



ASK THE
CHRISTIAN
COUNSELOR



I HAVE PTSD

REORIENTING
AFTER TRAUMA

CURTIS SOLOMON

“The experience of trauma is not new for human beings—it is part of the human condition after the fall. Nevertheless, the modern age has greatly increased the opportunities and avenues of trauma. I’m thankful for Curtis Solomon and his good work in this book. You will be too.”

Al Mohler, President, The Southern Baptist
Theological Seminary

“I Have PTSD offers wise insights into how our bodies and souls respond to extreme suffering while offering the hope of the gospel for healing. Curtis compassionately breaks down the disorienting aspects of trauma and provides orienting biblical truths paired with practical steps to begin the healing journey.”

Darby Strickland, CCEF Counselor and Faculty;
author of *Is it Abuse?*

“In *I Have PTSD*, Curtis Solomon helps Christians rally the resources of their faith as powerful tools for regaining a sense of peace, stability, and hope. This is a great resource for believers wanting to know more of the Savior’s comfort amid their struggle with trauma.”

Brad Hambrick, Pastor of Counseling, The Summit
Church, Raleigh-Durham, NC; author of *Angry
with God*

“Curtis Solomon has compassionately combined practical advice with a biblical foundation, blessing us with this invaluable resource. This book will prove to be a wonderful tool for any counselor or sufferer seeking to offer or find hope within the disorienting realities of trauma.”

Chris Moles, Pastor; author of *The Heart of
Domestic Abuse*

“In this book, Curtis Solomon does a masterful job of providing both a clear perspective on trauma and PTSD and a biblical framework with practical steps for addressing it. This book is a hope-filled guide for anyone struggling through the challenges of trauma.”

Jeremy Stalnecker, Cofounder, Mighty Oaks Foundation; author of *The Truth About PTSD*

“Have you suffered trauma? Are you an overwhelmed friend, family member, or church leader who needs guidance to help traumatized loved ones? This book is for you!”

Ellen Mary Dykas, Director of Equipping for Ministry to Women, Harvest USA; author of *Jesus and Your Unwanted Journey*

“Curtis’s book on post-traumatic stress helps us lean in with curiosity, hope, and practical help. This book will become a faithful companion for complex struggles as you meet people in the darkest of places.”

Jonathan D. Holmes, Executive Director, Fieldstone Counseling

“I am so thankful for this book which addresses a specific but common form of trauma and does so in a way that is deeply grounded in Scripture. I am certain it will prove to be a blessing to those who have endured such trauma and to those who are seeking to minister to them.”

Tim Challies, Author of *Seasons of Sorrow*

“Solomon’s wealth of experience with PTSD is constantly evident. It is realistic, rooted in Scripture, wise about physiology, full of case studies, and insightful about guilt, shame,

and despair. *I Have PTSD* connects constantly back to the Lord and helps you construct a wise, holistic, and practical peace plan.”

J. Alasdair Groves, Executive Director, Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation (CCEF); coauthor of *Untangling Emotions*

“If you’re looking for a better understanding of PTSD, this is a must-read book that will help you, your loved ones, and those around you find hope through the gospel and pursue the life God intended for you!”

Chad Robichaux, Founder and CEO, Mighty Oaks Foundation; Force Recon Marine; JSOC operator; author of *Saving Aziz*

“People who suffer post-traumatic stress are exactly that—people who suffer. In this book, Dr. Solomon addresses you as a person, not a diagnosis or set of symptoms. He shows you the respect of a person made to know God in the complexities of your suffering.”

Jeremy Pierre, Dean, The Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism, and Ministry and Lawrence & Charlotte Hoover Professor of Biblical Counseling, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; author of *The Dynamic Heart in Daily Life*

I HAVE PTSD

REORIENTING AFTER TRAUMA

Curtis Solomon



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To Jonny.

My teacher, my friend, my brother.

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INTRODUCTION

Trauma invades life. It harms, destroys, and even kills. Anyone left alive after a potentially traumatic event feels confused, lost, out of control, unsure, and unsteady—disoriented. This book is written for people in that state. If you have faced intense suffering or love someone who has, then it's for you. Words are inadequate and most imaginations cannot fathom the kind of suffering I'm talking about—suffering which always leaves marks, sometimes on the body, but always on the soul, and often on both.

