



The Sexual  
Attachment Conference  
**Understanding  
Your Sexual Story**

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**April 30, 2022**

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## Introduction

JAY

Inherited Stories

- Church history
- Culture (purity culture, porn, media, etc).
- Childhood & Family

Two Questions

1. Where do you come from?
2. Where do you want your sexual story to go?

The Neurobiology of Shame

- Manual transmission car (gas, brake, and clutch)
- Sympathetic nervous system = gas pedal to explore the world
- Parasympathetic nervous system = brake pedal to experience rest and protection
- Shame = when the brake is slammed without the clutch

Will you commit to engaging your story and the story of others with the clutch of kindness?

A Seven Word Theology of Sex:

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*“May you find in yourself a courageous hospitality towards what is difficult, painful and unknown.”*

-John O’Donohue



ADAM

Story work is detective work. Detectives have to collect enough data that they can piece together the scene of the crime.

The memories that hold the deepest shame for you will be the very memories *that can set you free*.

“Arousal structures” refers to the people and things that turn you on. Your arousal structures in the present have developed *because of your story*.

The *particularity of your past story* will allow you to understand your present arousal structures.

## **Attachment and the Big Six**

**Attachment** is the degree to which I feel relationally connected to you, and originally, to my primary caregiver.

Attachment is the degree to which I have a felt sense in my body that I am cared for, and that I am going to be responded to when I have needs or desires.

### **The Still Face Experiment**

Why is the baby calm and happy? It is because the baby knows that Mom is *responding* to it. It is not merely Mom’s expressiveness that the baby needs; it is Mom’s responsiveness.

**Secure attachment** is an embodied sense of knowing that I matter to my primary caregiver, that they **want** to be in relationship with me, and that they will respond to my needs.

Securely attached adults anticipate that when there is relational rupture—when there’s interpersonal conflict—the relationship will be restored. It's only a matter of time, and it will come about without either me or the other person having to sacrifice our individuality.

If you received The Big Six as a kid, you will be securely attached as an adult.



## **The Big Six**

### **# 1 Attunement**

Attunement refers to reading the emotional state of the child. Reading the emotional state of the child.

### **# 2 Responsiveness**

Responsiveness refers to “What did your parents do with the sad face they saw at the dinner table?”

If you never would have told your Mom if something bad happened, it is likely because you learned from a very young age that it wouldn’t matter if you told Mom.

### **# 3 Engagement**

Engagement means that your Mom and Dad wanted to know you, the real you—with all of your quirks—and that they sought to know you and draw you out.

Engagement means that your parents had a genuine desire to know your inner emotional world and that they pursued you.

### **# 4 Able To Regulate Your Affect**

Affect is the felt sense of what is happening in your body. Affect refers to your inner emotional and bodily experience.

The way a child’s brain develops the neurobiological structures to self-regulate is by having their affect interactively regulated by parents who are attuned, responsive, and engaged.



## # 5 Strong Enough To Handle Your Big Emotions

As a child, you needed to be free to express negative emotions—to cry, rage, or fall silent—knowing that you would be responded to in a loving, meaningful way.

## # 6 Willing To Repair

A secure attachment is not built on the absence of failure but on the willingness of the parent to own and rectify failures when they do occur.

What mattered to you as a child was not that your parents got it right each time, but that they recognized when they missed you or hurt you and responded in a way that brought comfort and reconnection.

### **Avoidant Attachment**

When your caregiver is often unavailable, dismissive, or rejecting, you will develop an avoidant attachment—i.e, you will become avoidant of attachment.

An avoidantly attached child reasons that it is easier to try to regulate his own anxiety than to seek comfort from his unavailable or unresponsive caregiver.

The child adapts to his environment by avoiding the longing for closeness and emotional connection with his parents.

"We can grow up in homes in which the food finds the table, the money finds the college funds, and the family even finds the church each Sunday; but somehow our hearts remain undiscovered by the two people we most need to know us—our parents."  
Curt Thompson



## **The Marks of Avoidant Attachment in Adulthood**

1. You will feel more comfortable with emotional distance and separateness.
2. You will enjoy relationships at times, but never really need others.
3. You will tend toward an auto-regulatory state.
4. You feel *needed but not wanted*.
5. You will expect other people to handle their own big feelings. “I’ll take care of me, you take care of you.”
6. You likely have decreased access to—and awareness of—your emotions.
7. You are apt to recall facts about your life but have great difficulty recalling memories of family experiences where there was authentic emotional engagement.
8. You will tend to idealize their parents (to avoid connecting with how bad it really was) and insist that past family life has little to no effect on how you developed.

