

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

THE CUCKOO SYNDROME

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

ANDREA ANDERSON POLK

LICENSED PROFESSIONAL COUNSELOR



The Cuckoo Syndrome
The Secret to Breaking Free from Unhealthy Relationships,
Toxic Thinking, and Self-Sabotaging Behavior

Copyright © 2022 Andrea Anderson Polk

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publishers, except by a reviewer who may quote brief passages in a review to be printed in a newspaper, magazine, or journal.

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.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked (AMP) are taken from the Amplified Bible. Copyright © 2015 by the Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. (www.Lockman.org). Scripture quotations marked (AMPC) are taken from the Amplified Bible Classic Edition. Copyright © 1954, 1958, 1962, 1964, 1965, 1987 by the Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. (www.Lockman.org). Scripture quotations marked (KJV) are taken from the King James Version. Scripture quotations marked (MSG) are taken from The Message. Copyright © by Eugene H. Peterson 1993, 2002, 2008. Used by permission of NavPress. All rights reserved. Represented by Tyndale House Publishers, a Division of Tyndale House Ministries. Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide; www.zondervan.com. The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.®. Scripture quotations marked (NLT) are taken from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2007, 2013, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Published by Forefront Books.

Cover Design by Bruce Gore, Gore Studio Inc.
Interior Design by Bill Kersey, KerseyGraphics

ISBN: 978-1-63763-041-9 print
ISBN: 978-1-63763-042-6 e-book

To My Mother

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

CONTENTS

AUTHOR'S NOTE	11
INTRODUCTION: ARE CUCKOOS REAL BIRDS?	13
CHAPTER 1: THE CUCKOO IN YOUR NEST	19
<i>Do Your Relationships Resemble Cuckoos?</i>	
CHAPTER 2: STUCK IN CUCKOO LAND	47
<i>How to Deal with the Cuckoos in Your Life</i>	
CHAPTER 3: THE CUCKOO OF NOT FEELING YOUR FEELINGS	73
<i>What Happens When You Avoid Emotions?</i>	
CHAPTER 4: THE CUCKOO OF LOSS	91
<i>The Paradox of Grief</i>	
CHAPTER 5: WHAT FEEDS A CUCKOO?	101
<i>Lies We Believe and Defenses We Use</i>	
CHAPTER 6: THE FEAR CUCKOO	127
<i>A Subtle Cuckoo in Disguise</i>	

CHAPTER 7: THE PERFECTIONISM CUCKOO 149
When Passions Become Obsessions

CHAPTER 8: WHEN YOU BECOME A CUCKOO 165
Making Yourself a Project to Fix

CHAPTER 9: CUCKOO COUNSEL 177
Who Hurts You and Who Can Help You

CHAPTER 10: THE RELIGION CUCKOO 199
Twisters of God’s Word

CHAPTER 11: A PROTECTION AGAINST CUCKOOS 223
The Gift of Anger

CHAPTER 12: THE ANTIDOTE TO CUCKOOS	237
<i>Discovering Your Purpose</i>	
CHAPTER 13: HOW TO LIVE A CUCKOO-FREE LIFE	251
<i>Embracing Desire, Pursuing Passion, Creating Vision</i>	
CHAPTER 14: LET YOUR EGGS HATCH!	271
<i>Treasures from Darkness</i>	
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	283
NOTES	287

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 *chairo*, 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 9

CUCKOO COUNSEL

Who Hurts You and Who Can Help You

*When someone shows you who they
are, believe them the first time.*

—MAYA ANGELOU

NOW THAT WE HAVE IDENTIFIED WHAT OR WHO IS YOUR cuckoo, whether it be an unhealthy relationship or a self-inflicted cuckoo like perfectionism, you might be wondering, *Who is the right person to help me?* You do not have to know the answers to all the questions flowing through your mind (that is the role of a professional expert to assist you), but you must begin the process by asking for help so you are not alone.

As a clinician, based on more than a decade of experience counseling people who have a cuckoo in their life, it saddens my heart to state the reality that so many people who provide counsel (professional therapists, ministry leaders, and pastors) provide cuckoo counsel. By that I mean, rather than helping people, their counsel inflicts harm.

