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# Doors

A Workbook for Male Survivors of  
Childhood Sexual Abuse

Larry Conrad



# Contents

What's Up?	ix
Getting Started	1
Why "Secret Doors"?	1
Finding Your Own "Secret Doors"	3
Taking Control	9
SECRET DOORS	
The Young Me	13
Abusers	27
Abuse	39
After the Abuse	55
Thriving	69
Finished!	85
Concluding Thoughts	87
Where To from Here?	93
Connections	94
Recovery as a Path	96
Progress	97
Looking Back	101
What's in a Word?	103

appreciative of the results as I am. I also wish to thank him for his input on matters of content. Chris has been a superb sounding board, and his suggestions have served to clarify numerous points that required a second look.

The Secret Doors project has had many other friends and supporters, too many to list here, and I am grateful to all of them for their criticisms and suggestions. A number of survivors tried out provisional versions of the workbook and suggested improvements, and several of their loved ones and friends also offered feedback. One comment in particular, from a survivor's son, bears repeating: "Break the silence. Speak your truth."

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## Getting Started

### Why "Secret Doors"?

This workbook adopts an unconventional approach to recovery from childhood sexual abuse, in that its effort to empower male survivors focuses on single short statements by survivors themselves, each addressing an issue that many others also face. As the statements emerge from abuse as lived experience, rather than as an object of study, the resulting images and dynamics are those that survivors will recognize from what they have actually endured. "Welcome to my world," as the saying goes.

Each statement is expressed in a way that stresses the blamelessness of the contributor, and by extension, of other survivors who read that statement and consider it relevant to their own experience and feelings. Hence, while these statements, as a corpus, range broadly over sexual abuse issues, they at the same time focus on a knot of core difficulties that confront survivors from the beginning of their recovery work and continue to do so subsequently. By constantly reframing these problems, the workbook seeks to turn them into powerful opportunities for growth and healing. The essential message of *Secret Doors*, stressed throughout, is that these opportunities are also part of the survivor's world.

The "knot" we're going to address here began with what I call the Why Questions that a survivor so often has: "Why me?," "Why didn't I say no?," "Why didn't I run or call for help?," "Why didn't I tell someone?," "Why did I go back?," and so on. The lies used to deceive and manipulate him may still hold power over him. And perhaps he remembers the reactions of his body to abuse: he may not yet realize that if a boy is stimulated sexually his body will respond, whatever his feelings may be about what is being done to him. As a result – and here's the knot – the survivor may blame himself and experience intense feelings of shame, guilt, fear, and confusion. Such feelings keep him silent (as the abuser originally intended), lead him into harmful patterns of thinking and behavior, and discourage him from seeking support and guidance, no matter how long it has been since the abuse occurred.

When we look back like that, however, we are asking ourselves why, when we were younger, we didn't acknowledge and act on options that may seem clearer to us now. But isn't that unfair? The simple truth is that throughout life we are growing, maturing, learning more about ourselves and the world. However young or old we may be at present, back when the abuse was taking place we didn't possess the knowledge or maturity that we have now. Whatever we or others might think we could have done to prevent the abuse, or react to it in a healthier way, or stop it – we *didn't know* those things.

So if a boy doesn't know, does any option really *exist* for him? If he doesn't understand what is being done to him, or feels powerless to stop it or tell someone safe without suffering consequences he perceives as unbearable, exactly what is he to do? What if the boy doesn't yet appreciate that he has the right to his innocence, to his childhood, to safety at home, school, and play, to reliable responsible answers to his questions about growing up from adults committed to his welfare, and to exploring his sexual feelings with his peers and at his own pace? How can he even begin to protect himself when these rights are violated? And how is he to trust those who can help him when his trust has already been so profoundly betrayed?

To see how unfair it is to judge ourselves, let's consider the hypothetical situation of someone who is injured in a fire and taken to the hospital, where a nurse comments, "Oh, I know that building. Why didn't you just use the Secret Door and escape?" How can the victim reply? If he didn't even know such a door existed, was the choice of using that door available to him? What if he knew about the door but didn't know how to open it? What if life experiences had led him to believe that opening the door would expose him to more fiercely raging flames on the other side? What if he was just too traumatized, frightened, and confused to act?

Some years ago I suggested to some survivor friends that it might be helpful to come to terms with our Secret Doors, approaching them in a way that allows us to recognize truths about abuse that help us now, but which we didn't know earlier in our lives, or could only see in terms that compelled our silence. My thought was that our dialogue would help us to recognize and appreciate how totally innocent and defenseless we all were as children.

The crucial word here is "we." It is very common for a survivor to perceive and acknowledge the innocence of other survivors while blaming and shaming himself when he looks back on similar events in his own life. Why? Because when we recall our own past our vision is clouded and distorted by all the negative feelings and erroneous ideas

that we picked up as abused boys (I will return to this later). Even years after the abuse ends, these feelings and ideas can continue to influence us in thought, word, and deed... until we acknowledge and address them. Sharing our own Secret Doors in a group context, in which each contribution begins with "I didn't know..." – a fundamental assertion of childhood innocence – would encourage that process of resolution. That is, a conversation in which participants are repeatedly framing sexual abuse issues in terms of personal innocence would help a reader to see that this innocence applies to survivors in general, and hence includes him too: not *your* fault → not *our* fault → not *my* fault.

As our dialogue expanded, lists began to take shape. Some of the participants took my suggestion a step further, interpreting it to include aspects of abuse that they remembered as especially traumatic. The dynamic here is that when we see others talking about these things we will in many cases think, "Me too," and as the list extends we will be struck by the enormity of what abuse entails and the utter inability of any boy to face such challenges effectively. In all these contributions survivors were providing their own versions of the very real truth: "I didn't know how totally abuse was overwhelming me."

