

A CHRISTIAN CLINICIAN'S GUIDE  
TO TREATING CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

# FREEDOM TO HEAL



TAMMY SCHULTZ, HANNAH ESTABROOK  
& ADAM DAVID DELL



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and Adam David Dell.

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# INTRODUCTION

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**Just as every survivor has a story,** *Freedom to Heal: A Christian Clinician's Guide to Treating Child Sexual Abuse* was also birthed in narrative. Years ago, Hannah and Tammy traveled to South Korea to speak at a sexual abuse conference. At the end of the conference, a poised and elegant woman lingered, waiting to talk with us. With hesitation, she looked around to ensure that no one could hear, and then, with her gaze fastened to the floor, she spoke in a hushed tone. A trusted and much-loved leader in her church had sexually violated her when she was a teenager. With the aid of a trusted translator, she explained that she would never confront this loved elder because this would bring dishonor to the church. During that week, we were deluged with many more sad stories of child sexual abuse (CSA) experienced by Korean women attending the conference.

After the conference, on our flight from South Korea to Germany, Hannah scribbled a downpour of ideas in a soft, red leather journal as we talked, dreamed, and prayed. The writing journey of the first edition of this text on CSA commenced. Specifically, the primary purpose of this text would be to serve as a trusted roadmap for clinicians and caregivers walking alongside adult survivors of CSA.

Under the broader umbrella of sexual trauma, there are two groups: adult survivors of CSA and adult survivors of sexual assault (ASA). There are overlapping mental health effects and neurobiological outcomes for both groups. However, there are also distinctions (Rowland et al., 2024). In our efforts to complete a distinctively Christian and clinical guide, we elected to focus singularly on adult survivors of CSA to narrow the focus and make this project attainable. Indeed, more research is needed on the topic of ASA. Moreover, many individuals who experience CSA often *also* later experience ASA (Rowland et al., 2024).

In 2022, we invited Adam to join us in the significant revision of this book. Adam served as an active-duty psychologist with the United States Air

Force. In his military career, he accumulated training and real-world experience in offering numerous empirically supported therapies for military members and civilians who survived childhood and adulthood traumas. We asked him to coauthor based on his clinical and teaching experience concerning CSA survivors, his personal, powerful story of CSA that he regularly shares with military and civilian audiences, and because we love and admire Adam.

Mental health research, clinical experience, and spiritual integration deeply matter to many faith-based clinicians as they journey with CSA survivors. Thus, we discuss the integration of theology, mental health approaches, and Christian-accommodated practices throughout this edition. We begin with the sullied story of an Israelite princess who was raped. The threads of her narrative are woven into each chapter. Years ago, when we first read Tamar's story in 2 Samuel, we were undone by how God so astutely understood and described the ways abuse impacted every aspect of her being. Without an excess of words, Scripture reveals that he sees and understands the imprint of sexual violation that crosses culture and class. We also include Tamar's story as an invitation to clients *and* clinicians to contend with the God who permits such violence.

We decided to also draw chapter portions from the reservoir of our own stories. The bittersweet waters we have swallowed remind us that this text was set in motion long before we met. We are three individuals born in different generations, growing up in other countries, each impacted by CSA in our lives. Coincidence? Hardly. As children with tiny hands and hearts, we each emerged from the rubble of CSA, tragically primed for the work God prepared for us to embark on. It would be paramount to share sips of God's grace poured out in our lives with our readers.

Still, despite all our combined experiences, personal opinions alone would be insufficient, as we intend this to be substantially a research-based endeavor for veteran clinicians, counselors in training, and other caregivers who bear witness to stories of individuals who have been sexually violated. With the increased global attention on CSA, there has been a more comprehensive, empirical focus on CSA. Thus, we have sifted through the rivers of research, panning for gold. In this second edition, we have intentionally incorporated evidence-based interventions into each chapter with greater

emphasis on practical and clinical considerations as we walk in the direction of hope and healing. We have also provided more hope-imbued perspectives and interventions focusing on flourishing.

While we hold evidence-based approaches in high regard, we also acknowledge their limitations. There are times when manualized approaches offer the illusion of certainty. We understand that well-being is not a simple equation of three steps or stages. Therefore, the goal of healing in this edition extends beyond the cessation of symptoms. It is about thriving, about being freed up to love others and to love God. We firmly believe that those marred by tragedy can also be destined for triumph.

