



Healing
IN CHRIST'S
LIGHT

FROM PATTERNS OF SEXUAL BETRAYAL

Jeni Brockbank

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Paperback ISBN 13: 978-1-4621-4610-9

Ebook ISBN 13: 978-1-4621-4654-3

Published by CFI, an imprint of Cedar Fort, Inc.

2373 W. 700 S., Suite 100, Springville, UT 84663

Distributed by Cedar Fort, Inc., www.cedarfort.com

Library of Congress Registration Number: 2023942321

Cover design by Shawnda Craig

Cover design © 2023 Cedar Fort, Inc.

Edited and Typeset by Liz Kazandzhy

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed on acid-free paper

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BETRAYAL: A MODERN -DAY PLAGUE

The first book I read about experiencing sexual betrayal (specifically about recovering from betrayal trauma) left me with tears streaming down my face every time I picked it up. I was flooded with relief as I finally realized that I was not alone, that I was not crazy, and that help was available for my situation.

The validation was so relieving. I also felt a sense of righteous empowerment—that with further education and support, I would be able to understand what was going on with me, and that I could work with the Lord to disrupt destructive patterns that were happening in my home.

Dear sister, you aren't alone. You aren't crazy. And help is available for you as well.

If pornography is “a plague of epic proportions”⁴ in our day, as Sister Joy D. Jones has said, then by default, so is sexual betrayal. (Note that pornography isn't the only way women experience sexual betrayal; it's just a common way.)

Almost 70 percent of those who receive a sexual disclosure or discovery—which includes hidden pornography use of a spouse or significant other—suffer from severe repercussions that can include post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) type symptoms, often referred to as betrayal trauma.⁵ Considering that one third of married men compulsively view pornography daily or weekly,⁶ think about how many wives might suffer from severe mental, physical, and spiritual distress when they receive a confession or discovery. The potential numbers for those of us who are suffering are astronomical. Because most of us suffer silently, the majority of people remain unaware of this demographic.

A large factor for why we are often unnoticed is likely because spouses who suffer from sexual betrayal frequently suffer in isolation. I for one suffered alone for many years, and I have been in the sacred presence of many women who have also tried to walk the path of healing through the sludge of isolation.

I feel strongly that there should be greater awareness that many women suffer from severe side effects due to sexual betrayal and that it is more common than people think. It's important to recognize this because we can greatly improve how we approach healing and connection with those who are suffering.

With the best of intentions, suffering from the effects of sexual betrayal can be judged by ourselves and others as merely a need to forgive. Generally speaking, this is a severe minimization and misjudgment of what we are experiencing, which often includes experiencing ongoing destructive patterns and not singular events.

No one willingly chooses to face sexual betrayal. Many of us find that this particular trial hits nearly every tender and unsure part of us. Intimate betrayal can make us wonder about our identity and worth, leaving us spinning in *what ifs* and destructive thoughts like “If only I had [fill in the blank]” or “Something must be wrong with me.”

We can suffer in tremendous ways, such as feeling crazy, feeling like we're not enough for our loved ones, and experiencing a state of compromised emotional stability. We often keep the secrets of our loved ones due to shame, fear, and a sense of devotion.

Dear sister, such experiences and reactions are normal.

Your loved one's choices to act out and betray covenants are a sign that *they* are struggling, not a sign that *you* are flawed. You are more than enough, and so am I.

Our generation is unique because, with the explosion of the internet, more of us are affected by patterns of sexual betrayal. Many more of us. I believe that our future posterity is hopeful that we will begin to break these chains so that they can have better support and healing than has been available thus far.

Your healing from sexual betrayal matters and has the potential to affect family, friends, and entire communities for generations to come. I am healing with you.

HEAVENLY VALIDATION

Heaven can be very tender toward those of us who have experienced sexual betrayal.

My dear friend likes to remind me of Jacob 2:31–32, and I will pass on this balm to you as well:

For behold, I, the Lord, have seen the sorrow, and heard the mourning of the daughters of my people in the land of Jerusalem, yea, and in all the lands of my people, because of the wickedness and abominations of their husbands.

And I will not suffer, saith the Lord of Hosts, that the cries of the fair daughters of this people, which I have led out of the land of Jerusalem, shall come up unto me against the men of my people, saith the Lord of Hosts.

