

THE CUCKOO SYNDROME

THE SECRET TO
BREAKING FREE FROM
UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS,
TOXIC THINKING, AND
SELF-SABOTAGING
BEHAVIOR

ANDREA ANDERSON POLK

LICENSED PROFESSIONAL COUNSELOR

Praise for *The Cuckoo Syndrome*

“Andrea intimately understands the human heart and the heart of God. As a follower of Jesus and with over a decade of clinical experience counseling hurting people, she powerfully integrates Scripture, science, and psychology. Andrea’s words, equally elegant and surprisingly provocative, demonstrate that by facing our deepest heartaches and identifying the lies we believe, transformation and healing happen. You will be welcomed into an honest conversation with yourself, God, and others about your wants, needs, and desires. You’ll discover what or who is keeping you stuck is not what you think it is. *The Cuckoo Syndrome* is driven by the truth of John 8:32 that the truth will set you free.”

—Mark Batterson, lead pastor of National Community Church and *New York Times* best-selling author of nineteen books including *The Circle Maker*, *In a Pit with a Lion on a Snowy Day*, and *Wild Goose Chase*

“Andrea Anderson Polk’s *The Cuckoo Syndrome* is a very personal story about overcoming toxic relationships and self-sabotaging behaviors to find the courage to be ourselves. Taking vignettes both from her therapy practice and her own life, Andrea uses the cuckoo bird metaphor to describe both the people in our lives who prey on our vulnerabilities as well as the unconscious ways we can prevent ourselves from acting upon our own best interests. This book is also a very accessible primer on emotion theory, providing the reader with many examples of how accessing core feelings provides a compass for living our lives. To find our true desires and life’s purpose, Andrea suggests that we must address the psychological defenses (the various disguises of the cuckoo) that we developed in childhood to protect ourselves from difficult relationships and experiences. These internalized cuckoo tendencies allowed us to survive traumatic and

overwhelming experiences but result in a variety of destructive behaviors. Such a journey of the soul can be harrowing, and Andrea suggests that we can find resolve and courage by tapping into the unconditional love of past caregivers and by developing an open and deeply personal relationship with Christ.”

—Stuart Andrews, Ph.D., Faculty Chair, The Intensive Short-term Dynamic Psychotherapy Program at the Washington School of Psychiatry, and coauthor of *Treating Affect Phobia: A Manual for Short-Term Dynamic Psychotherapy*

“One of the true blessings I have experienced as a professor is to see students grow and thrive in their calling. Through hard work and personal struggle, Andrea stands out among her peers as a gifted professional counselor, speaker, and writer. Andrea writes with compassion, empathy, and transparency. *The Cuckoo Syndrome* will help readers overcome false thinking and enable them to learn how to challenge their thinking, listen to their hearts, and trust their emotions to live fully and joyfully in the present.”

—Kathleen Arveson, Ph.D., Senior Lecturer, Department of Psychology and Counseling, Regent University

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Some of the examples in this book are fictional composites based on the author's clinical experience with hundreds of clients through the years. All names are invented, and any resemblance between these fictional characters and actual persons is coincidental.

Case studies of former clients have been used with permission. All actual identifying information of those former clients (and other individuals relevant to their experiences) have been removed and fictional names were substituted to protect the confidentiality of those people involved.

The information provided in this book is intended to help educate and offer support to individuals dealing with mental health issues and pain. Every person's story is different and unique. This book is not intended as a substitute for treatment by a trained and licensed mental health professional. Please seek professional advice, help, and support if you are struggling to deal with any of the topics covered inside.

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To My Mother

*My eternal gratitude to you for taking a courageous
stand for truth and paving our way to freedom.*

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

MY THERAPEUTIC WORK AS A LICENSED PROFESSIONAL counselor has inspired this book. I have spoken to and counseled hundreds, possibly thousands of people about the subjects covered inside, all of whom have motivated me on this journey.

The Cuckoo Syndrome is a compilation of my story, the clinical experience gained from more than a decade of close attention and treatment of my clients in private practice, and the study of psychological research. All of which I have developed into an innovative strategy for breaking free from unhealthy relationships, toxic thinking, and self-sabotaging behavior (i.e., cuckoos). Consequently, this creates space for one's purpose to "hatch" and come to life and no longer be destroyed and suffocated by the cuckoo.

As a clinician, I strongly believe we can only take our clients as far as we are willing to go ourselves.

At the prompting and encouragement of my clients to write a book, I feel honored to present my work to you in this volume.

INTRODUCTION

ARE CUCKOOS REAL BIRDS?

Sitting in your office was a healing balm for my soul. It was the first time I had ever had the courage to confront the truth that I was in an emotionally and spiritually abusive marriage. This healing journey to freedom released me from my prison. I no longer feel lost. I was stuck and suffering silently far too long. I have courageously and victoriously taken back my life.

THIS CLIENT, LIKE SO MANY OTHERS, HAD SAT UNDER MY counsel after seeing a number of professional therapists, pastors, mentors, lay ministers, and others who were all trying to fix her and her abusive marriage, yet she felt crazier and crazier. It was not until she realized she was sitting under the toxic weight of a cuckoo relationship that she was able to begin the process of freedom.

Did you know a cuckoo is a *real* bird?

Imagine it is a beautiful spring day, and you are sitting in your favorite spot at home and relaxing, and you notice a robin in her nest outside your window.

You also notice a large, ugly bird, a cuckoo bird, watching the robin's nest from a nearby tree. As soon as the mother robin leaves her nest, the cuckoo bird swoops in, removes a robin's egg, and while holding it in her beak, lays her own egg directly in the robin's nest along with the robin's other eggs. The cuckoo bird then flies off, devouring the robin's egg as she makes her getaway!

In taking a closer look at the robin's nest you are shocked at what you see. The cuckoo's egg looks eerily similar and almost identical to the robin's eggs; it is a light shade of blue with small brown speckles. The resemblance is uncanny! You are curious to watch and see what the mother robin will do when she returns to her nest to incubate her eggs. Surely, she would notice this foreign egg in her nest, even though it looks like one of her own. But once she returns, she sits on the cuckoo bird's egg and treats it as if it

were her own. She's been tricked. In fact, she continues to sit on her eggs day after day and eventually one hatches. It is the cuckoo chick and only the cuckoo chick. The robin's other eggs have not yet hatched.

Almost immediately upon hatching, the featherless cuckoo chick, with its eyes still closed, uses its wings to push some of the robin's eggs out of the nest. It's almost as if it was born with innate knowledge to kill the other eggs in the nest. The robin returns with a worm to feed the cuckoo chick because she believes it is her young. Day after day you witness the mother and father robins exhausting themselves to feed the cuckoo chick, which has an insatiable appetite. It never seems to be satisfied as the cuckoo chick is constantly calling out for food and attention. Your heart breaks as you look on in shock at the robins who are feeding this thing that does not even belong to them, yet they believe it is their young! The cuckoo chick grows larger and larger, very quickly outgrowing the robin parents. Any remaining robin eggs are ejected or smothered by the cuckoo chick. Even after the cuckoo chick grows and exits the nest, the robins continue to feed it and follow its distinctive call, *cuckoo . . . cuckoo . . .*, leaving the robins drained and depleted as empty nesters with no robin chicks of their own.

If your curiosity has gotten the best of you and you want a visual of the cuckoo bird, you'll see a picture at the very beginning of chapter 1.

As a counselor who spent years studying the human condition, I couldn't help but wonder: can our most intimate relationships and our own self-sabotaging behaviors resemble that of a cuckoo—nature's infamous imposter?

I have listened to thousands of stories, worked with thousands of individuals and couples, and followed my own curiosity about the cuckoo as patterns and common experiences began

to emerge. The cuckoo bird represents unhealthy relationships, toxic thinking, and self-sabotaging behaviors that secretly creep into our lives when we least expect them. I've used the cuckoo analogy and illustration in my counseling practice with nearly all my clients at some point during their treatment.

Cuckoos are invisible enemies that deceptively and elusively consume your time, energy, and attention. Ultimately cuckoos hijack your life, and you find yourself left with a haunting confusion and chronic emptiness as you wander through your days feeling lost, with no purpose of your own. This invisible enemy is hidden only to be revealed when it feels like it is too late or the suffering is too great.

I came to the cuckoo metaphor through my own story. My journey of healing coincided with my parents' divorce and a particularly difficult season of my life. That was decades ago, and since that time, I have spent my career as a licensed professional counselor and supervisor treating relationship issues. Numerous clients have come to me feeling overwhelmed, stuck, and powerless. I have studied both the research and my clients, and I have concluded that we all experience the Cuckoo Syndrome.

Do you have a cuckoo in your life, your nest, right now and you don't even recognize it? Are you the one doing all the work in the relationship? Have you succumbed to an ever-demanding, never-satisfied person who leaves you feeling as if you are not enough?

Throughout this book, my story is interwoven with the stories of my clients to create clarity and direction for those who have reached an impasse, suffering in the turmoil that shadows a destructive relationship. It is through the combination of my own lived experience, the close attention given to my clients, and the study of psychological and spiritual research that I have developed this practical guide to breaking free from the cuckoo's snare.

The Cuckoo Syndrome gives you a long-term successful strategy to fend off these cuckoos that invade your life so you are not prone and susceptible to being a target for future cuckoos.

Each chapter addresses the cuckoo's various disguises. There is the cuckoo of not feeling your feelings, the cuckoo of unresolved grief, the fear cuckoo, the shame cuckoo, the stress cuckoo, the perfectionism cuckoo, you as the cuckoo, the abuse cuckoo, the counselor cuckoo, and probably the most insidious cuckoo of all, the religion cuckoo.

If your cuckoo is the culprit, then discovering your purpose is the antidote to the cuckoo. The final chapters of this book answer the question, "Now that I learned how to identify my cuckoo, what now?"

Your attention will shift from the cuckoo in your life to pursuing your passions and embracing your heart's deepest desires. You will begin to identify your purpose beyond your cuckoos and the suffering they inflict and take back what has been stolen from your nest that has never been allowed to hatch.

CHAPTER 1

THE CUCKOO IN YOUR NEST

***Do Your Relationships
Resemble Cuckoos?***

*Insanity is doing the same thing over and over
again and expecting different results.*

—ALBERT EINSTEIN

MY FATHER SAT CROSS-LEGGED ON MY PARENTS' BED WITH A loaded gun in his lap and threatened to kill himself if my mother left him.

Decades later, as a professional counselor who has spent years studying the human condition, I recognized the Cuckoo Syndrome, a group of symptoms that collectively indicate a predictable yet invisible pattern of unhealthy relationships, toxic thinking, and self-sabotaging behavior that lead to unnecessary suffering. At its core the Cuckoo Syndrome is an imposter that seeks to mimic who you are and what you want.

The Cuckoo Syndrome is a nonscientific and nonclinical term that allows complicated, psychological concepts such as personality disorders, mental illness, codependency, trauma, attachment styles, emotional and spiritual abuse, and addictions to become easier to understand and relate to. I've discovered in my treatment of thousands of clients that most people do not know exactly what these terms mean, how they show up practically in our everyday lives, and how to translate them into our lives.

