# **Discovering Your Identity**

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### A little bit about me...

- I am a licensed professional counselor who went back to school at the age of 50 to get my master's in counseling. I became licensed during Covid and have been practicing ever since both in person and online.
- I am trauma certified, EMDR certified, and hold certificates from various institutions in the area of trauma and particularly in processing trauma stories.
- I am a wife and mother of five children. I am a grandmother to one lovely little girl. I love stories of every kind, so I am an avid movie watcher, show binger, book reader, and amateur genealogist.





# Before we get started...

- This presentation is created for survivors of complex trauma specifically related to human trafficking. This includes both survivors from familial trafficking and adult human trafficking. As we move through the material, I hope you will be able to join me in honoring the strength it takes to have survived, overcome, and to be here.
- A note of care: Some of what we discuss may touch on sensitive or painful memories. Please listen to yourself, take breaks if you need to, and know that your well-being is most important. Remember to breathe. Get up and move if you need to.
- Feel free to interrupt and ask questions. I want this to be an interactive teaching. I am a counselor by trade, so I appreciate the back and forth of conversation.

### 1. Identity Formation

- 2. Identity Distortion
- 3. Self-Regulation
- 4. Naming and Identity
- 5. Values and Roles
- 6. Closing Thoughts

# What is Identity?

- Identity is a living story we write about ourselves over time.
   It includes values, roles, relationships, culture, and
   actions. It includes aspects of what we do and what is
   done to us.
- It is the story we tell ourselves about ourselves.
- If you study this definition, you will notice that the good news is that identity can change. Our stories can be edited over time, and a new identity can emerge. My hope is that we can work on shifting our identities a little bit today.



# Initial Formation of Identity

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- The initial formation of our identity is within the context of our families. Little children form in response to the big people around them. They are hard wired to please the big people so that they are safe and cared for.
- In good families and in good environments with ethical people, the child is supported in developing their identity as an individual. They receive encouragement and love. They are seen and responded to, which we call attunement. They are also given boundaries to help develop their nervous systems, which we call containment.
- In an abusive family, which is absolutely present in cases of familial trafficking, the child's formation is in response to the need for safety in an unsafe environment.



# Initial Formation of Identity continued

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- In an abusive family, which is absolutely present in cases of familial trafficking, the child's formation is in response to the need for safety in an unsafe environment.
- As well, in cases of adult prolonged interpersonal trauma through human trafficking, we see even healthy identity become conformed to unsafe environments.
- The type of trauma that happens within close relationship has been termed "betrayal trauma."



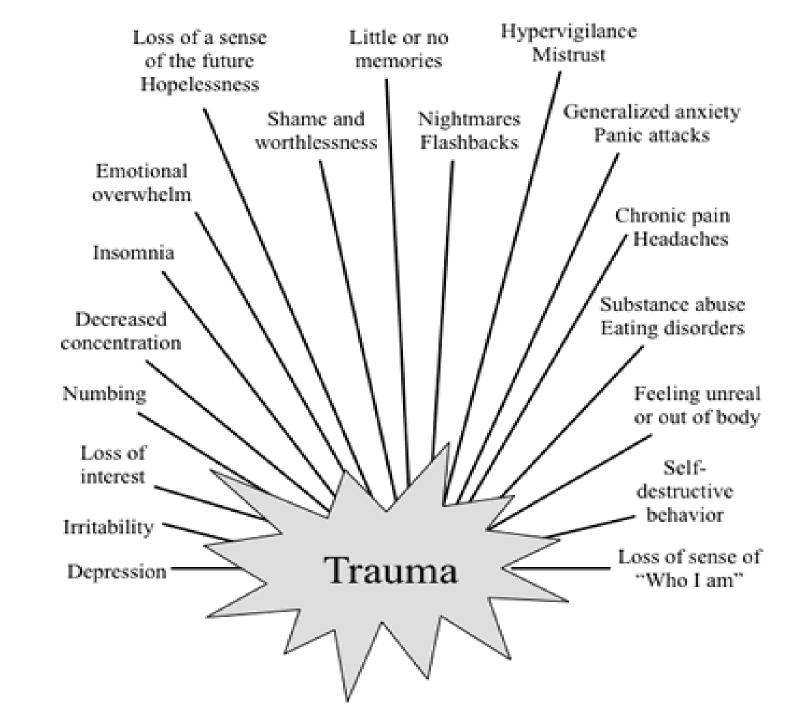
### Janina's Chart

- 1. Identity Formation
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• In her book, "Transforming the Living Legacy of Trauma," Janina Fisher has a chart showing the effects of trauma on survivors. Remember, we also see these same effects from prolonged interpersonal trauma as adults.