Disorienting is a good word to describe the impact of trauma. It leaves one feeling dazed. No book can solve your problems, take the pain away, or fix it, but this one is designed to help you reorient your life after you have been disoriented by trauma. Trauma is not something that can be undone, but it can be overcome. This volume and the people who journey alongside you as you suffer are not ultimate solutions, but they are a source of help and will point you to the One who is.

Genesis 1:31 assures us God created the world to be “very good”—perfect in fact. Humanity's first sin opened the door to trauma and it has been with us ever since. One rebellious choice by the first couple left their descendants susceptible to death and decay and prone to go their own wrong way (see Genesis 3). If you open the Bible to its first book, Genesis, you

will read story after story of trauma inflicted and endured. Trauma did not take a break or disappear; it has been with us ever since. In each generation, people from every tribe and nation have experienced and inflicted trauma.

There is no way a single book can say all that could be said about trauma or completely resolve all the challenges you encounter as someone disoriented by it. But don't lose heart. There is hope and healing offered in these pages. I have seen transformation in the lives of those disoriented by trauma. That's why I wrote this book for you—someone who has suffered greatly. I want to help you get your bearings and reorient your life.

Each chapter is designed to address different aspects of the struggle with trauma, including grief, guilt, and how you can experience post-traumatic growth and transformation. The chapters are in an order I hope will prove helpful, but you may want to tackle particular chapters out of order to meet your most pressing needs first.

Allow me to make two points on chapter order. First, if part of your experience involves panic attacks, dissociative episodes, or other instances in which life and your body feel out of control, please review chapter 4, "Your Peace Plan," first. This will help equip you to address these problems promptly. I don't want you to have to wait until the end of the book to get some relief from these disruptive experiences. Second, while it is not an absolute rule, I do find it's helpful to address grief and loss before addressing issues of guilt. This approach will show you the compassionate love of Christ so that any call to deal with what you have or have not done wrong will be wrapped in a loving invitation from Jesus to come to him for rest from your burden of guilt and shame.

“POST” TRAUMA

This book is written for those struggling with Post-Traumatic Stress. Understanding that it is for those who are “post” their traumatic experiences is key. One of the first and most important steps to reorienting your life and healing after trauma is to no longer be facing trauma. If you have been traumatized by abuse, the first step to take is making sure you are not still in an abusive relationship. The truths in this book will still be helpful to you if you are, but your first concern should be to get out of the abusive relationship. Leaving an abuser is hard but it is important for your spiritual and physical health. Please, as soon as possible, reach out to someone you trust and ask for help. You can start by calling the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 800-799-7233 or by texting START to 88788. There are also great Christian ministries like Called to Peace that care for people in abusive situations. (Please visit <https://www.calledtopeace.org/>.)

If you are not in an abusive relationship, you could still be facing repeated traumatic events. First responders, military members, and medical care providers often encounter one traumatic event after another. Your situation requires careful consideration. Two questions to think about are these: First, are you currently experiencing any of the impacts of the traumatic events in your life? And second, is it possible, advisable, or necessary for you to change career fields?

Regarding the first question, you could be in one of three places. Either you aren't experiencing any negative consequences from the traumatic events you've lived through, or you are experiencing some and don't know it, or you are aware of the trouble you are having. If you have a role like those I mentioned and are reading this book, you are most likely in one of the last two categories—you know you are

experiencing trouble, or someone near you sees your struggle and has recommended this book to you. If you are in either one of these places, this volume can help. You will learn some ways to deal with past trauma and can start to build resilience so you can better handle future trauma. The fact that you continue to face traumatic events, however, will make it challenging to fully heal and move forward.