Does that make your soul sigh as it does mine? If so, feel free to read it again.

And then there are the Savior's words in 3 Nephi 12:28 that say, "But I say unto you, that whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery already in his heart."

Fidelity to one's spouse is so important that it's addressed in the seventh commandment: "Thou shalt not commit adultery" (Exodus 20:14).

The world might be on a path of accepting infidelity, but the Savior is the same yesterday, today, and forever, and the sexual betrayal of one's spouse, even by way of fantasy, is still not okay with Him.

Heaven has counted your tears, dear sister. You are seen, loved, and treasured. You are not alone.

Does it make a difference to you to learn or remember that there are commandments against infidelity and fantasy, and that the Savior has great tenderness toward those who have experienced sexual betrayal?

THE ATONEMENT IS FOR THE BETRAYED

I once heard about a bishop who sat with a husband and wife as the husband confessed his sexual betrayal. After listening to his confession, the bishop turned to the wife and said something like "What has this been like for you?"

It melts me that she was "seen" in such a way.

Often our attention, along with the attention from professionals and priesthood leaders, is instinctually to focus attention toward the offending spouse. After all, the Atonement is for the sinner, right?

Of *course* the Atonement is for the sinner. But the Atonement is also for the heartbroken, emotionally distressed spouse.

Remember the betrayal of the Savior? “Judas, betrayest thou the Son of man with a kiss?” the Savior had asked (Luke 22:48). While this betrayal was not sexual in nature—Judas was His Apostle, and kisses were greetings—it was certainly personal. After being betrayed with a kiss, the Savior was led to events that ended at the cross.

Not only did the Savior experience betrayal regarding His death, but He also experienced what it was like to be betrayed in *your* and *my* individual situations because He suffered the Atonement. Because of this, *He can heal us*.

Christ said, “[The Father] hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives . . . and to set at liberty them that are bruised” (Luke 4:18). This verse contains validation, and it is brimming with hope as well. *He can liberate us from the excruciating pain of sexual betrayal, and He can heal parts of us we didn’t know needed healing. With Him we can be set free from heartache.* He understands our personal experiences better than we can because of the Atonement.

I love how Alma explains the Atonement from the aspect of suffering: “And he shall go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind; and this that the word might be fulfilled which saith he will take upon him the pains and the sicknesses of his people. . . . And he will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities” (Alma 7:11–12)

Those of us who have experienced sexual betrayal can also relate to the Savior’s experience of betrayal to some degree. After all, we have suffered betrayal from a loved one, and we can experience great consequences from betrayal in our circumstances.

Knowing that a God can relate to, empathize with, and ultimately heal us can be the source of hope that a broken heart needs. If you, like me, have not fully experienced this healing, just hang on. As Elder Jeffrey R. Holland said, “Some blessings come soon, some come late, some don’t come until heaven—but for those who embrace the gospel of Jesus Christ, they come.”⁷

Healing is possible, and each of us is worth the effort, time, and resources needed for it to occur.

Do you believe or have hope that the Atonement can comfort the brokenhearted? Do you have hope that the Savior can heal you?

POTENTIAL SERIOUS EFFECTS OF EXPERIENCING SEXUAL BETRAYAL

“Hiding” in my shower with my heart racing, sweaty palms, and adrenaline plus cortisol coursing through my veins. That’s where I was, even though my husband knew I had run in there, and I knew that he saw me. I felt panicked in a way I had never experienced before, and I felt like I was in mortal danger, yet I was physically safe. It was the first time I had experienced an extreme “flight” response due to a discovery of acting-out behavior.

And it terrified me.

My experience may or may not be relatable because not all responses are as extreme as mine, while others are more intense. However, fight, flight, and freeze responses are not foreign to many of us whose world just imploded. They result from our brains trying to protect us when we become emotionally overloaded. In essence, the brain is saying, “You are in mortal danger!”

Quoting from excerpts from her website, Dr. Jill Manning says this about betrayal trauma:

Betrayal trauma occurs when someone we depend on for survival, or are significantly attached to, violates our trust in a critical way. . . .