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### 1. Identity Formation

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## Fragmentation of Identity

- In the prolonged interpersonal trauma of trafficking during childhood or adulthood, there is a series of effects on the development and function of a person.
- Chronic danger such as isolation, threats, debt bondage, identity theft, spiritual/sexual coercion narrows choices to those **entirely** preoccupied with safety.
- In the process voices are silenced and identity adapts to surviving the danger.
- These adaptations can include dissociation, compartmentalization, and submission.
- These adaptations are entirely appropriate for survival in these circumstances.



## Development of the False Self

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- Survivors may lose touch with preferences, desires, or even a sense of who they are because identity becomes organized around staying alive and anticipating others' needs.
- A "false self" or "survivor self" can take root—focused on compliance, invisibility, or whatever else the perpetrator requires.



## Control and Loss of Autonomy

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- Trafficking, in all its forms, strips away autonomy.
- Choices around body, movement, even thoughts and beliefs can be coerced.
- Imagination and dreams of the future shrink under situations of extreme control.
- Survivors often emerge with profound questions like: Do I have the right to want? To say no? To take up space?



## Loss of Agency

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- This loss of agency results in profound self-doubt: "Am I doing it right?" "Am I pleasing?"
- Even after external control has ended, internal voices of control can continue. "I can't do this or that." "I'll get in trouble." "I'm only valuable if I am doing something for someone else."



## Discerning the Distortions

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- The beginning of healing is recognizing what happened.
- It also begins with being kind to yourself about how you survived. Trafficking is known now as organized extreme abuse; something that people aren't really meant to endure.
- After recognition, the work is to name the negative beliefs about your identity that you have developed in survival mode and begin replacing those with new beliefs about identity.
- It is time to write a new story.



## Self Regulation: Window of Tolerance

- An important aspect of healing is to be able to self-regulate.
- With self-regulation comes the freedom to begin imagining a new story for yourself.

### **Hyperarousal Zone**

Sympathetic Fight or Flight Reponse is activated

- Angry outbursts
- Fear
- Flashbacks
- Tension/shaking
- · Emotional overwhelm
- Racing thoughts
- Feeling unsafe
- Sleep issues

- Hypervigilance
- Intrusive Images
- Difficulty concentrating
- Unable to rest

- Tight muscles
- AnxietyPanic
- Defensiveness

### **Optimal Arousal Zone**

Window of Tolerance

- Feel and think simultaneously
- Experience empathy
- · Feel 'present'
- · You feel safe

- · Feel open and curious (versus judgemental and defensive)
- Have awareness of boundaries (yours and others)
- · Your reactions adapt to fit situations

### **Hypoarousal Zone**

Parasympathetic Freeze response is activated

- Depression
- Emotional numbness
- Emptiness
- Feel disconnected
- · Low energy
- Flaccid body
- Memory loss
- · Shut down
- · Feelings of shame

· Physical lethargy

· 'I just can't think'

· Blank stare

- · Inability (or lack of desire) to speak
- Dissociation
- Slow digestion
- · Blood pressure may drop



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## Triggers: Outside the Window

**Definition**: Triggers are reminders — internal or external — that bring up sensations, emotions, or memories connected to past trauma.

### **Types:**

- External: sounds, smells, environments, anniversaries, certain people, media.
- *Internal:* body sensations, emotions, fatigue, thoughts, or even positive experiences.

**Purpose**: Triggers are not signs of weakness—they are signs of survival memory activating. They just feel inconvenient at the moment, but they are communication that something is wrong.