If you are in a career field like those I mentioned and are not currently facing any trouble from past trauma, this book can help you build resilience against it. After all, many people, especially those in the first responder community, don't experience Post-Traumatic Stress symptoms until they quit, retire, or switch career fields. When faced with one emergency after another, it's common to press forward without ever processing. People tend to stay in alert mode, being constantly distracted by the next emergency. While many can live by this pattern for a while, it often catches up to them eventually. You, in fact, might notice that unprocessed trauma will gradually (or suddenly) come to the surface. I tell retiring police officers, firefighters, EMTs, and combat veterans to be on the lookout for things to start popping up as they slow down. It is helpful to prepare for change and not be caught off guard by it.

Now, for that second question I mentioned. Is it possible you need to change careers or do something else to break the cycle of traumatic events related to your work? Each person is unique and there is not a one-size-fits-all answer here. If you are experiencing the impacts of trauma or your family or friends suspect you are, I encourage you to reach out to a biblical counselor and begin assessing the wisest path forward for you. Involve your family, close friends, and spiritual leadership in the decision-making process. Though changing

careers is not without difficulty, doing so may be the best thing for you.

Whatever has prompted you to pick up this book, I encourage you to reach out to a trusted friend to walk through the journey ahead alongside you. You are not meant to go through life, let alone trauma, alone. So ask someone you trust, who loves you and Jesus, to help. A pastor, a small group leader, a biblical counselor, or just a good friend can be a wonderful support for you. You don't have to get into all the details of your trauma yet, or maybe ever, with that person. But you should let them know you've suffered significantly and would like them to read through this book with you in support of your efforts to reorient your life. If you don't know anyone that you feel could serve in that role, please reach out to a biblical counselor. (You can visit <https://partners.biblicalcc.org/counselor-map/> to find one.) Some now provide care via online video sessions.

One truth that will be repeated many times in this book is this: *you are not alone!* Having someone walk this journey alongside you will demonstrate that reality to you again and again. Such an individual will be a concrete reminder of that core truth, which is important since those affected by trauma often struggle to believe it.

INTRODUCING THREE PEOPLE DISORIENTED BY TRAUMA

Allow me to introduce you to a few people who I will mention throughout this book. Their names are Vanessa, Javier, and Carl. Each of them represents a real person whose life has been disoriented by trauma. Some of the details shared in their stories have been altered or are an amalgam of the experiences of several different people; nevertheless, their

suffering, loss, trauma, and disorientation—as well as reorientation, restoration, and hope—are authentic.

Let's begin with Vanessa. Her big brother was a high school football star. One Friday night, during a game, a fluke incident sent his helmet flying from his head right before he collided head-on with a player from the opposing team. Vanessa (and hundreds of others) watched in horror from the sidelines as the team's athletic trainer, then a doctor from the stand, and ultimately the EMTs surrounded her brother on the field. They rushed him away in an ambulance. Later, when she arrived at the hospital with her parents, Vanessa learned her brother had not survived.

Sergeant Javier Sanchez was an Army Ranger who had multiple deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan. While he encountered many traumatic events, he is haunted by two in particular. He once escorted a wounded enemy combatant through a hospital full of people maimed by war. In a separate incident, he was trapped in a broken-down Humvee while enemy fire slowly compromised the ballistic glass in front of him. The whole time, he wondered whether the next bullet would break through and end his life. Javier survived, but his injuries led him to be medically discharged from the Army.

Carl was driving down the road when a car suddenly shot out in front of him. There was no time for Carl to stop, and he hit the side of the car at full speed. It turned out that the other driver's vision had been blocked by a line of traffic waiting to make a right turn, so he hadn't seen Carl's car driving in the lefthand lane. The airbags and other safety features of Carl's car saved his life and prevented any major injuries. But the same could not be said for the child in the back seat of the other car who died in the crash. Carl was cleared of all legal responsibility since the car accident had been the fault of the other driver making an illegal blind turn.

Vanessa, Javier, and Carl all experienced traumatic events and, like you, each ended up suffering and disoriented. We will revisit their stories throughout this book, so that you can see how—step by step—trauma can be overcome. While overcoming often involves a long journey, there is hope for healing and growth. These can come from the hands of the great Healer of soul and body—Jesus Christ.

A WORD FOR THE HELPER

If you are taking time to minister to someone who has suffered greatly, I thank you. This book is written for trauma sufferers, but also with you—the helper—in mind. Those coming to you for care may not be able to read this on their own. If that’s the case, you can read it for them. Please use it as a guide as you offer counsel and support; its pages are packed with wisdom.