Almost two decades have passed between Hannah's and my (Tammy) plane ride from South Korea and the gift of Adam joining the writing of this second edition. We have journeyed through forests of gloom and heard one more story about a famous Christian leader molesting a trusting teenager. The #MeToo and #ChurchToo movements that occurred have increased the onslaught of abuse stories shared by survivors worldwide. We have met with many more brave survivors who have entrusted their stories to each of us, which has continued to inform us and, at times, move us to tears.

Hannah has worked in varied settings where she journeyed primarily with survivors of sex trafficking. She is a well-known speaker in sex trafficking leadership circles across Ohio and is connected with municipal and state elected officials and influential leaders in the Ohio faith and clinical communities. She regularly responds to requests from clinicians and clergy alike concerning resources to better understand sexual trauma and care for survivors. Adam worked in military and civilian settings, including hospitals, private practice, integrated behavioral health, and multidisciplinary settings over the past twenty years. He is trained and experienced in offering the following therapies for survivors of CSA: prolonged exposure (PE), concurrent treatment of PTSD and substance use disorders using prolonged exposure (COPE), Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT), Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), and Written Exposure Therapy (WET). My therapy work (Tammy) with survivors has continued over many decades in community mental health centers, private practice, and college counseling centers. As the co-coordinator of the trauma certificate program at Wheaton College, I have also

learned from numerous brave conference attendees and students who have shared their stories with me over the years. Moreover, each chapter of this book has been read by students in my Wheaton College Introduction to Trauma class. It has been such a privilege to hear from these dear students and make revisions based on their wise feedback prior to sending it off to our publisher.

*Freedom to Heal* is designed to be a go-to resource for faith-based therapists, medical professionals, clinicians in training, pastoral counselors, foster parents, teachers, and student life professionals on university campuses hungry for theologically informed principles and evidence-based approaches to use with adult survivors of CSA. The reader will find additional clinical resources at the end of each chapter and in the “Children’s Corner,” where we share children’s books that focus on a theme from the chapter for children (and adults) to grasp. Sometimes complexities are more aptly understood when spoken in the language of children.

## A FEW CAVEATS

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*No two alike.* During a deposition, a defense attorney asked me (Tammy) why my client, who had experienced years of abuse by a trusted caregiver, did not exhibit every posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptomatology. His question reflected a one-size-fits-all perspective. People who are sexually abused do not react in carbon-copy ways. They are a heterogeneous group. This means no two survivors are exactly alike. Diversity of abuse ensures diversity of aftermath effects of abuse. As psychiatrist Frank Putnam (2003, p. 269) explained,

Childhood sexual abuse is a complex life experience. . . . This diversity alone ensures that there will be a range of outcomes. . . . Thus sexually abused children constitute a very heterogeneous group with many degrees of abuse about whom few simple generalizations hold.

A review of research on CSA reveals significant consistency among trauma clinicians and researchers regarding the most common negative aftereffects. Yet differences are apparent as well. The age of the victim; the severity of abuse; the nature of the relationship with the perpetrator; the response of caregivers and significant others; personality factors; support system; relationship with God; family dynamics; use of force, aggression

and grooming; number of perpetrators; culture; and other types of trauma experience all contribute to differing symptoms, dissimilar collages. In addition, specific symptoms may dominate at one point along the journey, while other effects may preside during a different phase. More recently, the attention to survivors' uniqueness has coincided with an increasing call to use a trauma-informed modular approach. This personalized treatment approach includes a flexible demeanor and tailoring interventions to clients depending on their unique symptoms, circumstances, culture, and readiness to grapple with specific concerns (Elsaesser et al., 2022).

**Protection of privacy.** Counseling, by its very nature, is a private profession. We typically sit with clients in rooms where no one else can hear what is said. However, when we write, we share stories to illuminate the darkness of others. Therefore, we have included narratives only when we have received permission, and in most cases where permission was granted, we do not use real names. Many stories are composites based on various experiences of multiple clients, designed to protect the brave souls who have shared their stories with us.

