

THE CUCKOO SYNDROME

**THE SECRET TO
BREAKING FREE FROM
UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS,
TOXIC THINKING, AND
SELF-SABOTAGING
BEHAVIOR**

ANDREA ANDERSON POLK

LICENSED PROFESSIONAL COUNSELOR

Praise for *The Cuckoo Syndrome*

“Andrea intimately understands the human heart and the heart of God. As a follower of Jesus and with over a decade of clinical experience counseling hurting people, she powerfully integrates Scripture, science, and psychology. Andrea’s words, equally elegant and surprisingly provocative, demonstrate that by facing our deepest heartaches and identifying the lies we believe, transformation and healing happen. You will be welcomed into an honest conversation with yourself, God, and others about your wants, needs, and desires. You’ll discover what or who is keeping you stuck is not what you think it is. *The Cuckoo Syndrome* is driven by the truth of John 8:32 that the truth will set you free.”

—Mark Batterson, lead pastor of National Community Church and *New York Times* best-selling author of nineteen books including *The Circle Maker*, *In a Pit with a Lion on a Snowy Day*, and *Wild Goose Chase*

“Andrea Anderson Polk’s *The Cuckoo Syndrome* is a very personal story about overcoming toxic relationships and self-sabotaging behaviors to find the courage to be ourselves. Taking vignettes both from her therapy practice and her own life, Andrea uses the cuckoo bird metaphor to describe both the people in our lives who prey on our vulnerabilities as well as the unconscious ways we can prevent ourselves from acting upon our own best interests. This book is also a very accessible primer on emotion theory, providing the reader with many examples of how accessing core feelings provides a compass for living our lives. To find our true desires and life’s purpose, Andrea suggests that we must address the psychological defenses (the various disguises of the cuckoo) that we developed in childhood to protect ourselves from difficult relationships and experiences. These internalized cuckoo tendencies allowed us to survive traumatic and

overwhelming experiences but result in a variety of destructive behaviors. Such a journey of the soul can be harrowing, and Andrea suggests that we can find resolve and courage by tapping into the unconditional love of past caregivers and by developing an open and deeply personal relationship with Christ.”

—**Stuart Andrews, Ph.D., Faculty Chair, The Intensive Short-term Dynamic Psychotherapy Program at the Washington School of Psychiatry, and coauthor of *Treating Affect Phobia: A Manual for Short-Term Dynamic Psychotherapy***

“One of the true blessings I have experienced as a professor is to see students grow and thrive in their calling. Through hard work and personal struggle, Andrea stands out among her peers as a gifted professional counselor, speaker, and writer. Andrea writes with compassion, empathy, and transparency. *The Cuckoo Syndrome* will help readers overcome false thinking and enable them to learn how to challenge their thinking, listen to their hearts, and trust their emotions to live fully and joyfully in the present.”

—**Kathleen Arveson, Ph.D., Senior Lecturer, Department of Psychology and Counseling, Regent University**

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Some of the examples in this book are fictional composites based on the author's clinical experience with hundreds of clients through the years. All names are invented, and any resemblance between these fictional characters and actual persons is coincidental.

Case studies of former clients have been used with permission. All actual identifying information of those former clients (and other individuals relevant to their experiences) have been removed and fictional names were substituted to protect the confidentiality of those people involved.

The information provided in this book is intended to help educate and offer support to individuals dealing with mental health issues and pain. Every person's story is different and unique. This book is not intended as a substitute for treatment by a trained and licensed mental health professional. Please seek professional advice, help, and support if you are struggling to deal with any of the topics covered inside.

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Published by Forefront Books.

Cover Design by Bruce Gore, Gore Studio Inc.
Interior Design by Bill Kersey, KerseyGraphics

ISBN: 978-1-63763-041-9 print
ISBN: 978-1-63763-042-6 e-book

To My Mother

*My eternal gratitude to you for taking a courageous
stand for truth and paving our way to freedom.*

CONTENTS

AUTHOR'S NOTE	11
INTRODUCTION: ARE CUCKOOS REAL BIRDS?	13
CHAPTER 1: THE CUCKOO IN YOUR NEST	19
<i>Do Your Relationships Resemble Cuckoos?</i>	
CHAPTER 2: STUCK IN CUCKOO LAND	47
<i>How to Deal with the Cuckoos in Your Life</i>	
CHAPTER 3: THE CUCKOO OF NOT FEELING YOUR FEELINGS	73
<i>What Happens When You Avoid Emotions?</i>	
CHAPTER 4: THE CUCKOO OF LOSS	91
<i>The Paradox of Grief</i>	
CHAPTER 5: WHAT FEEDS A CUCKOO?	101
<i>Lies We Believe and Defenses We Use</i>	
CHAPTER 6: THE FEAR CUCKOO	127
<i>A Subtle Cuckoo in Disguise</i>	

CHAPTER 7: THE PERFECTIONISM CUCKOO	149
<i>When Passions Become Obsessions</i>	
CHAPTER 8: WHEN YOU BECOME A CUCKOO	165
<i>Making Yourself a Project to Fix</i>	
CHAPTER 9: CUCKOO COUNSEL	177
<i>Who Hurts You and Who Can Help You</i>	
CHAPTER 10: THE RELIGION CUCKOO	199
<i>Twisters of God's Word</i>	
CHAPTER 11: A PROTECTION AGAINST CUCKOOS	223
<i>The Gift of Anger</i>	

CHAPTER 12: THE ANTIDOTE TO CUCKOOS	237
<i>Discovering Your Purpose</i>	
CHAPTER 13: HOW TO LIVE A CUCKOO-FREE LIFE	251
<i>Embracing Desire, Pursuing Passion, Creating Vision</i>	
CHAPTER 14: LET YOUR EGGS HATCH!	271
<i>Treasures from Darkness</i>	
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	283
NOTES	287

AUTHOR'S NOTE

MY THERAPEUTIC WORK AS A LICENSED PROFESSIONAL counselor has inspired this book. I have spoken to and counseled hundreds, possibly thousands of people about the subjects covered inside, all of whom have motivated me on this journey.

The Cuckoo Syndrome is a compilation of my story, the clinical experience gained from more than a decade of close attention and treatment of my clients in private practice, and the study of psychological research. All of which I have developed into an innovative strategy for breaking free from unhealthy relationships, toxic thinking, and self-sabotaging behavior (i.e., cuckoos). Consequently, this creates space for one's purpose to "hatch" and come to life and no longer be destroyed and suffocated by the cuckoo.

As a clinician, I strongly believe we can only take our clients as far as we are willing to go ourselves.

At the prompting and encouragement of my clients to write a book, I feel honored to present my work to you in this volume.

INTRODUCTION

**ARE CUCKOOS
REAL BIRDS?**

Sitting in your office was a healing balm for my soul. It was the first time I had ever had the courage to confront the truth that I was in an emotionally and spiritually abusive marriage. This healing journey to freedom released me from my prison. I no longer feel lost. I was stuck and suffering silently far too long. I have courageously and victoriously taken back my life.

THIS CLIENT, LIKE SO MANY OTHERS, HAD SAT UNDER MY counsel after seeing a number of professional therapists, pastors, mentors, lay ministers, and others who were all trying to fix her and her abusive marriage, yet she felt crazier and crazier. It was not until she realized she was sitting under the toxic weight of a cuckoo relationship that she was able to begin the process of freedom.

Did you know a cuckoo is a *real* bird?

Imagine it is a beautiful spring day, and you are sitting in your favorite spot at home and relaxing, and you notice a robin in her nest outside your window.

You also notice a large, ugly bird, a cuckoo bird, watching the robin's nest from a nearby tree. As soon as the mother robin leaves her nest, the cuckoo bird swoops in, removes a robin's egg, and while holding it in her beak, lays her own egg directly in the robin's nest along with the robin's other eggs. The cuckoo bird then flies off, devouring the robin's egg as she makes her getaway!

In taking a closer look at the robin's nest you are shocked at what you see. The cuckoo's egg looks eerily similar and almost identical to the robin's eggs; it is a light shade of blue with small brown speckles. The resemblance is uncanny! You are curious to watch and see what the mother robin will do when she returns to her nest to incubate her eggs. Surely, she would notice this foreign egg in her nest, even though it looks like one of her own. But once she returns, she sits on the cuckoo bird's egg and treats it as if it

were her own. She's been tricked. In fact, she continues to sit on her eggs day after day and eventually one hatches. It is the cuckoo chick and only the cuckoo chick. The robin's other eggs have not yet hatched.

Almost immediately upon hatching, the featherless cuckoo chick, with its eyes still closed, uses its wings to push some of the robin's eggs out of the nest. It's almost as if it was born with innate knowledge to kill the other eggs in the nest. The robin returns with a worm to feed the cuckoo chick because she believes it is her young. Day after day you witness the mother and father robins exhausting themselves to feed the cuckoo chick, which has an insatiable appetite. It never seems to be satisfied as the cuckoo chick is constantly calling out for food and attention. Your heart breaks as you look on in shock at the robins who are feeding this thing that does not even belong to them, yet they believe it is their young! The cuckoo chick grows larger and larger, very quickly outgrowing the robin parents. Any remaining robin eggs are ejected or smothered by the cuckoo chick. Even after the cuckoo chick grows and exits the nest, the robins continue to feed it and follow its distinctive call, *cuckoo . . . cuckoo . . .*, leaving the robins drained and depleted as empty nesters with no robin chicks of their own.

If your curiosity has gotten the best of you and you want a visual of the cuckoo bird, you'll see a picture at the very beginning of chapter 1.

As a counselor who spent years studying the human condition, I couldn't help but wonder: can our most intimate relationships and our own self-sabotaging behaviors resemble that of a cuckoo—nature's infamous imposter?

I have listened to thousands of stories, worked with thousands of individuals and couples, and followed my own curiosity about the cuckoo as patterns and common experiences began

to emerge. The cuckoo bird represents unhealthy relationships, toxic thinking, and self-sabotaging behaviors that secretly creep into our lives when we least expect them. I've used the cuckoo analogy and illustration in my counseling practice with nearly all my clients at some point during their treatment.