Others included truths about their recovery: Secret Doors that earlier in their lives they would never have imagined could be true, but which are now making important contributions to their healing. What this shows us is that it often takes a long time for a survivor to believe that things can ever really improve for him, all the while acknowledging that others are clearly making very encouraging progress.

The sense of dialogue helped guys to recognize that the hope and validation they acknowledged for others were theirs as well. Survivors and their allies confirmed how much they felt the discussion had helped them. For some it has been a crucial step in breaking the power that abuse once held over them.

### Finding Your Own "Secret Doors"

Perhaps the experience of these brother survivors can help you too. Read over the following materials when you feel you are ready; try to approach the task when you have time to think and work in peace and quiet. Give some thought to what the best way would be for you to proceed. Do you need your privacy? If so, where and when could you work without being interrupted? And are you sure being alone is a good idea?

Solitude is one thing; isolation is another. Or you may feel you could use some personal support. Who, where, and when?

Either way, consider whether a particular time and place suits you for working on sexual abuse issues. You may have in mind to go through your workbook in the evening, for example, but think back. Many abused boys were victimized at night. If that was the case with you, how will it affect you to review abuse issues at that same time? If you are a teenager living at home and still using the bedroom where you were hurt when you were younger (or are still being abused there), think about whether your room is the best place for you to give serious thought to such matters. It may be that no time or place feels entirely safe, but if that's the case, then all the more reason to find the circumstances and setting offering the greatest sense of comfort and assurance.

What you will find here are five lists of things that male survivors in recovery report that they just "didn't know" about childhood sexual abuse. The topic areas, which I identified at a later point and used to organize the workbook, are:

The Young Me  
Abusers  
Abuse  
After the Abuse  
Thriving

Each statement begins, "I didn't know..." and within each topic the survivor statements are grouped into untitled thematic sections. In some cases you may wonder if an item should have been placed elsewhere, and in fact that was a problem I encountered as soon as I began to organize the materials. In the end I concluded that many contributions could be variously placed depending on the reader's viewpoint and priorities. If you see something that you think belongs in another section, then by all means move it: cross it out where it currently stands and write it down in the place where it works best for you. Or drop it entirely. After all, this is about *your* recovery. Take charge. Find the way forward that best works for *you*.

It will not be easy to confront what you read here, and you will likely find that as you proceed the material seems to become darker and darker. What you are noticing is the impact that childhood sexual abuse so often has. Many survivors confirm that after the abuse ended their problems seemed to worsen. The harm done to an abused boy

can continue to affect him indefinitely, in ways that are difficult to identify and address, and this is why survivors are best advised to confront their issues in conjunction with personal support and professional help. Still, healing and recovery are possible. They are real. The positive results that can be achieved are reflected in the final section of the workbook: "Thriving."

My placement of that section at the end of the workbook doesn't mean that you can only expect positive results in a kind of culminating stage in recovery. Survivors can gain tangible fruits for their efforts at any time. Some of the points raised under "Thriving" were in fact gains the survivor recognized in the midst of challenging difficulties. The chronological difference is that as one moves forward the clearer these results become and the easier it is to trust them and claim them.

If you begin to feel overwhelmed, or just uncomfortable, ask yourself whether you should set your workbook aside and return to it later. You may need to discuss it with your support sources before you give it serious attention. It is absolutely okay if you need a break or find you cannot continue; if recovery were an easy task we would all have been finished a long time ago. In any case, whatever your reactions and feelings, it will be useful to talk through them with an ally, in a support group, or with a therapist.

Try not to skim or read too quickly. If you find yourself doing this you may be dissociating, that is, disconnecting emotionally from the task at hand. Everyone dissociates – every day. When a boy's mind drifts in school, or when a driver doesn't notice his exit come and go on a long monotonous drive, that's dissociation. The guy has "checked out" because his surroundings aren't holding his attention. But dissociation also provides a temporary escape from traumatic events or feelings too overwhelming to handle. As an abused boy do you remember "freezing," or "zoning out," or feeling like you were leaving your body, or like you were observing yourself from elsewhere? That was dissociation, and back then it was a basic survival skill. But there's a tendency to revert to that skill later in life, when experiences or feelings again feel threatening or difficult, and that can be a problem during recovery work. In a project such as this workbook, dissociation can cause us to rush forward just to "get through this," too fast to access feelings and absorb what we're learning.

Don't blame yourself for dissociating: in the moment it's beyond your control. One strategy you can use to "stay present" and give your full attention to recovery tasks is to practice your breathing. If you find yourself skimming or losing focus, stop and take a few long, slow, deep, cleansing breaths. Take a break and walk around the room;

if you have an ally with you, pause and talk about what you're reading and how you're responding to it. If you need to, put your workbook down and do something else for a while. Another strategy you may find helpful is to think of a short slogan you can repeat to yourself as you return to your work. And remember that this is *your* workbook: would it help you to pause and write down a few thoughts?

As a reminder of the importance of staying present and pacing yourself, I have flagged the text at various places to suggest moments when you may want to pause for a few deep breaths and check to make sure you are not rushing or "zoning out." The marginal medallion marking these places bears a slogan I find useful: "Pause; breathe; focus," and the burning candle at the center is a reminder of how complex and varied recovery is as lived experience. Committing to recovery is difficult when we have no idea what we are getting ourselves into; it's like walking into a dark unknown room with only a candle to light the way. When we first enter the room, the candlelight can seem to emphasize the perils and shadows, obliging us to keep to a slower pace than we would like. And yet, that candle is our guide along the safe paths. Use the medallion not only as an opportunity for a pause, but also as a reminder that darkness, ignorance, silence, and inaction are the traditional allies of abuse; truth, knowledge, speaking out, and commitment are important aspects of recovery. Every step forward you take, however seemingly difficult or minor, adds to the light. It's part of thriving.

