

Setting
BOUNDARIES
with
NEGATIVE THOUGHTS
and
PAINFUL MEMORIES

Allison Bottke



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This book contains stories in which people's names and some details of their situations have been changed.

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To Cheryll and Greg

Shared history, childhood memories, and grown-up dreams. Like branches on a tree we have grown in different directions, yet our roots will forever remain as one.

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Foreword

By Bonnie Keen

Confession Number One: I have issues.

And setting healthy boundaries would be in my top three.

Every one of Allison's previous six books about boundaries has passed my doorstep. So right now I'm giving you a hearty, high-five congratulations for choosing the seventh book in her bestselling series. You've made a brave, bold choice and are in for some rich, healing time.

Perhaps the title drew you in or made you stop and think. If you're anything like me, the words "negative thoughts and painful memories" prefaced with "setting boundaries" can be intimidating—or in my case, utterly laughable.

When Allison contacted me about writing this, I was grateful that she couldn't see my response. I rolled my eyes and sighed at the irony of her request. Seriously, you're asking *me* to write a foreword to a book about boundaries? Many a family member, therapist, counselor, friend, and pastor have suggested I explore "assistance" with setting emotional boundaries. I confess I've hoarded books on the subject. They keep arriving. It's a running joke. Sort of. I've been kindly

reprimanded—encouraged to set more boundaries. I try. So may we all. It's a process.

When Allison began to explain her purpose for tackling this particular aspect of setting boundaries around pain and memories, I was more than intrigued. I am convinced this book has been written for a lot of us. If you've lived any length of time on this broken planet, painful memories and various levels of trauma have had their way with your history. They've certainly had their way with mine.

How can we put to rest destructive, deep-rooted, agonizing memories from painful episodes in our past that haunt, taunt, and wreak havoc with our hearts in the present?

It's no easy discipline, undertaking the challenge of setting hardcore internal boundaries like the ones Allison has found the courage to address. It's one thing to protect ourselves from obvious unhealthy conversations, situations, substances, work, and even certain people in our path.

It's another thing entirely to learn to protect ourselves—from ourselves.

This book goes to the gritty bottom floor core level of setting boundaries that were around before we knew what to call them. You're about to go to the pain under the painful memory, to the root core under the traumatic response, to the weakest humanity under your personal human story.

All of us have a story, and mine is littered with its fair share of messy humanity. By God's grace I'm still standing after a melancholy childhood (that's putting it kindly), a failed first marriage, single parenthood blunders, dating again (landmines exploding), date rape, clinical depression, and on into new seasons of recovery. I love my husband—my second-chance marriage, and my priceless grown children. I love my work in the arts. Most of all, I love the unfolding beauty of knowing Christ. Yet, I'll be honest. It's a tough journey, navigating the daily stress of living as a daughter of God this side of heaven.

When I agreed to take Allison up on her offer to write this, I recognized again the grand wisdom found by applying the steps outlined in this book.

This book is quite simply about godly, emotional care of your heart and mind. A step-by-step guide to heart care and head health, it's about learning to put your thoughts, words, and actions into guarding and caring for the center of yourself.

Allison's invitation comes from Proverbs 4:23: "Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life."

Confession Number Two: You're going to love Allison.

Those of you who've read her previous work on setting boundaries are nodding yes. Those who are new to her writing will soon be graced to call her friend. She will not ask you to go anywhere alone. She opens a vein to join you on the path, led by her faith in God and the move of His Spirit in the process.

I'm impacted most of all by reading authors who are honest about the underbelly of life. Christ came for the sinner, the beat up and hopeless ones who will cling to His offer of amazing grace. With Allison, you'll find complete and utter authenticity. Her vulnerability gently seeps off the pages of her writing and safely into your space.

At first glance, Allison Bottke looks and sounds like a by-product of the quintessential charmed American life. It was at a gathering of authors from around the US when I first met my beautiful blonde friend. I took one look at her glamorous face and quickly surmised we had nothing in common. She's so stunning it's almost frustrating—a homecoming queen who actually deserves the crown. With little effort, Allison exudes "got it all together."