The Cuckoo Syndrome can deceitfully and subtly erode our careers, our ministries, and our most intimate relationships, including the relationships we have with ourselves. In this way, the Cuckoo Syndrome shows up as a chronic neglect of self due to consistently taking care of someone else, receiving little or no reciprocation, or unknowingly living a counterfeit purpose. Ultimately you find yourself lost, wandering through life with haunting confusion, lingering emptiness, and persistent grief.

Let's begin by understanding the biological nature of the cuckoo bird. Researchers who have studied cuckoos for hundreds of years have found a vicious, shocking, secret life of these predatory creatures in their natural habitats.

The Predatory, Secretive Life of the Cuckoo Bird Exposed

This cuckoo bird is a brood parasite. “Brood parasites use various gimmicks to deceive the hosts into slaving for them.”¹ A parasite is someone or something who lives and feeds on another person or thing and causes harm to its host. Parasites “habitually take advantage of the generosity of others without making any useful return.”² Does this dynamic feel familiar to any of your relationships?

Of all the birds in the world, none may be as clever and cruel as brood parasites. These opportunistic animals dump their eggs into another species’ nest to avoid wasting time and energy on childcare. Their life strategy is built upon tricking other birds, so perhaps they’ve learned the nasty reputation that precedes them.³

Similarly, human cuckoos are opportunistic and aim to take advantage of you and monopolize your time and energy by dumping their issues into your life. Persons living with a cuckoo in their nest are often initially unaware they are habitually taking care of this person even though this invisible, injurious behavior is right in front of them. They are aware, however, that something feels off, something doesn’t feel OK, and something is missing, yet they can’t put their finger on how or why.

A fascinating genetic fact about female parasitic cuckoo birds is that they “have secretive and fast-laying behaviors”⁴ as well as an ability to lay cryptic eggs or “eggs that closely resemble the eggs of their chosen host”⁵ to a shocking extent:

The parasite’s eggs have a number of tricks up their shells, too. They often mimic host eggs in color and shape—so the nest owners don’t notice the eggs aren’t theirs—and also

have thicker shells and shorter incubation times, which allow the invading offspring to hatch first.⁶

The cuckoo bird's eggs can look nearly identical to the host eggs! The host parents have been tricked. Similarly, human cuckoos mimic the behaviors and desires of other people to trick them into letting them into their life and forming relationships with them. Human cuckoos adopt a devious disguise. As they get to know another person, they seek to prey on their weaknesses and vulnerabilities in order to use them and take advantage of their kindness and their deeper need to be known, to be loved, and to have companionship, which every human being requires.

Chances are if the Cuckoo Syndrome is manifesting in one of your relationships, it will infect seemingly unrelated areas of your life as well. Cuckoos create cuckoos; they multiply by passing off their eggs to the nests of the other birds they invade and destroy the eggs that are already present:

If the parasite makes it out of its egg (cue the *Jaws* theme), then it's often time for a real massacre . . . a newborn Common Cuckoo wiggles its way around the Reed Warbler's nest, using its shoulders and back to push out all three of the host's eggs. Brood parasites, it seems, are basically born evil . . . while still blind and featherless, will stab the host's chicks to death with its hooked beak.⁷

Human cuckoo relationships not only invade your life, but they also want to toss your purpose, hopes, and dreams, your so-called eggs, right out of your life and replace them so you will nurture and take care of theirs instead of your own.

Are you thinking of a certain relationship right now that creates a similar cycle of suffering in your life? Do you feel like a slave to

someone else's needs, nurturing their dreams at the expense of your own?

Now that the cuckoo chick has hatched, the host parents become extremely exhausted keeping up with this ever-demanding, never-satisfied cuckoo chick that is always needing them.



Image Credit: Bill Kersey

“Little warbler feeding a cuckoo chick and seeming to risk being devoured itself as it bows deep into the enormous gape to feed a very young bird many times its own size.”⁸

This is just the beginning. It's a long, hard life.

As you can see from the image, a cuckoo chick egg hatches first and grows extremely large very quickly, even bigger than the host parents!

Take a moment as you look at this image. Imagine who the cuckoo is in your nest. Does it evoke a tinge of sadness as you look at the host parent feeding the cuckoo chick? Perhaps even anger? How do you feel toward the cuckoo in your nest?

The cuckoo chick's insatiable appetite consumes all the attention, time, and energy of the host parents who must feed it constantly. This is because "the young cuckoo needs as much food as four young reed warblers."⁹ The host parents continue feeding and caring for the cuckoo chick, working to meet its every need, and it is not even their young. The host parents are deceived into believing the cuckoo chick is their own and they exhaust themselves while taking care of it.

The cuckoo chick will destroy the remaining host eggs, if it hasn't killed them already, due to its huge size, eventually crushing them. The cuckoo chick not only becomes the host parents' entire life's purpose, but they also have no chicks, no purpose of their own.

Sadly, the host eggs never hatch and come to life.

Cuckoos are, in essence, nature's brilliant, masterful manipulators.

Can you relate to the host parent? Perhaps like the host eggs, your own purposes (hopes, dreams, desires) never came to life. They are smothered by the cuckoo in your life. Who has your eggs? Your energy, time, and care are given away to nurturing an unhealthy relationship that is now bringing you hurt and harm.

Do Your Relationships Resemble a Cuckoo, Nature's Infamous Deceiver and Taker?

There are two ways the Cuckoo Syndrome can show up:

1. The Relationship Cuckoo: Unhealthy, dysfunctional, and lopsided relationships

2. The Self-Inflicted Cuckoo: Toxic thinking patterns and self-sabotaging behavior

The Relationship Cuckoo

Now that you have been considering whether or not you have a cuckoo in your nest, here are some questions to help you identify if you are hosting the relationship cuckoo:

1. Is there someone in your life who tries to monopolize your time and consumes a lot of your energy?
2. Is there someone in your life who is more of a taker than a giver and does not give back to you in the same way?
3. Is there someone in your life who leaves you feeling overwhelmed because your purpose in life revolves around them, and your voice, feelings, and needs are not mutually acknowledged?
4. Is there someone in your life with whom you are unable to have a rational conversation because simple things become very complicated?
5. Is there someone in your life who leaves you feeling confused and misunderstood, but you cannot put your finger on exactly how or why?
6. Is there someone in your life who you feel manipulates you, and your gut is telling you something is not right?
7. Is there someone in your life for whom you feel responsible carrying the emotional weight of the relationship?
8. Is there someone in your life you feel has been gradually deceiving you over a period of time, and you realize this person is not who you thought they were?
9. Is there someone in your life who is never satisfied, no matter how much you try to love, help, and please them?

10. Is there someone in your life who twists the truth and avoids dealing with facts and becomes accusatory, critical, or overly emotional when you try to point it out?

If you can relate to any of these questions, who is the person with whom you are in a cuckoo relationship? Name them here:

If you answered *no* to all of the questions, your cuckoo might not be a relationship. Instead, you might have a self-inflicted cuckoo: toxic thinking or a self-sabotaging behavior, which will be addressed in the next section. Alternatively, perhaps you realize you are displaying some cuckoo-type behavior in your relationships.

The Cuckoo Syndrome can show up in unhealthy relationships with a friend, spouse, mentor, pastor, counselor, sibling, parent, colleague, boss, or significant other.

It can also be a role you adopt based on a situation or event where you have taken on more responsibility than you are capable of handling—roles that allow you to feel needed and loved such as caretaker, the always-on-call person, the fixer, the peacemaker, or the rescuer. The Cuckoo Syndrome can sound like this: “I’m always the person who . . .” For example, maybe you are the one who always organizes the carpool or schedules all the Zoom calls or does all the household chores or pays the bills or runs all the errands. Perhaps your spouse suffers from a chronic illness and you are going beyond your capacity to take care of him or her because you believe your needs are not as important as theirs

since you are not the one who is sick. You have falsely believed it is your sole responsibility to carry the full load. Deep down you feel resentful and have a strong desire to be alone and numb out.

Our choices and associated behaviors offer some form of benefit or we would not be operating in a situation where we are absorbing the responsibility for another person or group of people. If you are the pleaser, caretaker, peacemaker, rescuer, or fixer, ask yourself, *What am I getting from this role?* Perhaps you feel worthy, important, or needed. Ask yourself, *What does this role allow me to avoid?* Perhaps you avoid painful emotions such as the guilt from saying *no* and not being there for someone, or you avoid the fear of disappointing people you care about, or you are avoiding your own difficult issues.

Here is an example.

It's the holiday season. You discuss with your spouse and make the decision that for Christmas this year you are going to vacation alone with your children to enjoy a relaxing change of pace. You want to spend some much-needed fun time together as a family. You want to take a much-needed break from the hustle and bustle to sit on a beach instead of sweating over a hot stove only to engage in the same religious and political conversations year after year.

You finally muster up the courage to tell your extended family you will not be hosting Christmas this year. They respond by trying to guilt-trip you into changing your mind. They are shocked and appalled at your decision.

"How can you break this precious family tradition? After all, you have the nice house and space for everyone, and you are centrally located, so it makes it so much easier on everyone." Your family goes on and on about how their lives are more stressful than yours, how they really need a break. "Why can't you go on vacation this summer instead of taking time off over the holidays?"

After engaging with them and trying to maintain your boundaries and state your needs, you feel the emotional weight of responsibility to make everyone happy. So you tell your spouse, “Let’s just host one more year.”

These decisions seem miniscule at first, but when the pattern continues in your relationships (chronic caretaking, putting other people’s needs above your own, having no boundaries), you eventually find yourself depleted and joyless and your sense of self slowly eroded.

Every relationship requires effort, time, energy, and attention, which in turn require fruits of the Spirit such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, characteristics found in a healthy relationship. What is most important is that the relationship is mutual because both people are equally attentive to each other’s needs, and they sacrifice and compromise accordingly. The problem with a cuckoo relationship is that you deceive yourself into thinking you must do all the work to keep the relationship going, and you continue to nurture, take care of, and feed your cuckoo, and that becomes your primary responsibility.

The most important thing to remember about the cuckoo is that they are imposters packaged in a seemingly good and healthy relationship, disguising themselves as the real thing, and mimicking who they think you want them to be. The issue arises when the other person in the relationship, like the cuckoo bird, perpetually uses you, takes advantage of your kindness and openness, and does not reciprocate. Through a deceptive process, you have falsely come to believe you are being empathetic, patient, forgiving, and kind, when the truth is that you are not long-suffering. You *are* suffering.

Cuckoo Communication

Trying to communicate with the person in your cuckoo relationship about how you feel and what is happening can lead to chronic

experiences of feeling disillusioned. They repeatedly make excuses for their hurtful behavior and blame you instead. Many clients say to me, “Maybe it is my fault.”

Cuckoo communication tactics are manipulative and deceptive. I explain to my clients, “They complicate the simple and emote the factual.” By this, I mean that they twist the truth and avoid dealing with facts/reality in conversation and become overly emotional. They avoid facing the true situation that happened—the real event or situation that was painful or harmful to you. It is difficult to have a rational conversation because they make simple things (the facts) extremely confusing and complicated, leaving you questioning yourself, doubting reality, and wondering if you are somehow wrong.