As you read, give each item some thought and decide if this is a "me too" moment. If it is, check it, or better still, underline it with a pen or highlight it with a colored highlighter. Claim it. Be honest with yourself, and remember that unless you decide to share your work, no one else need ever see it. As you proceed, your own lists of Secret Doors will emerge. Feel free to add items of your own that occur to you; space for such additions is provided at the end of each section.

If you want to add something that feels especially important to you personally, bear in mind that the absence of that item from the lists in this workbook does not mean you are the only guy who has had this experience or feeling. Lists like those given here are inevitably incomplete, and I'm quite sure that if we could ask around about any item you are thinking of adding, there would be a crowd of others who would tell you, "Me too!" That is precisely what happens, by the way, in male survivor retreats and workshops.

Individuality is important to remember when, in the following pages, you encounter survivor statements that do not hold true for you. Suppose, for example, a

particular family member abused you. Places where other survivors speak positively about that person in their own families may trouble you, or at least you will not agree with those statements. That's perfectly okay; it just goes to show that our experiences often differ. Your "vote" on that statement will be cast when you decline to mark it, because it just doesn't apply to you. Or if a statement is so contrary to your own experience that you feel you need to react to it, then again, take charge. Cross it out; don't let it stand in *your* workbook. But try to resist the temptation to obliterate it entirely; later on it may be useful to see what it was that had provoked you.

Try also to use the same pen or highlighter, or at least the same color, as you go through the text. In the future you may want to review how you responded the first time through, and there may be places where you find that your thinking and feelings have changed. Using a different way of marking each time you review your work will distinguish these changes. If you used a green highlighter the first time through, for example, try a red pen if you want to review the text later. At the end of the last section you will find a page where you can date your work and indicate occasions when you returned to review it.

A comment about memory and "triggers" is in order here. The mind finds many ways to protect us, and when a boy is enduring a terrible experience his brain will often go into a kind of "emergency mode," concentrating only on the information it needs right then and there to ensure his survival. The rest of the input it's receiving it does not process and store in an orderly fashion, as it does with non-traumatic memories. Rather, it sets trauma memories aside as unprocessed fragments and vignettes in a part of the brain separate from where it preserves non-traumatic memories. Trauma memories are not retrieved in the same way we would recall, for example, what we had for breakfast this morning. They are "triggered," sometimes many years later, by something that reminds us of that past event. If the perpetrator used a certain cosmetic fragrance, for example, then even years later that scent, or anything similar, may trigger abuse memories, including ones that the survivor has not previously recalled.

So you may find that there are areas where you have no clear memories, and that may feel frustrating, and even frightening. But remember that this has happened because you needed to protect yourself from something you could not understand and against which you had no defense. If you keep thinking "I just can't remember" as you go through your workbook, speak to your supporters or therapist about options for addressing this problem. There are methods that can help to recover memories or to

“bridge” over the areas that you still cannot access. You may even find that recovering old memories is not something you need to do.

On the other hand, you may find that working through these lists “triggers” you, or causes you to recall aspects of the abuse or related experiences in a way that feels more harmful than helpful. These triggered memories can take the form of flashbacks, which can feel very real because trauma memories are raw and unprocessed. The sensory “tags” recording what an experience actually looked and felt like, for example, are still linked to the memory, so that when the memory is triggered it can feel like you are experiencing the event all over again.

If that begins to happen, set your workbook aside, take some time to relax and refocus, and perhaps talk to your sources of support. Don’t feel you have to keep going regardless of how it affects you. There will inevitably be occasions when we just have to set a task aside for the time being, and when that happens you are simply doing what is best for you. That too is part of thriving.

Once you have gone through the lists I hope you will see two things. The first is that you are not alone. A survivor may feel that abuse has left him uniquely damaged or isolated, but exploring this further will show him that many others feel the same way. In fact, behind the issues raised in this workbook lies an important dynamic referenced above. As contributions came in during this project, many of the same points were raised by different guys, sometimes in exactly the same words. So when you see a statement that rings true for you, bear in mind that it may well have been brought up in various forms by many contributors (in some cases, nearly 50).

The discovery that he is not alone is an important one for a survivor, and here I want to pursue a point mentioned above. When a boy or man reviews his own abuse experiences and blames himself in various ways, other survivors will be quick to assure him that none of what was done to him could possibly be his fault. And they are right. Sexual abuse can never be the boy’s fault – not *ever*, not in *any* way, no matter what he thought or said or did. As you go through the workbook you will probably catch yourself thinking, “No way! That was not your fault. How could you have known that? How could you have faced that?” Think about this, because the innocence you see so clearly in those speaking to you in the workbook is your innocence as well. Seeing that he is not alone in his feelings is a crucial step – yet another aspect of thriving – towards challenging the negative feelings a survivor so often has about himself. It’s a stepping-stone to full appreciation of what it means to be a child.

And that is the second thing I hope will emerge from your work. I hope this project will help you to see how many Secret Doors there were for us, and for yourself in particular. We really didn’t know these things, we really didn’t understand what was being done to us, we had no clue what the consequences would be for us later in life, and it was never within our power or responsibility either to stop the abuse or to find an effective response to it. This does not mean that in childhood we were stupid or weak, or that as adults or older teens we failed to “get over it.” It means that as victims of abuse we really were that innocent, and that defenseless. *We were children.* To assert that truth is not to concede any deficiency as males, as much traditional – and very harmful – thinking would have us believe.