### Recognizing Triggers

- Green Zone (No active trigger): You feel grounded and connected. You can think clearly and make choices.
- **Yellow Zone:** You notice tension, irritability, or early warning signs of overwhelm. Grounding and support can help restore balance.
- **Red Zone:** You feel flooded, frozen, or unsafe. You may need crisis support or a safe environment to return to regulation.

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## Trigger Plan: Green Zone

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- Green Zone:
- What keeps me well day-to-day?
- Who/what helps me feel connected?
- What activities bring calm or joy?
- Sleep, food, medications, movement, connection, nature, creativity.
- In Deb Dana's work, she calls these things "glimmers."



## Trigger Plan: Yellow Zone

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- Yellow Zone:
- What are my early cues (body, emotion, thoughts)?
- What grounding skills or resources can I use?
- Who can I reach out to for gentle support?



## Trigger Plan: Red Zone

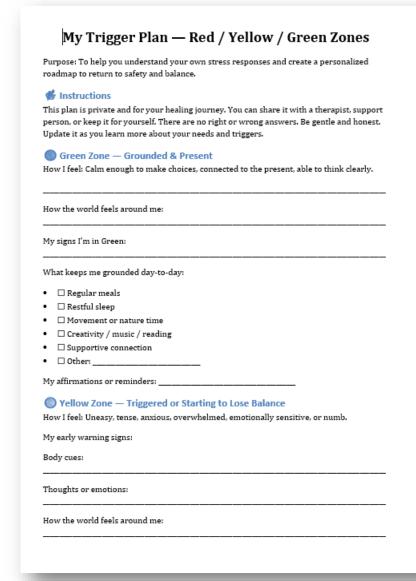
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- Red Zone:
- What signs tell me I'm in crisis or shutting down?
- What actions or scripts help me stay safe?
- Who do I contact? (friend, counselor, hotline, safe space).



# See Trigger Handout

- 1. Identity Formation
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Grounding actions that help:
□ Deep breathing     □ 5.4.3.2.1 grounding
□ 5-4-3-2-1 grounding     □ Step outside / drink water
Step duside / drink water     Text a friend or support person
□ Journaling or coloring
• Other:
Support contacts for this zone:
Red Zone — Crisis or Flooded State
How I feel: Frozen, panicked, hopeless, unsafe, or disconnected.
My crisis signs:
How the world feels around me:
What helps me return to safety:
Move to a safe environment
Wrap in blanket / warmth
□ Listen to grounding music
□ Call my therapist / friend / hotline
□ Use my written safety script
• 🗆 Other:
Emergency contacts:
- Trusted person:
- Counselor / Case Manager:
- National Crisis Lifeline (988 in the U.S.)
- National Human Trafficking Hotline (1-888-373-7888 / Text 233733)
T My One Sentence Reminder:
"When I'm triggered, I can return to safety one breath and one choice at a time."



# Four Steps to Freedom

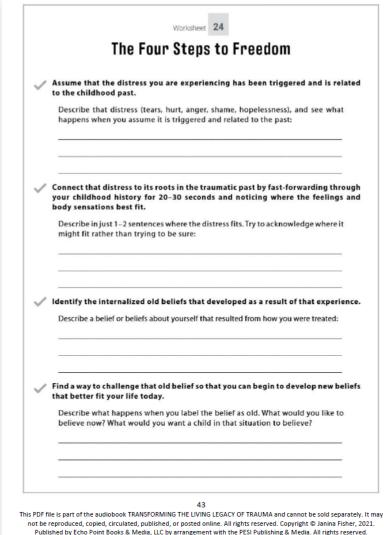
- 1. Assume that your distress has been triggered and is related to past trauma. (Trigger)
  - Just notice and recognize. Name what is happening in your body.
- 2. Connect the distress to the roots in the traumatic past. (History)
  - Just muse over the possible connections to your past where this might have originated. Don't spend too much time here. It will likely come to you quickly.
- 3. Identify the internalized old beliefs that have developed as a result of that experience.
  - Negative belief about yourself.
- 4. Challenge the old beliefs to begin developing new beliefs needed to live in today's reality.
  - Positive belief you would rather hold instead

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# See the Four Steps to Freedom handout

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### How Are We Named Through Trauma

- When harm occurs, it doesn't just wound the body or mind
   — it names us. We are given *identities* by others' actions,
   words, and silence.
- Ways We Are "Named" by Trauma
  - Through abuse or neglect: "Unworthy," "Too much," "Invisible."
  - Through systems of power: "Victim," "Problem," "Crazy," "Disruptive."
  - Through family dynamics: "The strong one," "The caretaker," "The black sheep."
  - Through culture and stigma: "Damaged," "Broken," "Other."