This chapter addresses the following issues based on my experience of treating cuckoo-counsel-inflicted clients:

- What makes a therapist a good therapist? How do we define a healthy counseling relationship?
- Do I stay or leave the counseling relationship?
- What does the counseling process entail?
- What do you say to the person in your cuckoo relationship about counseling? Do you ask them to join you? Do you tell them you are going?
- How do you identify the cuckoo's toxic behavior in a counseling session?
- Is my counselor a cuckoo counsel? How do I identify the counselor's cuckoo behavior?

What Makes a Therapist a Good Therapist? How Do We Define a Healthy Counseling Relationship?

Many of my clients seek counseling after having been in therapy for years and suffering without experiencing significant symptoms

of relief and without lasting healing after multiple therapists have failed. After a few sessions with me, they say, “I’ve felt a freedom here that I never experienced in three years of counseling with my other therapists after just three sessions with you! How do you do that?”

My response is simple: “I’m not trying to fix you.”

So what makes a therapist a *good* therapist? A good therapist has gained innate wisdom from the pains of their own life that can be gained in no other way, but there is more to it than that. To fully answer this question, I need to clarify the purpose of therapy. A therapeutic relationship cannot be purely a method, a technique, a regimen, or something done to us. Something must happen *through* us. As we discussed in chapter 8, “When You Become a Cuckoo: Making Yourself a Project to Fix,” you do not need to be fixed. You are not a problem to solve or a project; you are a person. The purpose of therapy is to help you, not fix you.

A good therapist does not simply discuss our thinking patterns, because therapy is not a head-to-head relationship or simply an intellectual conversation where the client does all the talking and the therapist does all the listening. Therapy requires a working relationship of mutual engagement between the client and the counselor.

A good therapist does not rely on knowledge alone, because awareness and understanding in and of itself is from the head, which will not heal the deep pain in our hearts. It is not an intellectual knowing that sets us free; healing comes from experiential, intimate knowing. Head knowledge can never be a substitute for relationship. I invite my clients into a relationship, which is the foundation for successful therapy. This is how lasting healing occurs.

The Purpose of Therapy

Symptoms such as anxiety, depression, stress, and relationship difficulties are what bring my clients into therapy. Many of their symptoms are rooted in the ways they have learned to avoid the truth: the truth of who they are, who others are, and who God is. Avoiding truth will never bring freedom; it will only bring suffering. Beneath a client's suffering are the lies they are believing and the emotions they are burying. A counselor helps us to see those lies that are invisible to us and the suffering they inflict. Then we can face the truths we have been avoiding, the truths that bring freedom.

By bringing these emotions to the surface so healing can occur and by exposing the lies to truth, my clients embrace the reality of their authentic selves. They begin to take the steps to confidently face their cuckoos. I work closely with my clients and take a very active role in addressing how they are stuck and suffering that is thwarting their purpose so they can live an abundant, meaningful life.

The reason I pursued my purpose as a counselor is because of my own experience of healing through counseling. People helped me face my pain in a safe and compassionate environment. It was the truth I learned during that season of counseling that set me free and brought tremendous healing. Because of my painful childhood I needed someone to sit with me while I sat with myself; I was used to enduring and carrying my pain alone.

Counseling is a relationship, not a formula or a technique. How can it be a technique when we're dealing with the heart and soul of another person? When I counsel my clients, we do not dialogue about their circumstances. I access their deep, innermost emotions and desires. As a counselor, I do not relate to my clients' symptoms or their diagnosis or their personality disorder. There is a person beneath those issues with a story of personal pain.

What is the purpose of therapy? Truth. And if it does not lead to freedom, it's not truth. How do I know this? Jesus said so:

*Then you will know the truth, and the truth
will set you free. (JOHN 8:32 NIV)*

We learn the truth in therapy. We learn the truth by embracing it in the reality of the present moment. My clients experience issues such as anxiety, depression, chronic stress, and relationship problems. These issues are opportunities for them to know the truth. I invite them to come out of suffering through the lies they tell themselves and the defenses they use that block out truth. Therefore, they come out of hiding from others, from God, and from themselves. They not only discover who they are but they can begin to walk into it and the truth it reveals, the truth that sets them free.

Will the Cuckoo in My Life Ever Change and Get Better?

The two most common questions my clients ask in therapy when they are in a cuckoo relationship are “Will the person in my life ever change, heal, or get better?” and “Should I stay or leave the relationship?” I address the answers to these questions so they are aware of any cuckoo counseling that does not align with the truth.

As I mentioned in chapter 2, “Stuck in Cuckoo Land,” my response to the first question is for them to stop waiting for people to change and change yourself instead.

