

Appendix 4
Suggested Readings for
Chapter 4: Symptom Management



New Partnerships for Women

PSYCHOLOGICAL OR EMOTIONAL SYMPTOMS*

Beginning Ritual

To begin work on this topic, write four good things that happened to you in the last two days:

Experiencing Symptoms Caused by Abuse

If you were abused, you probably developed certain symptoms in response. The symptoms may have happened right away or, in some cases, months or even years after the abuse.

Some symptoms, such as fear, anger, or sadness, are obviously connected to the abuse. Other symptoms, such as paranoia, dissociation, or panic attacks, may have caused a bit more confusion for you. The feelings and behaviors may have been so upsetting and overwhelming at times that you felt as if you were going crazy. In fact, all of these symptoms were signs that abuse had occurred. Some were immediate responses to the abuse, others were attempts to cope with the abuse and prevent it from happening again, and still others were ways to deny that it had ever happened at all so that you could go on living.

As you begin to think about your symptoms differently, it will be up to you to decide what you want to do about particular feelings and behaviors. Some you will want to control yourself, some you will need help from medication or counseling to control. Some symptoms will be easy for you to let go. In other cases, you might decide to hold on to a symptom for a while, in case you need it.

Many signs of abuse have been mistaken for symptoms of mental illness or biochemical brain imbalances, such as chronic depression, bipolar disorder, manic depression, or schizophrenia. If you've sought help from health care providers,

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perhaps you were told that your symptoms were signs of a disease or a mental illness instead of being the markers of abuse. You may have been given a diagnosis and some medication and never even asked about your abuse. It may be tempting to focus on one view of the problem, but when you see your emotions, biology, and everyday experiences as part of an integrated whole, your recovery will make more sense to you.

Some traumatized women receive treatment at mental health clinics for years for symptoms of anxiety, withdrawal, and dissociation, receiving diagnoses of major depression, bipolar disorder, and borderline personality disorder. Meanwhile, the underlying problem is ignored. Rather than help, diagnoses that obscure the role of trauma just make many women feel bad about themselves. When a woman begins to see her symptoms as connected to years of physical and emotional abuse, she may feel an enormous sense of relief, as if a cloud of confusion had lifted. She may also, however, feel sad and angry because her underlying problem—the trauma—was never really treated.

In this topic, some of the symptoms and feelings associated with abuse will be described. (Addictive and compulsive behaviors will be addressed in topic 20.³) For any of the symptoms you have, or have had in the past, write down your answers to the series of questions we've listed. At the end of the exercise there are additional spaces for you to write about other symptoms or feelings that are not listed here.

Dissociation—feeling as though you are out of your body, watching what is happening to you from a distance. For example, when Ann's counselor mentioned troubling times in Ann's childhood, Ann would protect herself by feeling disconnected from her body. She found she could relieve this symptom by telling the counselor she wanted to change the subject and discuss something pleasant that was happening in her life now, like the course she is taking or an outing with a good friend.

I currently have, or have in the past had, this symptom.

_____ Yes

_____ No

Why is this feeling hard for you?

Where do you think it may have come from?

³ This refers to a chapter in the Copeland and Harris book Healing the Trauma of Abuse: A Woman's Workbook.

How have you tried to help yourself feel better when you experience this symptoms?

How effective has it been?

Excessive anxiety—Worry accompanied by feelings of nervousness or jitteriness and sometimes shortness of breath, weakness in the arms and legs, and profuse sweating. For example, Nancy experienced anxiety every time she went to visit her parents because she anticipated that an uncle would stop by who had been abusive to her when she was a child. To relieve this anxiety, Ann asked her parents to tell the uncle in advance of her visit that he was not welcome. She learned deep breathing and relaxation and stress-reduction exercises that she practiced regularly. In addition, she cut down on the amount of caffeine she was using.

I currently have, or have had in the past, this symptom.

_____ Yes

_____ No

Why is this feeling hard for you?

Where do you think it may have come from?

How have you tried to help yourself feel better when you experience this symptom?

How effective has it been?

Disturbed sleep—having a hard time falling asleep, waking often during the night, or waking very early and being unable to get back to sleep. This may be the result of recurring nightmares, even though a woman sometimes can't remember them when she wakes. Mary Ellen has addressed this problem by doing relaxation exercises several times during the day, doing journal writing before going to bed, and taking herbal supplements recommended by a health care professional.

I currently have, or have had in the past, this symptom

_____ Yes

_____ No

Why is this feeling hard for you?

Where do you think it may have come from?

How have you tried to help yourself feel better when you experience this symptom?

How effective has it been?

Losing track of time—you can't account for where you were and what you were doing at certain times. For example, Marcy kept finding clothes in her closet that she couldn't remember buying. Sometimes people came up to her on the street, acting as if they knew her well, and she had no recollection of who they were. She is dealing with this in three ways: through counseling with a therapist who has experience treating people who have been abused, by practicing being in the moment (discussed in topic 7⁴), and by involving herself in grounding activities such as cooking and cleaning when she is feeling stressed.

I currently have, or have had in the past, this symptom

_____ Yes

_____ No

Why is this feeling hard for you?

⁴ This refers to a chapter in the Copeland and Harris book Healing the Trauma of Abuse: A Woman's Workbook.