Perpetrators of betrayal traumas are in close relationship with the victim, and therefore the violation of trust is experienced as a deeply personalized (versus random) offense.

Due to the personalized nature of the betrayal, betrayal trauma can be more destabilizing to one's social schema than a strictly fear-based trauma. . . .

Symptoms of Betrayal Trauma:

- Anxiety
- Hypervigilance [Constantly alert and looking for potential threats. Examples include obsessively searching through phone history, being on high alert regarding a spouse's lustful gaze while in public, etc.]
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Withdrawal & isolation
- Difficulty concentrating
- Difficulty regulating intense emotions
- Avoidance
- Flashbacks
- Negative thoughts
- Numbness & detachment
- Sleep & appetite disturbances
- Somatic symptoms (e.g., headaches, tremors)⁸

If you relate to such symptoms, then you might be suffering from betrayal trauma. However, such a diagnosis would need to be made by a qualified professional.

For those who do not relate to these symptoms, then I am so glad for you. Feel free to skip through things that do not relate to your situation.

Have you experienced, or are you experiencing now, any of the symptoms from the list above after the discovery or disclosure of your loved one's sexual acting-out behaviors? If so, which symptoms do you relate with?

YOU AREN'T ALONE THERE IS ANOTHER IN THE FIRE

Remember Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego? Three young men in what should have been a deadly situation. King Nebuchadnezzar commanded their death to be by fire in a furnace so hot that it killed the mighty men who put them in.

There is no *earthly* reason that these three young men did not die as well. But God is not an earthly God.

As the king looked into the fiery furnace, he was astonished because instead of just three men, he saw a fourth who was “like the Son of God” (Daniel 3:25).

The young men were commanded to come out of that murderous inferno, and it was God’s will that they were completely unharmed and without even the smell of fire on them. Their own refiner’s fire had tested and proved them, and they lived to tell the tale and to continue testifying.

As wonderful as it sounds to be unharmed, that is not always the divine plan. Just ask Job, Abinadi, or Stephen.

Like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, we do not choose the refiner’s fire that we are thrown into, and it is incredibly disorienting when the person throwing us into the fire is the very one who covenanted to protect us. But just like them, we don’t *ever* face it alone. Jesus is not afraid to be in the fire with us, and we do not have to walk alone.

ABIDING IN CHRIST

Christ said to Enoch, “Thou shalt abide in me, and I in you; therefore walk with me” (Moses 6: 34). Similarly, in John 15:4, He said, “Abide in me and I in you.”

One meaning of the word *abide* means “to live or stay somewhere.”⁹ Isn’t it beautiful that we can live with or stay with Christ and He with us?

I learned this lesson in a profoundly personal way a few years ago, and I share this with permission from the Spirit. At that time, we lived a few blocks from the Brigham City Utah Temple. I sometimes walked to the temple, and this particular day as I was walking, I looked down at my shoes and saw that I was wearing plain brown leather sandals. I instantly started to internally berate myself about my shoe choice. I chastised myself with internal dialogue: “Couldn’t you have chosen a more appropriate shoe for the temple? Something closed-toed, maybe? Or fancier?”

As I walked while inflicting self-flagellation and paying attention to little else, I was unexpectedly interrupted by these words: “I used to wear sandals like these.”

What? He’s here? With me?

The shame left. Christ had offered a “me too” of sorts, and I was okay to wear brown leather sandals to the temple. After all, He once did. My heavy steps turned lighter after that experience.

Elder David A. Bednar said, “If we abide in Christ, then He will abide in and walk with us.”¹⁰ If Christ abides in us as we abide in Him, then we can have a sacred connection with Him no matter where we are. The Savior does not leave us alone in the refiner’s fire. He will walk with us as we walk with Him.

We may choose to isolate ourselves from people when we experience sexual betrayal, but we are not alone. As Elder Jeffrey R. Holland tells us, “Heaven is cheering you on today, tomorrow, and forever.”¹¹ Leading the cheering section is our precious Savior.

Is there something about abiding in Christ that you would like to practice or try?

OVERCOMING SHAME ON THE JOURNEY TO HAPPINESS

I stared in wonder at the women seated in our group therapy circle. They were laughing and joyful. Their circumstances were severe, and yet they could feel enough happiness to enjoy wholehearted laughter. I, on the other hand, had lost my laugh, and I couldn’t seem to find it again. Their jovial moods seemed foreign to me.