Then came the real conversation and getting to know the lady behind the huge, generous eyes. Never judge a book by its cover comes to mind.

In Christ Jesus, Allison is a survivor of a horrific past. I'm quite sure the enemy of all good things would have thrown a party if Allison had caved under the brutal weight of the emotional and physical abuse in her life, of the losses and painful episodes. As you read about her story, just know this, she's the real deal. Grace overwhelms lies, and by God's power, Allison has staked her claim on His turf.

God is using her story to help us write our own.

I truly love this quote from her first book on boundaries: “Born out of my own experience. Driven by sheer necessity, I walked the walk that led me to write these books.”

Confession Number Three: Necessity is the steam in our walk with Christ.

Jesus found it “necessary” to go to Samaria and meet the woman at the well. It was imperative for God to reach out to women, see them where they were, and to speak into their moment in time, “Drink from Me and you will never be thirsty again” (John 4).

He found it necessary to walk this earth and understand our pain.

He knew the necessity of setting boundaries.

He took what we cannot understand in the worst circumstances of our lives to the cross because of the necessary restoration of our relationship with our God.

He walked out of a grave so that we can live life fully now and always.

“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10).

In Jesus, we have a huge, full life to live and a heart He deemed irreplaceable to guard.

Allison uses a profound statement when it comes to changing our perspective on the pain from our past, “We must find glory in our suffering.”

This book is going to help us find glory in our suffering in a healthy way. Suffering is part of our connection to Jesus. But He didn’t die on that cross so that we should remain tied to our own tree of suffering—He wants us to find freedom from all bondage.

With the tools throughout this book, with Allison’s experiences of healing, and with God’s ongoing grace, we can and will move forward to build healthy walls around the unnecessary memories and pain that threaten to steal, rob, and destroy.

There are treasures to be found in the darkness. There are practical, applicable ways to do this thing of guarding our human hearts, measuring out painful memories, putting them into safety zones, and giving them no more space to threaten our joy in Christ.

Trauma may be our past, but it does not lay claim to our present.

It seems like the enemy of God, the one who attacks the mental and physical health, the enemy who nailed the heart of God in Christ to a cross more than 2000 years ago, has taken enough ground. It's time to stand with wise counsel, to refuse to allow any more of your life to be robbed by the father of lies. Enough is enough.

For those of us who find our identity in Jesus, the core takeaway gift of *Setting Boundaries with Negative Thoughts and Painful Memories* is to actively think through what His blood covers in our personal history and how to use the power of His blood objectively in our lives. He covers it all. He covers the good, the bad, the incomprehensible, the undone, the mystery of unanswerable questions, and most of all the attacks each of us face in the quiet moments of memory we may try to avoid.

Take your painful, worst memories out of the dark and bring them into His Light. It's time. Take God's Word and this book and a journal in hand. Trust God, trust the precious gift of Allison's experiences and wisdom shared here, and move forward. No one is grading. There is no curve. Here and now you have the opportunity to move one step at a time ahead and into freedom.

After the Oklahoma City bombing, which took so many lives and left others shattered and torn, First Call (Marty McCall and myself) had the honor of recording and performing a powerful song. These lyrics come to mind so often now in the middle of difficult days when demons whisper, when our nation strains, when our hearts murmur of years-old pain and memories, and we need more than ever to fall into God's healing arms.

Let the healing begin

You've got to trust in the power of God when nothing makes sense

Let the healing begin

In the wake of the tears of the innocent

For the sake of the tears of the innocent

Let the healing begin

In and through and because of our glorious, ever-present Christ¹

This is my prayer for all of us, with a grateful heart to Allison Bottke for a book that will lead more hearts and minds into soul healing.

Bonnie Keen,

Founding member of the critically acclaimed
recording trio First Call



Before You Begin

I had just finished watching a movie on television and randomly clicked through the channels to see if anything else caught my eye. When I saw a woman teetering precariously atop a huge mound of trash, I stopped.

What on earth is she doing? This was several years ago, and what I happened upon in my channel surfing was one of the first episodes of a new television program that focused on an issue viewers would come to find both fascinating and repulsive.