For example, let’s say you are at a company dinner or happy hour for your spouse or significant other when you witness them acting in an inappropriate, romantic way with their colleague. When you gently bring your concern to their attention, they angrily respond, “You’re controlling. You want to dictate what I do and who I am friends with. You are just jealous and insecure.” Clearly, they are ignoring the reality of what happened between them and their colleague while becoming overly emotional. They are also complicating the facts of what you saw by accusing you of things that are not true.

When conflicts arise, these people are focused on being right instead of being open and desiring to understand your perspective. During conversations, they operate with a closed mentality, expect you to read their mind, and criticize you for not understanding them. If you disagree with them and share your opinion, they take it personally and become offended.

When you share your thoughts and needs, you receive no acknowledgment, and they continue their selfish and harmful behavior patterns toward you. When you share with them how

you are feeling, they respond by saying how they feel based on what you said rather than acknowledging your emotions and actively listening to you.

Here are some examples from my counseling sessions:

“When I gently share with my mother that she hurt my feelings, she does not acknowledge me. She changes the subject. It’s as if the conversation never happened.”

“When I share how I am hurt by something my colleague said or did, I walk away from the conversation feeling confused, as if I have done something wrong.”

“When I share my feelings with my friend, he gets defensive, and I end up questioning myself and doubting my own feelings after a conversation with him.”

“When sharing my feelings with my father, it never feels like a two-way dialogue. My feelings are dismissed, criticized, or ignored.”

“When I tell my sister what I feel, she tells me I shouldn’t feel that way. Are my feelings wrong?”

“When I share how I feel with my boyfriend, he seems to have a way of always switching the focus back to himself.”

“When I share how I feel with my wife, she responds, ‘After all I’ve done for you, you still don’t appreciate me.’ I was simply trying to say that my feelings were hurt. And now I seem to have hurt her.”

The intent of cuckoo communication is that the person seeks to convince you that you are the dysfunctional and unhealthy one. Like the cuckoo bird, they desire more and more of your time, energy, and attention. The longer you stay in the relationship, feeding their ever-hungry, never-satisfied ego, the larger and larger their feelings become, and your feelings are consumed by theirs. You are filling a void in their life that you were never meant to fill. Meanwhile, your needs, dreams, desires, and purpose never hatch or come to fruition.

The Abusive Relationship Cuckoo: Death by a Thousand Cuts

The Cuckoo Syndrome exists on a spectrum, with some forms of cuckoo-type relationships more damaging and severe than others, such as abuse. Being in a relationship where abuse is present establishes a similar dynamic to that of the cuckoo bird. It feels like death by a thousand cuts, namely, painful moments that take pieces of your soul and bring that pain into your life again and again.

Biologists describe cuckoo birds as “masters of disguise” and “notorious cheats” who prey on an “unsuspecting host” and mirror them to a “startling degree.”¹⁰ These parasitic birds are experts at escaping responsibility and intuitively adopt methods of trickery. The abusive process in human relationships is eerily similar and leaves you with a haunting confusion and immense suffering as they invade your life. You are the unsuspecting host they watch carefully, study intuitively, and then prey on. They aim to deceive you by disguising their true self in order to use and take advantage of you. They secretly plan their agenda to harm you and monopolize your time and energy.

An abusive relationship is characterized by a person’s demonstrating deception, manipulation, and control, where the other

person intentionally harms another person. Abuse comes in many forms, such as physical, verbal, emotional, sexual, and spiritual. Abuse can produce a painful, crazy-making feeling in which the person being abused falsely believes they are overreacting, selfish, difficult to be with, too sensitive, ungrateful, and a failure at relationships. When these lies are repeated often by the abuser, the victim eventually comes to believe them.

Like the cuckoo bird, people who abuse others can be masters of adopting various disguises to hide their true nature and lure their hosts into developing a relationship with them. They are highly intelligent, seeking to exploit weaknesses and vulnerabilities. In the beginning of the relationship, the abusive person can be especially kind and charming, but their deceptive nature slowly turns their kindness and eagerness into manipulation and control.

It might feel good at first to feel important and special: someone pursues you, shows such a strong interest in you and your life, and desires so much of your time. But after a while you start to feel used, lied to, and taken advantage of. Ultimately the relationship revolves around them, and they want you all to themselves.

The relationship is not mutual and reciprocal; it is lopsided and draining. You are the one doing all the work to please them and make them happy, yet they are consistently unsatisfied, and you are wounded in the process. Deep down you believe the lie that you are too much or not enough.

The cuckoo's reactions become intense if you try to set boundaries, have a voice, express your needs, and make room for yourself in the relationship. They can shift blame, accuse, and criticize. Over time you feel severely confused and hurt and are increasingly isolated; your reality becomes altered.

One of the reasons people feel such self-doubt when they are in an abusive relationship is because an abusive person does not manifest abusive tendencies all the time. They can go for long

periods without manifesting any abusive behaviors toward you. That is mostly due to the fact that they want to keep you engaged in the relationship. At times they make you feel better than anyone else, and at other times they make you feel lower than anyone else. It is when they feel triggered by you pushing one of their hidden buttons that you are blindsided and shocked by their toxic behavior when it comes to the surface again. They can tend to quietly keep a record of your wrongs and wait for the opportune moment to punish you. As I said, the abuse feels like death by a thousand cuts, painful moments that take pieces of your soul and bring that pain into your life again and again.

A Story of Abuse

Thomas was given a drum set as a Christmas gift from his close friend Dave, who knew Thomas had played in college and hoped to encourage him to pursue his long-lost musical talent that work pressures had displaced. Thomas also enjoyed spending time with his family when he was not working. Dave admired how Thomas prioritized his wife and family; they were his pride and joy. Dave knew Thomas tends to put the needs of others above his own and that he was too busy with work to purchase the drums himself. Upon receiving the drums, Thomas was hesitant and a bit anxious to tell his wife that he was going to take lessons at the local community center after seeing the class advertised in the newspaper.

Once he mustered up the courage to tell her, he left the conversation feeling afraid and guilty for pursuing something he was passionate about outside of his work and family. Thomas's wife criticized him repeatedly: "You are a terrible father for choosing to take lessons for your silly drums over spending time with your own children." "You are going to damage your children because you are going to make them feel abandoned each time you go to your lesson." "You don't really want to spend time with

our children or you wouldn't play the drums." "You are trying to avoid the responsibility of being a parent." "I am like a single parent in this family, and you are like another child: selfish and irresponsible."

Rather than celebrate his opportunity to pursue a personal passion and encourage him, despite his fears, she became passive aggressive and did not speak to Thomas. She slept in another room and avoided him for long periods.

Although Thomas pursued his drum lessons, she repeatedly told him he was neglecting his children and her when he played the drums. He began seeking counseling because he felt disoriented and recognized that this painful pattern of constant criticism of him as a father and husband had manifested in other ways for a long time in his marriage. The verbal and emotional abuse had been invisible to him.

The Cuckoo Syndrome slowly erodes your sense of self and thwarts your purpose. As a counselor, I have worked with many individuals and couples where abuse is present in the relationship. At times, abusers are unlikely to seek counseling because they may not want to believe that anything is wrong with them. If they do seek counseling, following through with counseling is also difficult for these individuals because they can become defensive and question the counsel they are given by therapists, who want to help. I have found that these individuals become extremely upset and disappointed when they are not given the answers or the solutions they are seeking or the special treatment they deeply believe they deserve. For this reason, it has been my experience that they tend to jump from counselor to counselor, hoping the next advice from a counselor will align with their behavior.

Based on my experience, when they do seek counseling, it is more often for other symptoms such as substance abuse, infidelity, a work crisis, depression, or anxiety. The problem occurs

in the relationship when the person is unwilling to be accountable for their abusive behavior and do the necessary work to change their actions. I have discovered the cuckoo bird analogy serves to reveal what's really going on to the partner in the abusive relationship as they begin to acknowledge the deceit, manipulation, and control and put a name to their pain for the first time.

To repair such a relationship, it is essential that a person in an abusive relationship breaks the silence of their suffering and seeks help. It is necessary for the abusive person to be equally willing to pursue help and do the work necessary to overcome their toxic behavior patterns so they do not continue to hurt their spouse or friend. Chapter 9, "Cuckoo Counsel," will provide some practical steps on when and how to pursue professional counseling, what makes a therapist safe, and what to expect in counseling.

Hurting People Hurt People

Although signs and symptoms resemble other personality disorders or traits, the Cuckoo Syndrome is not a disorder or a pathology. The Cuckoo Syndrome is not about blaming the cuckoo. It is important to note that any of us can behave like a cuckoo or fall into the Cuckoo Syndrome. I've discovered in my treatment of clients over the years that hurting people hurt people.

All people carry their own wounds, unresolved pain, and heartaches from their past. I have worked with numerous individuals who experience intense guilt and regret regarding their abusive behavior and desire to make amends. I have such empathy and compassion for these men and women since there exists an underlying shame, which is primary to why they become defensive and angry and go on the attack quite easily due to their woundedness and delicate ego. I have found that beneath that external facade of self-confidence is a deeper

layer of fragility, insecurity, and a fear of being seen as weak and a failure.

I've found they are typically victims of abuse and trauma earlier in life. They can often appear to be arrogant and emotionally distant or cold. This can be a survival mode to compensate for the lack of self due to believing at their core that they are unlovable and unworthy.

The good news is that you can heal regardless of whether or not the cuckoo in your life is willing to do the necessary work to change their unhealthy behavior. They are not responsible for your healing—you are. And with God's help and the help of others, you can be free. Freedom is knowing this truth, which begins to shift how you operate within certain relationships.

It takes courage and deep commitment to do the healing work and not blame other people but still recognize your role in the cuckoo relational dynamic. Acknowledging this truth can be extremely difficult because when we face reality, we face the lies we have been telling ourselves, we face painful emotions that we have buried, and we become aware of just how much our false beliefs and toxic thoughts are contributing to our suffering. Healing consists of knowing the cuckoo relationships we have allowed in our life and the ways we have nurtured them and neglected ourselves in the process.

What Do All Cuckoos Have in Common? They Need a Host. You Are Their Host.

Once you realize the cuckoo-host struggle you are currently experiencing in your relationships, it is important to identify what made your life susceptible to cuckoos in the first place.

If you find yourself continually attracting destructive or lopsided relationships, it is most likely because in some capacity, you were willing to give up your needs, your wants, your thoughts, your

feelings, your voice, your boundaries, your hopes, and your dreams. Therefore, you are enabling the Cuckoo Syndrome to be present within your relationships. Additionally, something is missing inside of you that you are hoping the relationship will heal or fix. Or perhaps you have a deep-seated fear of rejection, abandonment, or disappointing others or your identity is found in the need to be needed and as a result, you lose connection to knowing your own needs. Have compassion on yourself and do not shame yourself either. We all have a deep need to be loved and cared for. We all have seasons of life where we are involved in cuckoo-type relationships.