I remember thinking that something was wrong with me if I couldn't feel happiness amid the agonizing experience of learning about my husband's secrets. I was shaming myself for experiencing pain that had taken my breath away. Other people also tried to pump positivity into my system, not understanding the seriousness, the shock, or the depth of what I was experiencing.

Not everyone will relate to feeling this way. However, those who do relate might feel the shock of losing joy for a time. I have some questions for you and me:

- Was Joseph Smith cheerful as he suffered severe circumstances in Liberty Jail and asked, "O God, where art thou? And where is the pavilion that covereth thy hiding place?" (Doctrine and Covenants 121:1).
- Was Job happy as he "sat down among the ashes" (Job 2:8) and cursed the day he was born due to severe losses, including the deaths of his children?
- Did Christ smile through Gethsemane and the cross when He said, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34).

The answer to all three of these circumstances is, of course, no. *And* there's also nothing wrong with periods of heartache and mourning for you and me. Yes, we want to find joy and happiness. Christ did overcome the world, and we can again "be of good cheer" (John 16:33). But it's also okay if that's a process.

The laughter of those women did more than confuse me that day—it sparked hope as well. Maybe I won't always hurt so severely. Maybe I can find my laugh again too.

And with Christ, I did.

Take heart if you have lost your laugh or joy in your proverbial Liberty Jail. You will find it again, and the healing process can be stunning.

Do you relate with severe overwhelm that has made joy seem far away?

If you have lost joy for a time, do you have hope that it can be restored through Christ? Explain.

HEALING IN COMMUNITY

Do you relate to offering prayers of intense desperation? The ones where your whole soul is involved, and you finally get to the point of being willing to try something—*anything*—that might help? I was praying such a prayer a few years ago. My prayer went something like this:

"Heavenly Father, I will do *anything* to improve this. I'll attend the 12-step program and ARP. I'll go to therapy. I'll read books. I can't do this on my own any longer."

As soon as those words escaped my mouth, I thought, "Wait a minute. I don't know whether it's an addiction that my husband is experiencing, but I'm praying as if it *is* an addiction." I've since decided that the revelatory part of me must have known the truth about my situation in a bone-deep way.

Up to that point, I had previously thought, "I can do this with God. He is enough." Of course He's enough, but a prompting that followed such a thought bulldozed me over: "Heavenly Father doesn't have to reinvent the wheel for you, Jeni."

The Spirit then penetrated my heart with this profound understanding that has proven true in countless ways: "I will heal you in community."

I have since learned that one of the greatest tools Heavenly Father uses to help us is His children. For many years I had not really confided in anyone, so this was a hard sell for me, and it's a hard sell for most of us. Many of us suffer in silence for years before talking to someone who can possibly help.

My first experience with talking to another woman in recovery was after my stake president suggested that I call a woman named Katy Willis. I initially rejected his suggestion, but the thought kept coming to me that I should call her.

It took me a few weeks to gain the courage to reach out, but Katy was the perfect first person to confide in. She offered genuine empathy and affirmations of "me too," and she pushed back on some of my thinking in gentle but firm ways. Katy is sunshine in human form, and my soul needed her experience, faith, and hope. That conversation marked many important things, but my favorite part was realizing this: *I am not alone*. Others can and will walk this path with me. It is possible to thrive again.

I have found that when I walk through trials with other like-minded sisters, the Savior magnifies my healing. Matthew 18:20 might offer a clue as to why that is: "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." Apparently, healing in such a community invites the Savior to join in those efforts, thus magnifying endeavors to find healing. Oftentimes, healing in community with others who are also seeking to mend their broken hearts is compensated in ways that aren't tangible. I can't fully articulate this gift, but I have found it to be true in my situation.

I understand that coming out of isolation can be a hard shift to make, and it might not be what everyone chooses to do. Also, I believe that the more we speak about our painful and even shameful experiences with people who take seriously their baptismal covenant to "mourn with those who mourn" (Mosiah 18:9), the more opportunities for healing we will find.