Cuckoos are invisible enemies that deceptively and elusively consume your time, energy, and attention. Ultimately cuckoos hijack your life, and you find yourself left with a haunting confusion and chronic emptiness as you wander through your days feeling lost, with no purpose of your own. This invisible enemy is hidden only to be revealed when it feels like it is too late or the suffering is too great.

I came to the cuckoo metaphor through my own story. My journey of healing coincided with my parents' divorce and a particularly difficult season of my life. That was decades ago, and since that time, I have spent my career as a licensed professional counselor and supervisor treating relationship issues. Numerous clients have come to me feeling overwhelmed, stuck, and powerless. I have studied both the research and my clients, and I have concluded that we all experience the Cuckoo Syndrome.

Do you have a cuckoo in your life, your nest, right now and you don't even recognize it? Are you the one doing all the work in the relationship? Have you succumbed to an ever-demanding, never-satisfied person who leaves you feeling as if you are not enough?

Throughout this book, my story is interwoven with the stories of my clients to create clarity and direction for those who have reached an impasse, suffering in the turmoil that shadows a destructive relationship. It is through the combination of my own lived experience, the close attention given to my clients, and the study of psychological and spiritual research that I have developed this practical guide to breaking free from the cuckoo's snare.

The Cuckoo Syndrome gives you a long-term successful strategy to fend off these cuckoos that invade your life so you are not prone and susceptible to being a target for future cuckoos.

Each chapter addresses the cuckoo's various disguises. There is the cuckoo of not feeling your feelings, the cuckoo of unresolved grief, the fear cuckoo, the shame cuckoo, the stress cuckoo, the perfectionism cuckoo, you as the cuckoo, the abuse cuckoo, the counselor cuckoo, and probably the most insidious cuckoo of all, the religion cuckoo.

If your cuckoo is the culprit, then discovering your purpose is the antidote to the cuckoo. The final chapters of this book answer the question, "Now that I learned how to identify my cuckoo, what now?"

Your attention will shift from the cuckoo in your life to pursuing your passions and embracing your heart's deepest desires. You will begin to identify your purpose beyond your cuckoos and the suffering they inflict and take back what has been stolen from your nest that has never been allowed to hatch.

CHAPTER 1

THE CUCKOO IN YOUR NEST

***Do Your Relationships
Resemble Cuckoos?***

*Insanity is doing the same thing over and over
again and expecting different results.*

—ALBERT EINSTEIN

MY FATHER SAT CROSS-LEGGED ON MY PARENTS' BED WITH A loaded gun in his lap and threatened to kill himself if my mother left him.

Decades later, as a professional counselor who has spent years studying the human condition, I recognized the Cuckoo Syndrome, a group of symptoms that collectively indicate a predictable yet invisible pattern of unhealthy relationships, toxic thinking, and self-sabotaging behavior that lead to unnecessary suffering. At its core the Cuckoo Syndrome is an imposter that seeks to mimic who you are and what you want.

The Cuckoo Syndrome is a nonscientific and nonclinical term that allows complicated, psychological concepts such as personality disorders, mental illness, codependency, trauma, attachment styles, emotional and spiritual abuse, and addictions to become easier to understand and relate to. I've discovered in my treatment of thousands of clients that most people do not know exactly what these terms mean, how they show up practically in our everyday lives, and how to translate them into our lives.

The Cuckoo Syndrome can deceitfully and subtly erode our careers, our ministries, and our most intimate relationships, including the relationships we have with ourselves. In this way, the Cuckoo Syndrome shows up as a chronic neglect of self due to consistently taking care of someone else, receiving little or no reciprocation, or unknowingly living a counterfeit purpose. Ultimately you find yourself lost, wandering through life with haunting confusion, lingering emptiness, and persistent grief.

Let's begin by understanding the biological nature of the cuckoo bird. Researchers who have studied cuckoos for hundreds of years have found a vicious, shocking, secret life of these predatory creatures in their natural habitats.

The Predatory, Secretive Life of the Cuckoo Bird Exposed

This cuckoo bird is a brood parasite. “Brood parasites use various gimmicks to deceive the hosts into slaving for them.”¹ A parasite is someone or something who lives and feeds on another person or thing and causes harm to its host. Parasites “habitually take advantage of the generosity of others without making any useful return.”² Does this dynamic feel familiar to any of your relationships?

Of all the birds in the world, none may be as clever and cruel as brood parasites. These opportunistic animals dump their eggs into another species’ nest to avoid wasting time and energy on childcare. Their life strategy is built upon tricking other birds, so perhaps they’ve learned the nasty reputation that precedes them.³

Similarly, human cuckoos are opportunistic and aim to take advantage of you and monopolize your time and energy by dumping their issues into your life. Persons living with a cuckoo in their nest are often initially unaware they are habitually taking care of this person even though this invisible, injurious behavior is right in front of them. They are aware, however, that something feels off, something doesn’t feel OK, and something is missing, yet they can’t put their finger on how or why.

A fascinating genetic fact about female parasitic cuckoo birds is that they “have secretive and fast-laying behaviors”⁴ as well as an ability to lay cryptic eggs or “eggs that closely resemble the eggs of their chosen host”⁵ to a shocking extent:

The parasite’s eggs have a number of tricks up their shells, too. They often mimic host eggs in color and shape—so the nest owners don’t notice the eggs aren’t theirs—and also

have thicker shells and shorter incubation times, which allow the invading offspring to hatch first.⁶

The cuckoo bird's eggs can look nearly identical to the host eggs! The host parents have been tricked. Similarly, human cuckoos mimic the behaviors and desires of other people to trick them into letting them into their life and forming relationships with them. Human cuckoos adopt a devious disguise. As they get to know another person, they seek to prey on their weaknesses and vulnerabilities in order to use them and take advantage of their kindness and their deeper need to be known, to be loved, and to have companionship, which every human being requires.

Chances are if the Cuckoo Syndrome is manifesting in one of your relationships, it will infect seemingly unrelated areas of your life as well. Cuckoos create cuckoos; they multiply by passing off their eggs to the nests of the other birds they invade and destroy the eggs that are already present:

If the parasite makes it out of its egg (cue the *Jaws* theme), then it's often time for a real massacre . . . a newborn Common Cuckoo wiggles its way around the Reed Warbler's nest, using its shoulders and back to push out all three of the host's eggs. Brood parasites, it seems, are basically born evil . . . while still blind and featherless, will stab the host's chicks to death with its hooked beak.⁷

Human cuckoo relationships not only invade your life, but they also want to toss your purpose, hopes, and dreams, your so-called eggs, right out of your life and replace them so you will nurture and take care of theirs instead of your own.

Are you thinking of a certain relationship right now that creates a similar cycle of suffering in your life? Do you feel like a slave to

someone else's needs, nurturing their dreams at the expense of your own?

Now that the cuckoo chick has hatched, the host parents become extremely exhausted keeping up with this ever-demanding, never-satisfied cuckoo chick that is always needing them.



Image Credit: Bill Kersey

“Little warbler feeding a cuckoo chick and seeming to risk being devoured itself as it bows deep into the enormous gape to feed a very young bird many times its own size.”⁸

This is just the beginning. It's a long, hard life.

As you can see from the image, a cuckoo chick egg hatches first and grows extremely large very quickly, even bigger than the host parents!

Take a moment as you look at this image. Imagine who the cuckoo is in your nest. Does it evoke a tinge of sadness as you look at the host parent feeding the cuckoo chick? Perhaps even anger? How do you feel toward the cuckoo in your nest?

The cuckoo chick's insatiable appetite consumes all the attention, time, and energy of the host parents who must feed it constantly. This is because "the young cuckoo needs as much food as four young reed warblers."⁹ The host parents continue feeding and caring for the cuckoo chick, working to meet its every need, and it is not even their young. The host parents are deceived into believing the cuckoo chick is their own and they exhaust themselves while taking care of it.

The cuckoo chick will destroy the remaining host eggs, if it hasn't killed them already, due to its huge size, eventually crushing them. The cuckoo chick not only becomes the host parents' entire life's purpose, but they also have no chicks, no purpose of their own.

Sadly, the host eggs never hatch and come to life.

Cuckoos are, in essence, nature's brilliant, masterful manipulators.

Can you relate to the host parent? Perhaps like the host eggs, your own purposes (hopes, dreams, desires) never came to life. They are smothered by the cuckoo in your life. Who has your eggs? Your energy, time, and care are given away to nurturing an unhealthy relationship that is now bringing you hurt and harm.

Do Your Relationships Resemble a Cuckoo, Nature's Infamous Deceiver and Taker?

There are two ways the Cuckoo Syndrome can show up:

1. The Relationship Cuckoo: Unhealthy, dysfunctional, and lopsided relationships

2. The Self-Inflicted Cuckoo: Toxic thinking patterns and self-sabotaging behavior

The Relationship Cuckoo

Now that you have been considering whether or not you have a cuckoo in your nest, here are some questions to help you identify if you are hosting the relationship cuckoo:

1. Is there someone in your life who tries to monopolize your time and consumes a lot of your energy?
2. Is there someone in your life who is more of a taker than a giver and does not give back to you in the same way?
3. Is there someone in your life who leaves you feeling overwhelmed because your purpose in life revolves around them, and your voice, feelings, and needs are not mutually acknowledged?
4. Is there someone in your life with whom you are unable to have a rational conversation because simple things become very complicated?
5. Is there someone in your life who leaves you feeling confused and misunderstood, but you cannot put your finger on exactly how or why?
6. Is there someone in your life who you feel manipulates you, and your gut is telling you something is not right?
7. Is there someone in your life for whom you feel responsible carrying the emotional weight of the relationship?
8. Is there someone in your life you feel has been gradually deceiving you over a period of time, and you realize this person is not who you thought they were?
9. Is there someone in your life who is never satisfied, no matter how much you try to love, help, and please them?

10. Is there someone in your life who twists the truth and avoids dealing with facts and becomes accusatory, critical, or overly emotional when you try to point it out?

If you can relate to any of these questions, who is the person with whom you are in a cuckoo relationship? Name them here:

If you answered *no* to all of the questions, your cuckoo might not be a relationship. Instead, you might have a self-inflicted cuckoo: toxic thinking or a self-sabotaging behavior, which will be addressed in the next section. Alternatively, perhaps you realize you are displaying some cuckoo-type behavior in your relationships.