## **How Avoidantly Attached Adults Experience Sexuality**

1. It may be hard for you to emotionally connect with your partner during sex.
2. Given the above, you may have an affair... because when you’re having an affair there is much less emotional intimacy.



3. You may turn to sexual fantasy.
4. You will likely have trouble wanting your partner, desiring your partner.

### **Ambivalent Attachment**

A child will develop an ambivalent attachment when she experiences her primary caregiver as inconsistent and, at times, intrusive.

“I'm not certain whether my parent will be able to meet my needs, at least in any reliable way.”

Intrusiveness refers to the fact that ambivalently attached children are often required to meet Mom's (or Dad's) emotional needs.

### **The Marks of Ambivalent Attachment in Adulthood**

1. You have great difficulty regulating your big emotions.
2. You are often plagued by a deep fear that you are going to be rejected or abandoned, which makes it very difficult to trust anyone.
3. You tend to believe that unless you dramatically express your pain, it is unlikely that the other person will respond.
4. You almost always feel like you are too “needy.”



### **How Ambivalently Attached Adults Experience Sexuality**

1. Your sex life is largely about reassuring yourself that you are truly loved by your partner.
2. You might use fantasy as a substitute for intimacy. The fantasy is about someone who WANTS you and will be there for you.
3. Since you don't feel secure in your relationship with your spouse, it may be hard for you to be clear about what you want sexually.
4. You may agree to do things sexually that you aren't comfortable with because you don't want to lose your partner's affection and love.

### **How Securely Attached Adults Experience Sexuality**

1. You are able to be emotionally present when having sex.
2. You feel comfortable enough about who you are and comfortable enough in the relationship that you can risk sharing the specifics of what you want to do sexually.
3. You are filled with desire and you are comfortable with your sexual desires. Your "wanter" is fully operational.

If you want to be a better parent, the single most important thing you can do has nothing to do with interacting differently with your children. The single most important thing you can do is to: address... your own... story!



## Family Systems and Adverse Childhood Experiences

**Big Idea:** The relationship we have with our parents and the childhood experiences we undergo offer some of the most glorious moments in life, but if we're honest, they also contain painful stories we will spend a lifetime attempting to heal. Until a bridge is built between the present sexual difficulty and the past, we will continue to fight battles without understanding where and why the war began.

### Honor and Honesty

One of a parent's most important roles is to steward the desires of their child. Our relationship to adult sexual desire was shaped by how our parents chose to cultivate, govern, ignore, indulge, or shame our childhood desires.

Two common types of family systems are \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.

### Rigid Family

The key features of a rigid home are:

- Rules become weapons
- "My way or the highway" parenting
- Your gifts are exploited
- Individuation is framed as rebellion
- You **orbit** your life around the rigid parent(s) expectations and desires.

The difference between a rigid home and a home with good boundaries often has to do with how discipline is used.

The root word of discipline is \_\_\_\_\_, which means to teach.

Therefore, the question to ask yourself is: Was discipline used as a means of intimidation to force conformity OR was it used for instruction?



## How a rigid family might affect your sexual life:

- Rigid Families create fertile soil for anger to emerge. Where do you take your anger in the aftermath of the hypocrisy you've seen and the powerlessness you experienced?
- Many parents are incredibly invasive in the sexual development of their child, thus setting up a war with shame and hiding.
- You might attempt to reverse the powerlessness you felt through finding sexual experiences which make you feel powerful (porn use is often more about control than lust or exploration).
- You might find yourself becoming the parent you hated as a child. Your romantic partners (and children, if you have them) feel the pressure to conform to your sexual desires and expectations.
- As an adult you find yourself in similar relational binds that you knew in childhood: Now you orbit around your romantic partners sexual needs, expectations and desires at the cost of developing your own.

**Key point:** While it's good to be honest about our desire to outgrow or transform a sexual difficulty, we also need to honor it as a way we learned to make our life work in a rigid family.

## Disengaged Family

The key features of a disengaged home are:

- Holistic care is overlooked.
- Work, domestic tasks, or other family members seem to be more important to your parents.
- No one really sees you or seeks to understand you.
- Desires remain uncultivated.
- Find yourself emotionally, relationally, and sexually unprepared for life.
- You learn to sexualize your wounds and needs.