I do not disregard the fact that the unhealthy people who hurt you can change if they are willing to do the work, but the client must exert their own will in this process and the cuckoo must want help. The cuckoo might say they really want to change, but time will tell if their actions correspond to their words and they change their behavior. I advise my clients not to wait around if this

does not happen, because they will be living in denial and false hope, which breeds deeper pain and suffering.

Hope deferred makes the heart sick. (PROV. 13:12)

People hope that the person in their cuckoo relationship will change at their desired time and in a certain way, and when that does not happen, their hope is delayed or postponed to some future time. Expectations are created, and they place their hope in the person changing when there is no change occurring. One of the major themes of this book is that *we suffer when we avoid truth, when we avoid reality.*

The reality is that we have been protecting ourselves from seeing the truth that the cuckoo will not change, even for us, no matter how much we have done to help them. Therefore, we suffer by being disappointed and disheartened, heartsick. We begin to believe we are not worth it. We feel rejected. We create defenses. “Maybe their behavior is not so bad . . .” We gradually become weary, impatient, depressed, weak, unable to stand strong. We become dependent on the cuckoo dynamic changing rather than changing ourselves and surrendering the cuckoo to God. You can never take the place of the Holy Spirit’s conviction in someone else’s life. You can only focus on your healing journey.

Letting go of expectation does not mean you lose hope or faith; it means you are protecting yourself and using wisdom by no longer setting yourself up for heartsickness and suffering. You will most likely have to go through this painful (but necessary) reality check, a grieving process, a loss of expectations, and put the focus off your cuckoo’s behavior and back onto yourself. You have a choice to stay a victim to waiting and suffering or begin a new process that leads to freedom.

*Do not remember the former things,
Nor consider the things of old.
Behold, I will do a new thing,
Now it shall spring forth;
Shall you not know it?
I will even make a road in the wilderness
And rivers in the desert. (ISA. 43:18–19)*

Take a moment and ask yourself, *Am I willing to let God do a new thing in my life? Will I choose to know it? Can I place my hope in God instead of placing my hope in the other person changing?*

Should I Stay or Should I Go?

Now that you have identified that you are in a cuckoo relationship, you might be wondering, *Do I stay in the relationship or leave the relationship?* The answer is neither straightforward nor black and white. It is complex and nuanced. Many of my clients do not know what to do, and they become stuck in the land of indecision. My goal is to help them make the decision to stay or leave, but not from a place of being stuck.

Assigning Meaning: False Beliefs Around Staying or Leaving. It is important to note that assigning meaning to your decision to stay or leave or allowing someone else to do so is harmful. Placing assumptions on such a life-changing decision can create shame, doubt, and confusion. Some believe that leaving the relationship is the healthier choice to make or the stronger choice to make. The same could be said about staying. Staying means you have no self-respect or means you are weak. But all of these responses are unhealthy. They are false beliefs, false judgments. They oversimplify very complicated issues.

Every person is different. Each cuckoo relational dynamic is different. Labeling a person's decision to stay or go as unhealthy

or healthy, strong or weak is destructive and untrue. The decision to stay or leave can be made in unhealthy ways. Based on the available research in the fields of trauma, attachment studies, and neuroscience, these decisions are not simple because there are complex systems in place stemming from childhood even.

Obsessive Overthinking Keeps Us Stuck. For my clients, thinking about the answer to the staying-or-leaving question becomes all-consuming, emotionally overwhelming, and mentally tormenting. This is because they are obsessing mentally in their effort to figure it out. In addition to an already painful relationship where a cuckoo dynamic is present, there is an underlying layer of suffering in thinking about whether to stay or go.

This defense mechanism is our mind's way of keeping us preoccupied. The toxic thinking pattern keeps us stuck. It is paralysis by analysis. We become stuck (paralyzed) with indecision because of our constant overanalyzing. Obsessing in your mind to figure out whether to stay or go prevents you from making the decision to stay or go. You are living in your head rather than living in your behavior. Our obsessive thinking is distracting us and keeping us busy; therefore, we falsely believe we are doing something. Obsessing is not doing, and it is blocking us from doing, from staying or going.

Essentially, we are thinking instead of doing. Our behavior will expose the cuckoo dynamics and help us determine what is happening in our relationships rather than feeling stuck in a tormenting mental bubble. Obsessive overthinking is also a form of projectizing, making yourself a project to fix rather than focusing your attention on the relationship and the other person involved. You become the cuckoo when you are frantically fixating on the stay-or-go question. You are feeding your own insatiable appetite of needing an immediate answer and

inhibiting yourself from making the decision to stay or go from a healthy place.