The Cuckoo Syndrome can show up in unhealthy relationships with a friend, spouse, mentor, pastor, counselor, sibling, parent, colleague, boss, or significant other.

It can also be a role you adopt based on a situation or event where you have taken on more responsibility than you are capable of handling—roles that allow you to feel needed and loved such as caretaker, the always-on-call person, the fixer, the peacemaker, or the rescuer. The Cuckoo Syndrome can sound like this: “I’m always the person who . . .” For example, maybe you are the one who always organizes the carpool or schedules all the Zoom calls or does all the household chores or pays the bills or runs all the errands. Perhaps your spouse suffers from a chronic illness and you are going beyond your capacity to take care of him or her because you believe your needs are not as important as theirs

since you are not the one who is sick. You have falsely believed it is your sole responsibility to carry the full load. Deep down you feel resentful and have a strong desire to be alone and numb out.

Our choices and associated behaviors offer some form of benefit or we would not be operating in a situation where we are absorbing the responsibility for another person or group of people. If you are the pleaser, caretaker, peacemaker, rescuer, or fixer, ask yourself, *What am I getting from this role?* Perhaps you feel worthy, important, or needed. Ask yourself, *What does this role allow me to avoid?* Perhaps you avoid painful emotions such as the guilt from saying *no* and not being there for someone, or you avoid the fear of disappointing people you care about, or you are avoiding your own difficult issues.

Here is an example.

It's the holiday season. You discuss with your spouse and make the decision that for Christmas this year you are going to vacation alone with your children to enjoy a relaxing change of pace. You want to spend some much-needed fun time together as a family. You want to take a much-needed break from the hustle and bustle to sit on a beach instead of sweating over a hot stove only to engage in the same religious and political conversations year after year.

You finally muster up the courage to tell your extended family you will not be hosting Christmas this year. They respond by trying to guilt-trip you into changing your mind. They are shocked and appalled at your decision.

“How can you break this precious family tradition? After all, you have the nice house and space for everyone, and you are centrally located, so it makes it so much easier on everyone.” Your family goes on and on about how their lives are more stressful than yours, how they really need a break. “Why can't you go on vacation this summer instead of taking time off over the holidays?”

After engaging with them and trying to maintain your boundaries and state your needs, you feel the emotional weight of responsibility to make everyone happy. So you tell your spouse, “Let’s just host one more year.”

These decisions seem miniscule at first, but when the pattern continues in your relationships (chronic caretaking, putting other people’s needs above your own, having no boundaries), you eventually find yourself depleted and joyless and your sense of self slowly eroded.

Every relationship requires effort, time, energy, and attention, which in turn require fruits of the Spirit such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, characteristics found in a healthy relationship. What is most important is that the relationship is mutual because both people are equally attentive to each other’s needs, and they sacrifice and compromise accordingly. The problem with a cuckoo relationship is that you deceive yourself into thinking you must do all the work to keep the relationship going, and you continue to nurture, take care of, and feed your cuckoo, and that becomes your primary responsibility.

The most important thing to remember about the cuckoo is that they are imposters packaged in a seemingly good and healthy relationship, disguising themselves as the real thing, and mimicking who they think you want them to be. The issue arises when the other person in the relationship, like the cuckoo bird, perpetually uses you, takes advantage of your kindness and openness, and does not reciprocate. Through a deceptive process, you have falsely come to believe you are being empathetic, patient, forgiving, and kind, when the truth is that you are not long-suffering. You *are* suffering.

Cuckoo Communication

Trying to communicate with the person in your cuckoo relationship about how you feel and what is happening can lead to chronic

experiences of feeling disillusioned. They repeatedly make excuses for their hurtful behavior and blame you instead. Many clients say to me, “Maybe it is my fault.”

Cuckoo communication tactics are manipulative and deceptive. I explain to my clients, “They complicate the simple and emote the factual.” By this, I mean that they twist the truth and avoid dealing with facts/reality in conversation and become overly emotional. They avoid facing the true situation that happened—the real event or situation that was painful or harmful to you. It is difficult to have a rational conversation because they make simple things (the facts) extremely confusing and complicated, leaving you questioning yourself, doubting reality, and wondering if you are somehow wrong.

For example, let’s say you are at a company dinner or happy hour for your spouse or significant other when you witness them acting in an inappropriate, romantic way with their colleague. When you gently bring your concern to their attention, they angrily respond, “You’re controlling. You want to dictate what I do and who I am friends with. You are just jealous and insecure.” Clearly, they are ignoring the reality of what happened between them and their colleague while becoming overly emotional. They are also complicating the facts of what you saw by accusing you of things that are not true.

When conflicts arise, these people are focused on being right instead of being open and desiring to understand your perspective. During conversations, they operate with a closed mentality, expect you to read their mind, and criticize you for not understanding them. If you disagree with them and share your opinion, they take it personally and become offended.

When you share your thoughts and needs, you receive no acknowledgment, and they continue their selfish and harmful behavior patterns toward you. When you share with them how

you are feeling, they respond by saying how they feel based on what you said rather than acknowledging your emotions and actively listening to you.

Here are some examples from my counseling sessions:

“When I gently share with my mother that she hurt my feelings, she does not acknowledge me. She changes the subject. It’s as if the conversation never happened.”

“When I share how I am hurt by something my colleague said or did, I walk away from the conversation feeling confused, as if I have done something wrong.”

“When I share my feelings with my friend, he gets defensive, and I end up questioning myself and doubting my own feelings after a conversation with him.”

“When sharing my feelings with my father, it never feels like a two-way dialogue. My feelings are dismissed, criticized, or ignored.”

“When I tell my sister what I feel, she tells me I shouldn’t feel that way. Are my feelings wrong?”

“When I share how I feel with my boyfriend, he seems to have a way of always switching the focus back to himself.”

“When I share how I feel with my wife, she responds, ‘After all I’ve done for you, you still don’t appreciate me.’ I was simply trying to say that my feelings were hurt. And now I seem to have hurt her.”

The intent of cuckoo communication is that the person seeks to convince you that you are the dysfunctional and unhealthy one. Like the cuckoo bird, they desire more and more of your time, energy, and attention. The longer you stay in the relationship, feeding their ever-hungry, never-satisfied ego, the larger and larger their feelings become, and your feelings are consumed by theirs. You are filling a void in their life that you were never meant to fill. Meanwhile, your needs, dreams, desires, and purpose never hatch or come to fruition.

The Abusive Relationship Cuckoo: Death by a Thousand Cuts

The Cuckoo Syndrome exists on a spectrum, with some forms of cuckoo-type relationships more damaging and severe than others, such as abuse. Being in a relationship where abuse is present establishes a similar dynamic to that of the cuckoo bird. It feels like death by a thousand cuts, namely, painful moments that take pieces of your soul and bring that pain into your life again and again.

Biologists describe cuckoo birds as “masters of disguise” and “notorious cheats” who prey on an “unsuspecting host” and mirror them to a “startling degree.”¹⁰ These parasitic birds are experts at escaping responsibility and intuitively adopt methods of trickery. The abusive process in human relationships is eerily similar and leaves you with a haunting confusion and immense suffering as they invade your life. You are the unsuspecting host they watch carefully, study intuitively, and then prey on. They aim to deceive you by disguising their true self in order to use and take advantage of you. They secretly plan their agenda to harm you and monopolize your time and energy.

An abusive relationship is characterized by a person’s demonstrating deception, manipulation, and control, where the other

person intentionally harms another person. Abuse comes in many forms, such as physical, verbal, emotional, sexual, and spiritual. Abuse can produce a painful, crazy-making feeling in which the person being abused falsely believes they are overreacting, selfish, difficult to be with, too sensitive, ungrateful, and a failure at relationships. When these lies are repeated often by the abuser, the victim eventually comes to believe them.

Like the cuckoo bird, people who abuse others can be masters of adopting various disguises to hide their true nature and lure their hosts into developing a relationship with them. They are highly intelligent, seeking to exploit weaknesses and vulnerabilities. In the beginning of the relationship, the abusive person can be especially kind and charming, but their deceptive nature slowly turns their kindness and eagerness into manipulation and control.

It might feel good at first to feel important and special: someone pursues you, shows such a strong interest in you and your life, and desires so much of your time. But after a while you start to feel used, lied to, and taken advantage of. Ultimately the relationship revolves around them, and they want you all to themselves.

The relationship is not mutual and reciprocal; it is lopsided and draining. You are the one doing all the work to please them and make them happy, yet they are consistently unsatisfied, and you are wounded in the process. Deep down you believe the lie that you are too much or not enough.

The cuckoo's reactions become intense if you try to set boundaries, have a voice, express your needs, and make room for yourself in the relationship. They can shift blame, accuse, and criticize. Over time you feel severely confused and hurt and are increasingly isolated; your reality becomes altered.

One of the reasons people feel such self-doubt when they are in an abusive relationship is because an abusive person does not manifest abusive tendencies all the time. They can go for long

periods without manifesting any abusive behaviors toward you. That is mostly due to the fact that they want to keep you engaged in the relationship. At times they make you feel better than anyone else, and at other times they make you feel lower than anyone else. It is when they feel triggered by you pushing one of their hidden buttons that you are blindsided and shocked by their toxic behavior when it comes to the surface again. They can tend to quietly keep a record of your wrongs and wait for the opportune moment to punish you. As I said, the abuse feels like death by a thousand cuts, painful moments that take pieces of your soul and bring that pain into your life again and again.

A Story of Abuse

Thomas was given a drum set as a Christmas gift from his close friend Dave, who knew Thomas had played in college and hoped to encourage him to pursue his long-lost musical talent that work pressures had displaced. Thomas also enjoyed spending time with his family when he was not working. Dave admired how Thomas prioritized his wife and family; they were his pride and joy. Dave knew Thomas tends to put the needs of others above his own and that he was too busy with work to purchase the drums himself. Upon receiving the drums, Thomas was hesitant and a bit anxious to tell his wife that he was going to take lessons at the local community center after seeing the class advertised in the newspaper.