Remember, you are not alone. God is with you, I’m with you, the body of Christ is with you, and the person who is coming for care is with you. He or she is not just someone who needs help, but—I think you will find—can be a great source of encouragement, help, and wisdom to you as well.

Should you ever feel in over your head, know there’s nothing wrong with reaching out for help. I’ll guide you through developing a Transformation Team in chapter 1 and in resource 1: “Transformation Team Additions on page 118.” Don’t neglect the help offered by secular authorities to help in emergency situations. If someone you are caring for is a threat to themselves or others, don’t hesitate to call 911 or 988 (the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline). But I want to remind you to pray more than anything else. Pray for the one you are caring for. Do so before each meeting to discuss this book. Do

so during your time together. Do so anytime the one you're aiming to help comes to mind.

Be encouraged that by walking alongside someone disoriented by trauma, you are participating in Jesus's mission "to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed" (Luke 4:18). Jesus wants to set free those who are disoriented by trauma, and he will help you and them. Don't forget that the one asking for your help is not ultimately in your hands, but in God's. So call out to him, rely on him, trust in him.

PART 1

You Are Not Alone

Chapter 1

NEVER FIGHT ALONE

Sergeant Javier Sanchez awoke on the side of a dirt road. He could feel someone searching through his pockets for medication and another person doing a sternal rub, a technique he knew medical providers use to determine whether a person is conscious. For a moment he wondered what had happened. Then it came back to him. The van he'd been riding in had made a turn off a smooth blacktop road onto a gravel road. The sound of the gravel bouncing off the van's wheel wells had triggered his body's fight-or-flight response and he had passed out. It had reminded him of the time he was trapped in a broken-down armored Humvee, watching the ballistic glass in front of him deteriorate with each enemy round.

As Javier sat up, he looked around and reminded himself, *I'm in a safe place*. Many of the men with him in the van had been in a similar situation. Their response to his dissociative episode showed him they knew what it was like to walk in his shoes. He knew he was surrounded by other men who had gathered together to get biblical help for their battle with Post-Traumatic Stress (PTS).¹ The ministry called Mighty Oaks had been started by combat veterans to help other veterans whose lives have been disoriented by trauma. The

ministry has since grown to reach out to first responders as well as the spouses of those impacted by trauma. The motto of Mighty Oaks is “Never fight alone.”²²

If you, like Javier, find yourself experiencing the long-term effects of trauma, that motto marks the place you must start the journey toward reorientation. *You are not alone*, and you really don’t have to address what you’re dealing with by yourself.

I don’t know what you have been through, but I do know it was horrible. People don’t read a book on overcoming trauma if something terrible has not rocked their world. But while your story is unique to you, I want you to know there are other people who have lived through terrors too. In fact, there is no segment of the population, no age range, no gender, no ethnicity, no socioeconomic status, that is beyond the reach of trauma. It is not a military thing or a law-enforcement thing; sadly, it is a human thing. Trauma happens on the battlefield and in the bedroom. It is linked to combat, car accidents, violent crime, natural disasters, abuse, and unexpected deaths of all kinds. Trauma leaves behind a wake of destruction. Many of its sufferers have physical scars to accompany the invisible ones. These show up in all kinds of ways, such as how we respond to certain scents, sounds, sights, and textures. Trauma can impact whole families and futures. It can crush dreams and happy memories of what was. Trauma disrupts the body, the soul, one’s abilities and relationships, one’s connection to creation, the concept of God, and even the desire to live. It leaves its victims disoriented, unsure of where to go, what to do, or what lies ahead.

If overcoming trauma seems like a mountain you can’t climb, don’t look at the whole mountain—just grab the first rock you can hold on to. It’s labeled, *You are not alone!* Grasping that will give you a measure of stability as you start

learning to reorient your life. It will be a source of hope and strength. By contrast, believing you are alone could cause you to slip deeper into despair.