*"Emotional isolation, powerlessness, and stress are exactly the conditions that create the neurobiology of addiction."*

-Gabor Maté

Note: If you don't like Maté's use of the word *addiction*, feel free to substitute it with out-of-control or self-sabotage behavior. A few prominent examples of behaviors that can become self-destructive or addictive would be: screen-time, shopping, porn, alcohol, or substances. The point is that we can end up seeking intimacy in non-relational or relationally exploitive ways.



## How a disengaged family might affect your sexual life:

- Disengaged families create fertile soil for lust and fantasy emerge. Where do you go when you're lonely?
- You might wander through life looking for someone to desire or validate you, which unfortunately ends up diminishing that person's desire for you over time.
- Sex becomes the only desire and need you know or choose to request.
- You might find yourself using sex to find attachment.
- Hyper-independence: A commitment to not need or rely on anyone (which decreases intimacy and can promote secretive sexual behaviors).
- Children who were ignored by their parents were incredibly susceptible to sexual abuse.
- You don't trust that intimate relationships are the place to feel known, so you scan the horizon looking for someone looking for you.

### Key questions to ask yourself:

Some of us have spent a lifetime condemning or managing our longings and fantasies. What would it mean for you to seek to honor them as a deep desire to find belonging?

For others, you may have been hiding behind the language of "self-medicating" or "loneliness." What would it mean for you to be honest about how your sexual choices reinforce your core belief that you are unworthy of love or belonging? (You deserve to be disengaged from)

### Adverse Childhood Experiences & Sexual Abuse

*"We have learned that trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience on mind, brain, and body. This imprint has ongoing consequences for how the human organism manages to survive in the present."*

*"For every soldier who serves in a war zone abroad, there are ten children who are endangered in their homes. This is particularly tragic since it is very difficult for growing children to recover when the source of terror and pain is not enemy combatants but their own caretakers."*

-Bessel van der Kolk

Trauma exists on a spectrum.



## ACES - Adverse Childhood Experiences

- **Household Challenges**
  - Domestic violence
  - Substance abuse
  - Mental illness
  - Parental separation / divorce
  - Incarcerated parent
- **Abuse**
  - Emotional abuse
  - Physical abuse
  - Sexual abuse
- **Neglect**
  - Emotional neglect
  - Physical Neglect

*Many of us will not experience trauma as a memory, but as a reaction.*

## Sexual Abuse

While there are many types of trauma that can impact us, there are few that introduce as much heartache and confusion as sexual abuse.

Sexual abuse exists on a spectrum. On one end might be violent and degrading abuse, but it could also be something we've dismissed as an "awkward" or "weird" interaction. Additionally, the introduction of porn can also be a form of abuse.

## The Four Core Experiences of Sexual Abuse

1. The abuser emotionally connected with the survivor.  
*Oxytocin*
2. The survivor knew pleasure and arousal with their abuser.  
*Dopamine*
3. The survivor felt the pressure to maintain secrecy.  
*Cortisol, adrenaline, noradrenaline*
4. The survivor eventually felt shame, overwhelm and eventual numbness  
*Serotonin depletion*



## **Trauma cocktail**

The trauma cocktail is when our formative sexual experiences contained oxytocin, dopamine, cortisol and the depletion of serotonin (among many others). Sexual abuse is a diabolical experience where bonding, pleasure, stress, shame and overwhelm occur in the same event.

### **Survivors of sexual abuse might find their struggle with sex occurs in one of two ways:**

**Reenactment:** We continue to pursue sexual experiences which repeat the trauma cocktail of feeling aroused, bonded, stressed, overwhelmed, and eventually steeped in shame.

**Reversal:** We shut down future sexual desire in an effort to decrease the potential for betrayal or excitement.

### **Healing from sexual abuse requires three dimensions:**

1. Blessing your desire for pleasure and connection.
2. Grief and anger for how your abuser stole from you.
3. Owning and taking authority of your sexual story.

### **Detective Time:** Reflection questions for after the conference

- 1) In what ways was your family characterized by rigidity? Write down 1-2 memories where you encountered the rigidity of your parent(s).
- 2) In what ways was your family characterized by disengagement? Write down 1-2 memories where you encountered the disengagement of your parent(s).



- 3) What evidence of trauma and/or sexual abuse do you see in your story?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 4) Given what you learned at the conference, do you have new insights about traumatic or sexual experiences you previously dismissed as inconsequential?

5) *Hypothesis Time*

I wonder if there is a relationship between my \_\_\_\_\_ (type of family system) and \_\_\_\_\_ (current sexual difficulty).