The woman was nicely dressed and appeared to be in her forties. Her long dark hair was pulled back in a ponytail. The narrator said the woman worked part-time as a clerk for a local hardware store. As I watched her awkwardly navigate the space, I was stunned to hear the narrator say this was Carla's bedroom.

Upon closer inspection, you could see piles of clothes, but they were strewn haphazardly among boxes, stacks of newspapers, magazines, and books. There was no visible furniture other than a broken lampshade lying on its side atop a mishmash pile of junk. Plastic trash bags—filled with God knows what—dotted the room. Most disconcerting was the

trash: food wrappers, pizza boxes, soft drink cans, plastic milk jugs, yogurt containers, and obvious garbage contributed to the landscape.

Well over four feet of refuse and personal belongings covered the entire floor.

The camera followed Carla as she proceeded to what looked to be a path where the tower of trash was somewhat less dense but still difficult for her to traverse. As Carla tried to get a foothold, she often slipped and fell into the rubble—the situation looked very dangerous. Eventually, she reached a place where a slight clearing had been carved out of the chaos, revealing what appeared to be a large circular microfiber dog bed.

“This is where I sleep,” she said quietly.

I stared in horror as the camera zoomed in on a visibly active roach population moving freely amidst the debris surrounding her “bed.”

Suddenly, I felt like a gawker driving by a horrendous accident—torn between the knowledge I should keep moving, but compelled to stare.

Could anyone truly live in this squalor?

Surely, this was some kind of staged scene, an elaborate set. When it became apparent that wasn't the case, I was at first disgusted, disturbed, and then strangely drawn to the situation—and to the woman who called this disaster her home. I wondered what was going on inside her head—and heart—that allowed her or compelled her to live like this.

When the phenomenon of hoarding was introduced to the TV viewing public, most of us found it incomprehensible. We couldn't believe anyone would *choose* to live this way.

What caused Carla to accumulate so much clutter? What kind of painful experience led someone to this point? Why couldn't she discard trash or part with some of her possessions? How long had she been living this way? Were her family, friends, or coworkers aware of how she lived behind closed doors? How did all of this affect her relationships—if, in fact, she even had any?

As numerous hoarding programs filled the airwaves, we watched trained mental-health professionals cautiously intervene, and we began to see the layers of hurt buried under tons of trash, hidden beneath

stacks of garbage. We began to see the complicated reasons and distorted thought processes that led these tortured souls to hold on to things that literally and figuratively buried them, causing them to live in desperate, despicable conditions.

We learned that much of the physical stuff surrounding these people was tied to memories—both good and bad—that often perpetuated negative thoughts and emotions and fueled unhealthy behaviors. We began to understand hoarding as the outward manifestation of inner pain and emotional devastation.

Watching this program got me to thinking.

What about the not-so-visible hoarding people do? What if there are no outward symptoms or tangible evidence of inner chaos? What about the intangibles we can't let go, that clutter up our heart, soul, and mind? I began to wonder, *How do we identify all the emotional junk we hang on to—junk that can't be seen by the naked eye—and dig ourselves out from under years of accumulated emotional, psychological, and spiritual pain that has buried our broken hearts? How do we learn to set healthy boundaries with our negative thoughts and emotions when we've spent years both hanging on to our painful memories and hoarding our hurts?*

My Story

We didn't have a name for it back then in the fifties and sixties, but my mother was a hoarder.

Fortunately, she had three children who, each in our own way, kept her from burying herself alive. We were never in danger of having mounds of refuse fall on us, we never crawled over mountains of trash, and the rented home where we lived growing up was never without utilities or running water, never physically unsafe, never in danger of being condemned. It was also never without copious mounds of papers covering nearly every surface.

But not just any paper—only “important” papers—and what constituted “important” was, well, whatever was important to my mother.