**Pacing in reading.** Readers will notice that chapter sections include pictures with dark hues and rough edges bereft of happily-ever-after shades. While we crave happy endings, many survivor stories involve getting back on the proverbial bandwagon repeatedly. These stories also need expression. Due to the darker hues, we do not intend this text to be a single-sitting textbook. Like athletes who engage in intense training, their bodies need recovery time. Overtraining can lead to poor performance and injuries. So, too, with clinicians. Overreading trauma material can lead to poor performance and injuries (body, mind, and soul). While we intend that this edition be imbued with hope, it is heavy too. For many clinicians, certain pages may mirror their own abuse experiences. Thus, it is essential for you to read at a tempo that supports both your personal and professional development.

**Terminology.** POWs, Holocaust survivors, and other groups of folks who have lived through evil experiences identify themselves in specific ways. There are varying opinions regarding the appropriate terminology to refer to individuals who have lived through CSA. The term *victim* connotes the truth of being sexually violated, raped, abused, molested, pawed, exploited, ravaged, powerless, and betrayed. This word allocates responsibility for the

abuse to the perpetrator and underscores that abuse was something done to the person who was violated. However, some reject the usage of *victim* because people who have been abused are not only victims. They are also agents who make choices, not about the abuse but about ways to respond to the abuse. Others embrace the identification with the word *survivor* because it honors that while a person did not escape the evil of abuse, that person lived through it.

Neither word by itself fully captures the person who has been abused. No label does. People who have experienced CSA are so much more than their abuse. However, both terms suggest a portion of the picture. For some individuals, on a specific day, the term *victim* may more adequately express her feelings about the abuse and her experience; on another day, the designation of *survivor* is preferable. More descriptive. More appropriate.

Years ago, when I (Tammy) asked a group of students to gather in groups to discuss the most fitting term for individuals who have experienced abuse, the first person to speak was a woman whose husband had died in a war. She shared a story about filling out papers when she was asked to check off one of three boxes: single, married, or widowed. We felt her angst as she told our class that the years she was married to her husband and his death could never be captured by checking one little box on a piece of paper. Another student queried, "What do people who have been abused call themselves?" My students are so wise.

On the pages of *Freedom to Heal*, we use both *victim* and *survivor* when we speak of individuals who have experienced sexual violations. We realize, however, these terms will never capture the magnificence of image-bearers. Thus, we invite clinicians to ask individuals who have experienced sexual abuse what language is most fitting for them. We invite people who have experienced sexual abuse to select terminology that depicts their experience and identity most accurately at their present juncture of the healing journey. Yet, it is essential to understand that these words may change over time. Some clients may be liberated from identifying as a victim or even a survivor, and their experience of victimization may begin to feel like a portion of their narrative and not the entire story.

Over the years, we have found that the clinical pathway of healing for survivors is commonly a nonlinear journey marked by sharp turns, steep

valleys, unexpected detours, and mountains beckoning onward. Many pages are raw and disturbing, bereft of the neat and tidy. Over the years, we have found that the wreckage of abuse in our own lives and the lives of survivors is not so easily pressed absent of wrinkles. Perhaps God does not want the mysteries of suffering so easily jettisoned. Thus, the theme that runs like a bright red thread through these pages is that clinicians need to invite survivors to speak about their suffering before they can sing the song of hope.

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# TAMAR

## A DESOLATE WOMAN

*Someone was hurt before you . . . beaten before you; humiliated  
before you; raped before you; yet someone survived.*

MAYA ANGELOU

*Recovery can only take place within the context of  
relationships; it cannot occur in isolation.*

JUDITH LEWIS HERMAN

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**In the sacred text of Scripture**, there is a narrative tucked away between those familiar stories of David and Goliath and the one about the guy swallowed by a whale. It is a sordid story about deception, abuse of power, betrayal, and rape.

Few may have heard a sermon or Sunday school lesson based on Tamar (Van der Walt, 2012). But it is there, inspired by the Holy Spirit and recorded in the Word of God (2 Sam 13:1-22), imbued with depths of understanding regarding the dynamics and aftermath of sexual violence for clinicians *and* survivors.

Once upon a time, a long, long time ago, a beautiful girl lived in a royal palace. As many daughters of kings do, she waited for the day her Prince Charming would arrive, recognize her beauty, and fall in love with her. However, Prince Charming never came. She didn't live happily ever after. Something devastating happened instead. Her brother raped her. Her



*brother*. David's firstborn, the crown prince, wielded power, prestige, and privilege (Karman, 2022).

