

Chapter I

The Healing Process

The exhortation by King Benjamin to yield “to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, and putteth off the natural man and becometh a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord, and becometh as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father” (Mosiah 3:19), may be especially challenging for those who have experienced abuse. Submitting to a parent, sibling, spouse, or any other individual in an abusive situation creates an assortment of negative, demeaning, and lifeless conditions so that the idea of submitting to a heavenly being becomes counterintuitive.

In any type of abusive relationship, submitting—or being forced into submission—means temporarily giving up your agency, not your will. It’s your will that helps you to survive. Love, trust, and hope are feelings that are manipulated; these feelings are eventually replaced with hate, mistrust, anxiety, and fear—survival responses that we naturally resort to in order to endure painful times.

I need to draw a distinction between the terms *agency* and *will*. They are not the same. Agency is “the privilege of choice which was introduced by God the Eternal Father to all of his spirit children in the premortal state.”¹ Will is a deliberate choice, and “the power to arrive at one’s own decision and to act upon it independently in spite of opposition.”² Agency is what God gives us. Will is what we choose to give God. It takes great faith to submit our will to God.

In submitting to God's will, we are gaining our agency, not losing it. This is a beautiful paradox. The marvelous blessing of the Savior's gospel and Atonement is that they enable us to manage and overcome the consequences of abuse and other unhealthy patterns of behavior. Our Savior and Redeemer, Jesus Christ, willingly made the ultimate sacrifice because of his great love for each of us. Once we experience this love, we begin to understand that submitting to God's will is the only way to find real joy and happiness. Our lives take on new meaning, and we see the world through different eyes. We have an increased desire to put off the natural man and become as a child, knowing that through submissiveness and humility, we can truly experience God's love—a perfect love that changes our hearts, fills us with joy, and gives us the energy and the will to obey his commandments and strive to become like him.

Regarding the consequences of abuse, Elder Richard G. Scott wisely teaches,

The beginning of healing requires childlike faith in the unalterable fact that Father in Heaven loves you and has supplied a way to heal. His Beloved Son, Jesus Christ, laid down His life to provide that healing. But there is no magic solution, no balm to provide healing, nor is there an easy path to the complete remedy. The cure requires profound faith in Jesus Christ and in His infinite capacity to heal. It is rooted in an understanding of doctrine and a resolute determination to follow it.

Healing may begin with a thoughtful bishop or stake president or a wise professional counselor. If you had a broken leg, you wouldn't decide to fix it yourself. Serious abuse can also benefit from professional help. There are many ways to begin healing, but remember that a full cure comes through the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, our Master and Redeemer. Have faith that with effort His perfect, eternal, infinite Atonement can heal your suffering from the consequences of abuse.³

Hope motivates us to change and helps us begin to heal. We can strengthen our hope as we actively strive to understand and do God's will. "And if you have no hope ye must needs be in despair; and despair cometh because of iniquity. And Christ truly said . . . If ye have faith

ye can do all things which are expedient unto me” (Moroni 10:22–23). Iniquity is choosing to do our will rather than God’s. When we have faith in and hope of a loving Heavenly Father’s ability to bless us, he is able to communicate his will and we discover, as his children, that he has the power to heal us.

Clinical Insights

Overcoming Unhealthy Patterns of Behavior

As members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, we have a unique view of life. We understand where we’ve come from, why we’re here, and where we’re going. Even with this knowledge, sometimes we become experts at misunderstanding and misperceiving what we’ve been taught.

Since some of the basic concepts of our religion are obedience, sacrifice, service, and loving those around us in spite of their mistakes, we tend to get confused about limits, boundaries, tolerance, and endurance. When we add to this foundation the concept that pain is an unavoidable and yet necessary part of our experience in this world, we tend to think that we’re supposed to quietly endure this pain. We are taught to endure to the end, but we often misunderstand the importance of enduring well or enjoying the process along the way. As a result, the pain caused by people and circumstances often push us beyond our limits.

When we feel confusion and guilt about the necessity of meeting our needs and exercising our rights, we cannot develop healthy boundaries for ourselves. These uncertain boundaries often lead to our being used, abused, and confused. As our confusion continues, we eventually convert it to anger—anger at ourselves, at our families, and even at God. All of these dynamics result from misunderstanding and misperceiving correct principles.