Your lists in the first four parts of the workbook will likely seem complicated and difficult, and that is precisely because these issues *are* complicated and difficult. You aren’t struggling because you just can’t do it, but because recovery really is an exceptionally challenging task: progress is often hard to perceive and sudden obstacles are common. And if committing to recovery has taken you a long time, that fact too reflects no shortcoming on your part; it simply demonstrates how daunting such a step into the unknown is.

### Taking Control

Accessing feelings is an essential recovery task, but working through the materials here may seem like you are being swept along in an emotional torrent. This can be problematic since, after all, loss of control in its most visceral form – a boy’s loss of ownership of his own body – plays a central role in sexual abuse. So good recovery strategy will always include efforts to establish a healthy sense of control.

An example will serve to illustrate how important this can be. A question I often hear is this one: “I know the abuse wasn’t my fault – I get it! So why do I still feel so guilty and ashamed?” The answer is that feelings arising from abuse are deep-seated ones that have influenced the survivor’s thinking and behavior for a long time – perhaps for decades if he is an adult. He may know his innocence rationally, but at an emotional level, as the hurt boy who still dwells inside him, he doesn’t yet believe in it or trust it enough to act on it. The truth of his innocence will eventually convince him and become a powerful tool, but that will happen after he has tested it and learned to trust it.

Taking back control, then, is about learning to trust and use facts and ideas that we are beginning to recognize as true and useful, or already know to be so, but still find difficult to embrace.

It may not have occurred to you yet, but just the very act of picking up this workbook is a positive step towards taking control. Ask yourself why you are looking through these pages, or even just reading this introduction. Some of you may be in the state of “quiet desperation” that Thoreau says men live in. Or you may already be questioning the false ideas you learned as an abused boy. Maybe you are wondering what help is “out there” for you. You may be working on your recovery and looking for new resources or ideas. But one thing you are surely doing is admitting to yourself that the abuse is something you need to think about. To one degree or another you are recognizing that the impact of sexual abuse on the life of a boy and the man he eventually becomes doesn’t just “go away” with time. It needs to be addressed. So maybe it’s time – your time – to do something, or something further, to take important steps forward. That growing awareness is an important incentive to claiming a sense of control, and hence is already a foundation stone in your recovery.

The various places where I have suggested a break to focus and breathe are essentially about control, keeping you in a frame of mind that will best promote your work. As a further aid to this part of the project, each section of this workbook has space for marginal notes, which you can use to write down whatever thoughts or ideas come to mind. Each section also concludes with blank pages headed “My Turn to Speak,” which you can use to record your reactions and thoughts. Or something may occur to you later. Either way, remember that you’re not doing this for an audience; unless you decide to do so, you need never show what you write to any other person. You’re doing this for yourself, and in quite immediate ways: research shows that writing is a powerful tool that can help survivors deal with even the most difficult problems that arise as a consequence of sexual abuse.

As you begin to write you may find yourself thinking things like, “I shouldn’t say this,” or “I can’t talk about that,” or “What’s wrong with me; I shouldn’t feel this way.” That’s your Internal Editor at work, the warning system you developed as an abused boy, telling you that you needed to stop thinking about what was being done to you, stay quiet, and focus on the task of survival and ensuring that no one finds out. Now, however, messages like that are obstacles to healing. So if any of them come to mind, just write them down on your page. That is, if you find yourself thinking, “I shouldn’t

acknowledge this one,” or “I shouldn’t write about this,” *write that down*, wherever you are, right then and there, in exactly those words. The Internal Editor *hates* to be exposed, and writing out in words what it is trying to tell you will help to put you back in control.

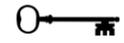
Exactly how you use the “My Turn to Speak” pages is up to you. Perhaps it would help you to write poems. If so, use a page, or several, or all of them, to record verse on these topics. Do you like to draw or sketch? If you do, use the pages for that purpose. Have you found it useful to write letters to yourself or to other people connected with your experiences in abuse and recovery? Perhaps you can use the pages for that purpose (and if you do, remember that these letters are yours and don’t ever need to be sent). Have you been keeping a journal? Maybe this would be a good opportunity for some journaling, on the subject areas of the workbook or any other topic you want to address. Do you participate in a survivor group? If so, would it help you to use these pages for notes and ideas that you can bring up in your sessions? If you’re angry, you may want to use your blank pages as a kind of “mad pad.” It’s okay if your pages are covered with curses and scribbles; you have a lot to be angry about!

The possibilities are practically unlimited. Do what works for you, and be willing to explore new options. Say what you need to say, even if – and especially if – you have never before said such things. Claim the right to speak. Break the silence to which sexual abuse condemns its victims. And do not be deterred. If you catch yourself thinking that no “real man” composes poems, that’s the Internal Editor at work again. Write that thought down to expose the Editor, and bear in mind that until recently in history almost all known poetry was composed by men. If you think you’re an awful artist – well, the point isn’t to create masterpieces, but to take charge. Try drawing with your non-dominant hand; that will allow you to focus on the content of what you draw rather than on its artistry. Writing with your non-dominant hand may also produce unexpected insights. Allow yourself to experiment to see what works for you.

At the end of the final section you will find a page inviting you to record your final thoughts upon completing your workbook. Reflect on that and write down your feelings and reactions when you’re able to do so – if not immediately, then perhaps later on. There is also a place for you to sign and date your work. Take credit for what you have achieved.