Choosing who to speak with can be a work in progress. I think it's often wise to have a gated approach when sharing tender topics, and it can go something like this: Share a little and evaluate the response. If the response is helpful and feels safe, share a little more and evaluate again. It's okay to close the gate when needed.

Here are a few questions that might help you evaluate:

- Did they lecture me?
- Are they holding me in compassion?
- Do I believe they will honor my confidentiality?
- Are they judging me unfairly?
- Is the person I am sharing this with uncomfortable?
- Do they have the emotional capacity and maturity to hear this?

When someone proves to not have capability in the area of hearing my story, I have found it helpful to recognize that it was courageous for me to try to find someone who can hold that pain and try to relate. Even when people disappoint me, heaven does not leave me alone, and I can continue to search for someone I can talk to.

There are people who get it. They are worth finding.

In meetings with other spouses who have suffered from sexual betrayal, I have felt the gentle spirit of the Savior, who seems to cradle participants in tenderness and love.

How did I ever do this alone? I have no idea, nor do I ever want to return to living in isolation.

THE SACRED WALLS OF RECOVERY

Coming out of isolation is a big deal, and I can say with certainty that it is a brave thing to do.

I remember sitting in my car, drumming up the courage to walk into my first ARP family support recovery meeting. The prayer I said right before going into that meeting went something like this: “Please, oh please, oh *please* do not let anyone that I know attend this meeting!” Shame is a frequent companion when a spouse struggles with sexual compulsions or addictions.

Physical ailments most often carry much less shame. If someone has cancer, for instance, there is great compassion and empathy toward the struggling person and their family members. Dinners are brought, people visit, and other help is frequently offered. Present in such situations is an almost tangible tenderness. It seems easy to minister to someone who is physically ill.

Contrast that with emotional struggles. After sharing about sexual betrayal, we are sometimes met with stammers, silence, and judgment. It’s no wonder why it’s so tempting to suffer in silence when sexual betrayal lives in our homes.

Recovery looks different for everyone. For some, a basic understanding and some tools are enough, while others need more intense help. Some attend virtual meetings, while in-person connection is vital for others. Some find talk therapy to be what they need, while others might connect with a horse. (It’s a thing!) Yoga can be a wonderful healing tool to help develop greater self-awareness and grow in mindfulness. So many factors make the options endless.

There is no right or wrong way to work recovery as long as God is at the center of our journey—as long as we “let God prevail,”¹² as President Russell M. Nelson has counseled.

Sometimes people have painful experiences in recovery situations, which makes it hard to want to go back. To me, it seems wise to just try something, and if it doesn’t work, try something else. For instance, I’ve been to recovery meetings that did not feel emotionally safe, and I did not return. However, there was still a need for me to heal in community with others. Thankfully, I was able to find other meetings that better met my needs.

What support would feel good to your soul and helpful at this time?

Is there something that has held you back from finding the support that you need?

THE FOUR A’S

So often, issues in marriage are due to two people who are learning and growing. However, there are four things that should be treated as exceptions to this:

- Addiction
- Adultery
- Abuse
- Abandonment

Because this book is addressed to women who are possibly in the midst of experiencing one or more of the four A’s, please be aware that not every authority figure understands this. With the

best of intentions, therapists and clergy often treat such situations as “marriage issues” when such things are not the fault of the other spouse.

Well-intentioned professionals and clergy can also mistakenly validate the spouse who is participating in one or more of the 4 A’s. The result can be that the betraying spouse can then justify and increase destructive behavior and feel more entitled. These well-intentioned yet inappropriate responses from authority figures can cause great distress and even secondary trauma. In some situations, such responses can even perpetuate an increase in abuse for the receiving spouse.

When a spouse displays any of these A-type behaviors, it’s often better to focus on our own healing until the other party has changed their behavior or is at least working hard at changing that behavior.

Some therapists and clergy are striving to make marriage therapy and counseling with clergy a safer experience for betrayed spouses. However, these efforts are not yet standard and are still being developed.

For priesthood leaders, I often pray intently before counseling with them and strive to receive revelation about whether or not visiting with them is a good choice at that time. While praying about such things in my own situation, I have twice felt prompted to visit my stake president instead of my bishop, which proved to be a better choice in those situations. This might seem extreme to some, and that’s alright. No answer is right or wrong if you are relying on Heavenly Father for your personal direction.