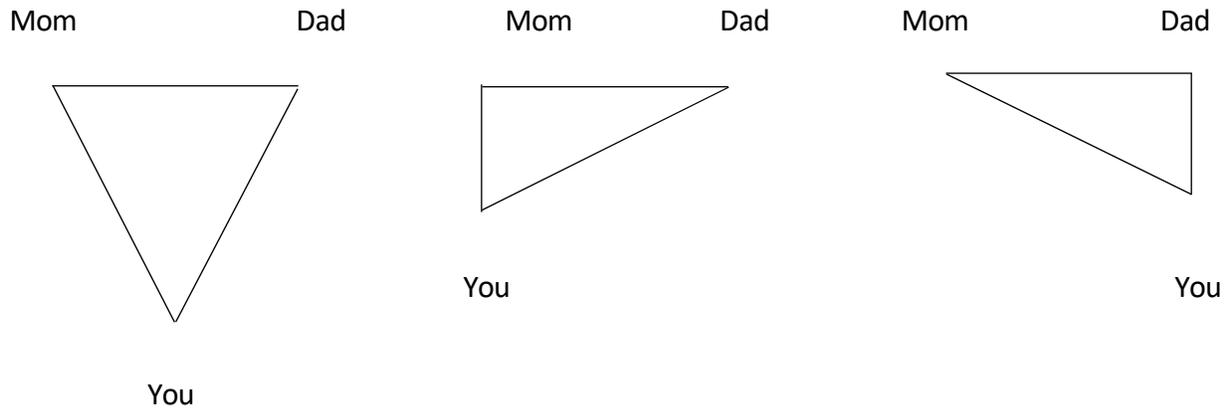
6) *Hypothesis Time*

I wonder if there is a relationship between my \_\_\_\_\_ (adverse childhood experience) and my \_\_\_\_\_ (current sexual difficulty).

- 7) What is one childhood experience you feel ready to explore with a therapist or friend for the first time or in a deeper way?



## Triangulation and Subtle Sexual Abuse



**Triangulation** means that one parent becomes closer to you, the child, than to their spouse.

You cannot understand your own sexual story without putting language to how emotionally close your parents were *to each other*.

Triangulation is synonymous with subtle sexual abuse.

### **Two Deadly Dynamics of Subtle Sexual Abuse**

Dynamic # 1 — your goodness is consumed (usually by your opposite sex parent). Dynamic # 2 — as a result, you are setup to be envied by your same sex parent.



Subtle sexual abuse occurs when a child becomes the object of a parent's affection, when the child becomes the person that the parent starts to emotionally lean on or turn to.

There is nothing loving or caring about a close parent-child relationship when it services the needs and feelings of the parent rather than the child.

"My father always had me by his side when I was growing up. I was his little sweetie. He and my mother didn't have much of a relationship so I was the object he adored. When I was younger, I enjoyed all the attention and closeness."

"It felt so good to be able to make my mom stop crying and put a smile on her face. I was more than willing to be there for her. I felt so important and powerful. After a while it seemed that my mother actually preferred my company over my father's."

The person who has been subtly sexually abused will not feel abused at all... quite the opposite, they will feel idealized and privileged.

"I thought I had the perfect parents. I was particularly fond of my mother because she was always there for me, to comfort me and talk. We talked about everything. Often she talked about my dad... I always felt special around her because she trusted me with personal information. My father was an attorney who loved his work. He seemed more married to it than to my mother. But he made sure we had everything — the best clothes, schools and whatever we wanted. It was hard to be angry with him. Besides, as a family, we seemed fine. I always felt special after one of my talks with Mom... I thought including me was my mom's way of making me feel special... I had no idea my mother was seducing me because she was lonely."

When you are required to function like a surrogate spouse to your Mom or Dad, your childhood is stolen... because you can't be a kid when you're being an adult.



## **Symptoms of Subtle Sexual Abuse**

Symptom # 1 On the one hand you will feel privileged because of the special relationship you have with your father; on the other hand you will feel like you are never doing enough for him.

Symptom # 2 You will feel guilty about your own needs and probably have a difficult time identifying what they are.

Symptom 3. As you think back on your childhood, there will be a sense of rivalry and competition with your same sex parent.

Symptom # 4. You may have feelings of inadequacy and unworthiness.