"Amnon was so tormented that he made himself ill because of his sister Tamar, for she was a virgin, and it seemed impossible to Amnon to do anything to her" (2 Sam 13:2). She was a virgin. And she was his sister. So, she was closed off to him. He was not thinking of things he could do *with* her. Notice the word "to." It lacks any relational emphasis; "to" is about Amnon, not Tamar (Brouer, 2014).

In his frustration, he consulted a family member. Enter a man named Jonadab. Listen to Jonadab's words of wisdom. Jonadab: "Why are you so haggard morning after morning? Will you not tell me?" Amnon: "I love Tamar, my brother Absalom's sister" (2 Sam 13:4 ESV 2016).

#### *Love.*

The Hebrew word for "love" can hold myriad meanings (Hârlăoanu, 2009). Grasping the gist of a word in Scripture can also be gained by understanding the context. As later events in this story reveal, what Amnon was experiencing was the antithesis of love (Woodbridge & Joubert, 2018). Authentic love, in contrast, discussed in 1 Corinthians 13, is patient and kind; it is not proud, rude, self-seeking, easily angered, or delighting in evil; and it always protects. Amnon was in lust with Tamar.

"Jonadab said to him, 'Lie down on your bed and pretend to be ill, and when your father comes to see you, say to him, "Let my sister Tamar come and give me something to eat and prepare the food in my sight, so that I may see it and eat it from her hand"' (2 Sam 13:5 ESV 2016).

Is it just us, or does it bother anyone else that Jonadab dispensed this advice without hesitation? We would have preferred to see: "Then Jonadab warned Amnon that Tamar was not property. He was not entitled to take her at will. His cousin was concerned that Amnon's feelings could lead to violation and violence. Then, having prayed about what Amnon had told him, he shared words of wisdom with him three days later." But the Bible does not say that.

It says that Jonadab shared his nefarious advice with unwavering bravado. In a condensed moment, Jonadab devised an entirely underhanded and violent scheme so the prince could possess what he wanted, underscoring awareness that sexual violence does not "just happen" (Winters & Jeglic, 2022).

Was Jonadab experienced in the ways of manipulation and evil seduction? Our knowledge is lean and spare, but one thing is evident: he connived, colluded, and conspired in the plot against Tamar, resulting in her being isolated and violated (Higgins, 2020).

Imagine that you were watching this incident take place on a stage. The mastermind of the upcoming act (Jonadab) has just exited stage right. Entering stage left is David, and somewhere in the distance, we see Tamar hard at work. The scene lacks any advanced warning, but the danger is advancing.

We notice that she is beautiful (2 Sam 13:1). On center stage, Amnon is feigning the groans one would make on their deathbed. He asked King David if he could have Tamar care for him in his bedridden condition. The king didn't hesitate. King David fell for it hook, line, and sinker—yet he was a wise king, one of the best (1 Sam 13:14). How did the king miss his son Amnon's predatory intentions?

Simply put, rapists are adept at lying about their motives and behaviors (Chopin et al., 2022). Perpetrators frequently use unwitting outsiders as pawns in their chess game, moving them one or two spaces simultaneously until a victim is trapped in a checkmate. Moreover, this is a like-father-likeson scene. Years earlier, David similarly pilfered what was not his (Woodbridge & Joubert, 2018).

Imagine when the king, her father, entreated Tamar to go to Amnon and take care of him. You saw the last scene; you know what is coming. She has no idea. It is tantamount to witnessing a horror movie where a woman is racing through a house to escape a nefarious villain. She enters a room and pauses to gulp for air. Meanwhile, the camera zooms in on the evildoer hiding behind the door. This is when you want to stand up and scream, "He's behind the door! Check behind you!" Unaware of the trap that awaited her, Tamar obeyed her father.

Tamar finished baking the cakes and walked to Amnon to feed him. He refused to eat what she had made him. Then the crown prince ordered everyone else in the room to leave to remove witnesses to his future deeds, and they complied. Perhaps Tamar began to feel uneasy, but we're not sure. Scripture doesn't specify. In response to his request, she followed him into the bedroom so that Amnon could "eat from [her] hand" (2 Sam 13:10 ESV 2016).

She drew near to feed him, care for him, and meet his needs. And when she began to feed him, he smelled her scent, heard her voice, and saw what she looked like up close. He saw that she was beautiful. Then he grabbed her, and she pleaded with Amnon to stop. Tamar was not silent. She was well acquainted with the law (Lev 20:13). She knew that this thing that Amnon was trying to do was disgraceful, this was wicked.