Once he mustered up the courage to tell her, he left the conversation feeling afraid and guilty for pursuing something he was passionate about outside of his work and family. Thomas's wife criticized him repeatedly: "You are a terrible father for choosing to take lessons for your silly drums over spending time with your own children." "You are going to damage your children because you are going to make them feel abandoned each time you go to your lesson." "You don't really want to spend time with

our children or you wouldn't play the drums." "You are trying to avoid the responsibility of being a parent." "I am like a single parent in this family, and you are like another child: selfish and irresponsible."

Rather than celebrate his opportunity to pursue a personal passion and encourage him, despite his fears, she became passive aggressive and did not speak to Thomas. She slept in another room and avoided him for long periods.

Although Thomas pursued his drum lessons, she repeatedly told him he was neglecting his children and her when he played the drums. He began seeking counseling because he felt disoriented and recognized that this painful pattern of constant criticism of him as a father and husband had manifested in other ways for a long time in his marriage. The verbal and emotional abuse had been invisible to him.

The Cuckoo Syndrome slowly erodes your sense of self and thwarts your purpose. As a counselor, I have worked with many individuals and couples where abuse is present in the relationship. At times, abusers are unlikely to seek counseling because they may not want to believe that anything is wrong with them. If they do seek counseling, following through with counseling is also difficult for these individuals because they can become defensive and question the counsel they are given by therapists, who want to help. I have found that these individuals become extremely upset and disappointed when they are not given the answers or the solutions they are seeking or the special treatment they deeply believe they deserve. For this reason, it has been my experience that they tend to jump from counselor to counselor, hoping the next advice from a counselor will align with their behavior.

Based on my experience, when they do seek counseling, it is more often for other symptoms such as substance abuse, infidelity, a work crisis, depression, or anxiety. The problem occurs

in the relationship when the person is unwilling to be accountable for their abusive behavior and do the necessary work to change their actions. I have discovered the cuckoo bird analogy serves to reveal what's really going on to the partner in the abusive relationship as they begin to acknowledge the deceit, manipulation, and control and put a name to their pain for the first time.

To repair such a relationship, it is essential that a person in an abusive relationship breaks the silence of their suffering and seeks help. It is necessary for the abusive person to be equally willing to pursue help and do the work necessary to overcome their toxic behavior patterns so they do not continue to hurt their spouse or friend. Chapter 9, "Cuckoo Counsel," will provide some practical steps on when and how to pursue professional counseling, what makes a therapist safe, and what to expect in counseling.

Hurting People Hurt People

Although signs and symptoms resemble other personality disorders or traits, the Cuckoo Syndrome is not a disorder or a pathology. The Cuckoo Syndrome is not about blaming the cuckoo. It is important to note that any of us can behave like a cuckoo or fall into the Cuckoo Syndrome. I've discovered in my treatment of clients over the years that hurting people hurt people.

All people carry their own wounds, unresolved pain, and heartaches from their past. I have worked with numerous individuals who experience intense guilt and regret regarding their abusive behavior and desire to make amends. I have such empathy and compassion for these men and women since there exists an underlying shame, which is primary to why they become defensive and angry and go on the attack quite easily due to their woundedness and delicate ego. I have found that beneath that external facade of self-confidence is a deeper

layer of fragility, insecurity, and a fear of being seen as weak and a failure.

I've found they are typically victims of abuse and trauma earlier in life. They can often appear to be arrogant and emotionally distant or cold. This can be a survival mode to compensate for the lack of self due to believing at their core that they are unlovable and unworthy.

The good news is that you can heal regardless of whether or not the cuckoo in your life is willing to do the necessary work to change their unhealthy behavior. They are not responsible for your healing—you are. And with God's help and the help of others, you can be free. Freedom is knowing this truth, which begins to shift how you operate within certain relationships.

It takes courage and deep commitment to do the healing work and not blame other people but still recognize your role in the cuckoo relational dynamic. Acknowledging this truth can be extremely difficult because when we face reality, we face the lies we have been telling ourselves, we face painful emotions that we have buried, and we become aware of just how much our false beliefs and toxic thoughts are contributing to our suffering. Healing consists of knowing the cuckoo relationships we have allowed in our life and the ways we have nurtured them and neglected ourselves in the process.

What Do All Cuckoos Have in Common? They Need a Host. You Are Their Host.

Once you realize the cuckoo-host struggle you are currently experiencing in your relationships, it is important to identify what made your life susceptible to cuckoos in the first place.

If you find yourself continually attracting destructive or lopsided relationships, it is most likely because in some capacity, you were willing to give up your needs, your wants, your thoughts, your

feelings, your voice, your boundaries, your hopes, and your dreams. Therefore, you are enabling the Cuckoo Syndrome to be present within your relationships. Additionally, something is missing inside of you that you are hoping the relationship will heal or fix. Or perhaps you have a deep-seated fear of rejection, abandonment, or disappointing others or your identity is found in the need to be needed and as a result, you lose connection to knowing your own needs. Have compassion on yourself and do not shame yourself either. We all have a deep need to be loved and cared for. We all have seasons of life where we are involved in cuckoo-type relationships.

The Cuckoo Syndrome shows up as a chronic neglect of self by consistently taking care of someone you have allowed into your life while receiving little or no reciprocation. Understanding and becoming aware of being the host and how you participate in the cuckoo relationship is essential to the healing process and to reclaiming your life and the eggs in your life that have never been able to hatch.

You are the one who must stop hosting your cuckoo and believing the lie that you are responsible for carrying the emotional weight of the relationship. Other people do not have the power to control you. They can attempt to control you or try to make you feel a certain way or act a certain way, but only if you allow them.

As stated, the Cuckoo Syndrome is not about placing blame on the other person (significant other, family members, ministry leaders, colleagues). The cuckoo is not the problem; the problem is the unhealthy relational dynamic that is occurring between the two of you. You need to acknowledge the role you play in allowing them to become your primary purpose rather than having your own purpose and heart's desires to delight in.

Remember, because cuckoos come into your life disguised as a seemingly good relationship or healthy person, initially you don't know if you have a cuckoo relationship, but you do know something

seems off even though you can't quite put your finger on it. You are stuck, exhausted, and have lost precious pieces of yourself.

In the next chapter, "Stuck in Cuckoo Land: How to Deal with the Cuckoos in Your Life" you will learn the tools that will help you to get unstuck and begin the process of finding yourself again.

Start by asking yourself, *Do I make a good host for a cuckoo? "Have I allowed a cuckoo to invade my life? Am I now sitting on their eggs instead of nurturing my own? Am I now exhausting myself feeding and taking care of them?"*

The Self-Inflicted Cuckoo

The cuckoo in your life does not have to be an unhealthy relationship with another person; it can be the unhealthy relationship you have within yourself. A self-inflicted cuckoo shows up as an internal battle rather than an external relationship. So instead of a person who continues to hurt you, use you, or take advantage of you, the self-inflicted cuckoo is your own behaviors and thinking patterns that are keeping you stuck.

You might not realize that the things that are holding you back or getting in your way are actually because of your own thinking, actions, and behaviors. We have all been here. Understanding this cuckoo dynamic can help prevent you from shaming yourself when you repeat these destructive behaviors over and over again.

Self-Inflicted Cuckoo = Toxic Thinking Patterns + Self-Sabotaging Behaviors

In my work with thousands of clients, I've discovered that although self-sabotage is a very common experience, most people do not know they are engaging in self-sabotaging behaviors. It is important to note that the words *self-sabotaging* and *self-inflicted* are not designed to shame you or place blame. The purpose is to put a name to specific ways we unknowingly harm ourselves

that leads to unnecessary suffering. What we can name we can heal. Naming this invisible enemy brings truth, not shame, and knowing the truth leads to freedom.

The following questions will you identify if you are hosting the self-inflicted cuckoo:

1. Is there an area of your life that began as a passion and has increasingly grown into an obsessive preoccupation, crippling perfectionism, or worse, an addiction? (For example, your to-do list, social media, work, volunteering, exercise, cleaning, online dating, shopping.)
2. Is there an area of your life where you are feeding your ego because you are more concerned with success, keeping up appearances, and being the best? Do you feel bound to these internal drives that grow bigger and bigger the more you nurture them?
3. Is there an area of your life that initially appeared to be a good thing or a God thing, yet it has left you feeling empty, lost, and lonely? (For example, a ministry, career, project.)
4. Is there an area of your work, home, or social life that has gradually consumed you and become the primary source of your identity, worth, and value?
5. Is there an area of your life where you tend to neglect your mental health and emotional well-being and you experience stress and burnout as a result? Do you also tend to neglect or not prioritize relationships with the people closest to you? (For example, your marriage, friendships, family.)
6. Is there an area of your life that has overtaken you, and the more you try to control it, the more out of control you feel? (For example, food, drugs, work, TV, drinking.)
7. Is there an area of your life in which you have become driven by your performance instead of guided by your

purpose, and where you have lost your peace of mind and joy as a result?

8. Is there an area of your life that originally fulfilled you but now drains you and no longer truly satisfies the longings of your soul or your heart's deepest desires?

Self-inflicted cuckoos appear good on the outside, but they create harm because you gradually develop an obsessive preoccupation that takes over your life. Self-inflicted cuckoos are imposters disguised as things that will fulfill you, yet ultimately they leave you feeling empty, lost, and lonely.

Unlike relationship cuckoos, with self-inflicted cuckoos, you are not feeding the insatiable appetite of an unhealthy person; you are feeding the insatiable appetite of your ego by searching for relief and significance in unhealthy ways.

Self-inflicted cuckoos come in many forms. They can be regular things that become all-consuming and spiral out of control or they can be passions that become obsessions or worse—addictions. Examples of these regular things are your to-do list, online dating, cooking, cleaning, exercising, social media, television, sex, work, food, alcohol, shopping, volunteering, and decorating. None of these things is harmful, wrong, or bad in and of itself.

The danger comes when they slowly consume your daily life and control you rather than you exhibiting self-control over them and using them in moderation. For example, perhaps you turn to your phone to distract yourself from difficult issues and it becomes obsessive; you can't enjoy a moment without it because you are constantly checking Instagram, email, text messages, news, Facebook, and the number of views for your most recent comment, or a YouTube video, or the number of followers and "Likes" you have.