Thankfully, she didn't save used food wrappers, dirty paper plates, or unsanitary trash. Mom's important papers mainly consisted of anything

concerning her kids or items that connected her to anyone she knew personally. Things like greeting cards, drawings, report cards, letters, and photographs. Lots and lots of photographs. She also saved newspaper articles, magazines, receipts, business cards, brochures, menus, and imprinted napkins from restaurants she visited.

I think my beloved mother felt safer when she was surrounded by the things she saved. In some way, all this stuff anchored her. It represented security and safety. Although she wouldn't have been a candidate for a TV show (her hoard was not of monumental proportions), there was definitely something wrong—very wrong—with how we lived and how she processed (or, more accurately, didn't process) her painful memories. Those deeply traumatic and violent memories haunted her for decades, and I doubt she connected her painful memories with her obsessive need to save things.

While chaos reigned supreme inside, our life outside the walls of our home was entirely different. Mom was always taking us somewhere, keen to explore Cleveland and expose us to things she'd never experienced as a child. We usually took public transportation, specifically the Route 22 bus that ran from Public Square across the huge suspension bridge and up Lorain Avenue. (Of course, we had stacks and stacks of bus schedules at home—current, expired, and very important.) All of our family outings happened on free admission days, or we went to public places that cost nothing but the bus fare to get there. We frequented libraries, parks, the zoo, museums, art galleries, the West Side Market, and the grand department stores downtown. Mom found so much joy in these excursions that they became our joy as well.

Mom's primary goal in life was to broaden our horizons, keep us happy, and give us the childhood she lacked. In essence, she created the youth of her dreams by filling ours with adventure and opportunity. My younger brother, my older sister, and I were introduced to things many of our peers never experienced.

Years later, I realized it was this exposure to activity, arts, and culture that saved my sanity.

You see, my entire life changed when I was a toddler, and my mother

was hospitalized with spinal meningitis. My father wasn't able to care for us, and with no extended family nearby, we were placed in temporary foster care for several weeks. When Mom was well enough to come home, we were all reunited, but the carefree little Allison she remembered was gone.

That abuse stayed with me like the constant beat of a drum that set the sad and steady rhythm for my life—for my thoughts—and for my relationships.

When the social worker came to pick us up and take us home, my baby brother was found upstairs in a crib: he was naked, covered in his own excrement, and wildly shaking his head and limbs to keep the flies at bay. (As a result, he rocked his head back and forth for years afterward in order to get to sleep.) I was found locked in a dark closet under the stairwell—horribly abused, sexually molested, and, literally, catatonic.

Our older sister was more fortunate: she had been sent to a different foster home. Her memories from that time are joyful—and decades later she still finds the horror I experienced difficult to grasp because her memories are so completely different.

That abuse stayed with me like the constant beat of a drum that set the sad and steady rhythm for my life—for my thoughts—and for my relationships.

Layers of Unresolved Pain

Not long after the three of us had been in foster care, my parents divorced. Although I saw my father over the years during scheduled visits, I always felt abandoned by him, unloved, and unwanted. And a part of me felt certain it was my fault he left because, after all, there was obviously something wrong with me. The sexual abuse had taught me that. Confirmation came as I often heard my parents arguing at night about my nightmares. Dad was angry that every time I woke up screaming, Mom would come in, hold me, and rock me back to sleep.

“For crying out loud, Dolores!” he yelled. “Quit babying her and let her cry! She’ll eventually go back to sleep.”

In addition to trying to cope with my fear of the dark and my

nightmares, I also struggled with undiagnosed learning disabilities growing up. Distracted, impulsive, and painfully intuitive, I never fit in. It seemed my brain fired on more—or at least different—cylinders than most of my peers', and I didn't approach projects or problems in usual ways. I knew early on that my mind didn't work like the mind of a "normal" person.

So throughout my entire childhood, I felt like an outcast. I lived in an almost constant state of anxiety and fear except for the times I played dress-up and could pretend to be someone else. Whenever something triggered a painful memory or prompted emotions I couldn't process, this creative outlet kept me from cracking wide open. In essence, it was drama therapy without a therapist.