All of this will help you gain a sense of control. It may at first seem perilous even to consider any of these options, but in the end what really empowers us and moves us forward are tasks that break the silence and demonstrate that it really is possible to reject

what was done to us and gain the full measure of joy and peace in our lives that was always our right to have. And bear in mind that recovery calls for patience; the most solid steps are usually the smaller ones. Each is important; each plays its role.



As you move forward in recovery there are many books that may be useful for you – I would of course be pleased if this is one of them. But books are not the key to your recovery. *You* are the key to your recovery! Looking at this workbook from that perspective, I hope the work it encourages you to do will allow you to see, and accept, and believe in certain truths more clearly and with more conviction than perhaps you do at present. I hope the experience of using it leads you to a greater feeling of strength and courage, but remember that these resources can't be acquired from a book. One of the tasks in a project like this one is to help you access the strength and courage that you already possess. So with that in mind, let's get started.

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## Secret Doors

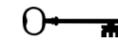
### The Young Me



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What was childhood like before the abuse? Some don't know because abuse began so early in life. Others remember a loving home, security, and happiness; recalling this will help a survivor connect with the boy he was before he was hurt and see that so many of the problems he later encountered were not about him, but were reactions to and consequences of abuse. But others recognize that already before the sexual abuse there were issues that made them vulnerable by causing them to doubt their worth, question whether the world could be safe for them, and feel that they had to struggle for the attention and love that all children need. Despite these differences, however, two fundamental truths unite us. The first is that children deserve safe loving adults in their lives to guide, nurture, and protect them, not just in physical terms, but in emotional aspects as well. The second is that while the circumstances of a boy's life can never make him responsible for the consequences when a predator gains access to him, they can facilitate that access and set him up for abuse. All these points and more are illustrated by what guys recall about "me" before the abuse began.



I didn't know I was happy and safe before he hurt me.  
I didn't know I was always special and important to my parents.  
I didn't know I was really worth loving.  
I didn't know how special I was.  
I didn't know I wasn't a bad boy.  
I didn't know the sadness only came later.

I didn't know I deserved love.  
I didn't know why they hated me.  
I didn't know I was still important even if others mistreated me.  
I didn't know why my friends had loving families but I didn't.  
I didn't know there's no such thing as a worthless boy.  
I didn't know how to stop feeling ashamed of myself.  
I didn't know I wasn't stupid, despite everything they said.  
I didn't know why nothing I did was ever good enough.  
I didn't know how or where to get the affection I needed.  
I didn't know I would give anything for a hug.  
I didn't know it's not love if it only comes at a price.

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I didn't know our poverty didn't make me less special.  
 I didn't know the rats and roaches didn't make me less valuable.  
 I didn't know how to face the humiliation of food stamps.  
 I didn't know my worn-out clothes didn't mean that's all I was worth.  
 I didn't know the hand-me-downs didn't mean I was unloved.  
 I didn't know that "illiterate" doesn't mean "stupid."

I didn't know why people thought a big house must be a safe house.  
 I didn't know our affluence was just covering up the chaos.  
 I didn't know why my parents' social life made me feel so worthless.  
 I didn't know designer clothes could be such a great disguise.  
 I didn't know how teachers in my private school could be so blind.  
 I didn't know why having my own car didn't make me feel better.

I didn't know my broken English didn't make me a loser.  
 I didn't know the color of my skin has nothing to do with my worth.  
 I didn't know I could take pride in my community's music.  
 I didn't know "non-white" doesn't mean "deserves to be poor."  
 I didn't know why it was open season on Black kids.  
 I didn't know that racial, ethnic, and religious slurs are signs of ignorance.  
 I didn't know that bigots express their own fear, not facts about me.

I didn't know how to react to awkward feelings.  
 I didn't know what to do when I got scared.  
 I didn't know I wasn't as grown up as I thought.  
 I didn't know I wasn't tough at all.

I didn't know you should talk when you're scared and confused.  
 I didn't know the right words for talking about tough problems.  
 I didn't know it's not bad to need help.  
 I didn't know it's okay to be so mixed up about everything.  
 I didn't know all boys sometimes feel confused and frightened.  
 I didn't know it wasn't my job to have all the answers I needed.  
 I didn't know seeking answers doesn't mean you're stupid or weak.

I didn't know what sex was.  
 I didn't know anything about puberty.  
 I didn't know that getting erections a lot is normal.  
 I didn't know it was wrong to yell at me for having wet dreams.  
 I didn't know that "wet dream" isn't the same as "masturbation."  
 I didn't know what "masturbation" meant.  
 I didn't know masturbation is normal.  
 I didn't know masturbating doesn't make me bad.  
 I didn't know all guys get confused about sex.  
 I didn't know how to ask my questions about puberty and sex.  
 I didn't know it's easy for a kid to believe wrong things about sex.  
 I didn't know parents shouldn't freak when their son asks about sex.  
 I didn't know it's okay to be curious about other guys.  
 I didn't know it's alright to not be ready for sex.  
 I didn't know it's okay to think some things about sex are disgusting.  
 I didn't know I wasn't weird for thinking sex is gross.

I didn't know it's okay to be gay.  
 I didn't know I wasn't alone in being gay.  
 I didn't know I wasn't a coward for being too scared to come out.  
 I didn't know it's okay for gay kids to feel awkward about sex too.  
 I didn't know no one had any right to call me "fag" or "queer."  
 I didn't know being gay didn't mean I deserved a beat-down.  
 I didn't know why that teacher thought I have no purpose in life.  
 I didn't know why gay students should be banned from the prom.  
 I didn't know why a gay kid couldn't be in Scouting.