Addictive behaviors—such as alcoholism, disordered eating, sex and love addiction, drug addiction, and workaholism—are also self-inflicted cuckoos. Like the host parent of the cuckoo chick who becomes a slave to its ever-demanding, never-satisfied demands. So it is with self-inflicted cuckoos because you are a servant to your own internal drives that grow bigger and bigger.

Self-inflicted cuckoos can also be an area of your life that begin as a passion and then slowly grow into an obsession and a crippling perfectionism, which can become the sole source of your identity, worth, and value. As a result, you easily feel envious, resentful, competitive, and prideful or push yourself too hard and endure dangerous levels of stress. Examples include being passionate about a project, a ministry, or a career.

The cuckoo arises when your life becomes out of balance and your relationships, mental health, and physical health are affected. Your marriage suffers, you do not spend as much time with your children, you experience chronic fatigue or other unexplained medical symptoms, you are not sleeping well, you struggle with bouts of depression, and you are anxious most of the time. These are all signs you could have a self-inflicted cuckoo in your nest even though you are passionate about what you are doing. We become driven by our performance instead of driven by our purpose.

Toxic thinking patterns such as overthinking, overanalyzing, and obsessing to the point where we cannot make simple decisions as well as feeling overwhelmed and losing our peace and joy are self-inflicted cuckoos. These toxic patterns create an illness of introspection where we live in our minds rather than in our behaviors. This paralysis-by-analysis mentality keeps us stuck and trapped in cuckoo land, believing the lies we tell ourselves. Toxic-thinking cuckoos suck the joy out of our work, relationships, and life. Simple things become extremely complicated and crippling as we imagine worst-case

scenarios and rehearse conversations with people to seek some type of control. However, the more we try to control our circumstances, the more out of control we feel.

Regardless of what your self-inflicted cuckoo might be, you do not realize it is in your nest, yet eventually you become your own worst enemy. The most important thing to understand about the self-inflicted cuckoo is this: you deceive yourself into believing these behaviors will protect you. Your unconscious mind seeks to protect you from feeling pain or experiencing failure and rejection by keeping you in predictable, familiar patterns. Although self-inflicted cuckoos help you feel better in the short term, they are imposters that leave you feeling worse because those patterns are harmful, not helpful. You become consumed by feelings of inadequacy, low self-esteem, and shame as you strive to perform, please, and perfect your life away.

Think of self-inflicted cuckoos as self-erected prisons holding you hostage—you are a prisoner of your own insatiable appetite—yet the door to your prison is open although you do not realize you are free. Hence the nature of the cuckoo. They are sneaky. They resemble what you want. They look as if they belong in your nest, your life. But they are imposters. Remember, the process is subtle at first and you are deceived into thinking things are OK, especially because the self-inflicted cuckoos appear to be good things on the outside. Not until later do you realize you are being held captive by the things, and your true purpose never manifests at all or does not reach its fullness. Essentially your own eggs never hatch and don't come to life, and you have a nest full of imposter eggs that mimic what you want but are not truly what satisfies your heart's deepest desires. Something is missing in your life, and you can't quite put your finger on it. Until now.

The Root of the Self-Inflicted Cuckoo

We are often our own worst enemy because of these self-destructive tendencies and habits we do not acknowledge and refuse to quit. This is because self-inflicted cuckoos are often a symptom of a deeper-rooted issue that needs to be recognized and addressed. This is the time to be honest with yourself, others, and God about the true source of your pain that is hiding beneath the empty promises of your self-inflicted cuckoo.

Self-inflicted cuckoos are a distraction and deceitfully promise to protect you against painful emotions or a fear of failure, rejection, and abandonment. A wounded heart full of fear and unmet relational needs will direct you toward other things to fulfill and satisfy you.

Self-inflicted cuckoos seek to satisfy you when you experience perceived feelings of failure, loneliness, boredom, shame, or disappointment within yourself. Perhaps you lost your best friend, you're recently divorced, your child left home for the first time, your husband is working all the time, or you were diagnosed with an illness.

Maybe you had a painful breakup and turned to shopping as a distraction, and like the cuckoo, it grew bigger and bigger, and now you are making poor financial decisions. Or you turned to binge-watching shows when you lost your job so you could avoid feeling afraid, and now you are spending an inordinate amount of time watching shows and procrastinating about looking for a new job. Or you started a new company and began comparing yourself to people on social media who had a bigger platform, and you lost your passion and joy. You are trying to please an audience based on what others are doing and lost your unique voice as a result, and now you are doubting your purpose altogether. Or you are checking your online dating profile incessantly and neglecting your current

relationships with your family, church, and friends because you feel ashamed of being single. At night you have one more glass of wine, and now you cannot go to sleep without it or attend social functions in a sober state.

What are your self-inflicted cuckoos? List them here:

We all have self-inflicted cuckoos. It is part of being human. We each have underlying wounds that await God's grace and truth to cleanse and to heal. It is important to give ourselves grace and have self-compassion as we learn to identify and let go of these destructive behaviors and toxic thinking patterns. Know deep down the truth that we are loved, worthy, successful, needed, and wanted. As we go through the healing process, it is important to give ourselves permission not to do the healing process perfectly. Even if we have moments where we spend too much time online or have too many glasses of wine, it is OK. We can always make a new choice next time the opportunity presents itself to say no to our self-inflicted cuckoo and to say yes to feeling the pain of that moment and realize we do not need to fear the pain any longer and hide from it.

An Invisible Enemy Becomes Visible

Being unable to point our finger to the suffering we experience is one of the most painful experiences a person can encounter day after day. For this reason, the Cuckoo Syndrome represents an invisible, self-destructive pattern and a compilation of symptoms that hides from your awareness until you find a name for it.

Regardless of whether you have an unhealthy relationship cuckoo or a self-inflicted cuckoo, the Cuckoo Syndrome is an imposter and a counterfeit purpose.

Whether you are hosting the relationship cuckoo or the self-inflicted cuckoo, they are an invisible enemy, a blind spot. You do not know they are right in front of you. As stated, they are initially disguised as a good thing or a healthy person, or else you wouldn't find yourself in this dynamic in the first place; you would have known right away.

Think of the Cuckoo Syndrome as an autoimmune disease that is not always visible even though the internal pain exists. The body mistakenly attacks itself. The disease is weakening the body and creating internal damage. This is similar to a cancer in which the rapid creation of abnormal cells invades the body and has the potential to spread throughout. I have had many clients who were suffering from chronic pain who said they felt as if they had an invisible disease. The earlier these diseases can be detected, the sooner treatment can begin. And so it is with the Cuckoo Syndrome.

The Cuckoo Syndrome exists beneath the surface; its invisible wound and associated pain erode your strength, hope, and purpose. Eventually you find yourself in a conundrum, depleted, shattered, exhausted, and believing it is too late. You find yourself more and more in the constant company of anxiety, stress, depression, and addiction. Hidden within your soul is lingering confusion, insecurity, and fear that haunt you about your needs, wants, and desires.

Breaking free from the Cuckoo Syndrome starts by bringing this invisible enemy to light by naming who or what your cuckoo is and how you allow it to show up in your life. We spend a significant portion of our lives fighting the wrong enemy, hiding from our true selves, and wondering why we continue to remain stuck

and unfulfilled. It is largely because the real source of the problem is invisible to us.

Much of our lack of awareness is contributing to our cycle of suffering. This realization is not an easy one, and it is not pain-free, but living your life according to the cuckoo's demands and rules is certainly not a pain-free process either. Just because you are aware of the cuckoo dynamics in your life, relational or self-inflicted, they will not automatically disappear, but they will no longer remain hidden and powerful. The healing process requires hard work and facing the true source of your pain in conjunction with God's help and the help of others so that freedom and wholeness arise.

Addressing this invisible enemy and its associated wounds allow the healing process to begin. As you recover the lost parts of yourself, new energy awaits you because you are no longer allowing the cuckoo to dictate your happiness, steal your purpose, run your life, and drain your energy. Hope for your dreams and heart's desires that were smothered by the cuckoo is rediscovered and reignited. Your relationships improve as the toxic stronghold of the cuckoo struggle loosens its grip over your life so you are no longer held captive.

CHAPTER 3

**THE CUCKOO OF
NOT FEELING
YOUR FEELINGS**

***What Happens When
You Avoid Emotions?***

*The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be
seen or even touched. They must be felt with the heart.*

—HELEN KELLER

THIS CHAPTER WILL REVEAL AN IN-DEPTH LOOK AT THE powerful role emotions play in motivating us to live out these tools successfully in our daily life. Our feelings are an essential component to dealing with the cuckoos who have invaded our lives. To face our cuckoos, we must first face our feelings.

Buried Emotions: Bringing the Unconscious to Consciousness

Becoming conscious of our feelings gives us a sense of our true self, the foundation of our identity, and who we are in Christ. Feelings also allow us to know ourselves, others, and God authentically in the most intimate way. Feelings reveal to us who we are, what we want, what we do not want, and the choices we make from moment to moment. When we avoid our feelings, we lose the valuable information they provide.

When my clients are not feeling their feelings, they are simultaneously unaware of their needs, wants, and desires, which all serve as a guard against cuckoos taking advantage of them. Therefore, they have difficulty setting healthy boundaries in relationships with the cuckoo in their lives. When we avoid our emotions, we become susceptible to unhealthy relationships and self-sabotaging behaviors. After years in private practice, I am convinced that we all have developed ways to avoid our emotions.

We feel feelings all through every day, whether we are aware of them or not. I encourage my clients to feel their feelings and not fear their feelings. The most important aspect of healing and genuine transformation is to become aware of your buried, unconscious feelings. This process occurs by shifting your attention away from the cuckoos in your life who continually take from you. Now is the time to pay attention to who you are, how you feel, and what your needs are instead of chronically neglecting yourself to please your cuckoo.

What Are Emotions?