The Cuckoo Syndrome shows up as a chronic neglect of self by consistently taking care of someone you have allowed into your life while receiving little or no reciprocation. Understanding and becoming aware of being the host and how you participate in the cuckoo relationship is essential to the healing process and to reclaiming your life and the eggs in your life that have never been able to hatch.

You are the one who must stop hosting your cuckoo and believing the lie that you are responsible for carrying the emotional weight of the relationship. Other people do not have the power to control you. They can attempt to control you or try to make you feel a certain way or act a certain way, but only if you allow them.

As stated, the Cuckoo Syndrome is not about placing blame on the other person (significant other, family members, ministry leaders, colleagues). The cuckoo is not the problem; the problem is the unhealthy relational dynamic that is occurring between the two of you. You need to acknowledge the role you play in allowing them to become your primary purpose rather than having your own purpose and heart's desires to delight in.

Remember, because cuckoos come into your life disguised as a seemingly good relationship or healthy person, initially you don't know if you have a cuckoo relationship, but you do know something

seems off even though you can't quite put your finger on it. You are stuck, exhausted, and have lost precious pieces of yourself.

In the next chapter, "Stuck in Cuckoo Land: How to Deal with the Cuckoos in Your Life" you will learn the tools that will help you to get unstuck and begin the process of finding yourself again.

Start by asking yourself, *Do I make a good host for a cuckoo? "Have I allowed a cuckoo to invade my life? Am I now sitting on their eggs instead of nurturing my own? Am I now exhausting myself feeding and taking care of them?*

The Self-Inflicted Cuckoo

The cuckoo in your life does not have to be an unhealthy relationship with another person; it can be the unhealthy relationship you have within yourself. A self-inflicted cuckoo shows up as an internal battle rather than an external relationship. So instead of a person who continues to hurt you, use you, or take advantage of you, the self-inflicted cuckoo is your own behaviors and thinking patterns that are keeping you stuck.

You might not realize that the things that are holding you back or getting in your way are actually because of your own thinking, actions, and behaviors. We have all been here. Understanding this cuckoo dynamic can help prevent you from shaming yourself when you repeat these destructive behaviors over and over again.

Self-Inflicted Cuckoo = Toxic Thinking Patterns + Self-Sabotaging Behaviors

In my work with thousands of clients, I've discovered that although self-sabotage is a very common experience, most people do not know they are engaging in self-sabotaging behaviors. It is important to note that the words *self-sabotaging* and *self-inflicted* are not designed to shame you or place blame. The purpose is to put a name to specific ways we unknowingly harm ourselves

that leads to unnecessary suffering. What we can name we can heal. Naming this invisible enemy brings truth, not shame, and knowing the truth leads to freedom.

The following questions will you identify if you are hosting the self-inflicted cuckoo:

1. Is there an area of your life that began as a passion and has increasingly grown into an obsessive preoccupation, crippling perfectionism, or worse, an addiction? (For example, your to-do list, social media, work, volunteering, exercise, cleaning, online dating, shopping.)
2. Is there an area of your life where you are feeding your ego because you are more concerned with success, keeping up appearances, and being the best? Do you feel bound to these internal drives that grow bigger and bigger the more you nurture them?
3. Is there an area of your life that initially appeared to be a good thing or a God thing, yet it has left you feeling empty, lost, and lonely? (For example, a ministry, career, project.)
4. Is there an area of your work, home, or social life that has gradually consumed you and become the primary source of your identity, worth, and value?
5. Is there an area of your life where you tend to neglect your mental health and emotional well-being and you experience stress and burnout as a result? Do you also tend to neglect or not prioritize relationships with the people closest to you? (For example, your marriage, friendships, family.)
6. Is there an area of your life that has overtaken you, and the more you try to control it, the more out of control you feel? (For example, food, drugs, work, TV, drinking.)
7. Is there an area of your life in which you have become driven by your performance instead of guided by your

purpose, and where you have lost your peace of mind and joy as a result?

8. Is there an area of your life that originally fulfilled you but now drains you and no longer truly satisfies the longings of your soul or your heart's deepest desires?

Self-inflicted cuckoos appear good on the outside, but they create harm because you gradually develop an obsessive preoccupation that takes over your life. Self-inflicted cuckoos are imposters disguised as things that will fulfill you, yet ultimately they leave you feeling empty, lost, and lonely.

Unlike relationship cuckoos, with self-inflicted cuckoos, you are not feeding the insatiable appetite of an unhealthy person; you are feeding the insatiable appetite of your ego by searching for relief and significance in unhealthy ways.

Self-inflicted cuckoos come in many forms. They can be regular things that become all-consuming and spiral out of control or they can be passions that become obsessions or worse—addictions. Examples of these regular things are your to-do list, online dating, cooking, cleaning, exercising, social media, television, sex, work, food, alcohol, shopping, volunteering, and decorating. None of these things is harmful, wrong, or bad in and of itself.

The danger comes when they slowly consume your daily life and control you rather than you exhibiting self-control over them and using them in moderation. For example, perhaps you turn to your phone to distract yourself from difficult issues and it becomes obsessive; you can't enjoy a moment without it because you are constantly checking Instagram, email, text messages, news, Facebook, and the number of views for your most recent comment, or a YouTube video, or the number of followers and "Likes" you have.

Addictive behaviors—such as alcoholism, disordered eating, sex and love addiction, drug addiction, and workaholism—are also self-inflicted cuckoos. Like the host parent of the cuckoo chick who becomes a slave to its ever-demanding, never-satisfied demands. So it is with self-inflicted cuckoos because you are a servant to your own internal drives that grow bigger and bigger.

Self-inflicted cuckoos can also be an area of your life that begin as a passion and then slowly grow into an obsession and a crippling perfectionism, which can become the sole source of your identity, worth, and value. As a result, you easily feel envious, resentful, competitive, and prideful or push yourself too hard and endure dangerous levels of stress. Examples include being passionate about a project, a ministry, or a career.

The cuckoo arises when your life becomes out of balance and your relationships, mental health, and physical health are affected. Your marriage suffers, you do not spend as much time with your children, you experience chronic fatigue or other unexplained medical symptoms, you are not sleeping well, you struggle with bouts of depression, and you are anxious most of the time. These are all signs you could have a self-inflicted cuckoo in your nest even though you are passionate about what you are doing. We become driven by our performance instead of driven by our purpose.

Toxic thinking patterns such as overthinking, overanalyzing, and obsessing to the point where we cannot make simple decisions as well as feeling overwhelmed and losing our peace and joy are self-inflicted cuckoos. These toxic patterns create an illness of introspection where we live in our minds rather than in our behaviors. This paralysis-by-analysis mentality keeps us stuck and trapped in cuckoo land, believing the lies we tell ourselves. Toxic-thinking cuckoos suck the joy out of our work, relationships, and life. Simple things become extremely complicated and crippling as we imagine worst-case

scenarios and rehearse conversations with people to seek some type of control. However, the more we try to control our circumstances, the more out of control we feel.

Regardless of what your self-inflicted cuckoo might be, you do not realize it is in your nest, yet eventually you become your own worst enemy. The most important thing to understand about the self-inflicted cuckoo is this: you deceive yourself into believing these behaviors will protect you. Your unconscious mind seeks to protect you from feeling pain or experiencing failure and rejection by keeping you in predictable, familiar patterns. Although self-inflicted cuckoos help you feel better in the short term, they are imposters that leave you feeling worse because those patterns are harmful, not helpful. You become consumed by feelings of inadequacy, low self-esteem, and shame as you strive to perform, please, and perfect your life away.

Think of self-inflicted cuckoos as self-erected prisons holding you hostage—you are a prisoner of your own insatiable appetite—yet the door to your prison is open although you do not realize you are free. Hence the nature of the cuckoo. They are sneaky. They resemble what you want. They look as if they belong in your nest, your life. But they are imposters. Remember, the process is subtle at first and you are deceived into thinking things are OK, especially because the self-inflicted cuckoos appear to be good things on the outside. Not until later do you realize you are being held captive by the things, and your true purpose never manifests at all or does not reach its fullness. Essentially your own eggs never hatch and don't come to life, and you have a nest full of imposter eggs that mimic what you want but are not truly what satisfies your heart's deepest desires. Something is missing in your life, and you can't quite put your finger on it. Until now.

The Root of the Self-Inflicted Cuckoo

We are often our own worst enemy because of these self-destructive tendencies and habits we do not acknowledge and refuse to quit. This is because self-inflicted cuckoos are often a symptom of a deeper-rooted issue that needs to be recognized and addressed. This is the time to be honest with yourself, others, and God about the true source of your pain that is hiding beneath the empty promises of your self-inflicted cuckoo.

Self-inflicted cuckoos are a distraction and deceitfully promise to protect you against painful emotions or a fear of failure, rejection, and abandonment. A wounded heart full of fear and unmet relational needs will direct you toward other things to fulfill and satisfy you.

Self-inflicted cuckoos seek to satisfy you when you experience perceived feelings of failure, loneliness, boredom, shame, or disappointment within yourself. Perhaps you lost your best friend, you're recently divorced, your child left home for the first time, your husband is working all the time, or you were diagnosed with an illness.

Maybe you had a painful breakup and turned to shopping as a distraction, and like the cuckoo, it grew bigger and bigger, and now you are making poor financial decisions. Or you turned to binge-watching shows when you lost your job so you could avoid feeling afraid, and now you are spending an inordinate amount of time watching shows and procrastinating about looking for a new job. Or you started a new company and began comparing yourself to people on social media who had a bigger platform, and you lost your passion and joy. You are trying to please an audience based on what others are doing and lost your unique voice as a result, and now you are doubting your purpose altogether. Or you are checking your online dating profile incessantly and neglecting your current

relationships with your family, church, and friends because you feel ashamed of being single. At night you have one more glass of wine, and now you cannot go to sleep without it or attend social functions in a sober state.

What are your self-inflicted cuckoos? List them here:

We all have self-inflicted cuckoos. It is part of being human. We each have underlying wounds that await God's grace and truth to cleanse and to heal. It is important to give ourselves grace and have self-compassion as we learn to identify and let go of these destructive behaviors and toxic thinking patterns. Know deep down the truth that we are loved, worthy, successful, needed, and wanted. As we go through the healing process, it is important to give ourselves permission not to do the healing process perfectly. Even if we have moments where we spend too much time online or have too many glasses of wine, it is OK. We can always make a new choice next time the opportunity presents itself to say no to our self-inflicted cuckoo and to say yes to feeling the pain of that moment and realize we do not need to fear the pain any longer and hide from it.

An Invisible Enemy Becomes Visible

Being unable to point our finger to the suffering we experience is one of the most painful experiences a person can encounter day after day. For this reason, the Cuckoo Syndrome represents an invisible, self-destructive pattern and a compilation of symptoms that hides from your awareness until you find a name for it.

Regardless of whether you have an unhealthy relationship cuckoo or a self-inflicted cuckoo, the Cuckoo Syndrome is an imposter and a counterfeit purpose.