I didn't know my body is private: No Trespassing!  
 I didn't know body privacy isn't the same as secrecy about it.  
 I didn't know being a kid doesn't mean someone else owns your body.  
 I didn't know it was my right to decide who touches me and how.  
 I didn't know that no boy deserves to be shamed for his weight.  
 I didn't know it wasn't my fault I was so skinny.  
 I didn't know "athletic" isn't the same as "healthy."



I didn't know older boys didn't have the right to do that to me.  
 I didn't know they weren't accepting me as one of the guys.  
 I didn't know the real reason they let me hang out with them.  
 I didn't know you're not a loser if you say no.  
 I didn't know he was lying when he said, "Just one last time."  
 I didn't know that a friend would mock me while he did this to me.  
 I didn't know he would threaten to tell everyone it was my idea.  
 I didn't know he would threaten to stop being my friend if I said no.  
 I didn't know a real friend wouldn't treat me like that.

I didn't know I could say no.  
 I didn't know I had the right to say no.  
 I didn't know the world wouldn't explode if I said no.  
 I didn't know what else might happen if I said no.  
 I didn't know refusing wouldn't make me unlovable.  
 I didn't know that sometimes "No" is not enough.

I didn't know he didn't care about me.  
 I didn't know he wasn't my friend.  
 I didn't know he wasn't my hero.  
 I didn't know he was really a coward.

I didn't know it wasn't okay for him to want me like that.  
 I didn't know it wasn't up to me to make him happy.  
 I didn't know it wasn't my job to replace his wife.  
 I didn't know it wasn't my job to "help" him that way.

I didn't know he was hurting me.  
 I didn't know how deeply he was betraying me.  
 I didn't know he was using me as a sex object.  
 I didn't know I was just a toy to him.  
 I didn't know he had hurt lots of other boys.  
 I didn't know there were others, same time as me.  
 I didn't know even an animal deserves better treatment.

I didn't know why he brought his friends to my room.  
 I didn't know what I did to make him share me.  
 I didn't know they would want me that way.  
 I didn't know that even crying wouldn't make them stop.

I didn't know loving my mom didn't include sex with her.  
 I didn't know a woman could destroy her own child.  
 I didn't know she had no right to substitute me for my dad.  
 I didn't know what being "Mommy's little man" would mean.  
 I didn't know it wasn't okay for my mom to prostitute me.  
 I didn't know it wasn't my job to sell myself for her drugs.  
 I didn't know no one deserves this, especially not from his big sister.  
 I didn't know what my cousin and her friends wanted to show me.

I didn't know abusers are expert liars.  
 I didn't know abusers are great at confusing kids.  
 I didn't know anyone could make total lies sound like the truth.  
 I didn't know why he smiled when I asked, "Are you sure this is okay?"  
 I didn't know tricking me would be so easy for him.

I didn't know he would start threatening me.  
 I didn't know he could own me by threatening my friend.  
 I didn't know he would use any trick to keep me from telling.  
 I didn't know he would use my secrets against me.  
 I didn't know he needed the secrets so he could keep hurting me.  
 I didn't know they were his secrets, not mine.

I didn't know \_\_\_\_\_.

I didn't know "father" is about lots more than biology.  
 I didn't know I'd ever stop falling for, "She's still your mother."  
 I didn't know I'd finally flip off the excuse, "We have to include everyone."  
 I didn't know I could jettison toxic relatives.  
 I didn't know that "family" could be people who aren't blood relations.  
 I didn't know a true family means those who respect me.  
 I didn't know I would ever get a true family like that.

I didn't know my older brother was also abused.  
 I didn't know he would tell me and apologize when I confronted him.  
 I didn't know he'd say he understands if I hate him.  
 I didn't know he would ask how he could help.  
 I didn't know there are more important things than anger.  
 I didn't know we would tell the rest of the family about our coach.  
 I didn't know I would ever get my brother back.

I didn't know I could ever go into a church again.  
 I didn't know God wasn't angry with me.  
 I didn't know God would never hate me if I told.  
 I didn't know God would know who was really to blame.  
 I didn't know God knows who the predator clergy are.  
 I didn't know it wasn't God's fault.

I didn't know the Church deserves the shame for sheltering abusers.  
 I didn't know I'm not a money-grubber for demanding justice.  
 I didn't know I would stop getting angry every time I saw a priest.  
 I didn't know leaving the Church doesn't mean I'm rejecting God.  
 I didn't know I could ever find a true spiritual path.

I didn't know disclosing would lift such a huge stone off my heart.  
 I didn't know it would be safe to tell my truth.  
 I didn't know that once I started talking I wouldn't want to stop.  
 I didn't know that breaking the silence would set me free.  
 I didn't know disclosing would lead me into a different world.

I didn't know I could tell and my parents would still love and help me.  
 I didn't know my father would be furious, but not at me.  
 I didn't know Dad wouldn't send me to an orphanage.  
 I didn't know I wasn't going to end up in foster care.  
 I didn't know my parents would believe me.  
 I didn't know my parents would understand.  
 I didn't know Mom would still think I'm special.  
 I didn't know I would get huge hugs after I told.  
 I didn't know Dad would say it wasn't my fault.  
 I didn't know I would still be his son.  
 I didn't know he would say he would always love me.  
 I didn't know Mom would apologize for not seeing and not protecting me.  
 I didn't know my sister would burn all our pictures showing the abuser.

I didn't know my wife had already figured me out.  
 I didn't know my girlfriend would still love me.  
 I didn't know my wife would say we're in this together.  
 I didn't know she would keep asking how she could help.  
 I didn't know she would call me at work every day to ask how I'm doing.  
 I didn't know my wife would still want to share our bed with me.