Throughout this chapter I use the words *feelings* and *emotions* interchangeably. Essentially, feelings are how we label our emotions. We typically say, “I feel sad” as opposed to “I have an emotion of sadness.” Emotions such as anger, sadness, fear, and happiness are hardwired, nondebtable, and biological reactions that occur automatically in our brain and body. Your brain unconsciously evaluates your environment as you experience day-to-day life. These messages are processed in the limbic system of the brain as well as the autonomic nervous system, which is responsible for emotional activity outside our conscious awareness. This process is then motioned through the body, followed by physiological changes such as increased heart rate and respiration. Our emotions can also be expressed through our body language and facial expressions.

All of this is to say that I’ve found many people falsely believe that having emotions is a choice. They say, “I shouldn’t feel this way” or, worse, “Emotions are sinful.” Emotions are neither good nor bad, right nor wrong; they simply *are*. We do have a choice whether we feel our feelings or avoid them. Understanding and processing your emotions as they arise and dealing with the associated thoughts and behaviors in a healthy, productive manner can bring healing and wholeness.

I’ve discovered in my work with clients that their emotions serve as an inner compass to guide and inform them of impending threats and how to protect themselves. If we are created with emotions to guide us in helpful ways, why do we frequently avoid them? In short, because they are painful and scary. Clients do not come into counseling saying, “My issue is that I am avoiding my emotions” or, “I am afraid of feeling my feelings of sadness or anger.” They are suffering with things such as unhappy marriages, burnout, addictions, and financial struggles.

We do not bury our emotions consciously, logically, or rationally because this can happen on autopilot. Even though we ignore, deny, or numb our emotions, they are still active and alive inside us, lingering beneath the surface and creating unnecessary suffering.

How Do We Learn to Avoid Our Emotions?

Based on my clinical experiences, I've noticed that many of the problems clients come to counseling to address (depression, anxiety, stress, loneliness, and relationship difficulties) are rooted in the ways people have learned to fear and avoid their emotions. Ninety percent of this learning is unconscious. Unconscious means beyond conscious awareness. It is a fancy word for *buried*, whether it is burying our pain, unpleasant emotions, or traumatic memories, all of which are understandably so hard and scary to feel.

We always have feelings; we just learn to hide them from other people. Due to our past experiences, we come to believe we are not allowed to say no or be angry, afraid, vulnerable, or imperfect. This learning can occur in past relationships (e.g., romantic, friendships), during childhood experiences with our primary caregivers, teachings in church that emotions are not OK, or a combination of any or all of these. Therefore, expressing our feelings can trigger anxiety. If sharing feelings was dangerous in a past relationship, the body acts as if it is still dangerous in present relationships. If we learned to hide our feelings in the past, we might do so today. Hiding feelings may have been helpful in those moments; it may have alleviated some anxiety, but doing so now creates problems and symptoms that lead to unnecessary suffering. Anxiety is a signal of an underlying buried emotion.

As children, we depend on our parents and caregivers for protection and safety. Our survival depends on making sure

we are secure with them. Our caregivers were responsible for modeling for us how to experience our emotions by creating a safe and nurturing relationship where we learned to express our feelings and feel validated. Perhaps a parent was emotionally distant while physically present; perhaps your emotions inconvenienced your parents; perhaps your parents criticized you and accused you of being weak and needy; perhaps your emotions made your caregivers feel angry with you; perhaps they would punish you and tell you to pull yourself together; or perhaps they were emotionally distanced from you, became disengaged, and neglected you. Perhaps your parents became angry or anxious when you expressed an emotion so you hid your feelings to make them less anxious or less angry in order to sustain the relationship. Either way, we learn to hide our feelings to make our caregivers feel comfortable; to avoid them hurting us, verbally or physically; or to avoid them abandoning us. We hide our emotional life to attach to a parent with whom we cannot share the truth.

How Do We Avoid Our Emotions?

The truth is, it is never our emotions that cause our issues but the ways we choose to avoid those emotions. We avoid feeling our feelings by choosing methods to distract and numb ourselves. These methods are defense mechanisms, what I call *cuckoo-coping companions*. Defense mechanisms are maladaptive ways we seek to protect ourselves from pain by avoiding our true feelings, such as a painful breakup or getting fired. Cuckoo-coping companions are ways we numb our pain through food, sex, drugs, alcohol, and social media, for example. Both methods are self-inflicted cuckoos because they are self-sabotaging behaviors and toxic thought patterns that keep us stuck. They are deeply ingrained habits that fend off anxiety when a painful emotion surfaces (see more on these methods in chapter 5, “What Feeds a Cuckoo?”).

A common defense mechanism is intellectualizing, which means a person thinks rather than feels to avoid their current painful experience. Therefore, during a session a person provides a thought rather than a feeling. There is a distinction between one's thoughts and emotions and most people do not know the difference. When I ask my clients in cuckoo relationships how they feel, some of their responses include the following:

"I feel like my spouse doesn't understand me."

"I feel like leaving my job."

"I feel empty."

"I feel confused."

"I feel stuck."

These are all thoughts. Not one of them is a feeling.

It takes time to help my clients identify this defense of intellectualizing and feel their real emotions (anger, fear, sadness). For example, during a couple's session, one of them might say, "I feel like my spouse doesn't understand me." This is a statement of thought rather than an expression of emotion. The underlying emotion to the thought statement in this case was anger toward their spouse. Expressing anger in intimate relationships creates anxiety for this person due to past painful experiences where they learned that expressing anger leads to abandonment.

Another person was feeling stuck at work because their boss was treating them poorly. Rather than sharing how they felt toward their boss, they said, "I feel like leaving my job." This, too, is not a feeling; it is a thought. It is what they want to do, not how

they feel. This person might believe they are being taken advantage of and feel anger toward their boss, but they are afraid to feel the anger and admit it to themselves or their boss because they are afraid it means they are weak or incapable, or they might lose their job if they express their true anger. They might also say, “I feel worried,” which is also not a feeling but anxiety that is covering up a feeling. In reality, this person is angry at their boss for setting unrealistic expectations and threatening their job if all tasks are not completed. They might also respond “I feel stuck” or “I feel confused.” Again, these are thoughts, not feelings. It is important to get in touch with the real emotion, and then the “what to do” knowledge, such as learning to set boundaries, will come.

Take a moment and ask yourself, “How do I feel toward the cuckoo in my life?” Distinguish between your thoughts and your feelings. How do you experience that feeling? In what ways have you been burying that feeling?

False Beliefs versus Truths: The Role of Emotion and Christian Spirituality

Another way people have learned to avoid their emotions, besides from their childhood experiences with their primary caregivers, is through false teachings from their church.

The following are false beliefs about the role of emotion and faith: emotions are not from God, emotions are sinful, emotions should be ignored, emotions are irrelevant to your spiritual life, emotions mean you lack trust in God, emotions thwart following the will of God, emotions equate to an inferior Christian life, emotions should not be addressed in a church setting, and emotions are an obstacle to faith and need to be disciplined or controlled.

The following are truths about emotion and faith: God created us in his image with emotions, God experiences us and speaks to

us through emotion, emotion is a reflection of what God experiences in his heart, Scripture describes God's emotions, emotions are designed to be an intricate part of our faith journey, one of the Enemy's greatest tricks is to shut us down emotionally, and emotions play an essential role in the conviction of sin leading to repentance.

Emotions Are Indicators, Not Dictators

We are created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26). Our emotions are a natural part of who we are and how we were created. Again, emotions are nondebatable, biological realities that require close attention. If we deny, ignore, or numb our emotions with food or alcohol, we are dismissing vital data God intended for us when he created us. God speaks to us in many ways including through our emotions. Emotions keep us in the present moment rather than hiding from past hurts or anxiously anticipating the future. Emotions keep us honest and authentic.

Our emotions are indicators, not dictators, meaning that we do not let our emotions govern our behavior. We are not led by our emotions. We pay attention to them and the valuable information they provide us. Experiencing emotion is normal, not abnormal. They are part of what it means to be human. When we avoid our negative emotions, we have a tendency to avoid our positive emotions, too, such as joy. Selective emotional avoidance, however, is not possible because you become numb to feelings.

It is not possible to grow spiritually beyond your emotional immaturity.

There is a connection between your spiritual life and your emotional life, which means you cannot grow spiritually beyond where you are stuck emotionally. Our spiritual growth is significantly stunted when there is an absence of emotional growth.

When we ignore and disconnect from our emotional parts, we go through the motions of our faith in terms of prayers, spiritual disciplines, and ministry. Yet when we don't allow emotion to enter these experiences, we are unable to love God and our neighbor as ourselves wholeheartedly because we lack authenticity. If we cannot tell the truth about how we feel to ourselves, how can we tell it to other people? As humans we have an innate desire to be fully known and accepted for who we *really* are.

We can know Scripture intellectually but not experientially, personally, and intimately. Therefore we engage in Christian behaviors of doing yet live disconnected from our own hearts. God designed us in such a way that when our emotions are also involved in our spiritual experience, we deepen our intimacy with God. When the Spirit moves and speaks, we do not solely receive it intellectually, but we feel it deep within our hearts. Scripture says David was a man after God's own heart. The psalms are a beautiful example of David's embrace of a wide array of emotions such as joy, anger, fear, sadness, shame, and despair. He made mistakes. He repented. He obeyed. He grew and matured. He invited God into the depths of his heart. He was real.

The Emotions of God Found in Scripture

God is emotional. Throughout Scripture we see that God feels a plethora of emotions: compassion, joy, sadness, longing, jealousy, pleasure, mourning, love, laughter, and anger.

The following two scriptures reflect and describe the deeply intense emotions of Jesus and the Spirit:

*And when Jesus went out He saw a great multitude;
and He was moved with compassion for them,
and healed their sick. (MATT. 14:14)*

“Moved with compassion” in this verse is the Greek word *splanchnizomai*: “To be moved with deep compassion or pity. The Greeks regarded the bowels (*splanchna*) as the place where strong and powerful emotions originated. The place where tender mercies and feelings of affection, compassion, sympathy, and pity originated. It is the direct motive for at least five of Jesus’s miracles.”¹³

The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously. (JAMES 4:5)

The Greek word for “yearn” is *epipotheo*, meaning “to long for, desire, to pursue with love, to lust.”¹⁴ Strong’s Concordance defines lust as “to dote upon, intensely crave possession.”