She said *no*.

Tamar's strong voice is particularly noteworthy as she is the only one in this biblical narrative who says no to the prince (Brouer, 2014). But her desperate pleas were spurned. In her own home, she was brutally violated by someone she knew. This is an all-too-common tale (Mondragon et al., 2022; Stoltenborgh et al., 2011). Tamar said no, but not every victim can voice that word (Katz & Nicolet, 2022).

Some are scared speechless, neurobiologically frozen.

Some do not realize that they can say no.

Some have a hand covering their mouth.

Others are too young even to speak an intelligible sound.

Somehow Tamar uttered something perhaps peculiar to our twenty-first century, North American cultural understanding: "As for me, where could I carry my shame? And as for you, you would be as one of the scoundrels in Israel. Now therefore, I beg you, speak to the king, for he will not withhold me from you" (2 Sam 13:13 ESV 2016).

What is Tamar saying here? Is she negotiating with her rapist? We do know that victims of sexual violence frequently fight back and oppose rapists with a variety of creative and complex resistance strategies that are often not recognized by even the survivors themselves. Negotiating with rapists can be one attempt to dissuade perpetrators from their crimes and a time-buying tactic (Karman, 2022; Randall, 2010).

As Tamar stares into her attacker's lust-filled eyes, she knows in her culture and time in history the cost of being raped. She would lose her marriageability, be blamed, and be cast aside as a soiled and sullied woman (Brouer, 2014).

Tamar stated accurately that Amnon would be seen as a wicked fool, and he would receive severe penalties, as the Old Testament viewed rape as a violent crime (Ex 22:16; Deut 22:25). Thus, Tamar provided a sort of

counteroffer to Amnon's demand. She asked him to wait and then *she proposed marriage*.

Can you imagine committing your life to someone who looks at you as Amnon did at Tamar? She was a thing, an object, his playground. But Tamar knew that in her culture, there was nothing worse than being cast aside—a reputation beyond repair. She lived in a time and culture when a woman's worth was commonly gauged by her marital status and the number of sons she could bear. Who would want her if she was raped (Higgins, 2020)?

Tamar's petition was a bargaining tool with her brother and an acknowledgment of a cultural reality. There were no rape crisis hotlines for her to call. There were no shelters for her to turn to. If Amnon followed through with his plan, she would be empty. Alone. Desolate. Who would take her side, plead her case, or fight for her innocence?

Sadly, still today, in many countries around the world, rape is primarily viewed as a matter of dishonor toward the family (Amo-Adjei et al., 2022; Gorar, 2022; Shrivastava, 2022). The responsibility for tarnishing the family image often lies with the victim of the assault for being violated. Moreover, the central goal becomes the protection of the family's honor. Since the woman is no longer a virgin, a solution may involve marrying the rapist. Even when the marriage suitor *is* the rapist (Toniyo & Manoj, 2021).

In Tamar's mind, there was a possible way forward: "If he wants me this badly, then maybe he will marry me." But to her pleas, Amnon responded in the way he had been scheming all along: "But he would not listen to her, and being stronger than she, he violated her and lay with her" (2 Sam 13:14 ESV 2016).

Amnon wanted to own and possess Tamar. He wanted to envelop her, swallow her dignity, and spit out her innocence. He wanted to steal her beauty. So, he *ravaged* her. In vivid detail, this narrative draws attention to the fact that sexual violence is not sex gone too far. While there are varied factors underlying sexual violence (Seto, 2019), here sex was employed as a weapon.

"Then Amnon hated her with very great hatred, so that the hatred with which he hated her was greater than the love with which he had loved her. . . . Put this woman out of my presence and bolt the door after her" (2 Sam 13:15, 17 ESV 2016).

Wait a second. Amnon just captured and confined what he wanted, and now he . . . hates her? How could this be? We do not know for sure, but

perhaps during the rape, the alarm, distress, and disgust on Tamar's face mirrored his malicious heart and the reflection was unsettling, too revealing. So, he smashed the mirror, and his servant swept up the royal pieces and dumped them in the trash.

"This woman" was disposable (2 Sam 13:17 ESV 2016).