When I wasn't playing dress-up, I spent much of my out-of-school hours watching classic love stories on TV and reading romance magazines and novels. I pretended that I lived in a grown-up world of love, longing, beauty, and romance long before I really knew what any of those things were. Without the love of an earthly father and no understanding of a heavenly Father, I was desperately seeking someone to fill that huge void. So, years before the song was written, I began looking for love in all the wrong places.

When I met Jerry,¹ I was 14 years old and certain I had found my Prince Charming.

At 15—I had finished ninth grade—I quit school and ran away from home, became an emancipated minor, and married my boyfriend—the love of my life... and a young man whose brutal abuse and demoralizing violence almost killed me.

The first time he hit me was the day we were married. We had just left the courthouse in Greenville, South Carolina, and were sitting in the front seat of his car. I was so happy, so in love, and so excited. When I asked where we would be staying that night and what kind of honeymoon he had planned, Jerry's hand shot out like lightning and slapped me across the face. I was stunned, he was immediately apologetic, but the vicious cycle had begun.

His physical abuse escalated and reignited feelings of fear and terror

from my childhood that paralyzed me. I never fought back—at least not at first. In fact, I often blamed myself. After all, life had taught me there was something wrong with me, and I deserved what I got.

I was 16 when my son was born, and when I became a mother, I finally developed a backbone. I began to fight back—not for my own life, but for that of my child. At 17, I escaped my violent marriage and got divorced. Over the next year, I got my GED, fell in love again, and got pregnant. By the time I turned 18, that new relationship was over, and I'd had an abortion, gained 100 pounds, and discovered diet pills. By 19, I had my first apartment—and the first inclination of how petrified I was to be on my own with a baby. Mom lived nearby and helped take care of Chris, but I had no one to help take care of me—and I was an emotional powder keg.

My life was a mess, but in the time-honored tradition of my family, I pretended everything was fine. I decided I could do this: I could make something of myself, I could take care of my son, and I didn't need anyone, especially not God.

Lasting Impressions

I survived early-childhood abuse, extreme domestic violence, and a host of traumatic experiences over the years—and statistics show I'm not alone. Making sense of my violated *physical* boundaries was hard, but making sense of my violated *psychological* boundaries has been much harder.

While my relationship with the Lord has brought healing and hope to my life, it's impossible to deny that many of my traumatic life experiences have left lasting impressions on my heart and imprints of painful memories on my brain. These imprints haven't been easy to erase. In fact, some may never completely go away, and with God's help, I'm learning how to live with that.

For many of us, our painful memories and our negative thinking began in childhood. For others, these were acquired over time. We've been abandoned, abused, neglected, molested, bullied, and bruised. We were underachievers or overachievers, trying to fit in or never fitting in.

We've struggled with issues of inferiority, insecurity, and identity. We've made choices we're ashamed of and mistakes we regret. We've lost parents, siblings, spouses, and children to death or self-destruction. We've suffered the devastation of divorce. We've been betrayed and bewildered by people we trusted. We've had wayward children, grandchildren, and siblings. And we've fought depression, anxiety, disabilities, and a host of mental health and emotional issues.

And these are just some of the things that leave painful imprints on our lives—imprints that can forever alter the way we see our world whether or not we know it, whether or not we admit it. By the time we reach adulthood, many of us have collected a suffocating amount of toxic emotional trash.

Imagine Carla's bedroom in our brain.

In the Bible, God says, "I am the LORD. I will free you from your oppression and will rescue you from your slavery in Egypt. I will redeem you with a powerful arm and great acts of judgment" (Exodus 6:6 NLT). For many of us, Egypt is the gray matter in our heads, and we are enslaved to our negative thoughts and painful memories.

In the following pages, we're going to take a hard look at how our painful experiences from the past have shaped the way we think, feel, and relate to others today—including God. We're going to explore how negative thoughts and painful memories affect the choices we make as well as the way we communicate, trust, and even love.

And we're going to learn what we can do to set healthy emotional boundaries and nurture a mind/body/spirit connection that allows us to walk in renewed faith, hope, and victory. This connection begins with six steps that—with God's blessing—will change your life.