The Fear Cuckoo Rears Its Ugly Head. After meeting with countless clients who are stuck, I've discovered that fear is the driving factor in their place of suffering with indecision. The primary battle is with fear of uncertainty, fear of the unknown, and fear of abandonment. This is due to the enormous emotional, spiritual, financial, and relational implications that are painful and scary. When thinking about leaving a cuckoo relationship, they face new and different challenges, such as how their decision will impact their family and children, career, and living situation.

They are afraid of losing the relationship. They are afraid the other person is not willing to do the necessary work to change. That is a very scary reality to face. As a result, they become stuck, obsessively thinking about all these dynamics instead of taking action because of fear. What will happen if I set a boundary or stand my ground or say no or lose the relationship? Being stuck in your head about this decision is a way to avoid such big, scary, and hard questions.

Do the Work: How, Not What. Rather than focusing your attention on *what* to do, stay or leave, it is important to focus on *how* you make the decision. The how consists of the behavioral steps you have been applying (as discussed in chapter 2), which are setting boundaries and using your voice effectively when dealing with your cuckoo relationship. The how is the doing, the what is the thinking. If you do not apply those behaviors to your cuckoo relationship, you will remain stuck. Doing the work of applying those behaviors will guide you toward finding out if you should stay or go.

It is not about *what* decision you are making; it's about the process, the steps you take of *how* you arrive at a decision to stay or go and *how* you do it. Then you have your answer. If the other

person in your cuckoo relationship continues to not honor your boundaries and continues to hurt you, you can say, “You have crossed my boundary of _____” or “You continue to hurt me after I’ve asked you not to _____” or “You are still repeatedly doing _____ after I have told you no” or “If you do this behavior again, then I need you to move out” or “I cannot be in a relationship where you continue hurt me. That is not acceptable for me” or “This is my boundary, so if you do that again, I need to separate.”

Furthermore, remember to stop doing their work for them and to stop carrying the emotional weight of the relationship. Stop allowing them to monopolize your time and watch your life revolve around their insatiable demands. If you continue to give and they continue to take with no reciprocation, that tells you something. When your voice, feelings, and needs are not mutually acknowledged, that tells you something. If they continue to manipulate and control you, that tells you something. If they continue to lie to you and twist the truth, that tells you something.

When you set boundaries and use your voice effectively, you are going to find out what is true in the relationship. You will discover the reality of the other person’s behavior, whether it is a romantic partner, friend, work associate, church leader, or family member. Then you will know whether they are changing or not.

Will they stop keeping secrets from you, neglecting parental duties, cheating, engaging in addictive behaviors, abusing you, or whatever it may be that is hurting you? When you take action steps, it will reveal to you the truth about them, and you can make your decision from a place of reality after having witnessed the facts. You have been focusing on your healing journey and doing the necessary work. Have they? Only you can answer that question based on their actions, their behaviors.

Suffering and Stuck to Focus and Freedom. It takes tremendous courage to do the *how* and to take these steps. You face your fears. Many people do not take the steps because they are afraid to find out the truth about the other person in their cuckoo relationship. They are ultimately afraid of losing the relationship. They are afraid the answer is going to be the painful answer of the person not being willing to do the work. This is a scary reality to accept. But you do not want to stay in a cuckoo relationship just out of fear of losing the relationship. If you are staying because you are afraid, your choice to stay is not a true choice. You are staying because you're stuck and suffering rather than out of the freedom to choose to be in a relationship with this person. That is not how you want to stay.

Leaving a relationship and creating a new life for yourself outside of the cuckoo dynamic must be based on your choice and knowing that you have taken these necessary steps to arrive at that decision as well as recognizing it is apparent the other person is not doing the necessary work to change, get help, or heal. You confidently believe that you are making the best choice for you instead of staying stuck in a cuckoo relationship where you are the only one doing the work, thus continuing the cycle of suffering.

Staying in a relationship must come from a deep inner knowing that you are making the best choice for you. You want to stay out of choice, knowing you could leave if you need to or want to, but you are staying because you choose to be with the person. You love the person, and they are also making the necessary changes to make the relationship work.