*This woman.*

Amnon's brutalization and shaming amplify. He no longer used her name. She was barely human, scarcely a woman with mind and soul. She was not family. She was not "sister." She was *this woman*. Her entreaties before, during, and after the rape were loathed and dismissed.

Tamar, who had been wearing a distinctive royal robe that a virgin daughter of the king would wear, was banished from the place of the assault, and she did what Jews did when they were grieving: she put ashes on her head and tore her beautiful robes. She wept and wept. The robes symbolized that she was a virgin, but according to her culture, she could no longer make that claim. The Hebrew word for Tamar's loud cry reveals that she expressed anguish and a protest against injustice (Karman, 2022). With great courage, she made public what Amnon did surreptitiously. She begged for justice with each moan and wail until someone noticed. And someone did notice. Brother #2, Absalom.

Absalom's advice was pointed, clipped, and curt, masking the "vile" act done to Tamar (2 Sam 13:12). "Now hold your peace, my sister. He is your brother; do not take this to heart" (2 Sam 13:20 ESV 2016).

*Do not take this matter to heart.* In today's vernacular: "Don't let it get to you." "It could have been worse." "You should be grateful you are alive." "Protect the family image."

This is not the first time such censoring words have been spoken in this family. Not too far in the past, King David spoke similar silencing verbiage after he had Uriah eliminated. David said to the messenger, "Thus shall you say to Joab, 'Do not let this matter displease you, for the sword devours now one and now another'" (2 Sam 11:24-25 ESV 2016). The sins of the father are passed on to the next generation. David endeavored to cover up his sin, and Absalom, his son, did likewise.

Their father, King David, discovered what had happened, and Scripture tells us that "he was very angry" (2 Sam 13:21 ESV 2016). At this point, you

might expect that the king meted out some harsh punishment. But the truth is that he did nothing. *Nothing*. King David failed to allow Amnon to bear the consequences demanded by Scripture and the law at that time in history (Lev 18:11, 29-30; Deut 22:28-29). David did not seek justice for his daughter. The silencing response of Tamar's brother and the inaction of her father illuminate an important fact: how families respond to abuse matters (Biss & Geist-Martin, 2022; Donagh et al., 2022). Belittling, dismissing, and passivity deepen the damage of sexual violence.

The plot thickens. Later in the story, we see Absalom scheming and carrying out lethal revenge against Amnon, the first in line for the throne (Woodbridge & Joubert, 2018). Sin begets sin. David was notified that Amnon was dead, and then he mourned. He tore his clothes and wept and wept. His servants and all his men wept and tore their clothes. Amnon's death elicited a widespread response—a group of men mourning (2 Sam 13:36).

But what about what happened to Tamar? Who mourned for her? Who wiped the tears from her eyes? “So Tamar lived, a desolate woman, in her brother Absalom's house” (2 Sam 13:20 ESV 2016).

Desolate. In Hebrew, this poignant word means to be deflowered, deserted, laid waste, devastated, or *ravaged* (Adelman, 2021; Vine, 1992). This word is frequently used in Scripture to refer to annihilated cities that are no longer inhabitable (e.g., Is 49:19) (Higgins, 2020). This is remarkably significant because Tamar means “palm tree,” which signifies fruitfulness, the opposite of desolate (Strong, 2010). Tamar was designed to bear fruit. Perhaps she could have been a mom with several kids or a spiritual parent who led many to Yahweh. If she lived today, maybe she could have been a CEO calling leaders to empower employees and treat them with dignity because all individuals are made in the image of God. Instead, Tamar lived as a desolate woman.

Forsaken.

Abandoned.

Shamed.

Lonely.

Despondent.

Broken-hearted.



Grief-stricken.

Dejected.

Crushed.

This solitary evil act and the responses of those around her crushed her to the point that she no longer lived the life for which she was designed. In this biblical narrative, words of hope are in short supply. There is no happily ever after. Tamar lived a desolate life. Period.

This unsavory story raises an important question: *Why would God include this passage in Scripture?* We, the authors, have wrestled with this question and are deeply aware that there are no uncomplicated answers.

This vital question breaks into a kindergarten classroom, into the back seat of a Volkswagen Beetle, near a swing set at the local playground, into a bathtub where brightly colored toys are floating, or any other place where the ferocity of abuse happens. It raises another question: *Where was God when Tamar was being assaulted?* Tamar's life begs for there to be something more. Someone more.