On these pages, you're going to learn the value of applying the Six Steps to SANITY to situations and circumstances that threaten your peace, rob you of joy, and keep you from being all that God intends for you to be.

As you apply the SANITY Steps to your choices, you will learn how to both respond to your emotional triggers and intentionally incorporate God's wisdom and Word into your thought processes. You will

gain a better understanding of what it means to walk in God's divine plan and purpose, to be obedient to Christ, and to listen for Holy Spirit prompting. You will acquire tools that can give you the power to interrupt a negative thought and redirect it to another path, a far more peaceful and saner path. These tools will strengthen your faith, protect your thoughts, guard your heart, and bring you freedom from the bondage of negative thoughts and painful memories. The SANITY Steps will also help you get into right relationships with God, with others in your life, and with yourself. They will help you take your thoughts captive and find peace.

By the way, as someone who has a relatively poor ability to memorize things, I found it amazingly easy from the beginning to memorize these six steps, and I hope you will as well. At first, I had to consciously think about the steps and the process of applying them. Now, living out these steps—Stop, Assemble, Nip, Implement, Trust, and Yield—is almost as natural as breathing. In time, these steps will also become second nature to you. And I can guarantee that when they do, your life will change for the better. Much better.

God knew what we would be up against in our twenty-first-century world—a world deeply entrenched in sin and sadness. A world in which the enemy has so skillfully woven his lies into the fabric of life that even the most faithful sometimes have difficulty separating fact from fiction, truth from the enemy's deceit. Further complicating this reality, our memories *can* play tricks on us, our thoughts are *not* always fact, and—we *don't have to listen*—inner voices want us to believe we're less than who we really are.

Sanity is possible—and I want to help you find it.

God knew our greatest battle in these times would happen in the mind, and Scripture is filled with truths that will help us take victory over negative thoughts and painful memories. Nowhere is that clearer

Six Steps to SANITY

- S**—*Stop* hoarding your hurts.
- A**—*Assemble* supportive people.
- N**—*Nip* excuses in the bud.
- I**—*Implement* a plan of action.
- T**—*Trust* the voice of the Spirit.
- Y**—*Yield* everything to God.

than in 2 Corinthians 10:5 where Paul wrote, “We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.”

Join me in this process of learning to take our negative thoughts captive and to replace them with God’s hopeful words of truth, His amazing promises, and His unfailing provisions. Romans 15:4 teaches, “Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”



Chapter 1

What Is SANITY?

The Setting Boundaries books have been born out of my own experience. Driven by sheer necessity, I walked the walk that led me to write these books.

The first book in the series was a result of the pain I endured parenting my adult son, Christopher. Time after time—thinking I was helping him—I bailed him out of trouble. The truth was, I was merely enabling my son to continue his inappropriate behavior. My own negative thoughts and painful memories drove me to make unhealthy parenting choices. Choices that had their roots in my unhealthy and often nonexistent boundaries.

Plus, my struggle to say no, combined with my control-freak tendency to enable, was taking a toll on other areas of my life. I was driving myself crazy trying to keep up with the many other demands on my life. Life simply wasn't working—at all.

But learning from that sad experience, I developed the SANITY Steps. They helped me gain control of my life and acquire a deeper understanding of God's plan and purpose for me. As readers of my earlier Setting Boundaries books have implemented these steps, they, too,

have been helped in getting their lives back on track. And I'm confident you'll be among that number as you allow these steps to guide you in implementing the healthy boundaries you need for your thought life.

In those early days with Christopher, I was living out the well-known definition of insanity: I was repeating the same behavior and expecting different results. I now call that running on the gerbil wheel of insanity. You've seen those wheels that allow pet gerbils and hamsters to run long and fast but take them nowhere. That's essentially what the person without boundaries is doing: running, hoping, praying, waiting for change to happen, and expecting a new result from the same old tactics, but never employing the steps necessary for good change to occur. It took me awhile, but eventually I made the move I'm now asking you to make: I invite you to move off the gerbil wheel of insanity into the world of sanity by following the six SANITY steps.