Whether you are hosting the relationship cuckoo or the self-inflicted cuckoo, they are an invisible enemy, a blind spot. You do not know they are right in front of you. As stated, they are initially disguised as a good thing or a healthy person, or else you wouldn't find yourself in this dynamic in the first place; you would have known right away.

Think of the Cuckoo Syndrome as an autoimmune disease that is not always visible even though the internal pain exists. The body mistakenly attacks itself. The disease is weakening the body and creating internal damage. This is similar to a cancer in which the rapid creation of abnormal cells invades the body and has the potential to spread throughout. I have had many clients who were suffering from chronic pain who said they felt as if they had an invisible disease. The earlier these diseases can be detected, the sooner treatment can begin. And so it is with the Cuckoo Syndrome.

The Cuckoo Syndrome exists beneath the surface; its invisible wound and associated pain erode your strength, hope, and purpose. Eventually you find yourself in a conundrum, depleted, shattered, exhausted, and believing it is too late. You find yourself more and more in the constant company of anxiety, stress, depression, and addiction. Hidden within your soul is lingering confusion, insecurity, and fear that haunt you about your needs, wants, and desires.

Breaking free from the Cuckoo Syndrome starts by bringing this invisible enemy to light by naming who or what your cuckoo is and how you allow it to show up in your life. We spend a significant portion of our lives fighting the wrong enemy, hiding from our true selves, and wondering why we continue to remain stuck

and unfulfilled. It is largely because the real source of the problem is invisible to us.

Much of our lack of awareness is contributing to our cycle of suffering. This realization is not an easy one, and it is not pain-free, but living your life according to the cuckoo's demands and rules is certainly not a pain-free process either. Just because you are aware of the cuckoo dynamics in your life, relational or self-inflicted, they will not automatically disappear, but they will no longer remain hidden and powerful. The healing process requires hard work and facing the true source of your pain in conjunction with God's help and the help of others so that freedom and wholeness arise.

Addressing this invisible enemy and its associated wounds allow the healing process to begin. As you recover the lost parts of yourself, new energy awaits you because you are no longer allowing the cuckoo to dictate your happiness, steal your purpose, run your life, and drain your energy. Hope for your dreams and heart's desires that were smothered by the cuckoo is rediscovered and reignited. Your relationships improve as the toxic stronghold of the cuckoo struggle loosens its grip over your life so you are no longer held captive.

CHAPTER 4

THE CUCKOO OF LOSS

The Paradox of Grief

No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear.

—C. S. LEWIS

WE ALL EXPERIENCE LOSS. ANOTHER COMMON EMOTION we bury is sadness in the form of grief. Grief is a deep sadness and reality-based emotional reaction to loss. When we avoid our grief, it becomes a cuckoo in our life by bringing additional suffering to an already painful loss and eventually steals our joy.

With my clients, I have found that grief is the most debilitating and painful emotion and therefore the most feared and avoided. This is understandably so.

A few times each week I spend my break between clients in my childhood neighborhood, which is less than a mile from my private practice. No matter what changes I go through, good or bad, this neighborhood is always there. It never changes, and this brings comfort. Not that my childhood was all wonderful; it wasn't. In fact, it was quite painful and traumatic at times. As I sit on the bench across the street from the house where I grew up, my home until I was fifteen years old, I think to myself that Charles Dickens said it best: *It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.*

I consistently sought refuge by being outdoors, running through the woods, playing in the creek, riding my bike, creating forts, and catching fireflies. When I wasn't spending time with friends, I spent much of my early years alone with my imagination, which was lit up in my own inner world.

Now I walk the sidewalks of my childhood neighborhood and long for something I can't quite identify or articulate. There is a deep sense of desire, an ache. The seasons of my life come and go despite my yearning for time to stand still in this moment, yet I know in my heart I cannot stay. This is no longer my home.

When I was growing up, my grandmother (Ga-Ga) lived across the street from my house. She was my safe place throughout my childhood and early teenage years before she

passed away when I was sixteen years old. They say nobody is perfect, but *she* was. I still have a handwritten note she left on my dresser one morning: “You are the very best of everything.” When my home life became unsafe, I sought refuge at her house and often stayed the night. We had a familiar routine, and I cherished every minute we spent together. After bath time I would change into one of her nightgowns, instead of the pajamas I had packed, because they smelled like her. I would act silly and prance around the house; she never cared what mood I was in. I could always be myself. It was just me, no parents or siblings to interfere during our special times.

I would lie next to her each night after I had my sugar cookies and milk, and she would run her fingers through my hair for hours until I fell asleep. For years she sat in the same spot on her sofa, every afternoon, watching television while I was outside rollerblading, skateboarding, riding my bike, and playing with friends. It gave me such comfort and security to know she was right across the street.

Ga-Ga was diagnosed with liver cancer and her health deteriorated rapidly. One afternoon as I was preparing to leave for cheerleading practice, I stopped by to see her and had a feeling it would be the last time. As I looked at her in the hospice bed while I stood in the doorway, I debated staying and not going to practice, telling her how much I loved her and sitting beside her. I left instead. She died that evening, only three months after her diagnosis. She was only in her seventies. I bottled up my pain while others were grieving around me. I was numb. I sat with my family at her funeral and wondered why I couldn’t shed a single tear.

It was one of those traumas that left a very deep mark on me. Something died inside of me.

Unknown to me, on the day I left for cheerleading practice, I had flipped the switch to Off. That switch was my emotions.

Sadness. Pain. Fear. Anger. It was easier to live in denial and bury my pain.

Soon after, intense guilt crept in, and for years I was haunted by the memory of not having had a last goodbye with her.

I was not able to put a voice to my grief. Therefore, it did not go away. For years I lost myself. That carefree, imaginative, creative little girl with the pigtails who could live joyfully outside her circumstances was gone.

Scripture reveals a powerful truth about joy and sadness; they have a connection.

Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy. (Ps. 126:5)

Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning. (Ps. 30:5)

For I will turn their mourning to joy, will comfort them, and make them rejoice rather than sorrow. (JER. 31:13)

I never allowed myself to cry, so I never reaped joy. The cuckoo of my unresolved grief grew larger and larger as the years passed. I did not notice it for almost a decade, but the sadness did not leave; it was buried and slowly eroded my joy over time. After my grandmother passed, my family would gather in our living room and watch old videos of Ga-Ga while they cried and laughed as they relived the memories we shared with her. I would leave the room immediately before they pressed Play. I thwarted my own process of healing, and I never knew God as comforter in my grandmother's death. I had mastered the art of cutting off my feelings in earlier pain I had experienced as a child.

Grief and Abuse

Before our present grief experience, we learn very early, as children, to cut off our emotional pain and anger when abuse takes place. This is a survival and coping mechanism. When you are told you are at fault, it is not safe to feel and express the pain inflicted by abuse. That is what abuse does to a person; it causes shame. You learn to analyze your abuser instead of feeling your pain. That's an attempt to prevent the abuse from happening again, even though the abuser is unpredictable. This is why grieving our present losses is so important; it can connect us to past unresolved pain and shame to bring healing to those wounds.

Being in an abusive relationship with a cuckoo creates an environment of shame and fear. Because the cuckoo deceives and manipulates, we often question our reality as they blame us for things that are not our fault. They also make excuses for hurting us. Even if their current relationship with their cuckoo is not abusive, many of my clients still experience grief in relationships with a cuckoo. This is because, at a deep level, they have lost themselves by taking care of the cuckoo who consumes all their time and energy, thus chronically neglecting their own needs and wants. The cuckoo relationship dynamic is costly as they lose their own heart's desires, hopes, and dreams while they are being smothered by the crushing weight of the cuckoo.

The Outcome of Unresolved Grief

Loss, however, is as normal as breathing when we avoid our feelings of sadness or do not go through the grieving process. Sufferings such as anxiety and depression are common outcomes. In addition to creating suffering, unresolved grief sabotages joy. It is not possible to selectively numb our emotions, because when we numb painful emotions, we numb the positive emotions too.

When we do not embrace the grieving process, we lose our joy. For this reason, joy entails vulnerability because we must risk and develop courage to face our sadness.

Due to their unresolved grief, my clients live in fear of being hurt again, which drives them to take back control and self-protect by closing their hearts to everyone surrounding them. This defense mechanism prevents them from experiencing truly rewarding and intimate relationships with others.

I've discovered that avoiding the grieving process becomes the undercurrent of much pain being manifested in unhealthy relationships, sabotaging behaviors, and addictions. The outcome of not experiencing your grief can become a self-inflicted cuckoo. Grief is not an isolated emotion; it carries with it a wide array of pain, such as sadness, guilt, fear, anger, and doubt. Suppressed pain does not disappear. It only grows deeper, and we become vulnerable to developing ways to numb our pain to cope.

At times, avoiding emotional pain can manifest in physical pain within our bodies because at a deep-seated level it can seem easier to locate and feel physical pain rather than complex emotional pain. I have witnessed countless ways my clients avoid grief, but the emotional pain eventually manifests in their bodies as chronic fatigue, migraines, back pain, muscle tension, insomnia, and other unexplained medical symptoms that no doctor can diagnose with a physical cause.

Confusing Grief

Sometimes we are unexpectedly hit with grief upon making positive decisions, such as ending an unhealthy relationship, leaving a job that no longer brought fulfillment, or moving to a new place we are excited about. Confusion sets in because we are sad about something seemingly progressive and optimistic. We might think to ourselves, *Did I make a mistake? If this is something I wanted to*

do, why am I so sad? We might begin to doubt ourselves and even God. *Am I crazy? Did I not hear God correctly?*

We grieve when we lose, even if the loss is a good thing. By facing the reality of our loss, we can grieve what has passed and embrace what we have.

There is a process connected with grief, because losing someone or something is not an occasion or an event. And it does not happen just once. It whispers to us in unexpected ways and moments that take us off guard. Allow those waves of sorrow to wash over you and be certain that joy is near and will lift you back up again.

Sadness to Joy

The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. (Ps. 34:18 NIV)

In my case, nearly a decade after Ga-Ga's passing, I unexpectedly found her purse in my mother's closet. It had remained untouched since the last time she used it. The purse still smelled like her. I made the life-changing decision to open it and pull out each item. I was surprised by the number of tears that poured out with each memory. I allowed the waves of sorrow to wash over me. The toothpicks, her red lipstick, her Juicy Fruit gum, the lollipops from the bank, her perfume, a prescription bottle, and grocery lists.

It was as if someone flipped the switch to On after having been off for so long. Much to my surprise, I felt relief. I experienced God's presence, comforting me like a warm blanket. It wasn't too late after all. In fact, I was right on time. The intense pain of years of unresolved grief flooded back to me, and God used that moment to bring healing. The good news was, although my joy

was missing for years, I have a redemptive and powerful God who was able to restore my joy and who now allows me to help others on their journey of grieving.

Now, in my mind's eye, I can see Ga-Ga with her glasses hanging around her neck, her bright red lipstick, and her beautiful smile. There was such warmth to her. Her presence brought peace and assurance that everything was OK.