The word is used to describe the intense yearning the Spirit has for us. *Epipotheo* depicts a jealous love that is analogous to a partner boiling with anger. The Spirit is possessive of us. The picture is like that of a person who must have someone. That is how much God loves us. He is jealous of what takes our attention away from time with him. We often do not believe we have that much influence on God or that he experiences such intense emotions toward us.

The Shame Cuckoo

The emotion of shame, whether it be spiritual or relational, is toxic and creates unnecessary suffering. Many people feel stuck in unhealthy relationships, addictions, perfectionism, and people pleasing, and they have developed a mindset where they believe something is inherently wrong with them. Who they are equates to what they do or don’t do. They do not realize they have a cuckoo in their life and its name is shame.

Shame is an intensely painful, self-conscious emotion during which we believe we are flawed, condemned, broken, and unworthy of love. Shame drives people to hide their transgressions

from others, including God. When we are feeling shame, we are acutely aware of what is wrong with us. Rather than believing we are inherently flawed, it is important to become aware of the root of the shame, whether it be the presence of a self-inflicted cuckoo or a relationship cuckoo.

When we have a cuckoo in our life who is never satisfied, it leads to experiences of shame because we cannot please them regardless of how hard we try or how much we give of ourselves to make the relationship work. It is impossible to satisfy a cuckoo because they blame you and point out your flaws; they do not take responsibility for their harmful behavior, which, in their eyes, is always someone else's fault. Due to their deceptive and manipulative nature, we tend to believe their lies about us and we end up feeling worthless, unlovable, and wrong all the time. This shameful disillusionment leaves us wondering, *What is wrong with me?* instead of asking *What is not working in this relationship?*, or *Is this not reciprocal?*, or *Is this person harming me?*

Our self-inflicted cuckoos also provide opportunities for shame to manifest. Maybe the issue is not a person but rather your ministry or career that has gradually developed into an obsessive preoccupation that has taken over your life. Most days you feel ashamed to have neglected your marriage, children, friends, and health.

The Voice of Shame and the Voice of Conviction

On countless occasions, clients feel ashamed because they confuse conviction of sin as condemnation and shame rather than a call to repentance. This mostly stems from some false teachings in the church. This saddens my heart. My goal is to help my clients understand the truth about shame, especially lies they believe about conviction and repentance, which is a common theme in therapy.

The voice of shame when dealing with conviction of sin sounds like the following. A sense of dread, doubt, and fear comes over you. A paralyzing feeling of insecurity and inadequacy appears. You are abruptly reminded of your past failures and haunting memories of how you hurt others. A voice tells you, “You know that sin issue, that problem you are struggling with and can’t seem to overcome? You should know better by now and have this perfectly sorted out. Until you fix it, Jesus is displeased with you and disappointed that you are *still* battling with this. Here is what you need to do: overcome this in your own strength because grace has run out at this point, and don’t tell anyone about it until you stop doing it.”

The voice of conviction in dealing with sin that leads to repentance sounds like the following. Imagine being enveloped in a warm blanket, Jesus gently approaching you, looking deeply into your eyes, smiling, putting his arms around you, and saying, “I love you so much. You are my precious child. I am so pleased with you right now, as you are, just for being you. You are incredibly special to me. I think about you every moment of every day. My heart aches for you as you wrestle with this. Don’t be ashamed, dear one. I already know you have been struggling over this issue. You are not alone. I want to help you if you will allow me in. We have been through so much together, haven’t we? I will not abandon you now. Will you trust me? I have something so beautiful to give you in place of this thing that you can’t seem to let go. Will you release your grasp and give it up? I am willing when you are ready.”

Conviction is rooted in love. Shame is rooted in fear.

The Spirit convicts (convinces) us of our identity as a child of God. The Holy Spirit abides within us, according to Jesus, as our helper who is always with us and reminding us of our righteousness in Christ Jesus. He wants to help us, not condemn us. He does not motivate us to repentance through guilt and condemnation

(Rom. 8:1). Guilt and condemnation do not lead to repentance; they lead to shame. Shame and guilt lead to self-hate and self-attack. Conviction leads to genuine healing, making amends, and repentance.

Spiritually speaking, Satan also represents the voice of shame who wants to have us identify with our sinful nature rather than our identity in Christ and therefore to hide ourselves as did Adam and Eve, naked and afraid. When we are in shame, we fall from a place of God, from consciousness to a place of self-consciousness.

Neither God nor Jesus nor the Holy Spirit will ever come to you and say, “This is what’s wrong with you.” Rather, they will gently suggest, “This is what is missing in your relationship with me, and I invite you to give this thing over to me so I can replace it with something beautiful, something better.” Essentially, shame says *this is wrong* and conviction says *this is missing*.

God’s kindness is intended to lead you to repentance. (ROM. 2:4 NIV)

The Greek word for “kindness” is *chrestotes*: “Goodness in action, sweetness of disposition, gentleness in dealing with others, kindness, affability.”¹⁵

For this reason, repentance is meant to be a joyful experience, because we learn to trust in God’s goodness. This is not easy, yet repentance is helpful, productive, and adaptive—it leads to growth and transformation. We begin to recognize how our obedience to Christ provides incredible blessing, and we walk away in a better place.

My Conviction Story

I began watching a television series highly recommended by a friend. Immediately I was hooked. The series became a distraction,

a cuckoo. As the riveting plot unfolded with each episode, I found myself preoccupied with the show even when I was not watching it. Slowly and subtly my thought life and emotional energy were consumed. From the moment I got home from work until I went to sleep, I spent the entire evening watching this series.

I started to feel embarrassed that I was neglecting other things and people who had brought me joy in the evenings. I felt ashamed that perfectionism was rearing its ugly head. The voice of shame whispered, *What's wrong with you? You are a professional counselor, and you can't stop watching a silly show?* Although I was tempted to believe those lies, I chose to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit and invited him into the situation and asked him to convict me of what was missing. It felt awkward and vulnerable at first.

I focused my attention from what was wrong with me to what was missing in my relationship with Jesus, others, and even myself. Ever since I was a little girl, I had a vivid imagination and a highly active and creative thought life, which have served me well as an adult, both personally and professionally. I also find joy in daily life in simple pleasures. I talk to Jesus all day long about everything; it's an intimacy I have come to cherish.

My moment of conviction came quite suddenly and unexpectedly. In that moment I felt this warm, loving presence surround me, and I had this thought: *What did I used to think about?* I felt sad. All my thoughts, creativity, and imaginations had been overtaken by this show, and I realized I missed having my own thoughts and letting my mind wander freely and creatively. That is how I process my inner world void of distractions. I had been tormenting myself with shame and trying to stop watching the show instead of focusing on what was missing in my life. Some people might think, *What's the big deal? It's just a show! So what if you just thought about it too much.*

For me, it became a distraction. The reality was I felt disconnected from my own thoughts and feelings because I was spending my evenings absorbed in the characters' emotions and feelings, partly because my joy comes from intuiting and sharing the emotional experiences of those around me as well as learning why people do the things they do. But these weren't real relationships, and they were taking up more space in my life than real people were. I missed those people.

The shame cuckoo can rear its ugly head whether it is a distraction that becomes a bit obsessive or a debilitating emotion that creates immense pain.

Are you suffering under the heavy weight of the shame cuckoo? I encourage you to read aloud to yourself the voice of conviction statements above and then ask God, *What is missing in my life and in my relationship with you? What beautiful thing do you want to give me in place of this [fill in the blank] that I can't seem to let go of?*

Feeling Our Feelings Helps Us Face Our Cuckoos

Each of our emotions serves a purpose and points us back to our true selves. What a powerful gift that God created us with emotions. When we share our feelings, we share the truth of our experience in that moment. When we do not know how we feel, we are not aware of our boundaries, needs, wants, and desires, and we allow our cuckoo's needs and wants to consume our own. When we fear our feelings, we simultaneously fear our cuckoos because we don't want to be judged, criticized, rejected, blamed, or shamed. Yet we lack the wisdom our emotions provide. Emotional pain helps us avoid or leave hurtful and abusive relationships and situations where a cuckoo is present. When dealt with appropriately, feeling our feelings empowers us to know ourselves and who we are in Christ, void of shame, so we can face our cuckoos confidently.

I use the following letter template in my practice to help my clients get in touch with the feelings they are experiencing because of being in a relationship with a cuckoo. Please write out on a separate sheet of paper and use the below questions as your guide:

Dear [name the cuckoo who has hurt or harmed you],

The purpose of this letter is to share with you the pain I received because of [write down specifically what they did or said that was painful for you]:

As a result of this behavior, I want to share with you how I truly feel:

The effects of the pain I have experienced in our relationship has brought hurt to my life in these ways:

My needs, wants, and desires are the following:

My boundaries for the future include:

Here are the things I love and appreciate about you:

Note that this letter is intended for your healing. You do not have to give this letter to your cuckoo. The purpose is for you to express your feelings by writing them down.

You may also invite Jesus into the experience by praying and making a choice to forgive this person. Forgiveness does not equate to allowing the toxic behaviors to continue or release your cuckoo from taking responsibility for their actions. Forgiveness is a way to release yourself from harboring unresolved pain and anger buried deep within your heart. Unforgiveness can zap your energy, steal your joy, and take a tremendous toll on your body and can lead to grudges, bitterness, and resentment. These can become toxic to your overall health, and they hold the potential to block your emotional and physical healing and God's healing power.

Our emotional health is as important as our mental and physical health. Gaining an awareness and understanding of our emotions by facing our feelings and learning from them instead of fearing them is the true path to healing and the first step to doing something about it. Identifying the root cause of your issues can help you break free so you have more control of your life rather than allowing the cuckoo to control you, making you suffer as a result. An abundant, joyful, meaningful, and more peaceful life awaits you.

Here are some helpful truths to remember:

I don't need to fear and fight my feelings. They will provide me with valuable information.

Emotions are uncomfortable, not dangerous, sinful, or wrong.

I am experiencing feelings that are painful and I am not to blame for them.

My feelings can be channeled into healthy actions that will help me and not hurt me.