I didn't know I had been objectifying women all those years.  
 I didn't know a strong confident man doesn't need macho masks.  
 I didn't know I would start seeing the insecurity in sexist jokes.

I didn't know I would ever be able to date again.  
 I didn't know a girl would really want me as her boyfriend.  
 I didn't know she would really respect my confidence when I told her.  
 I didn't know I would stop freaking out about being touched.  
 I didn't know a woman could know about me and still love me.  
 I didn't know I could ever have sex without thinking of the abuse.  
 I didn't know I could have sex and still respect myself.  
 I didn't know I could set good sexual boundaries for myself.  
 I didn't know I could stop using sex as a way to prove my manhood.



I didn't know being gay is being me; it's not from the abuse.  
 I didn't know I could ever stop comparing abuse to sex with my partner.  
 I didn't know one day I could be sexual without thinking about "that."  
 I didn't know I could tell my boyfriend, "No, I don't do that."  
 I didn't know that boundaries aren't boundaries if I set them to please others.

I didn't know my friends would believe me.  
 I didn't know so many friends would stand by me.  
 I didn't know my best friend would check on me and support me.  
 I didn't know a friend I told would call me later and say he was abused too.  
 I didn't know I would get so much help.  
 I didn't know I wasn't beyond help.  
 I didn't know people just see a boy, not a victim.  
 I didn't know I could tell my doctor about bed-wetting.

I didn't know my mentor would still support me after he knew.  
 I didn't know I was a gifted student, not a broken junkie whore.  
 I didn't know I deserved help to get off the street and return home.  
 I didn't know my mentor would reply when I wrote years later to thank him.

I didn't know a teacher's kindness could be genuine.  
 I didn't know I would tell my science teacher I need help.  
 I didn't know nothing shows on me in gym class.  
 I didn't know I could be an A student.  
 I didn't know I would disclose the abuse in an essay for English class.  
 I didn't know my friends wouldn't treat me like a freak.  
 I didn't know they would tell me I was brave.

I didn't know one day I would talk to our congregation about the abuse.  
 I didn't know I would be able to tell my story at a conference.  
 I didn't know we would write a letter to other teen guys about abuse.  
 I didn't know our letter would be translated for boys in Europe.  
 I didn't know how awesome it would feel when a teen my age wrote a memoir.  
 I didn't know an adult would help my friend in juvey write about sexual abuse.

I didn't know I deserved the same respect as anybody else.  
 I didn't know I would find good ways to claim respect.  
 I didn't know I could set good boundaries.  
 I didn't know I would ever confront guys who tell altar boy jokes.  
 I didn't know how great it would feel to express my feelings.  
 I didn't know how lame the whole macho thing is.

I didn't know I would ever care about my health.  
 I didn't know I would ever check about getting my broken teeth fixed.  
 I didn't know I would start telling doctors I'm a survivor.  
 I didn't know I would want to take better care of myself.  
 I didn't know I would ever succeed in losing weight.  
 I didn't know I would start running and exercising again.  
 I didn't know I could work out for my health, not to cover my shame.  
 I didn't know I would ever see myself as attractive and feel good about it.

I didn't know it would feel so good to have my own teddy bear.  
 I didn't know having my stuffed dog would help me so much.  
 I didn't know so many of my survivor friends also have stuffed animals.

I didn't know I could be a husband.  
 I didn't know I could be a real dad.  
 I didn't know my teenage kids would support me.  
 I didn't know my son would high-five me when I went to the police.  
 I didn't know my son considers me a great father.

I didn't know therapy would really help.  
 I didn't know how much therapy would help me grow.  
 I didn't know I could talk about these things.  
 I didn't know a therapist would know things that I didn't.  
 I didn't know that therapy isn't psychobabble.  
 I didn't know a T doesn't just start asking you sensitive questions.  
 I didn't know a therapist would really care.  
 I didn't know a therapist would never agree it was my fault.

## Recovery as a Path

I've already commented several times about recovery as a path rather than a goal, and here I'd like to explore that further.

When we take on a major project we tend to think of it in terms of a clear beginning and a definite goal, like studying for exams or saving money for a major purchase. But healing from a traumatic past is different. We may be well on the way to dealing with the problem before we realize it, and though we yearn for a goal to aim for, it may be difficult to imagine what that goal would be.

You may wonder how you will even begin to face your issues, but in fact you are already doing that. Deciding to act was a positive step. Have you disclosed to anyone yet? Even considering that important decision is a major undertaking. Completing this workbook was another one.

The question of goals also poses an elusive challenge. Survivors routinely ask what their recovery goal should be, and when that question arises what the guy really wants to know is, "How long will this take?" Or rather, "How long will it hurt?" In his heart of hearts he's asking, "How long will it be before I can just forget about all this?"

The answer touches upon one of the keys to understanding the impact of childhood sexual abuse. Recovery is a path rather than a goal because it's a lifelong endeavor. The memories remain, and when we recall them they may hurt. How could it be otherwise? Sexual abuse causes a boy enduring harm, and survivors can no more forget that harm than soldiers returning from war can forget their battle experiences.

But recovery isn't about forgetting in the first place. It's about understanding how abuse has affected you and how you can address these consequences. It's about claiming and believing in your childhood innocence. And even more, now, it's about believing in your potential and finding healthy ways to realize that potential: in yourself as a man, in your relationships with others, and in coming to terms with the world at large. It's about regaining control and feeling like you are living your life rather than enduring it. It's about feeling real joy and peace.