As I share this memory now, my heart still aches to recall it. Before Ga-Ga's passing, I had never known anyone who had died, and it never occurred to me that someday my grandmother would no longer be a vital part of my everyday life. The greatest gift a person can give you is to show you are loved no matter what, you have a safe place you can call home, and you can be yourself without fear of judgment.

Ga-Ga modeled for me the heart of Jesus and what a relationship with him can be like. I do not have my Ga-Ga anymore, but I do have and will always have her memory and an experience of Jesus as my shelter, strong tower, and very present help in time of need (Ps. 46:1).

Grief Is Part of Your Story

Throughout my clinical career, I have learned a powerful and validating truth about grief after meeting with countless clients who came to me presenting secondary symptoms of depression and anxiety, a feeling of being stuck and finding no relief from medication. Because of my own struggles with grieving, rather than solely focusing on my clients' specific symptoms of anxiety and depression, I now ask them to share with me the story of their loss. The loss might be of a family member, a relationship, a job, a home, a dream of marriage or children or a career that never happened for them, or an ongoing relationship with a significant other who has left emotionally while still being physically present.

Healing occurs when my clients feel they have permission to not expend any more emotional energy trying to figure out why they are still grieving or why they are not strong enough to move on. As I mentioned earlier, choosing to grieve in the first place is the most powerful step. Grief is cyclical, and the pain can manifest itself in different ways that can bring confusion if you do not realize grief consists of multiple layers that involve healing. Grief is neither linear nor a black-and-white experience.

Grief is about giving yourself permission to experience the loss in the moment you feel it and not to rationalize it away, not to try to be strong or beat yourself up. “I should be over this by now.” “What’s wrong with me?” It has taken me quite some time to realize, softly and simply, those moments are not a time for self-diagnosis; there is nothing wrong with you.

The loss of my grandmother is part of my story to preserve and to embrace, not a shameful event to hide in the past. It is part of who I am, and it always will be.

Happiness Is Situational, Joy Is Relational

Happiness is situational because it is dependent on our circumstances. Happiness is externally focused. Joy is an internal state of being that is not dependent on our circumstances. I define joy as a deep-seated place of abiding in our hearts and souls. Being joyful does not mean you are always happy; we can have joy during painful situations, such as loss. Happiness is fleeting, and joy flourishes not only when things are good but also in difficult times.

Joy is rooted in our faith in God, who is bigger than our circumstances. The beautiful part about joy is that we do not have to bring it about in our strength. Joy is dependent on our relationship with God, and he is full of compassion and comfort. A prevalent Greek word for “joy” in the New Testament is *chara*. *Chara* means “joy, calm delight, or inner gladness.” The word is

also connected to *chairō*, which means “to rejoice,” and *charis*, which means “grace.” True joy comes from our relationship with God and relying on his grace to help us overcome painful trials. We can express our grief and pour our hearts out to God when we experience pain.

Choosing joy means choosing to embrace grief. As stated in the Scripture passage at the beginning of the chapter, those who sow in tears shall reap in joy. God promises to turn our mourning to joy and to comfort us. Mourning consists of feelings, and being comforted requires something we need comfort from, our pain. Pain is an inevitable reality of loss, and joy is an inevitable reality of grief.

The Paradox of Grief

The paradox of grief is that it brings joy. It restores our hearts and brings healing to our souls. Grieving is necessary; it is good and cleansing. The lie we believe is that grief will leave us in despair, so we fear it rather than embrace it. Grief can feel unwelcomed, unexpected, and inconvenient. But I invite you to make the choice to grieve and allow the waves of sadness to roll over you.

These realities about grief can either frighten you or free you. I invite you to surrender your feelings of fear, dread, and doubt and replace them with the hope and joy that will come.

Your life is a masterpiece.

Grief is just one piece put in place precisely by God.

CHAPTER 10

THE RELIGION CUCKOO

Twisters of God's Word

*For pride is spiritual cancer: It eats up the very possibility
of love, or contentment, or even common sense.*

—C. S. LEWIS

A SILENT EPIDEMIC

The religion cuckoo is a silent yet serious epidemic in Christian evangelical churches and communities who provide ill-advised counsel and label it as biblical. Based on both my personal and professional experiences, church leaders provide cuckoo counsel by twisting the Word of God according to their own pain, hidden agendas, lack of knowledge, or from a place of fear in order to control. These can include pastors, ministers, priests, lay counselors, elders, mentors, or Bible study leaders.

This chapter discusses three primary ways in which I've found the religion cuckoo shows up for people: a law-based system of rules, dealing with mental illness, and emotional and religious abuse.

My Religion Cuckoo Story

As a child, I saw my parents' relationship embed into churches and religious systems where the religion cuckoo was prevalent, and this profoundly impacted their marriage and my life. It was damaging for both my parents and me.

As I mentioned at the beginning of chapter 1, a pivotal moment for me was when I learned about the moment my father threatened to kill himself if my mother left him. It would not have been out of character for my father to make this threat with no intention of making it a reality. My mother and I have not spoken often about that moment and the incredible mark it left on my humanity. I couldn't have expected what would have happened in that moment for my parents. My father must have been in a desperate state. He must have thought about finding any way out of his suffering, and of course I do not think he had any intention of killing himself.

As far as I can tell, my parents had spent many years in counseling, both pastorally and professionally, to improve their

marriage. As a child and as a young woman, I had no context or understanding or experiential appreciation for what they must have gone through. I only remember feeling afraid.

Their divorce was the end of the end. The end of all the confusion, fear, misrepresentation, and fighting.

And I felt an overwhelming sense of relief.

As an adult and as a professional counselor myself, I understand these fears and complex emotions that show up in my clients' hearts. Although my parents' divorce was painful for many reasons, my mother, siblings, and I were able to feel safe in our home for the very first time because my father was no longer there. I was free from the continual cycle of trauma and suffering and living under a dark cloud of dread, shame, pain, and fear.

My own journey of healing coincided with my parents' divorce at a particularly difficult season of my life. I sat in the church waiting room, bouncing my leg up and down, trying to ignore my racing heart and sweaty palms. *What am I doing here? I should just leave. Wait, I am only meeting with the pastors as a favor to Mom. She knows I am hesitant to this idea because of past confusing church experiences, yet she said the pastors here are different. She feels supported and understood. After all, she has been through so much. The least I can do is this favor for her.*

I have to admit I was curious. Could these people really help me the way they helped my mother? My mind drifted back to painful memories related to both counseling and the church. *I can't wait to get out of here.* Before I could finish my thought, my name was called. I immediately felt my guard go up. What initially began as discussing my parents' divorce gradually became about me and my pain. After that, I sat on that sofa every week for a year.

I had grown accustomed to the way they brought Jesus into every conversation, as though he were another person in the

room. They talked about him the way I would about a beloved father, a good friend, someone I really wanted to know.

The confusing and distant God I perceived at times during my painful childhood became my closest companion, Lord and Savior, caring Father, and the love of my life. In all my years at church, I had never experienced people with such contagious joy. Initially, it was something I couldn't identify, but I knew it was missing from my life, and I wanted to experience that deep-seated joy of the soul.

I began to feel the presence of Jesus in a real, tangible way. Although I had grown up in church and attended Christian schools, not once did I vividly experience a personal and intimate relationship with Jesus until that time in my life. I had only experienced religion, but from that moment forward I knew I belonged to him. I was his precious daughter, and this revelation was far more than the intellectual answers I was searching for. I had a relationship with the Creator of the universe. I had an encounter with the presence of Christ.

Needless to say, my hardened heart toward counseling, God, and the church began to soften, and my pain no longer held me captive. I had been set free from the religion cuckoo's snare.

Rules of Religion Over a Relationship with Jesus

Removing the religion cuckoo in my own life enabled me to have a relationship with Jesus, receive his grace, and know his compassion. The religion cuckoo elevates rules above relationship and uses the Scripture and the law to try and control people, eliminating the idea that we are a community learning from one another and evolving in our understanding.

Many evangelical churches and Christian communities operate in a religion void of a relationship with God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. People falsely believe their acceptance

from God and their church leaders is based on their behavior, obedience, and performance. It has become a passion of mine to educate people on the difference between religion and relationship.

It is important to note that I am not inferring that all religion is a cuckoo. Religion can be a beautiful supplement to an authentic relationship with God. Many Christians embrace religion as an outward form of an inward faith (attending church services, praise and worship such as singing, communion, baptism, and prayer). But I am specifically critical of toxic religion as a cuckoo when it is used to control, generate fear and intimidation, and manipulate others.

There are some churches, Christian counselors, pastors, and people in ministry who counsel from a place of control rather than from a relational place of truly knowing the other person, their story, and their pain. They are more concerned with following the rules and being “right.”

The religion cuckoo shows up as a modern-day Pharisee mindset and behavior patterns. During Jesus’s ministry he regularly came up against the religious rulers of his day, the Pharisees and Sadducees. When Jesus was healing people and performing miracles, the Pharisees and Sadducees tried to oppose his anointing by reminding him that he was breaking the rules of the religious-based system of their day.

Their purpose was to accuse him and eventually destroy him, and they tried to accomplish this by holding him to their interpretation of God’s law. The apostle John described this in his gospel: “For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (1:17).

For we are not wrestling with flesh and blood [contending only with physical opponents], but against the despotisms, against the powers, against [the master spirits who are] the world rulers

of this present darkness, against the spirit forces of wickedness in the heavenly (supernatural) sphere. (EPH. 6:12 AMPC)

Although we no longer have the physical presence of Pharisees and Sadducees, there is still a legalistic, accusatory, and religious spirit that operates in our churches and communities that seeks to render the body of Christ inactive and ineffective.

The kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of living power (1 Cor. 4:20). Religion offers no power to heal and set free; there is no living proof of anything real. In this way, the religion cuckoo seeks to control people through fear by holding them to the law that governs their behavior. Essentially, they are all talk, following rules, and have no power to touch the hearts and lives of people.

The religion cuckoo is based on the law and creates suffering by robbing us of the freedom to live by the Spirit, abiding in our purpose, and experiencing a life of joy. The apostle Paul said that Jesus “has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor. 3:6 NIV).

The religion cuckoo is a performance-based system of rules adhering to a particular set of beliefs and practices. The religion cuckoo was invented for people to interpret for God what he meant to do rather than coming directly to him in relationship.

People long for what is real and authentic. Why adhere to a church or religious community that provides no hope, no experience, no transformation, and no real meaning to life? Jesus is after our hearts, not a system of man-made rules.

These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules. (MATT. 15:8–9 NIV)

The Pharisees had no understanding of the Father's heart. They loved the law more than they loved Jesus. Jesus's ministry came from a place of compassion. The religion cuckoo brings guilt and condemnation and the constant reminder that you are never good enough, followed by feelings of inadequacy.

Jesus said, "You search and investigate and pore over the Scriptures diligently, because you suppose and trust that you have eternal life through them. And these [very Scriptures] testify about Me! And still you are not willing [but refuse] to come to Me, so that you might have life" (John 5:39–40 AMPC).