YOU NEED A COMMUNITY

“But no one can understand what I’ve been through!” Does that sentence ring true for you? It commonly does among people who have been disoriented by trauma. The level of suffering you have faced seems rare and incomparable. But that is not true, and believing the lie will tempt you to isolate from the rest of the world and keep you from getting help. Throughout human history, people have been disoriented by trauma. But throughout history, people who have experienced trauma have also found hope and help. Their lives were reoriented, and they were able to move forward.

“Being alone with my thoughts was one of the worst places I could be,” my Uber driver confessed one day. He was a former combat medic who still had shrapnel embedded near his spine to go along with his diagnosis of PTSD. It turned out the man didn’t need to drive to make money. He drove to face his fear and to let strangers help him avoid isolation. I was impressed by his wherewithal, insight, and self-awareness. He hadn’t been to counseling. He wasn’t a Christian as far as I could tell. Nevertheless, he intuitively accepted the very thing God the Creator said at the beginning: “It is not good that the man . . . be alone” (Genesis 2:18). While isolation is not ideal for anyone, it is downright dangerous for those disoriented by trauma. As Joni Eareckson Tada puts it, “Community breeds life. Isolation leads to death.”³

You need a community. You need people around you to help you walk through life. On a tough journey like the one you are on, there are particular people I want you to invite into your life. I will call them your Transformation Team.

These are the individuals who will walk with you through your suffering and encourage you to become more like Jesus—the One who will be your ultimate source of comfort and transformation.

YOUR TRANSFORMATION TEAM

Your team starts with you. You are reading this book because you want help and that is significant. But others—whom you *do* need—can't help you if you don't invite them along. So whom should you ask to help you? Below is a list of key members of the transformation team I urge you to begin assembling.

The Primary Biblical Counselor

The primary biblical counselor is the person who'll meet regularly with you. His or her role is to bring hope, help, and healing from Scripture. Ideally, this individual already serves in a shepherding role in your local church or is trained in biblical counseling. But don't be discouraged if you don't have someone like that in your life already. God works through all kinds of people, trained and untrained. And if you need help finding a biblical counselor, you can visit the Biblical Counseling Coalition's website: <https://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/>. Your primary counselor can be a great resource in helping you build out the rest of your Transformation Team.⁴

Counseling Ally

The counseling ally is really just a close trusted friend. Ideally you will ask someone who is already a spiritual mentor to you and a mature believer in Jesus Christ to serve in this capacity. Your ally will attend counseling sessions but will not typically participate in the giving of counsel. His or her role is to support you while you are receiving counseling and to reinforce the counsel provided. Your ally can help you remember

to do homework, remind you of wisdom offered in session, and provide encouragement and accountability between sessions. Your ally will serve as the first point of contact between sessions too.

There are many benefits to using allies in counseling. For one, the practice will deepen your relationship with your friend and help you both better realize the benefits of meaningful friendship. Having an ally will also help you fight the stigma that sometimes accompanies being in counseling. He or she will be a key part of having a healthy community around you that will continue long after formal counseling concludes.

Support Friends

Support friends are three to five other close friends whom you can ask for help. They don't need to know the details of your problems, and they will not attend counseling sessions. Rather, being equipped with your Peace Plan (something we'll discuss later), they'll be available for phone calls. Having support friends helps distribute the caregiving and ensures someone is always available to talk should you have a need arise. If you have a panic attack, need some extra encouragement, or just want someone to talk to you, your support friends can be just as helpful as your counseling ally.

Co-Sufferers

The Bible teaches that there is comfort in shared suffering. The apostle Paul wrote this: "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man" (1 Corinthians 10:13). I bring that up because the word translated "temptation" here can also be translated as "trial."⁵ Trials and temptation go together. Temptations are times of testing and trial, and

suffering tempts us in particular ways. Severe suffering and tribulations of all kinds have been prevalent since Adam and Eve disobeyed God. Through the centuries there have been many people who have lived through similar circumstances to yours and actually grew through their suffering. This is why it is so good to find some people who can demonstrate this truth to you through their own stories.

Finding someone who has been through something similar to you can make the truths of Scripture more real to you too. Such people can bring us hope in our suffering. Hope that someone understands what we have been through and what we are going through. Hope that there is the possibility of growth. Hope that there is the possibility of a future.