So recovery isn't a pill – take it, wait for it to work, and the problem's all fixed. But at the same time, it doesn't doom you to struggling with abuse issues all the rest of your life. Rather, as a survivor adopts healthier views and behaviors he will find it easier to deal with these issues, and indeed, to cope with life's other challenges.



An example from my own recovery may help to illustrate this. Awhile back I was browsing in a large bookstore, waiting for a friend. As bad luck would have it, this store had decided that books on "Erotica" belong next to "Psychology." So as I walked down the aisle my eye was caught by a book displayed with the front cover rather than the spine facing outward, to draw the attention of customers. The title was sexually explicit and I was immediately triggered. Sensing the sudden approach of a wave of old childhood memories and feelings, I found myself thinking, "There's a book I could have written when I was ten."

A few years earlier that experience would have overwhelmed me with grief for a lost childhood and a storm of old negative feelings about myself. It would have interfered with my ability to function for quite a long time, and I would have taken refuge in isolation and other problematic coping strategies. But in the interim I had made progress in working through my issues. That didn't mean that I was "finished" with recovery; rather, it meant that I was doing better at coping with trigger experiences and that my growing confidence in that ability meant that the old memories had lost much of their power to harm me. So now, in the bookstore, I could "brace myself" as those memories and feelings arose, and I could let them pass – which is exactly what they did. A moment or two later I was back to checking to see if my friend had arrived.

So yes, memories of the abuse and how it affected you will remain. You may well recall them from time to time, and when you do, that may hurt. But not like it hurts now, and with time your efforts will diminish their power to interfere with your life. You will be able to move on. It's hard work, but that's precisely the point. Recognize and claim your achievements. They are real; take pride in them.

## Progress

When we think of a project we do so with more than a beginning and an end in mind. We identify steps and stages in between, not only because we want to work effectively, but also because we need encouragement and motivation along the way. We look for indications of progress as proof that we're "doing it right" and that it's worthwhile to persevere. And the more difficult the project, the more we yearn for specific signs that we're making progress.



Such thinking makes good sense, but here too, healing from childhood sexual abuse often evades conventional expectations. Working on recovery means accessing memories and feelings that have long remained unexamined, sometimes for many years, and when these memories and feelings are finally addressed they can tumble out in a chaotic and overwhelming manner. Survivors often refer, for example, to experiencing a “hurricane” of feelings that can seem difficult even to separate and identify, much less understand and address.

To feel confused and frustrated about all this is normal: after all, it’s most likely work of a new kind for you. And as I’ve already commented in the introduction, while our inclination is to try to solve problems logically, abuse issues are primarily emotional, not rational. True, part of the work that lies ahead involves acknowledging and organizing what you know about your past, but then what? The past cannot be changed. The real challenge is to deal with how past experiences made you *feel*, and in particular, how you feel about them *now*. Coming to terms with emotions as a present-oriented task is where genuine recovery and healing become possible.

It’s usually very difficult to gauge one’s progress when dealing with the traumatic emotions involved in childhood sexual abuse. As you follow your own path there are areas that may seem especially challenging. Here are my thoughts on a few that survivors frequently have to confront:

- **PROGRESS IS NOT LINEAR.** Recovery does not reward commitment and hard work with steady forward movement. One day you may feel encouraged or even exhilarated at how well you are doing, and then the next day it may seem like everything is falling apart. An issue you thought you had resolved may come storming back later, or aspects of it that you had not previously considered may need to be addressed. You may remember things that you had long forgotten or denied, and your thinking may change in unexpected ways.

Experiences like this are normal when dealing with powerful feelings, even when these experiences feel like major setbacks. This is why survivors so often describe recovery as an emotional roller coaster. When you’re having a really good day or week, take note of that (here in your workbook?) so you can refer to it when you feel discouraged. Recovery is real, but so are its ups and downs. You can be thriving and still encounter difficult times. Such moments

don’t mean you are failing. Take them, instead, as confirmation of how deeply abuse has affected you and how important your recovery work is.

- **PROGRESS IS GRADUAL.** A survivor will often judge himself for not resolving a problem well enough, or fast enough. Quite understandably, he wants to see decisive progress *now*. But in most cases abuse issues have been building up for a long time; progress in dealing with them will also take time. Rather than looking back to last month and blaming yourself for the persistence of a stubborn issue, look back to last year. A longer-term perspective may show you that you are doing better than you think.

Accepting that progress is gradual will also help you to recognize that however frustrating this may be, it doesn’t mean you are failing. At any given moment you can’t expect yourself to do any better than your best. If that feels unsatisfying, remember that all survivors encounter obstacles, and that at the same time, guys are constantly finding ways to move forward in areas that once felt like forbidden territory. When a problem makes you feel, “I can’t...,” try reframing it: “I can’t...yet.”

Give yourself a break, but persevere. If you feel frustrated or exhausted, allow yourself to ease back and perhaps redirect and work on a task that doesn’t feel so intractable. Many survivors report feeling tempted to abandon their recovery work on the grounds, “I need to get on with my life.” But opting out of addressing your abuse issues means continuing to carry their burden and struggle with their consequences. I have yet to encounter a survivor who regretted his decision to persevere in his recovery work.

Bear in mind too that the areas currently causing you the most difficulty will, for that very reason, draw your attention and seem especially important. If you look beyond these stubborn problems you may well recognize other areas where you can more clearly see progress. Take credit for these advances and take pride in them. The fact that you are doing better in those areas does not make them less important. The “little things” are not so little. They count.

- **PROGRESS IS NOT THE SAME THING AS THE RESULTS OF PROGRESS.** There will inevitably be times when your effort just doesn’t seem to be producing results. But in reality it’s that hard work itself that comprises progress, not the “light bulb