Even Jesus differentiated between the Scriptures testifying *about* him and our willingness to come *to* him. How do we come to him? Through relationship. By being authentic and vulnerable, through revealing our pain, our brokenness, and our genuine emotions. Searching and investigating the Scriptures is necessary, as it provides us with truth and tells of God's character and nature.

The Holy Spirit illuminates the written Word and makes it come alive on the inside of us in the context of intimacy with Jesus. What are you looking for? Religion or relationship? Jesus shows us the way. He exposed the religion cuckoo in the Pharisees' and Sadducees' teachings while healing the brokenhearted and setting the captives free. Jesus was in the business of breaking the man-made rules of his day and following the purpose of his Father.

The religion cuckoo can manifest itself in many areas of life, such as in parenting, sexuality, and other places that are too big to discuss in this book. Instead, I am focused on how the religion cuckoo shows up in relationships by trying to control what happens in marriage and, specifically, regarding mental health issues, divorce, and emotional and spiritual abuse.

If you are single or in a committed romantic relationship, this chapter is significant for you by helping you to understand healthy

marriages and how to deal with mental illness. This chapter also addresses the warning signs of when the church is providing ill-advised counsel and labeling it as biblical. This is especially important if you plan on getting married and there is a strong possibility the church will play a role in your premarital counseling.

The Emotionally and Religiously Abusive Marriage

Another way the religion cuckoo shows up in relationships is through emotional and religious abuse. Countless clients come to me after having seen numerous pastors, professional Christian therapists, and lay counselors, or they come to me referred by their pastor or church ministerial staff hoping I will fix the wife or husband and “heal their marriage.”

What none of these counselors or ministers realizes is that one spouse is being emotionally and/or religiously abused. They are in an abusive relationship, and the ill-advised church counsel is actually feeding their cuckoo dynamic and deepening their suffering.

What Is Emotional Abuse?

In my counseling, I’ve observed that the evangelical church has been rather passive and quiet about acknowledging the reality and legitimacy of emotional abuse, especially in marital relationships. My goal is to advocate for these men and women who have been harmed, shamed, and neglected by their church leaders and religious communities.

Emotional abuse is a pattern of behavior in which one person attempts to control, intimidate, and manipulate another. Emotional abuse causes serious trauma and has a significant impact on a person’s mental health. As with all cuckoos, my clients do not recognize this invisible enemy is right in front of them, because emotional abuse is not easily recognizable. Emotional abuse is a difficult form of abuse to detect because the harm being done is

not physical. The wounds of emotional abuse are invisible. Many clients have said, "It would be easier if my partner would just hit me or cheat on me so at least I could point to that so people would understand my pain." This is because the church does not recognize the pain and harm of emotional abuse as being equally as devastating and harmful as physical abuse.

Emotionally abusive tactics include humiliating, belittling, verbally assaulting, name-calling, criticizing, and shaming. Emotional abusers attempt to isolate you from your friends and family. They can neglect you by purposely and vindictively withholding love and affection as a form of punishment. They can be extremely jealous and falsely accuse you of cheating. They constantly monitor your behavior: whom you go out with, where you go, how you dress, and how you spend money. They can threaten to leave you or abandon you or even threaten suicide if you do not act the way they want you to. They attempt to thwart your purpose, your professional goals, by instilling self-doubt. Ultimately, as with all cuckoo relationships, your life revolves around them, and pleasing them becomes your purpose.

The religion cuckoo pretends that emotional abuse is not valid. Its ill-advised counsel says you can leave someone only if your partner cheats on you or hits you, but they can emotionally abuse you until you are severely mentally ill. And even in cases of physical abuse, the religion cuckoo will encourage men and women to forgive and give more chances while the violence at home escalates. They do not realize the abuse is going to escalate without intervention. They believe the person should come in and get prayer and a scolding from the pastor or elder board and everything will be fine, and then they send the wife or husband and children back home to a spouse who is escalating the abusive behavior.

What Is Religious Abuse?

Religious abuse is one of those topics that is rarely discussed and often disregarded and avoided in the church. In our culture, *religious abuse* and *spiritual abuse* are often used interchangeably. Spiritual abuse occurs when another person tells you how to behave, what to believe, what to think, and how you should feel by exerting their power to control you. Ultimately your own thoughts, feelings, and beliefs are not permissible and you could be punished.

Spiritual abuse encompasses all religions and occurs across all populations. Spiritual abuse can take place in a variety of settings. It does not just happen in churches; it can happen in the workplace, in the home, and in school systems.

For this chapter I will be focusing on religious abuse, which is a form of spiritual abuse in the evangelical church, and how it shows up in marriage. Religious abuse occurs when a spouse or church leader uses God and Scripture (twisting God's Word) as a disciplinary tool or a weapon to control, intimidate, and manipulate another person.

Religious abuse happens when Scripture or beliefs are used to shame or humiliate you as well as coerce you into giving your time, energy, or money that you do not have or want to give "for the purpose of ministry" or "because God has called you to."

Religious abuse also entails spiritualizing another person's emotions by telling them their feelings are evil, sinful, or wrong. For example, if a partner is expressing anger toward the other partner in a healthy manner, they are told they have "a spirit of anger" and need prayer. Or a spouse tells their partner they are still having difficulty trusting them after having been lied to repeatedly, and they respond, "You need God to heal you of your distrust and bitterness. You still haven't forgiven me."

Religious abuse also happens when your church leaders or partner is using Scripture to control your finances, clothing, sexual intimacy, relationships, and important life decisions, such as where to live or whether or not to have children.

Under the toxic weight of the religion cuckoo, you lose yourself to another person who deceives, manipulates, and controls you for their own selfish agendas. Your own thoughts, feelings, and beliefs are dismissed or criticized if they do not benefit the other person or religious organization. The religion cuckoo trains a person to ignore his or her true self in exchange for their religious teachings and scriptural ideas. They want you to ignore your own inner, spiritual, moral compass. Eventually you lose the freedom to think for yourself.

The religion cuckoo operates under the lie that other people have the answers for you, and if you do not accept their beliefs or ideas, there will be terrible and very personal consequences. Anytime we are being disconnected from the conscious awareness of our innermost being because we are being coerced by another, there is a religion cuckoo in our nest. We need to honor the deepest part of our spirit and soul as sacred and precious. Do not allow the religion cuckoo to smother and destroy your eggs. Protect them.

The Issue of Abuse and Divorce

When I meet with clients who are in an emotionally and religiously abusive marriage, I've discovered that when physical abuse or infidelity is not occurring, men and women receive cuckoo counsel from their church that divorce is not an option, because divorce is a sin and God hates divorce. These men and women are already suffering the pain of abuse, and now they also feel they are a sinner and disobedient to God if they leave their abusive spouse.

Rather than helping them deal with the emotional or religious abuse and even identify that abuse is happening in the relationship, they are told to try harder, fight for the marriage, work toward reconciliation, God can do miracles, stay in the marriage for the sake of the children, pray for healing or God's intervention, if you just do such and such your spouse will come around, he says he is willing to change, just give her more time to heal, or ask God to help you be patient. Meanwhile, the religion cuckoo ignores the traumatic experience of the partner being abused by their spouse.

The reality is that the spouse is in an abusive marriage, and the truth is that God hates abuse. Emotional and religious abuse *is* abuse. My clients have said, "My pastor believes divorce is only an option if physical abuse or infidelity is taking place in my marriage." Physical abuse is not worse than emotional abuse. *Abuse is abuse*. And infidelity and physical abuse does not trump emotional abuse in the case for divorce.

In these cases, the cuckoo idolizes the marriage unit and ignores the spouse and their experience of abuse. The lie is that God cares more about the marriage than the person and their suffering. The religion cuckoo uses the marriage as a weapon to control the person's decision to divorce an abusive spouse and therefore makes a mockery of marriage. Emotional and religious abuse is not God's intent for marriage. Marriage is a covenant and not an idol to elevate above painful realities occurring in the lives of each spouse. God does not manipulate us, as his children, into submission via control and fear.

In fact, I have found in working with clients that emotional abuse has a deeper psychological impact than physical abuse because it is an invisible wound. The lies, control, manipulation, and confusion involved in all three of these happen on a daily basis. Physical abuse, although extremely painful for obvious

reasons, is recognizable, but this is not always true for emotional abuse, which is part of the suffering so many endure.

In my treatment of clients, I have observed that divorce most often happens when one or both spouses refuse to do the necessary work required to change their toxic behaviors. There is no better indicator of change and reality than time and action (behavior). If one spouse is emotionally and religiously abusing the other and will not admit it or seek help or change their behavior, they are not submitting to God's will for the covenant of marriage, and they are not loving their spouse the way Christ loved the church.

A Story of Emotional and Religious Abuse

Laura came to me hesitant and highly anxious for her first counseling session. She tensely sat on the sofa and explained that she had recently left her husband, Graham, the associate pastor of a large evangelical church, and she was staying with a friend.

She explained that she was overwhelmed with guilt and shame over her decision to leave her husband. Laura said it was the most difficult decision of her life. "I am a Christian woman leaving my husband," she cried. "I've learned at church all these years that God hates divorce, and that divorce is a sin."

In that initial session, I asked her to share with me why she had left, and she very timidly whispered, "I'm not being physically abused or anything, and as far as I know Graham has never been unfaithful, but I don't feel safe and neither do my children." I gently asked her to elaborate.

The church leadership became aware that she and Graham were having marriage issues. They instructed Graham to seek marriage counseling. Out of an obligation to his pastoral duties, he agreed. Laura and Graham began seeing a licensed marriage counselor. The counselor diagnosed Graham with narcissistic personality disorder and identified his behaviors toward Laura as abusive.

Laura said that during the therapy sessions Graham was quiet and agreeable, but when they returned home he was furious and told her that she had disrespected and humiliated him in front of the counselor because she lied. "I am a pastor! How do you think this makes me look?" He accused her of twisting the truth to make him look bad and said the counselor did not understand their "unique" situation. Graham ended therapy.

At church, Graham explained to the head pastor that he and Laura no longer needed counseling and that everything was fine. Laura was devastated as Graham's abuse continued to escalate at home. She felt trapped. After all, Graham was very well liked and respected in their church community. Laura had to keep everything about their life a secret, and from the outside it appeared as though they had the perfect family.

Laura's friend was relentless in getting her the help she deserved. It never occurred to Laura to seek counseling on her own until her friend recommended her to me. When she told Graham, he was concerned but told her to spend her sessions addressing the many unresolved issues from her past that were the cause of their marriage problems. He told her she was not trying hard enough or fighting to fix their marriage.

After listening to her painful and heart-wrenching story, it was apparent to me she had been emotionally and religiously abused. After she shared her story, I encouraged her to write down all the hurtful things Graham had ever said or done to her and their three children and to bring her list, however long or short it was, to our next session. I purposely did not share with her the clear signs of emotional and religious abuse. My hope was that the exercise would bring it to light and she could see it for herself, which would give her confidence and clarity.

During her next session, she read through her list as she relived all the horrific memories and experiences that occurred

over many, many years. The emotional and religious abuse was like the death of a thousand cuts to her soul.