I normally don’t give actual advice, but I’ll break my own rule for this: If during a therapy session, due to your loved one participating in one or more of the four A’s, you are asked what *your* role in their behavior is—or it is suggested that you could change X, Y, or Z about yourself to fix the behavior of your loved one—do the following three things: Thank them for their time. Slowly back away toward the door and open it. *Walk out and find another therapist should that still be a need.*

For clergy who don’t understand the seriousness of the four A’s, boundaries are also a good idea. This subject is discussed in greater depth in chapter 12.

Spouses who have experienced sexual betrayal do have things to work on. However, experiencing behaviors like the four A’s is not the fault of the person on the receiving end, no matter what we have or have not done.

In your marriage or committed relationship, have you experienced patterns of your loved one’s addiction, abuse, adultery, or abandonment? If so, in what ways has that been manifested?

If you have experienced any of the four A’s from your loved one, have you sought out help? If so, what was your experience like?

QUALIFIED THERAPY

Having spent time and money to unravel previous therapy endeavors, I hope that others can use my experience to be more cautious than I once was. It came as a shock to me that not every therapist was qualified to understand my situation. I strongly believe that therapists enter their field with a desire to help, and I also believe in their good intentions. Because our society is still studying how to best help sexually betrayed partners, we are still in the pioneering stage. This extends to therapists.

Qualified therapy can be critical for finding healing, and if you are considering seeing a therapist, I want you to know that even the consideration is incredibly brave. Having gone

through a few therapists, I would like to take a little space to discuss a few tips for finding a *qualified* therapist.

I admit that I experience “therapy envy” (a phrase my cute friend Michelle uses) when I hear about things that APSATS therapists are trained to do. APSATS stands for “The Association of Partners of Sex Addicts Trauma Specialists,”¹³ and they are trained to advocate for and empower the betrayed spouse in really beautiful ways. It is certainly worth looking into current availability in your area as you search for a therapist who is specifically trained to treat those who are suffering from betrayal trauma.

Another type of therapist to consider could be a CSAT therapist, which stands for “Certified Sexual Addiction Therapist.” They are trained to specifically understand the addiction side of things. I have found that what a CSAT therapist understands about the experience of the betrayed partner can be hit and miss. It might be a good idea to interview a potential CSAT therapist with questions such as “What is your stance on treating trauma that is experienced by the sexually betrayed spouse?” Please note that a CSAT therapist is notably different from a sex therapist.

I found my current therapist after my friend recommended her. My friend had also shared a Utah Coalition Against Pornography (UCAP) presentation with me where my soon-to-be therapist was a presenter.¹⁴ The things my therapist shared in that presentation resonated with me, and she has been a great guide in my healing process. Even though my therapist is neither an APSATS nor a CSAT therapist, she is still a wonderful match for my situation.

Another important consideration is that therapy is not the appropriate time to have to defend religious beliefs. Some therapists do engage in behavior that might put their clients in a position to guard their religious convictions. Those of us who are struggling with broken hearts do not need the added pressure of defending religious beliefs to therapists we hire to help us. Also, though, just because a therapist is a member of the Church doesn’t mean they’re qualified to handle patterns of sexual betrayal.

Family Services, which is run by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, provides “short-term professional counseling.”¹⁵ Short-term time constraints do not generally allow for treatment via a trauma model, which in my personal experience can be critical for thorough healing from patterns of sexual betrayal. This is not a criticism of Family Services but simply meant to share an awareness of their business model.

Group therapy that’s specific to betrayal trauma is one of my favorite modes for healing. Group therapy allows participants to realize they are not alone, allows opportunity to find community with others who understand, and is generally more affordable than individual therapy. Many areas have therapists who run such groups, and calling local therapy offices is a good idea to find one near you.

It’s important to remember that therapists are not perfect—because that’s not possible. They do have training that can often help us in our healing, but because they are human, they might fall short. When they offer thoughts and advice that do not feel quite right, make sure to run such counsel through God. We are empowered when we trust God above all others and when we let God prevail.

Do you think that qualified therapy might be a need in your situation? If so, do you have a qualified therapist? If not, what steps might you take to find one?

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