Think about your present situation. Surely it's not a new set of circumstances. I'm guessing you've been on that gerbil wheel for a while, and nothing has worked. You've been ruminating on the same negative thoughts, or you've been repeating the same behavior—prompted by old tapes—and expecting different results, only to be disappointed again and again. Perhaps you're experiencing difficulties in your relationships with those people closest to you—a common occurrence when we find ourselves responding to others from emotional places of complex feelings rather than from rational places of clear thinking.

What Exactly is SANITY?

SANITY is what we gain when we shift our perspective, when we stop focusing on the painful situations and challenging circumstances of life and instead begin to focus on changing our own heart attitudes and the behaviors those attitudes prompt. SANITY comes when we make the heartfelt commitment to stop allowing our dysfunctional thoughts to destroy our peace of mind. SANITY comes when we begin to understand how much God loves us, that He has a plan and purpose for us, and that He wants to meet our every need in healthy, satisfying ways like nothing and no one else can.

SANITY is living in the peace that comes when we dig ourselves out from under the heavy weight of emotional burdens and confidently put our trust in God. In Philippians 4:6-7, God calls us to “not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” And this instruction—like all God’s commands—is for our own good.

The Heart of SANITY

The goal of SANITY is to help us protect and nurture our hearts—the center of all the vital activities of body, soul, and spirit; of our personality; and of our character. In our heart, we hide God’s words of truth (Psalm 119:11), and our heart is where the Lord dwells. The apostle Paul put it this way: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but *Christ lives in me*. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20, emphasis added).

Furthermore, the New Testament teaches that no man or woman is able to lead a life that pleases God apart from Jesus Christ because of the evil and treachery that naturally exist in the heart. Remember this key Scripture: “Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it” (Proverbs 4:23).

We need a heart that is both strengthened and softened by God, a heart filled with the Spirit. And God promises to provide exactly that kind of heart: “I will give them singleness of heart and put a new spirit within them. I will take away their stony, stubborn heart and give them a tender, responsive heart” (Ezekiel 11:19 NLT).

Only with such a heart can we fulfill our highest calling as Christians, that of being in a heart-relationship to Jesus. Only then can we begin to sort out how to live an obedient life in this deeply painful, immensely precarious, and often seemingly haphazard world. Only then can we accept the senseless and be able to trust that God is at work always in all ways.

How to Practice SANITY

It's important to keep in proper perspective any man-made program we may follow no matter how spiritually sound it may be.

Furthermore, finding SANITY isn't the end result, but a means to an end—with the end being a more intimate heart-relationship with Jesus Christ and a passionate desire to read His Word and understand His truth, a desire that will continue growing for life.

This fundamental truth needs to be rooted in the deepest part of our heart: we were created for one basic purpose...to love and be loved by God.

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Healthy boundaries do not develop in a vacuum or in isolation. They develop as we develop—and we develop as we grow in the character of Christ, acknowledging God's love and sovereignty, and depending on His sustaining grace, mercy, and forgiveness. This kind of healthy dependence doesn't happen overnight—it takes time to develop.

With that in mind, consider these wise words from Henry Blackaby and Claude King's *Experiencing God*:

Take time. Remember we have all the time there is. The majority of us waste time and want to encroach on eternity. "Oh well, I will think about these things when I have time." The only time you will have is the day after you are dead, and that will be eternity. An hour, or half an hour, of daily attention to and meditation on our own spiritual life is the secret of progress.¹

Finally, the tangible result of finding SANITY is finding a new you and a new life.

Charting Our Course

As we navigate this path to SANITY, let's consider ourselves modern-day cartographers and commit to recording on paper an account of the terrain we travel. Please get a spiral notebook, a blank journal,

or anything that will fit easily into your purse, briefcase, or carryall bag. I'll be giving you writing assignments along the way throughout this book, and I hope you'll choose to complete them. I know you'll be glad you did.

Skeptical? I understand. I first learned the value of recording my random thoughts, memories, and feelings when I was in my mid-thirties. During the counseling I began shortly after my conversion, I discovered the power of journaling. That's why journaling is an integral part of this book today: it was a vital part of my ability to find freedom from the bondage of negative thoughts and painful memories. Journaling has also been proven beneficial in numerous therapeutic environments.