Who wipes Tamar's tears? We emphatically believe God saw Tamar, her rape, and her life of desolation. He saw her weeping night after night. He heard the responses of others and knew the magnitude of her hurt. He walked all the way down to the deepest pit in her soul. He knew. He remembered. He has taken this matter to heart.

Yet again, we ask why God includes this unresolved, graphic, and disturbing story in Scripture. Perhaps this question is like other questions: Why would God include stories like this one in chapters of the lives of our clients, our loved ones, or ourselves?

Moreover, is God seeing and knowing enough? Why didn't he stop Amnon? Why does he not stop the individuals who perpetrate abuse daily worldwide? Does he care, or is he passive like David? We explore in this book these worthy queries and ways to bear witness to unanswerable questions. For now, we conclude this chapter with the emphatic statement that survivors of sexual violence were not designed to live a desolate life. They were made for something far greater. Survivors of abuse were made for what is beyond desolate. Way beyond.

We invite you, clinicians working alongside survivors of sexual violence, to dig deep into the complex concerns and questions Tamar's story brings

to light. Many Tamars are living desolate lives, thirsting for a life beyond. Tamar was silenced. We are breaking the silence.

*You have seen the wrong done to me, O LORD.*

LAMENTATIONS 3:59

## COUNSELING CONSIDERATIONS

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- **Engagement with biblical trauma narratives.** Trauma narratives are a salient component throughout Scripture (e.g., rape [Gen 34], rape/murder [Judg 19], slavery [Ex 21], murder of infant boys [Mt 2], murder of John the Baptist [Mt 14], and the crucifixion of Jesus [Mt 27]). Some clients seeking spiritual meaning making may benefit from engagement with biblical trauma narratives (Ballaban, 2014; van der Walt, 2012; West & Zondi-Mabizela, 2004; Yaye, 2009). Qualitative accounts of survivor engagement with the Tamar narrative (2 Sam 13) indicated that this practice provided normalization of trauma experiences, awareness that sexual violence has not escaped God's awareness, the empowerment that silence has been broken in Scripture, and opportunities to discuss the Davids, Amnons, Jonadabs, servants, and Absaloms in the lives of survivors (van der Walt, 2012; West & Zondi-Mabizela, 2004; Yaye, 2009). Given that some individuals report that religious practices (e.g., reading Scripture) are a beneficial way of coping with trauma (Cetty et al., 2022; Dumulescu et al., 2022), and spiritually accommodated therapy can improve mental health outcomes and spiritual well-being (Captari et al., 2018), at wisely timed junctures clinicians can invite clients to read the Tamar narrative in a sexual abuse group or an individual session, followed by dialogue and processing, to enhance religious coping.
- **Developing coping skills.** Trauma exposure (e.g., reading/hearing Tamar's narrative) can potentially elicit sympathetic nervous system (SNS) activation (i.e., our stress response gas pedal), which cues the body for fight, flight, freeze behaviors. A key ingredient in many evidence-based approaches with trauma survivors is activating the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS) responses (i.e., our stress response brake pedal) to counter the SNS stimulation. Doing so increases oxygen to the brain, activates the vagus nerve, decreases amygdala

activation, and increases slow breathing. Specific imagery, meditative/mindfulness exercises, and slow deep breathing techniques can calm the body. Practicing these skills can help survivors carefully comprehend and reflect on the inherent wisdom in Tamar's story and other biblical trauma narratives.

- **Breaking the silence of child sexual abuse (CSA) in ministry settings.** Sexual abuse awareness and training in ministry settings, churches, and faith-based educational institutions are integral to preventing CSA and caring for survivors. Educating pastoral teams and speaking on CSA serves as a method of advocacy that clinicians can engage in to break the conspiracy of silence.

## CHILDREN'S CORNER

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- *Tiny Finds His Whisper: A Little Mouse with a Big Secret About Childhood Sexual Abuse* (Katz, 2021). This book is about a tiny mouse who holds a large secret that hurts him deeply, but his whisper is barely audible, so others cannot hear him. When a child is ready, this book invites children who have been sexually abused to express what happened, even when they can only whisper the details.
- *God Made All of Me: A Book to Help Children Protect Their Bodies* (Holcomb & Holcomb, 2015) is written to help children understand that their bodies are priceless. It also focuses on differentiating appropriate and inappropriate touch.

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