## **Recovering From Triangulation/Subtle Sexual Abuse**

1. You have to name the reality that you were used. Used in the sense that your mother consumed your goodness and presence.
2. You have to name that your compass has been whacked your whole life.
3. You have to begin to let go of, and grieve, your idealized image of the parent who triangulated you.
4. Begin the process of emotionally separating from the parent who triangulated you.
5. You have to take yourself off the pedestal that you have been put on.
6. You have to understand how your history of subtle sexual abuse may be playing out in your current sexual relationship.



## **Desire**

What is your relationship to your *desire*?

If you have a history of sexual harm, desire can feel dangerous.

Your brain pairs your desire for care, for connection, for being seen and noticed—with “something bad is going to happen to me.”

If you are insecurely attached—whether it’s avoidant or ambivalent—you likely have very mixed emotions about your desire... because you have a truckload of unmet desires in the basement of your heart.

“I don’t want to want.”

## **Choice**

Sexual choices are far more complex, nuanced, and complicated than most people want to acknowledge, especially most Christians.

Choice is not the same for all people.

Priming refers to the likelihood that particular neural networks will fire in the present based on past experience. Priming is why choice is not the same for all people.



## Why Can't I Change: Understanding Sexual Difficulties

**Big Idea:** Sexual problems, while maddening, are a normal part of our personal and relational life. The complexity is that we want our problems resolved, but rarely seek to understand the meaning embedded within them. The truth is that one hour of curiosity for your sexual difficulties will take you further than a thousand nights of prayerful despair.

Unwanted sexual behaviors and sexual difficulties are a roadmap to healing, not a life sentence to shame or strife.

Two popular, but incomplete paradigms to deal with sexual problems are:

1. Lust management
2. Shame management

We need a third way: Understanding the strategy and meaning embedded within them.

Symptoms are holy prophets which communicate uncomfortable truths.

A metaphor for us to consider today: Your sexual life is a house. Go out on to the front porch and ask questions to your unwanted behaviors or your lack of sexual desire.

What are some initial questions you have for your sexual life?

High Desire Partner and Low Desire Partner.

### Four Strategies of Unwanted Sexual Behaviors

#### 1. Reversal

- Longings (Mirror of Erised)
- Circumstances (Powerlessness)

#### 2. Repetition

- Trauma
- Childhood style of relating
- Judgment / Shame



### **3. Relief**

- Loneliness
- Anxiety
- Pain
- Hope

### **4. Revenge**

- Anger at partner
- Anger at self

## **Seven Influencers of Low Sexual Desire**

### **1. A Form of Protest**

### **2. A Signal of Past Sexual Harm**

### **3. A Symptom of Betrayal**

### **4. A Sign of Sexual Shame**



## 5. A Way of Protecting Your Partner's Ego

## 6. A General Medical Condition

## 7. A Harbinger of Health of Unhealth

**Key Point:** Rather than condemning yourself for a sexual difficulty, get curious about what the struggle might be trying to communicate.

### **Detective Time**

#### *Out-of-Control Desire Questions*

One strategy for why I might pursue: \_\_\_\_\_ (specific unwanted behavior or fantasy search).

is because of \_\_\_\_\_ (reversal, repetition, relief, or revenge).

How might this fantasy or behavior be inviting me to growth or healing?

#### *Low Desire Questions*

Of the seven influencers of low desire listed, the two that resonated the most with me were:

1.

2.

One specific story that comes to mind that influences my low desire is:



### *For Everyone*

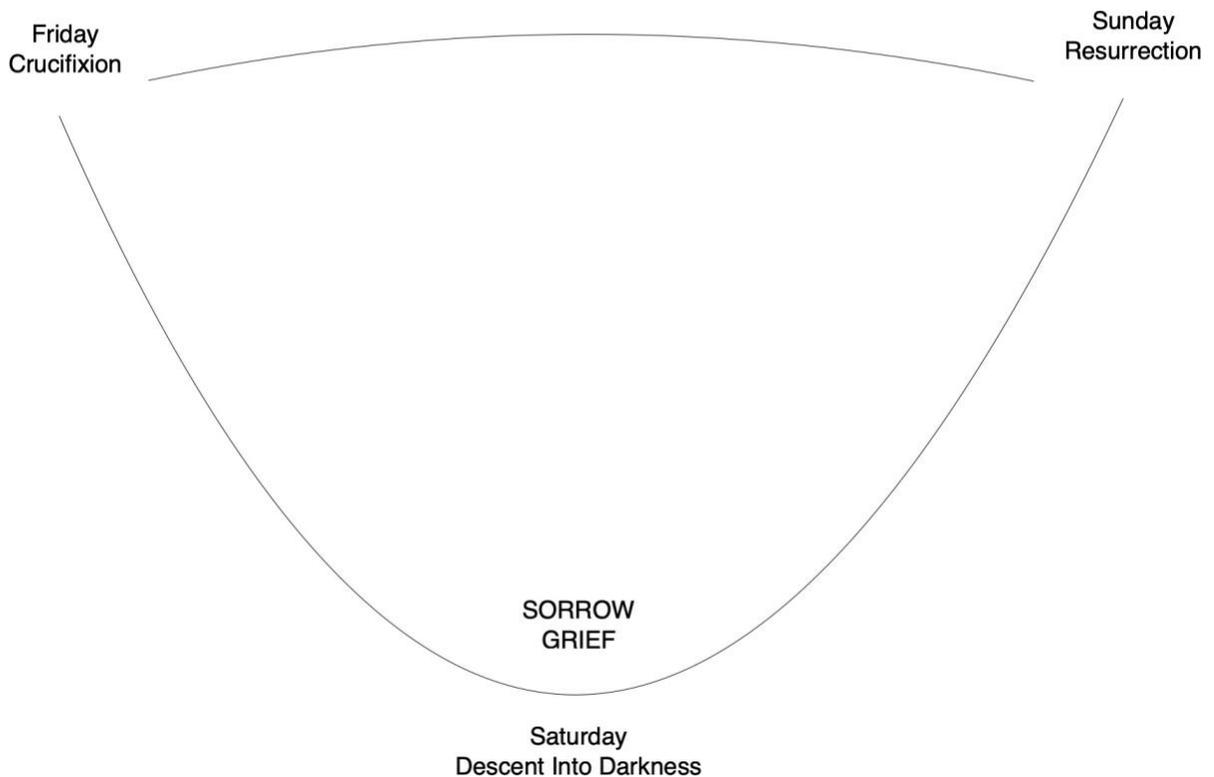
Sexual difficulties are often the most honest dimension of our life until we can bring language to the harm and difficulties we have known.

How might my sexual difficulties be inviting me to personal growth? Relational growth?

How might my sexual difficulties be inviting me to be more forthcoming about my needs, experiences, or desires?

## **The Path to Healing**

### **Lingering in Death**





Healing requires:

- Naming the harm you experienced in your family of origin
- Feeling your *emotions* about the harm you experienced
- Grieving the harm you experienced.

Grief is the body's natural response to seeing the truth... of the heartbreak... of your story.

What's keeping you from being captured by your own story?

### **The Surprise of Healing**

1. It is not a return to the old status quo.
2. It is always a surprise.
3. It is a gift.
4. It is unique to you.



## Kindness to Self and Conversations With Those You Love

**Big Idea:** Most of us attempt to change ourselves and others principally out of contempt. We use shame to leverage compliance. In reality, it is kindness and integrity that changes the human heart.

Guest Teacher: Heather Stringer

Heather's journey to understand, honor, and transform low desire.

Scaffolding is needed to have conversations with those we love about our sexual story.

Sex is the stage on which you can rewrite the scripts of your life.



## Resources and Next Steps

**The Allender Center** (Seattle) - [theallendercenter.org](http://theallendercenter.org)

**Story Workshop.** Four day group experience where you engage your story in more depth (next one: August 18-21, 2022)

**Narrative Focused Trauma Care Certificate Program.** (4) four day weekends (16 days total). Group experience where you engage your story in great depth.

**Recovery Week.** Six day Intensive group experience focused on healing from sexual abuse. If you have a history of sexual abuse, we highly recommend attending one of Dan Allender's Recovery Weeks. Jay helps lead these.

**Art of Living Counseling** (Chicago) - [artoflivingcounseling.com](http://artoflivingcounseling.com)

Ongoing Story Groups that meet virtually on various days of the week. Both women only and coed groups.

**The Journey Course** (Online) - [thejourneycourse.com](http://thejourneycourse.com)

A 5-month online program to help people identify and transform their struggles unwanted sexual behavior.

**The Sexual Behavior Self-Assessment** (Online) - <https://sexualbehaviorassessment.com/>

A self-assessment designed to help people understand why they are pursuing unwanted behaviors. After completing the assessment, you will receive a 40+ page report on the key drivers of your behavior and compass headings for how to transform it. Learn why you do what you don't want to do.