In reality, while pain may be purposeful in spurring us on to higher levels, it was never meant to destroy. Unfortunately, many people are born into families where correct principles are never clearly understood. They may learn to survive but are seldom able

to break the generational chains of dysfunction. Inadvertently, they pass the incorrect principles on to the following generations in the form of dependency, poor self-image, impaired coping techniques, depression, anxiety disorders, and various types of abuse that negatively influence all areas of life.

Incorrect perceptions lead to thinking and behavioral patterns that result in an external locus of control. This is the process in which other people, situations, and circumstances become the controlling factors in our decision-making. This is the opposite of an internal locus of control that is defined as knowing who we are, being healthy enough to identify and meet our own needs, and being assertive enough to exercise our agency.

Unfortunately, this type of dysfunction impairs the laws of growth and development. People from this type of family feel stuck. Their personal identities become enmeshed with unhealthy behaviors. To make reality manageable, they develop several types of denial. They begin to justify their conditions to provide a tolerable level of self-esteem and even begin to see the self-defeating behavioral patterns as an immutable part of their natures. They say things like, "That's just the way I've always been." With the resignation that results, they begin to believe that it's the way they will always be.

None of this is intentional. They simply don't know how to keep from doing what they're doing. It's what they were taught. It's all they know. When this type of dysfunction is generations deep, the afflicted individuals seem incapable of responding to guidance and direction from friends or Church leaders. As a result of living in this state of confusion and helplessness, they no longer perceive things clearly, their ability to accurately interpret the severity of their situations diminishes, and the paralysis of spiritual, emotional, and physical lethargy sets in. At that point, living gospel principles seems beyond their limited capacity. So they survive and they endure. They become entrapped by solutions that don't solve their problems and are ostracized by neighbors, coworkers, and leaders who don't understand.

These patterns of unhealthy behavior cause pain, confusion, and distress to both the individual and the individual's family. At

first glance, the individual assumes that such thoughts, feelings, and habits apply to everyone. In reality, the patterns of dysfunction that clearly define the problem differ from healthy behavioral patterns in three specific areas:

1. Frequency. This refers to the increased occurrence of specific, identifiable self-defeating behavioral patterns.
2. Intensity. Once these patterns develop, the devastation and severity clearly separate them from healthy patterns.
3. Duration. When these patterns are in place, they tend to perpetuate themselves, passing from generation to generation and leaving devastation in their wake.

These behavioral patterns are addictions. An addiction to such behavior refers to a much greater variety of dysfunction than merely addiction to alcohol or other drugs. It includes, but is not limited to, physical, sexual, emotional, and psychological abuse or neglect. It includes any type of dysfunctional family system that generates negative and self-limiting methods of coping with thoughts, feelings and personal needs.

Since we, as human beings, tend to do what we think is in our best interest, it should not surprise us that victims in a dysfunctional family develop these behaviors in an attempt to survive the painful and threatening situations in their homes. The problem is that these behaviors make pain, confusion, and distress a way of life and form the basis of an unhealthy perception of reality.

These patterns of behavior cause confusion when an individual leaves the home. Now, the survival techniques that have taken years to develop in the dysfunctional home, and which served very effectively during the individual's development, no longer consistently produce acceptable levels of functioning, and the person is left in a quandary. Their tools and techniques don't work. Their self-esteem and confidence become impaired. Because these individuals received inconsistent messages in the dysfunctional home, they develop problems with trusting others. They ignore, deny, or repress their feelings to the point that they often don't feel anything. They tend to go overboard in relationships, giving extreme loyalty and dedication, even

when these qualities are not justified. This often leads to depression and a pattern of failed relationships.

These individuals tend to be caretakers. In other words, they feel responsible for other people, for their feelings, thoughts, choices and well-being. They are generally attracted to people who are in the midst of personal problems. They become controlling—feeling almost compelled to solve the problems of others—and ultimately feel intense anxiety, pity, and guilt when they find they are unable to “fix” other people. They are generally very sensitive to the feelings of others and are able to anticipate their needs. Sooner or later, however, they begin to ask why others don’t do the same for them, why no one seems sensitive to their needs, and why no one appreciates them. The answer seems to be that much of the advice they give out is unwanted, unappreciated, and unused. Their feelings are hurt, and they become angry and resentful.