The ideal situation is one where we stay in our relationships and our relationships can be healthy. But not all relationships are healthy, and not all relationships are ones you can stay in. Both decisions to stay or leave can be made in unhealthy ways, and both

can be made in healthy ways. Therefore, leaving is not always the better way and staying is not always the better way. You can stay from a healthy place or you can leave from a healthy place.

Remember, it is not about *what* decision you are making, it is about *how* you are making the decision and how you are walking it out. That is what influences whether the decision is a healthy decision that is best for you. How you do it is what is important.

As you grow and learn the truth, freedom emerges, and you can make major relational decisions from a place of empowerment and faith, not powerlessness and fear.

What Does the Counseling Process Entail?

If you find yourself feeling afraid and stuck over whether to stay or leave and are having difficulty setting boundaries, using your voice effectively, knowing your needs, feeling your feelings, that is what counseling is for. You do not have to figure this process out on your own. Accepting the truth that you cannot change the person in the cuckoo relationship, the first step is knowing the only person you can change is you.

It is important to recognize this at the beginning of your counseling process, and you will feel afraid, uncomfortable, and unsure. Do not be deceived into believing the changes you are making in your life are not good just because they do not *feel* good. Bringing awareness to your toxic relationships, thinking patterns, and behaviors exposes the underlying trauma and painful emotions you have buried for years because this is how you have developed your coping mechanisms to protect yourself. Just know that when you start *healing intensely*, you will feel intensely.

Having a safe person sit with you in your pain can help put words to what you have been experiencing, so you no longer feel alone and confused. Just remember, once you begin to do the work, you might feel worse before you feel better.

I experience this with my clients and remind them that feeling worse and uncomfortable means they are making progress. That is something to celebrate because healing is taking place and they are slowly becoming free and unstuck as they allow their hidden issues to come to the light so they can be dealt with.

I tell my clients there is no magic wand. A counselor is not a magician. People are often too afraid to look at their pain because they do not know how to deal with it. So many people do not understand their own suffering. They want their counselor to fix them or fix their cuckoo, and they get frustrated when they realize this is a process that takes time and hard work.

It Will Be Hard, but It Will Be the Right Kind of Hard

Counseling is a safe place to continue to work through the healing process and to go deep and do the necessary psychological and spiritual work as well as create a strategy to evict the cuckoo dynamics from your nest.

Due to being in an unhealthy cuckoo relationship that has left them with a painful and disorienting environment not grounded in reality, many of my clients do not see the truth about who they are. They have believed the lies of the cuckoo that they are unwell, weak, fragile, stupid, and at fault. I help my clients view themselves as strong, capable, wise, and resilient.

They feel out of control and controlled at the same time. They are exhausted emotionally and worn down mentally while they have been taking care of a cuckoo's needs and wants at the cost of their own. They have been deceived and manipulated into caring for this thing that does not belong in their nest, and they do not know what to do about it. They are too afraid to confront the cuckoo relationship, and thus unaware of their tremendous anger, among other emotions, that they have deeply buried. At times, I am the last in a long line of church leaders and counselors

my clients have seen, and none have given them a voice or helped them to see the truth.

An expected part of the counseling process is the tendency to want to revert to old patterns of relating. "This is too hard. I'd rather just go back to the ways things were." This is a normal response once my clients reach a particular point in their therapy, which I call the Egyptian mindset.

After Moses brought the Israelites out of slavery toward the promised land, they had to endure forty years in the wilderness. The Israelites did not like the wilderness. It was intense, hard. They were unhappy, they complained, they were afraid, and they were sorry they had left Egypt. The Israelites were mad at God and mad at Moses, and although they were slaves and were treated terribly in Egypt, it was familiar because they still had food and water and knew what to expect every day.

During their time in the wilderness, God provided them with manna daily and they got tired of eating it. They wanted meat and they could not gather the manna for the next day or it would go bad, which made them feel afraid. They had to wait on God and trust him to provide for their daily needs. They had extreme difficulty placing their faith in God, Moses, or themselves to endure the journey to the promised land and often wondered if there really was a promised land.

The same principle applies as you embark on the journey to freedom in your counseling work. It is intense and can feel scary at times, especially as you begin to confront your cuckoo relationship. Many clients leave counseling because they become too afraid. Often they resume their sessions when their suffering has overtaken them completely or they are in a state of crisis. Fear of rejection and losing the relationship with their cuckoo, whom they love, is normal and to be expected. Like the Israelites, it is easier to go back to what is familiar and comfortable, even though

it is painful, rather than facing the fear of the unknown and the underlying pain that has been buried for so long. It takes courage and endurance, with the help of a counselor, to embrace their wilderness season.