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# Naming and Identity

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- Impact on Identity
- These external names become internal truths.
- They shape our core beliefs about self, safety, and belonging.
- They can fracture identity leaving parts of us hidden, silent, or ashamed.
- Healing begins when we recognize the names we were given, and begin to rename ourselves with truth, dignity, and compassion.



# Naming

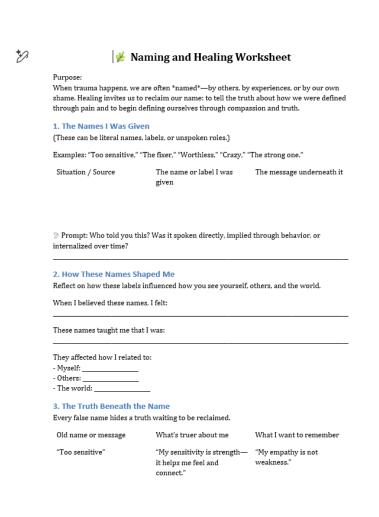
- How were you named by others?
- How have you named yourself?
- What are some new names you can try out?

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# See the Naming Handout

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4. Namir	ng Myself in Healing
	o offer yourself a new name—one that honors who you are and who you are
The name	I choose for myself now:
This name	e reminds me that I am:
When I sp	eak this name over myself. I feel:
(Example	s: "Beloved," "Whole," "Becoming," "Free," "Light-bearer.")
5. Reflec	tion / Integration
What part	t of me still struggles to believe this new name?
How migh	nt I nurture that part with compassion instead of criticism?

as a reminder of your truth.



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# How Human Trafficking Impacts Values and Roles

Understanding the journey from survival to self-defined identity



## What Happens To Values?

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- Coercion and control rewrite internal priorities to be the perpetrator's priorities.
- Survivors are punished for independent beliefs or boundaries.
- Shame and confusion replace personal conviction.
- The trafficker's values become the rules for survival.

Note that losing touch with your values, and taking on the values of the trafficker, is not a moral failure. This is a survival response.



# **Examples of Value Distortion**

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<b>Original Value</b>	<b>How Traffickers Manipulate It</b>	Result
Loyalty	"You owe me—no one else cares."	Isolation, dependence
Faith	"God wants you to obey me."	Spiritual confusion, guilt
Family	"We're your real family."	False belonging
Hard Work	"You have to earn your worth."	Exploitation, burnout



### How Roles Are Affected

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- Roles become survival mechanisms, not choices.
- People are forced into roles such as: "girlfriend," "property," "worker," or "recruiter."
- These labels define worth by function, not personhood.
- Over time, identity fragments—parts of self take on different survival roles.

Note that adaptive roles are creative survival strategies



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# Fragmentation and Adaptation

- When the system says: "Be who I need you to be."
  The nervous system learns: "Safety means shape-shifting."
- Hypervigilant protector parts emerge.
- Detached or numb parts hold unbearable pain.
- Performing or compliant parts maintain access to minimal safety.

Note that every part learned how to keep you alive.

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## Loss of Developmental Roles

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- Education, career, and healthy relationship paths are interrupted.
- Opportunities to experiment with identity are replaced by control and fear.
- Survivors may feel "stuck in time" developmentally.



# Reclaiming Values

- Healing means rediscovering what is inherently yours.
- Naming your real priorities: Safety, freedom, compassion, justice, creativity.
- Practicing choice in small ways (What do I wear? Who do I trust?).
- Values shift from imposed to self-defined instead
- Ask: "What value do I want to live by today?"