Where do you think it may have come from?

How have you tried to help yourself feel better when you experience this symptom?

How effective has it been?

Fear of leaving the safety and security of your living space—In extreme cases, you might be unable to go outdoors at all. For example, Robin only felt safe in the house because of traumatic events that had happened when she left the security of her home. She worked on relieving this problem by leaving the house for short periods of time and going only to safe places, often accompanied by a supporter. She very gradually increased the length of time she could be away and the number of places she could go, and eventually began spending more time away from home on her own.

I currently have, or have had in the past, this symptom

_____ Yes

_____ No

Why is this feeling hard for you?

Where do you think it may have come from?

How have you tried to help yourself feel better when you experience this symptom?

How effective has it been?

Hypervigilance—Feeling as though you are always on edge, expecting something bad to happen, always expecting the worst, and feeling tense all over in anticipation. For example, Patsy grimaced every time someone touched her because she expected the touch to be abusive. Patsy explained the problem to several friends and worked with them, practicing being touched without grimacing until she was able to enjoy friendly touch. Whenever this issue comes up she reminds herself that she is no longer in the abusive situation that she believes was responsible for this symptom.

I currently have, or have had in the past, this symptom

_____ Yes

_____ No

Why is this feeling hard for you?

Where do you think it may have come from?

How have you tried to help yourself feel better when you experience this symptom?

How effective has it been?

Uncontrollable rage—Yelling, screaming, or hollering at someone, something, or nothing. For example, Jan would have screaming fits toward her husband. Sometimes these fits were unprovoked, and other times they began as the result of a minor incident or misunderstanding. She felt this rage was left over from the physical and emotional abuse she experienced as a child. She learned to deal with this symptom by noticing early warning signs that she was getting stressed; sometimes she was able to recognize a certain circumstance that was likely to lead to an outburst. She would then stop what she was doing, go to a quiet place she had designated in the house, listen to quiet music, and do a relaxation exercise.

I currently have, or have had in the past, this symptom

_____ Yes

_____ No

Why is this feeling hard for you?

Where do you think it may have come from?

How have you tried to help yourself feel better when you experience this symptom?

How effective has it been?

Flashbacks—When you experience a vision of past traumatic event along with strong feelings relating to the trauma. For example, while she was involved in some enjoyable activity, Diane would suddenly see in her mind a frightening incident of abuse with her ex-husband. This seemed to drain away all her energy and fill her with fear. Diane learned to deal with this symptom by immediately reminding herself that flashbacks are “old news” that have nothing to do with her present circumstance. She would then take a few deep breaths before resuming her other activities.

I currently have, or have had in the past, this symptom

_____ Yes

_____ No

Why is this feeling hard for you?

Where do you think it may have come from?

How have you tried to help yourself feel better when you experience this symptom?

How effective has it been?

Hallucinations—Seeing, hearing, feeling, and thinking things that are not based in reality. For example, Marlene had times when her whole life felt out of control. Nothing seemed real. All of her senses seemed to be distorted. She would tell others about things she had seen and heard that made her upset and they knew these things had not really happened. Marlene learned to watch for possible triggering events and early signs of hallucinations. When they occurred, she took time off from work and spent one or several very quiet days at home, doing relaxation exercises, journaling, and engaging in activities she enjoys.

I currently have, or have had in the past, this symptom

_____ Yes

_____ No

Why is this feeling hard for you?

Where do you think it may have come from?

How have you tried to help yourself feel better when you experience this symptom?

How effective has it been?

Low self-esteem—Feeling as though you have little or no value as a person. For example, Jodie kept trying and trying to do things that would make her feel good about herself. She got a doctorate as well as a master's degree, had a successful career, and she still couldn't feel like she had any value. She felt this way because she was told over and over as a child that she was "no good for anything." Jodie worked on raising her self-esteem by repeating over and over the affirmation, "I am a wonderful person with lots of talents to share with others." In addition, she started avoiding people who gave her negative feedback about herself, spending more time with people who were positive and affirming.

I currently have, or have had in the past, this symptom

_____ Yes

_____ No

Why is this feeling hard for you?

Where do you think it may have come from?

How have you tried to help yourself feel better when you experience this symptom?

How effective has it been?

Inability to trust—Being unable to connect closely and bond with others because of fears of rejection or abuse. For example, Jane often felt lonely and separated from others. However, whenever people attempted to establish a connection with her she would become fearful, avoiding the person and not responding to their invitations. She felt she was unable to trust others because when she was a child her parents had physically and emotionally abused her and neglected her basic needs. To address this issue in her life, she interviewed several counselors until she found one with whom she felt comfortable. They worked together to develop a trusting relationship. The counselor then introduced Jan to a support group of other women who had been abused. In this group she learned to share personal information with others who had similar experiences and who respected her confidentiality. She developed close friendships with several of the women in the

group, getting together with them for walks and movies. With these successful trusting relationships, she began to take more risks, becoming friendly with people at work and at her church.

I currently have, or have had in the past, this symptom

_____ Yes

_____ No

Why is this feeling hard for you?

Where do you think it may have come from?

How have you tried to help yourself feel better when you experience this symptom?

How effective has it been?

Use the following spaces to address other symptoms and feelings you experience as a result of abuse.