Tears streamed down her cheeks. She said, “I really felt like I was crazy all these years. Now I see the truth.” That moment marked the beginning of her healing process and journey to freedom.

Mental Health Issues and Church Counsel

Part of the cuckoo counsel in churches is that they believe they are equipped to deal with these incredibly complex problems that people are dealing with when the church has zero clinical training on the brain, the nervous system, and the attachment system. Church leaders have no clinical, psychological, and professional education of how the human body and psychology works.

This is another religion cuckoo dynamic because the church leadership does not know anything about mental illness, but they pretend and operate as if they do. They try to use faith and prayer to deal with mental health issues. They wouldn’t do that with cancer. They wouldn’t do that with a broken leg. They wouldn’t do that with diabetes. But for some reason, when it comes to mental, emotional, and relational issues, church leaders believe they know what to do and how to counsel people. They inappropriately use their spiritual and theological authority to deal with the most intimate and vulnerable issues of the heart and the soul.

There is a difference between inner healing, spiritual direction, and pastoral counseling and professional counseling regarding how to deal with relational, mental health, and emotional health issues. Using inner healing by bringing Jesus into traumatic or painful memories can be helpful to people, but these methods can take a person only so far. Essentially, they are addressing the spiritual component, not the psychological. These two are different things and they each have a role, but unfortunately the church keeps trying to do the psychological role.

As discussed in chapter 3, “The Cuckoo of Not Feeling Your Feelings,” emotional work is an essential component in the healing process. I have discovered with my clients that they have been sent the message at church that they should fear or dismiss their emotions because emotions are negative, wrong, and even sinful.

Many religious and church leaders believe and teach that our emotions are irrelevant to our Christian life or perhaps an obstacle to our faith or that our emotions should be disciplined or controlled. The truth is that our emotions do not cause the problem; it is our defense mechanisms against feeling our feelings that trigger our pain. God created us biologically with emotions for a purpose. We cannot grow spiritually beyond our emotional immaturity, because we are stuck emotionally.

I do not recommend that people go to their church for counseling. Most pastors have had maybe a class or two in which a module addressed counseling. They have no clinical training on the neurobiological ramifications of trauma or addiction or mental illness and how that affects people.

I cannot emphasize this enough: *Do not seek the church for counseling.*

If you decide to involve your church in your relational issues or for premarital sessions as a requirement for a pastor to marry you, the final section in this chapter provides some warning signs and specific questions that need to be asked and answered. If you are reading this and you are already deeply involved in counseling with your church, ask if they have a professional counselor referral. If they do not, begin the process of researching and finding a professional counselor on your own.

A Story of Mental Illness in Marriage

Samuel was suffering in his emotionally abusive marriage for years. His wife was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, and she was

no longer open to pursuing therapy as she did at the beginning of their marriage. She stopped counseling and would regularly go off her medication. She was unwilling to get help medically and psychologically. She emotionally neglected him, moved to a different bedroom, stopped having sex with him, and was not willing to do the necessary work to change.

Samuel and his wife spent many years under the counsel of their church leadership. The church denied and never addressed the severity of his wife's mental illness and how it impacted the marital relationship. The church leaders and lay counselors advised him to continue to pray for her healing. That is spiritualizing, not psychotherapy.

He came to his first counseling session with me, and I asked him what he wanted to work on in therapy. Samuel said, "I want to fix my marriage. Nothing seems to help and things are getting worse."

After sharing with me the context and background of his story and previous church counseling experiences, I asked, "How are you feeling?"

"I feel stuck. I'm feeling lost and confused. I don't know what to do about my marriage."

I responded, "That must be hard, yet those are all thoughts you shared with me; none of them is a feeling. Can you tell me how you are feeling right now?"

"I feel broken," he said while looking down at his shoes.

Here again he is sharing a thought and not a feeling. By disconnecting from his feelings, Samuel also disconnected from me. He saw himself as broken instead of his marriage as broken. "I realize you say you feel broken. Are you a broken person? Or is your marriage what is broken?" I asked.

He responded, "I've done everything I can to please her and help her. She didn't used to be this way. When we first got

married, she really enjoyed my company. We had fun together. I don't know what I did wrong. I know she can be better."

I helped him understand that he was in denial. That he was lying to himself that his wife's issues were his fault. By embracing this lie, he is against the truth. The truth was that his wife did not want help, she did not want to change. Remember, our defense mechanisms, such as denial, are the lies we tell ourselves to avoid our painful emotions.

He was entertaining a fantasy of an imaginary wife who would love him, get help, move back into the bedroom, communicate with him, and be a happy family.

He did not want to feel the intense anger and sadness he was feeling. He did not want to accept the reality of the marriage he was in. He wanted to relate to his imaginary future happy marriage and share his testimony of redemption and healing that his church encouraged him to pray for.

I asked, "What are you feeling toward your wife?"

"I just don't understand why she won't get help. Why she stopped taking her meds. Why she won't come back to the bedroom. Why she won't talk to me anymore."

Again, he was thinking and not in touch with his feelings toward his wife. I shared, "You don't have to understand why she does those things for her to do them. It doesn't need to make sense to you for it to make sense to her. Whatever is happening does not need your understanding. It exists whether you understand it or not."

As his counselor, speaking the truth in therapy is not a lack of empathy or compassion. It frees people from their lies.

He responded, "I never thought about it like that. I just don't want to give up. I want this to work out. I'm a loyal person. I can't help it."

"Can we accept that you want this to work when she doesn't?" I asked.

A tinge of sadness came over him. “Well, I guess I just keep hoping things will change. I pray about it all the time.”

“You mean you keep wishing *she* will change,” I said.

By telling Samuel the truth, I reminded him of who he is, namely, the man he had neglected in order to please his wife.

“I guess so,” he timidly said as he looked away from me.

“Seems like you keep hoping for a healthy wife who will accept help instead of a mentally ill wife who rejects treatment, who does not want help, and who is not willing to do the necessary work to change.”

Samuel believed he was loyal to his wife, but in reality he had been loyal to his fantasy of her changing and choosing him.

I repeated the question. “How do you feel toward your wife?”

He paused and eventually answered, “I am angry with her. I am also angry at God.”

I asked if he would like to spend some time looking at his anger. As a result, we were able to process his deep-seated feelings of anger that he had buried for so long.

He said, “I feel ashamed that I am not being loyal to my wife and my children by having a voice and stating my needs and boundaries.”

Denying his reality by living in a fantasy of loyalty was the true source of his pain, blocking out truth and creating suffering. By avoiding his pain, he could not see the lies he believed: he was a failure as a husband, it was his fault, and he had not loved his wife enough. All of this had tortured him for years. And the truth was his wife had already left. She was the one who abandoned the marriage and gave up, not him.

I said, “It seems you take your anger toward your wife and direct it back on yourself, resulting in shame. You say you are stuck, but perhaps it is the lies you are believing of not being loyal that are keeping you stuck. In reality you are a loving and caring husband and father.”

Tears began to pour down his cheeks and became deep sobs. “I guess I am afraid.”

His breakdown revealed he was beginning to accept the reality. Although painful, our breakdowns of our lies and defense mechanisms lead us to a breakthrough of deeper truth. Truth brings freedom. It does not break us. It heals us even though it is scary.

“Hope deferred makes the heart sick” (Prov. 13:12). Samuel kept hoping his wife would change. He waited and waited and suffered and suffered. Later in therapy we discussed that for a decade he had waited for her to become someone else. The hard part was facing how she had rejected, neglected, and abandoned him for years and then blamed him. Thus, she had divorced him years before without his realizing it.

As Samuel waited for her to become better, healthy, and happy, he punished himself, believing he was broken, a failure, and yet his marriage lacked intimacy on every level. He called this loyalty. Now, he was learning to embrace the facts, the truth that she had left him many years ago.

Samuel began to take full responsibility for the life he created, even though it was a hard reality to face. The role of rescuer was easier, believing “I can be strong and do the work for the both of us.” Although that sounds pure and righteous, Samuel became empty within his hopeful fantasy that he could fix his wife’s mental illness. He lost himself and was not living in the truth. He was living in a cuckoo relationship under the church’s ill-advised counsel, which labeled it as biblical.

Questions and Warning Signs

What should you do when you realize you’re dealing with a religion cuckoo?

Speak with a trusted friend or family member about your emotionally or religiously abusive situation and pursue

professional counseling. For the reasons mentioned above regarding mental health, do not go to your church for counseling. Furthermore, professional counselors abide by a code of ethics and licensing standards specifically designed to protect their clients from harm.

If you are thinking of joining a church or religious community or seeking professional counseling from a therapist who is a Christian or if you are in an abusive relationship and considering divorce because the abuse continues, the following are important questions to ask your counselor or church leadership before beginning a counseling relationship or becoming a member:

- What are your beliefs on emotional and religious abuse?
- Do you believe that emotional abuse and religious abuse are abuses?
- Do you believe that emotional and religious abuse are just as painful as physical abuse or being cheated on?
- Do you believe emotional abuse and religious abuse are grounds for divorce if my spouse is unwilling to change their behavior and continues to abuse me?
- Do you believe I am disobeying God, that I am a sinner if I consider divorcing my abusive spouse?
- Do you believe I can allow the Holy Spirit to speak to me, hear his voice, and trust my heart in this counseling process?
- Do you believe my emotions are created by God and are important and relevant to my spiritual life?
- Do you believe I have to submit to my spouse if my partner is emotionally or religiously abusing me?
- What does your counseling process entail? Are there certain truths or nonnegotiable beliefs I need to be aware of?

Here are some warning signs signaling that the church is providing ill-advised cuckoo counsel:

- The counsel you are receiving seems inconsistent with the character and nature of Jesus. For example, you feel shame or fear with your counselor. You are being told not to trust your emotions, to control them, and that they are sinful. You feel afraid to question your pastor or counselor and give your opinion.
- You feel the church has taken the side of your abusive spouse because they cannot see the reality of abuse. They insinuate your relationship with God is not as valid as theirs. They use their authority and Scripture as a weapon against you to intimidate you. You feel ashamed, as if you are doing something wrong, when you are not abiding by their rules or taking their advice.
- You are told you are not fighting hard enough, praying enough, or trusting God enough in the relationship when your partner's abusive behavior continues with no consequences. You are told that God is teaching you a lesson about patience and long-suffering rather than addressing your partner's abusive behavior.
- When expressing your desire to get a divorce, as painful as that may be, you are told that God hates divorce and you are a sinner, while they ignore the abusive behavior of your spouse. You feel as if you are acting in disobedience to God when you have a voice in the session, disagree, and do not do exactly what you are told.
- They tell you that you have "unhealed issues" and that you need to be healed when you are stating facts of the reality of your abusive situation. For example, you share your anger about an abusive comment your partner made, and you are told, "You have a spirit of anger. We need to heal

you of that.” You unexpectedly find yourself as part of an intervention and you are being coerced into a situation where you are outnumbered.

The therapeutic process can seem overwhelming. Take it one step at a time and do not go through it alone. There are trustworthy counselors who are experts in their field, and they will advocate for you and help to create an effective strategy for you to obtain healing and break free.