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# Reclaiming Roles

- Begin exploring *chosen* roles—student, advocate, artist, friend, healer.
- Integrate strength from survival roles (resilience, intuition, adaptability).
- No role is final—each is an experiment in freedom.

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## From Survival to Identity

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Survival Role Skill Carried Forward
Protector Strength, discernment
Performer Adaptability, empathy
Numb part Endurance

New Chosen Role
Advocate, peer mentor
Artist, communicator
Listener, witness



## **Reflection Prompts**

- "What values were taken or used against me?"
- "Which values do I want to reclaim?"
- "What roles did I have to play to survive?"
- "Which roles am I ready to retire?"
- "What new role aligns with who I am becoming?"

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# **Integration Practice**

- Grounding: Place hand on heart, breathe slowly, say your name softly.
- Reflect: "What matters to me now?"
- Visualize stepping into a new role with calm confidence.
- Reclaiming values and roles is the process of rewriting your story.

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### See the Values And Roles Handouts

### Values and Roles Worksheet: Reclaiming Self After Trafficking

### **Purpose**

This worksheet helps you reconnect with who you are — beyond what others told you, demanded of you, or made you believe. It's about rediscovering your authentic values, redefining your roles, and choosing what truly reflects you.

### Part 1: Understanding Values

Values are the principles that give your life meaning and guide your choices. They're the "why" behind your actions and priorities.

- 1. What mattered most to you before trauma or trafficking? (Examples: kindness, faith, honesty, creativity, family) If you were trafficked in your family of origin, what moments of beauty did you notice around you that made an impact on who you are? (nature, people outside of the house, fictional characters)
- 2. What values helped you survive difficult experiences? (Examples: courage, endurance, adaptability, loyalty)
- 3. What values do you want to live by now in your healing and freedom? (Examples: authenticity, peace, safety, compassion, hope)
- 4. Circle or highlight your top 5 core values from the list below (or add your own):

Acceptance, Adventure, Authenticity, Balance, Belonging, Courage, Compassion, Creativity, Faith, Freedom, Growth, Healing, Honesty, Independence, Integrity, Joy, Love, Peace, Purpose, Safety, Self-respect, Spirituality, Trust, Wisdom

### Part 2: Exploring Roles

During trafficking or abuse, survivors often had roles forced upon them — "the obedient one," "the provider," "the caretaker," "the commodity." Healing involves recognizing that you can choose your roles now.

- 1. What roles were placed on you by others? (Examples: "the one who keeps peace," "the one who doesn't speak up," "the one who performs," etc.)
- 2. Which of those roles feel false or heavy today? (Which no longer fit who you are becoming?)
- 3. What roles feel true or healing to you now? (Examples: learner, advocate, mother, friend, artist, leader, survivor, healer)
- 4. Who do you want to become as you move forward? Write a short paragraph describing your future self living by your values, free from imposed roles.

"The person I am becoming is..." (Use your own words — no right or wrong answer.)

#### Part 3: Integrating Values and Roles

Reflect: How can your values support the roles you're choosing now? What small actions this week could align your daily life with your chosen values?

My Core Value

A Role That Reflects It

A Small Step I Can Take This Week

### The Kind Narrative of Self

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- Trauma stories are often written by survival and control. Healing stories are written with choice and care.
- The Kind Narrative of Self replaces shame with understanding, and judgment with compassion.
- Rewriting one's story doesn't deny what happened—it reclaims ownership of meaning.
- "When I tell my story kindly, I remind my nervous system that I am safe enough to exist as myself."
- You get to be both the author and the main character of your life moving forward.



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### See The Kind Narrative of Self Handout

The Kind Narrative of Self — Reclaiming My Story with Compassion	
Purpose: This journaling worksheet helps survivors gently explore their story through curiosity and kindness, rebuilding identity after trauma or exploitation.	
<ul> <li>How to Use This Handout</li> <li>Take your time. You don't have to finish in one sitting.</li> <li>Write freely: spelling and grammar don't matter.</li> <li>Everything here is optional — you choose what to explore.</li> <li>If strong emotions come up, pause and use grounding (notice your feet, breathe, orient to the room).</li> <li>You can revisit this exercise many times — your story will keep unfolding.</li> </ul>	
Part 1 — Remembering My Inner Story  1. Before others told my story, I was  Example: curious, brave, hopeful, imaginative.	
2. What I survived showsExample: my courage, my persistence, my ability to keep loving	
3. Values I carry forward areExample: honesty, creativity, connection, justice, freedom	
Part 2 — Rebuilding My Roles and Voice 4. Roles I'm reclaiming or trying areExample: learner, friend, mentor, artist, parent, advocate	