As you write, you will notice a new clarity. Without this process, your thoughts would likely stay jumbled up inside your head. So write whatever comes to mind. There is no right or wrong answer. Do your best not to censor yourself. After all, no one but you will see this unless you choose to share it.

The power of putting pen to paper can be remarkable even for those of us who don't typically write. And the more you write, the deeper you will go into places you've long forgotten or perhaps didn't even realize existed.

A word of caution...parts of this book may be difficult to read if the stories trigger emotions rooted in past trauma. Emotions are more easily triggered in people who have not processed the emotional pain caused by trauma. Growth (particularly this type) is often painful. So, if you're ready to make a change in your life and in your relationships, be prepared for some pain.

I also recommend keeping your Bible nearby and giving yourself grace as you process whatever thoughts or memories come to the surface as you read and write. Stop as often as necessary to ask God to calm your spirit and direct you to Scripture that will speak to your heart. My prayer is that you will find the courage to press through the pain until you find hope and healing.

It's also important to be aware that God really does work in mysterious ways and that there are no accidents or mere coincidences in His

kingdom. You're holding this book right now for a very specific purpose: whether it's to change your life or to be a change agent in the life of someone else, know that powerful forces are at work.

As you embark on this journey to find sanity in a life that may be anything but sane right now, my prayer is that you will open your heart wide, giving God free rein to do what only He can do in your life.

In *Experiencing God*, Henry Blackaby was very direct when he issued this warning to his readers:

To get from where you are to where God is will require major adjustments. These adjustments may relate to your thinking, circumstances, relationships, commitments, actions, and/or beliefs. Some people think that these adjustments are not major. However, any time you go from where you are to where God is you will have to make major adjustments. To move from your way of thinking or acting to God's way of thinking or acting will require adjustments. You cannot stay where you are and go with God at the same time.²

Still not sure about a journal? Try it. You've got nothing to lose.

Making Adjustments

Setting healthy boundaries is all about growing closer to God and relying on His wisdom, strength, and guidance. Healthy boundaries are also about strengthening the relationships we have with our loved ones, family, and friends; with adult children, aging parents, difficult people; and even with things like food and finances. Boundaries are also about strengthening the relationship we have with *ourselves*. As you may have often heard said, we can be our own worst enemy.

In her *Compassion Matters* blog on the *Psychology Today* website, Dr. Lisa Firestone expands on that truth, saying one of the biggest obstacles we will encounter in life is our inner critic. This voice inside our head often seems to have a mind of its own:

The “critical inner voice” is a concept I often introduce to new audiences. It's the cornerstone of a theory and therapy

technique developed by my father, psychologist and author Dr. Robert Firestone. It is the basis of a book we co-authored titled *Conquer Your Critical Inner Voice* and the subject of many of my lectures. I have invested so much of my time and work into this subject because what I have found in my 30 years of research and clinical practice is that, in almost all cases, we are our own worst enemy.

The critical inner voice is the language of this enemy. It is an internal dialogue that drives rumination, self-blame and self-loathing. It mocks us, shames us, scares us and lures us into self-limiting or self-destructive behavior. It tells us not to trust the people we love. It influences us to not try to reach a goal. It advises us and subdues us, keeping us seemingly safe inside a miserable, albeit familiar, shell.³

It's time to break out of that shell. It's time to change.

Finding hope, healing, and sanity in life isn't about changing other people; it's about changing how we respond to other people. *Finding sanity and health is about changing ourselves.* Learning to set healthy boundaries in our thought life, for instance, is about facing that inner critic and changing how we respond to our own emotions and memories.

You're not alone if you struggle with persistent or intrusive negative thoughts or with painful memories from past experiences—whether those experiences happened last week, last month, last year, or decades ago.

Sadly, bad stuff happens to good people. Sometimes, no matter how hard we try to put it behind us, we are forever changed by the experience. And sometimes it takes us years to make the connection that the mess we're in now has a whole lot to do with the misery we were in back then.