If you've already been talking to someone about your trauma, ask if they know others you could talk to who have been through experiences similar to your own. Then meet with that person and ask to hear the story of what they went through. How has it impacted that individual? How did they receive help? What growth has this person experienced since? Doing this can serve as a powerful source of hope and encouragement that will keep you pressing forward.

It might be a good idea to connect with a group of people who have also been through trauma. If you are a member of the military community (active, guard, reserve, or veteran), a first responder, or the spouse of someone in these fields, the Mighty Oaks Foundation has a free program you could attend.⁶ GriefShare is another ministry that connects people who've experienced significant loss in their lives.⁷

Connecting to other people who can show you that you are not alone in your suffering is one of the best ways to let go of isolation and lean into the healing and growth God can provide.

God

The Lord promises never to abandon anyone who comes to him in faith (Hebrews 13:5–6). Even though you can't see him, he is with you and can offer comfort, encouragement, and help through many avenues. God cares for all his children, but he has a special concern for those who have suffered greatly. In both the Old and New Testaments, God declares his love and care for those who are afflicted. His compassion is expressed in being intimately involved with us—he enters into our suffering (Isaiah 63:7–9; Hebrews 4:15).

God's heart for sufferers is apparent all throughout the Bible, but one particularly encouraging passage is in Romans 8. In it, the apostle Paul doesn't try to ignore or minimize suffering. Instead, he highlights the widespread nature of suffering and demonstrates how it affects the whole world (vv. 19–22). While this is bad news indeed, Paul points out that we who trust in Jesus Christ as Savior are not left to suffer alone. In verse 26, Paul reminds us that the Holy Spirit “intercedes for us” when we are so overwhelmed with suffering and sorrow that we don't know how to pray ourselves. In verse 34, we also see Jesus, God the Son, interceding on our behalf. Do you know that the Lord himself prays for you every day, always?

At the close of chapter 8, Paul lists a variety of trials and sources of suffering in this life but concludes that none of them can separate us from the love of God which is available to us in Jesus. In Romans 8:35–39 he says this:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? . . .

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that

neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God.

God understands suffering. God understands *your* suffering. And he doesn't run away from it, but runs into it. He invites you to draw near to him, and he draws near to you (Hebrews 4:16; James 4:8). His primary means of doing so and communing with you is through his Word, the Bible. In it you will find wisdom for life, including help to reorient your life after trauma.

SUFFERERS IN THE BIBLE

Another way to know you are not alone in your suffering involves reading the stories of the Bible. It is full of historical narratives about people who experienced severe suffering. Genesis, the first book of the Bible, has several. In one, the first brothers in human history become the world's first murderer and innocent victim. Further in, another brother steals the family inheritance and runs for his life from his twin's murderous rage. Later, a young woman is raped and an entire city feels the wrath of her family. Her little brother gets sold into slavery by this same family, then is falsely accused and imprisoned. And this is only a taste of the drama you'll find in just the first book of the Bible.

An entire book could be devoted to recounting the traumatic experiences recorded in Scripture. The Bible does not fail to address trauma. It does not ignore the hard parts of life; rather, it puts them on full display. But know this as well: it doesn't just record traumatic experiences. It addresses the hearts of people disoriented by trauma, and it offers hope and help to them and to you.

My goal in writing this book is to help you reorient your life to be aligned with God's original design. In the pages ahead, we are going to look at ways your traumatic experiences have disoriented your life and seek to reorient them around God's love and care for you. Should you have any doubt about his feelings for you, remember how lavishly he expressed them in sending his Son Jesus to redeem you from your sin and make you his own.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION, DISCUSSION, & ACTION:

1. Have you ever thought that no one can understand what you have been through? What other thoughts or feelings has trauma evoked in you?
2. How did what you read in this chapter address the thoughts or feelings you acknowledged in that first question?
3. How does knowing the Bible is full of the stories of sufferers impact you?
4. List the name(s) of anyone you've been able to share your suffering with to this point. Then list some people who might be able to walk with you in one of the ways described in the above section titled "Your Transformation Team." Reach out to each one, seeking their partnership.