5. Roles I	'm ready to retire or release
_Example	e: pleaser, performer, protector, invisible one
6. One ne	w role that excites or comforts me is
Dort 2	- Writing My Kind Narrative
	tory had a chapter title today, it might be
8. A sente	ence I want to practice saying about who I am now is:
"Today I a	am a person who"
9. One kir	nd truth I want to remember:
Inte	gration & Reflection
<ul> <li>What</li> </ul>	does it feel to tell your story from kindness instead of survival? : part of your story feels proud? : part needs gentleness or rest?
Optional .	Art Space: Draw a symbol, color, or image that represents your reclaimed self.
"My story	y is still being written. Every act of kindness toward myself is a new paragrap



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## Hope and Renewal

Healing opens the door to hope, allowing survivors to move beyond survival and begin shaping a life rooted in freedom and dignity. This often includes:

- New Possibilities Embracing the chance to imagine a future not defined by trauma but by choice and opportunity.
- Inner Strength Recognizing the resilience and courage that carried you through and allowing it to guide what comes next.
- Authentic Self Making space for joy, creativity, and expression of who you truly are, without fear or control.
- **Forward Journey** Building a life of meaning, dignity, and connection, where your story continues to unfold with hope.

# Final Thoughts

### **Key Messages:**

- Trafficking reshapes but never erases your identity.
- Healing restores the right to define your own values and roles.
- Every small act of choice widens the sense of freedom.

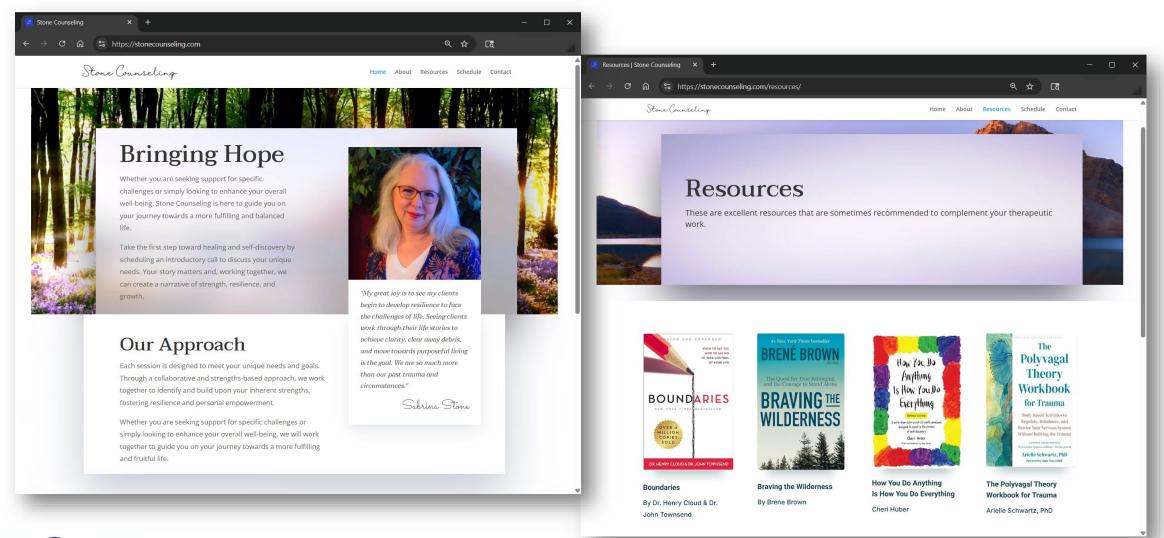
### **Thought for Reflection:**

The self that was hidden to survive can emerge safely, with gentleness and truth.

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### Thank You!





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