In other cases, they may take the opposite role, leaving others to make their own life decisions and then becoming negative, critical, and depressed when things don’t turn out the way they want. Unfortunately, these individuals often spend a major part of their lives locked into this type of self-defeating behavior, never understanding how it all could have happened in the first place.

In an effort to gain understanding, they may seek out self-help books and personal development courses. However, insight seldom develops during this active seeking phase because these individuals don’t have the necessary foundation to accurately assess and assimilate what is happening in their lives. What they learn seems to contradict what they are used to practicing. It’s extremely difficult for a person who is committed to an unhealthy and dysfunctional perception to be able to implement a healthy and functional behavioral system.

These individuals actually set themselves up for failure by trying to accommodate others. They find themselves saying yes when they really mean no. They end up doing things for others that they don’t want to do. They lose sight of their own needs, convincing themselves that what *they* want and need is not really important. Much of their happiness is derived from trying to please everyone around

them. This, of course, is impossible. Nevertheless, these individuals often become deeply involved in community causes, social movements, and civil rights activities. They are always fighting for the rights of others and always striving for the down-and-out. It's much easier for them to express anger about the injustices done to others than it is to focus on the injustices done to them.

They tend to be identified as very giving people. In reality, these behaviors are chosen because these individuals feel safest when giving to others. When someone tries to do something for them, they often feel insecure and uncomfortable and have great difficulty accepting compliments.

Since their giving tendencies attract people with needy personalities, they find their lives filled with crises and lost causes. They seem willing to abandon their normal routine at the drop of a hat to respond to such causes. They over-commit themselves, feel pressured beyond their ability to cope, and eventually burn themselves out. Increased anxiety and panic attacks are common hazards associated with this lifestyle. Yet, unless they are involved in such activities, they may feel bored, empty, and worthless.

On one hand, these people go overboard trying to help all the people around them. On the other hand, they resent the intense demands on their time. When this occurs, they blame others for making them crazy, angry, and victimized. They experience guilt for feeling this way and ask for forgiveness. In this manner, they become locked into a continuing series of self-defeating behaviors.

Even though it's clear that they come from dysfunctional families, most people from dysfunctional families will vehemently deny that their family was troubled. Because of their low self-worth, they tend to blame themselves for everything and are extremely critical of the way they think, feel, look, and act. When others blame or criticize them, they become angry, defensive, and self-righteous.

As they compare themselves to others, they often feel that they are different from the rest of the world and that they are never good enough, no matter what they do and how hard they try. This results in a tremendous amount of disabling guilt, which in turn makes it difficult for them to do anything fun or enjoyable for themselves.

Since many of these individuals have been the victims of sexual, physical, verbal, or emotional abuse, they often fear rejection or abandonment and tend to take on the role of a victim. They are afraid of making mistakes and set expectations for themselves so high that anything short of perfection is unacceptable. Their language and thoughts are full of “shoulds” and “should nots,” and yet when they are faced with making decisions they are incapable of doing so.

In an attempt to deal with all these feelings and contradictions, these individuals become depressed easily. The frequency, intensity, and duration of these periods of depression increase significantly over time. They wish good things would happen to them but don't actually believe that they will. They seem to feel that no matter what they do, they are undeserving and unsuccessful. Since they feel they are incapable of being loved, they tend to settle for simply being needed. As the dysfunction increases, they find that they fail even at this.

The only positive thing about such an unhealthy behavioral pattern is that it responds well to treatment. In a therapeutic setting designed especially for the unique combination of problems that characterize the illness, people with these problems find the support, direction, and hope that enable them to make the necessary changes in their lives. They learn to free themselves from the emotional shackles, obsessive thoughts, and self-defeating patterns of behavior that have imprisoned them. With new skills and effective self-development tools, they find themselves able to learn and develop in ways that lead to greater insight and to increased understanding, wisdom, and spirituality.

The Gifts of Chemical Imbalances

Rarely does anyone see anything one hundred percent accurately, and, because of this, we often miss the positive lessons in life when we only focus on the negative aspects of our situations and circumstances. When this occurs, we miss at least fifty percent of the learning opportunity.

For instance, we look at the forest fires in Yellowstone and think, “What a tragedy!” We look at the flooding of the Grand Canyon and