSE & REFLECT.