Once my clients stay the course of their treatment, the relief of no longer feeling crazy, being stuck, and trying to fix themselves starts to bring healing. They begin to see their promised land, including the miraculous ways God stepped into their situation and parted the sea on their behalf when they least expected it, when they felt that had reached the end of themselves.

As the client, you must be willing to do the deep psychological work and recognize that the process takes time. Remember, you are doing the right kind of work because you have been doing the work for the cuckoo and neglecting yourself. Now you need to do the work for you.

What Is Right to Say to Your Cuckoo About Counseling?

Do You Ask Them to Join You?

Do You Tell Them You Are Going?

This question does not apply if you are dealing with a self-inflicted cuckoo. If you have a self-inflicted cuckoo, such as perfectionism, chronic stress, or addictive behaviors, you will need to pursue individual counseling. If you know of someone who is in a cuckoo relationship, this section will help you to help them.

It is important to engage the person in your relationship and invite (rather than demand or force) them to counseling for your benefit as well as theirs. You want to create a safe space and an opportunity with an objective third party, a knowledgeable expert and professional. Say to your partner, "I would like us to go to counseling. I have noticed that we have not been getting along." Use the phrase "I feel" as opposed to "You

make me feel.” Gently invite them into this new relationship by making it about the two of you together and enhancing your relationship and communication rather than criticizing, accusing, or pointing a finger at them.

If you feel stuck, I encourage you to ask your counselor, “Based on your experience dealing with _____ [describe your issue here], what do you suggest would be helpful to say to my partner because they are resistant to counseling?”

If your partner adamantly refuses to join you in counseling, then pursue individual counseling and keep your sessions private between you and your counselor. If your partner asks you what you are talking about with your counselor or if you are talking about them, gently let them know you are working on your issues and how you feel. Your counselor will help you address this situation as well and will guide you in the process of developing a strategy. The focus will be on what you are learning about yourself instead of attacking, defending, or placing blame onto your partner.

If you cannot have your partner in counseling (e.g., a boss or work colleague, family member, friend, or church leader), seek individual counseling and ask your counselor to help you deal with this cuckoo relationship.

Cuckoo Behavior in the Counseling Session

If your partner agrees and you begin counseling together, here are some warning signs of their cuckoo behavior that can occur during the sessions:

- They have a tendency to jump from counselor to counselor, firing the therapist if they do not agree with how things are going. (I’ve been fired because they do not want the truth to be exposed and to be held accountable.)

- Their behavior never changes. They know how to talk the talk.
- They are manipulating and deceiving the therapist with their charm and lies.
- They are not teachable and do not take responsibility for any of their behavior.
- They focus the sessions entirely on you and what you are doing wrong.
- They are unwilling to do their part to actively participate. You are the one doing all the counseling work.
- They act a completely different way in counseling than they do at home. They are performing and putting on a show for the counselor and seeking to win the counselor's approval.

Meanwhile, you, the client, feel just as disillusioned or more confused in counseling than you did before counseling. Your intuition is telling you something is not right about the counseling process and how your partner is operating.

Additionally, your partner should not use the counseling relationship with your therapist against you as a weapon at home by twisting the counselor's words to serve their own purposes. If they are in individual counseling and you are not a part of their therapy, do not let them manipulate their therapist's authority by saying, "My counselor told me you are wrong." This counselor may have never met you and is only hearing one side of the story. Finally, if the two of you are in therapy together, and they continue to have solo sessions without you present or separate conversations with your couple's counselor, this is a red flag, because every couple's counselor should have a no-secrets policy to prevent them from building an alliance with one client. In couple's counseling, the couple is considered the client.

Cuckoo Counsel

If it is apparent from your sessions that your counselor is not aware of any of the above warning signs regarding cuckoo-type behavior in the counseling session, and if it's brought to their attention and they disregard your concerns, you are experiencing cuckoo counsel. I would encourage you to use the above warning signs as a guide in your sessions. It is essential to pay attention to those warning signs and bring them to your counselor's attention. Let them know how your partner is behaving at home outside of the counseling sessions. This is especially true if the toxic patterns continue to repeat themselves, even though they are telling the therapist things are going well. If this is the case, I encourage you to initiate a private phone call or request a solo counseling session with your counselor. Let them know how you are feeling at this point in your treatment process.

Give your counselor an opportunity to address the problem. You might feel your counselor and your partner have partnered up and are building a case against you and creating an agenda that is not based in truth or reality. If you find after discussing these dynamics with your counselor that you cannot trust them, trust your intuition. It is OK to end therapy with your counselor. You can say to your counselor, "Thank you for taking the time to work with me, but I do not feel this is a good fit for me. Can you recommend other counselors who specialize in _____ [whatever the issue is]?"

It is important for you to do your research and find additional counseling options outside of your counselor's recommendations. Experiencing cuckoo counsel creates an unsafe environment because you are submitting yourself to their authority in the most vulnerable, emotionally intimate way and trusting their expertise. And if they abuse that authority, you are no longer safe under their counsel.

Below is a list of cuckoo counsel warning signs when your counselor is displaying unprofessional, harmful behavior in your therapy sessions:

- They accuse you of things that are not true, such as “I think you’ve been sexually abused” when this is not based in reality, and your behavior does not warrant such an accusation.
- They tell you that you need medication and label you with a false diagnosis. If this happens and you feel misdiagnosed, seek a second opinion from a trusted psychiatrist.
- They always agree with your partner and take their side. Therapy is not about agreement and taking sides; it is about relationship and collaboration.
- They excuse your partner’s toxic behavior and do not hold them accountable.
- They defend your partner and find fault with you and place the blame solely on you.
- They brag on themselves and invalidate you as a result. “I’ve done this a long time.” “I’m really good at this.” “I know what I am doing.” “I am the expert.” A healthy counselor will never announce how good they are; they will just counsel you.
- They provide you with a personal opinion instead of professional counsel. “I would not want to be married to you.” “You spend way too much time with your children.” “Most couples have sex more often than you do.”
- They are critical of your thoughts and emotions rather than providing a safe, inviting, and compassionate environment. A healthy therapist will address any pertinent issues in a way that you do not feel attacked or wrong for feeling a certain way.

- They isolate and control you by telling you not to engage with or talk to anyone else but them because they see it as a threat.
- You do not feel like a priority. You feel you are wasting their time. They are not truly listening to you. They constantly reschedule your appointments. They seem disinterested.
- They take what you say personally and tell you how they feel as a result. “This hurts me that you would say or feel _____.”
- They give you bizarre homework assignments that make you feel uncomfortable and are not helpful in any way.
- They talk too much about themselves and their problems. They are too vulnerable and develop an inappropriate emotional intimacy with you as a result.

Never hesitate to tell your counselor exactly how you feel about them and how you feel the progress of your sessions is going. I frequently ask my clients, “How do you feel things are going in our time together thus far?” Clients might feel angry toward me over the course of our counseling relationship. This is normal and to be expected. I welcome all of their emotions because I want to be a safe person for them to be themselves and not fear my reactions and to learn to trust their own emotions. The counselor models for the client what a healthy relationship can look like outside of the counseling room.

You do not want your counselor, of all people, to jeopardize your healing process or create more suffering in your life in addition to an already painful cuckoo relationship.

Also note that your counselor does not know you better than you know yourself. Keep in mind that your counselor is not a psychic or a magician. They can only help you based on the

information you provide about yourself. The more open, honest, and vulnerable you are, the more they can help you.

There is such a thing as too many voices. You do not need more complication or confusion, especially now that you are in therapy and under the counsel of an expert professional. Have a few select people whom you trust to bring into your journey. You can also speak to your counselor about how to engage these people in the process and what would be helpful.

I encourage you to not give up. There are wonderful, safe counselors out there who will be able to help you overcome your current traumatic experience in counseling. I have had so many clients with a long history of professional counselors, psychologists, and psychiatrists who have hurt them, and they are afraid of experiencing the same with me. The initial part of our time together is centered on bringing healing from their previous counseling experiences and building trust. The last thing you want is to feel crazier, more confused, and ashamed in therapy.

The next chapter, “The Religion Cuckoo: Twisters of God’s Word,” is dedicated to exposing religious and emotional abuse, specifically how church leaders and ministers can provide ill-advised, destructive counsel and label it as biblical. My clients and colleagues have urged me to write about this because they feel there is very little material available that addresses this issue. They feel strongly that fellow believers, friends, family, and churches, as well as other Christian counselors, need to be better informed.