Facing my cuckoo may seem impossible right now, but I must avoid being helpless and move forward with courage.

I have more control over my emotions than I realize. They will not overwhelm me, and I can choose to feel them.

My feelings are indicators, not dictators.

I can turn these feelings of being hurt by my cuckoo into my allies rather than my enemies. They can help me find the solution I've been searching for.

I will allow my feelings to provide clarity on what is causing my symptoms and suffering.

This, too, shall pass.

CHAPTER 8

**WHEN YOU
BECOME A
CUCKOO**

***Making Yourself
a Project to Fix***

*It is well to remember from time to time that
nothing that is worth knowing can be taught.*

—OSCAR WILDE

FIX ME! FIX ME!

One of the most toxic relationships we endure is the relationship we have with ourselves. The most common yet subtle cuckoo behavior I witness my clients suffer from is through the defense mechanism of “projectizing,” a term I coined, which is a deeper and more dangerous form of perfectionism.

Projectizing: Making oneself a project that needs to be fixed.

When we make ourselves a project, we disconnect from our true self because we do not know who we are or what we want, need, and feel. We are trying to fix ourselves instead. The defense mechanism of projectizing shows up in obsessively trying to fix ourselves and results in self-hatred and self-attack. Projectizing is rooted in shame. I realize self-hatred might seem like a strong word, but we must be honest with ourselves because if we truly loved ourselves, we wouldn't treat ourselves as a project that needs to be fixed.

The word *self-hatred* is distinct from a common phrase such as “I don't like my body.” Self-hatred for being who you are embodies intense feelings of shame that are deeply entrenched and extremely painful. We are essentially being mean or cruel to ourselves.

Self-hatred takes on the form of projectizing, which is the need to make oneself a project to fix rather than seeing oneself as a person in pain deserving love and compassion. Essentially, you attack yourself for things that are beyond your control, because you intrinsically believe you are flawed.

As mentioned in chapter 5, “What Feeds a Cuckoo?,” strongholds consist of defense mechanisms that are the lies we tell ourselves to avoid pain and block out the truth. Defense mechanisms hold us captive and keep us stuck in a cycle of suffering.

With projectizing we believe the lie that if we fix ourselves, we will be OK. In reality, we are feeding the shame cuckoo.

Jesus commands us to love our neighbors as ourselves, so it's biblical and apparent that we are to love ourselves. How can you love your neighbor if you don't love yourself? You might feel the pressure to fix them also and think you are helping them. Loving yourself means you show compassion, care, listen, and feel.

Imagine a loved one saying to you, "I've been feeling anxious lately and I can't sleep at night. I'm really struggling. I dread waking up in the morning, and I don't know how I'm going to make it through the day. I feel off. This has never happened to me before. I'm usually such a joyful person."

Would you respond, "You need to fix that" and have absolutely no emotion toward that person whatsoever? Would you only entertain an intellectual dialogue with them? I doubt it. Yet that is often how we treat ourselves.

A single woman desiring to be married is told she is too picky and not doing her part, so she feels shame that her single-ness is her fault. Therefore, she is tempted to compromise her values because she falsely believes they are too rigid, and she ends up marrying someone she doesn't truly love. Or she spends an inordinate amount of time on dating websites and exhausts herself dating every man who shows an interest in her when she could be enjoying her life more fully. The reality is that she is single because she has not yet met a man she truly loves. Period. The truth is this: she is a strong woman who sticks to her values, and she is patient, confident, and content within herself.

But before she could receive these truths and begin the healing process, she had to face her pain and her feelings of anger, sadness, and fear that she was avoiding. Weekends were especially painful for her, especially after church on Sundays,

when she heard the fun plans of how a couple of friends were spending the remainder of the day together. She longed for companionship. She was lonely.

Through her counseling sessions she learned there was more to her singleness that was causing her so much suffering. It was that she felt shame about her loneliness and her need to fix her singleness. During her treatment we discovered, at a deeper level, she felt intense regret for past relational mistakes and believed it was her fault that she was single. Therefore, she feared feeling her painful emotions and buried them as a result. This kept her stuck in a continuous cycle of suffering.

Once she was introduced to the truth and allowed herself to experience her anger and sadness surrounding her singleness, she learned not to fear those lonely moments during the weekends. Instead of projectizing her singleness and seeing herself as a broken person who needed to be fixed, she allowed the waves of sadness to pass through her and had compassion for herself and reached out to a friend or God for comfort.

Toward the end of our treatment together, she said, “It’s amazing to me how simple—not easy—it is to sit with my loneliness. Yes, it is painful, but it does pass and I am OK! I’m incredibly grateful we identified the real enemy of projectizing so I no longer have to go through these tormenting and exhausting roller-coaster rides and mental Hula-Hoops trying to figure it all out. Now I can get back to living my life! I believe the right person will come along at the right time. After all, God knows my heart and I trust him, not just with my future husband but with my moments of loneliness.”

All in all, her cuckoo was not the fact that she was single; it was believing it was her fault and therefore exhausting herself to fix it.

At the close of her session, she said, “I have never heard of the defense mechanism of projectizing before. My other therapists have

never used the word with me. This is incredibly eye-opening and life-changing to be able to name this. I've struggled with making myself a project to fix all my life and never knew what it was. What freedom!"

Trying to Remove Your Cuckoo Makes You a Cuckoo!

On their first visit, many clients share with me the reason they are seeking counseling, such as anxiety, depression, and relationship issues. Clients who are unconsciously suffering from projectizing sit tensely on the edge of the sofa, determined to fix themselves. They are highly intelligent, motivated, and successful people. Often they hold back tears. They see feelings as a nuisance or an inconvenience to solving their problems.

They want tools so they can be fixed. They are impatient and in a hurry to fix the problem. They want things to go back to the way they were before they were struggling so they can be "happy or normal again." They do not see the connection between their suffering and frantically wanting to fix themselves. They are unaware of past and present underlying pains in their life and how these are affecting their current issues.

The cuckoo becomes you because you develop an insatiable need to make yourself better. This need, however, is never satisfied, because you will never have a pain-free or problem-free life. Your need to fix yourself every time a problem arises will overwhelm you, consuming your emotional energy and thought life. Instead of enjoying a life of purpose, fixing yourself becomes your purpose.

These clients desperately want to know things and how to be fixed at the cost of being known as a person. This tendency to fix oneself is a cuckoo in and of itself. Freedom from their issues entails doing the necessary work by facing the reality of their deep-seated pain so healing can take place. Many people unknowingly live out this cuckoo compulsion to fix themselves for most of their life.

We discussed the fear cuckoo in chapter 6 and found that control is rooted in fear, and one way control can show up is through an obsessive need to know. This toxic thinking pattern becomes an illness of introspection because we are scrutinizing ourselves, and we get stuck in paralysis by analysis. The more people try to understand and analyze themselves, the farther away the answer is and the more anxious they become.

Clients who struggle with projectizing always ask, “How do I fix this?” or “Why do I do this?” They say, “I just want to know why, so I can fix it.” Understanding why we do the things we do is important; however, in these cases, the healing process it takes to get there is hijacked by their need to know right away. As previously stated, *knowledge in and of itself does not bring freedom*. Healing begins with facing your pain. Your pain contains truth, and the truth will set you free.

Once my clients are aware they are projectizing, they ask, “So how can I fix that?” We have a good laugh because they realize they are making their defense mechanism of fixing themselves a project to fix too! Their laughing shows progress because they are learning all the ways they try to projectize themselves every time a new problem emerges.

The following are signs of projectizing leading to suffering:

- Regretting the past or fearing the future
- Rooted in shame: “It must be my fault” and “I must have done something wrong”
- Mental torment and obsessively overthinking
- *Why* questions driven by desperation to solve the issue
- What-if statements driven by anxiety
- Isolating and oppressive
- Where Satan resides and feeds us lies
- Toxic symptoms (for example, depression, anxiety, stress, addictive behaviors) manifest and create suffering



The following are signs of overcoming projectizing, which lead to freedom:

- Accept reality: operate in the present moment
- Rooted in self-compassion
- Share your story: you have a capacity to receive comfort from others and you know you are not alone
- Experience painful emotions instead of avoiding them.
- Embrace your authentic self so healing can occur
- Ability to receive God's truth to dispel the lies
- Confidence to cope with challenging circumstances and difficult relationships in life
- Freedom from suffering



What my clients are experiencing alongside their projectizing defense is fear. They are afraid of feeling their pain and not having an answer so the pain goes away. What they do not realize is that making themselves a project to fix *is* causing them tremendous pain.

Their issues appear so big and scary because they feel this responsibility to fix it, which feels lonely and impossible to heal on their own. They seek to control by projectizing themselves and removing their heart and emotions from the equation.

For that reason, they want to have an intellectual conversation in therapy. They love homework and they want tools. I work with

them so they understand what projectizing is and how the way they are thinking is complicated and chaotic because they are attacking themselves.

Projectizing deepens our suffering from already difficult situations and relationships. We want to fix it instead of facing it and feeling it. Those struggling with making themselves a project to fix feel a tremendous burden of what to do with the pain itself. The burden of responsibility to fix their pain is what they are avoiding, because it is mentally tormenting and isolating—as cuckoos are. This is due to the thought life and emotional energy needed for finding a reason why and then fixing it, alone.

I've discovered this defense of projectizing occurs beyond our conscious awareness and often develops in childhood, whether it involves rejection, abuse, neglect, or finding no validation or comfort in pain from our caregivers. As a result, we develop an unconscious vow that all pain is our fault. We believe at some very deep level we must have done something wrong, which is why making ourselves a project to fix is ultimately rooted in shame.

Many clients come to me after receiving no help or relief from previous counseling experiences. They have gained a plethora of tools but continue to remain stuck. Unfortunately, many therapists do not realize there is a strong defense of projectizing that is operating beneath the surface of the client's presenting problems, such as depression and anxiety.

When I Became a Cuckoo

I went through a season where I experienced migraines. I was confused why I had them because everything else in my life felt normal and fine.

I reached out to my doctor, who prescribed medication for my migraines. The migraines = always occurred in the early morning, so after I took the meds, they were gone after a couple of hours of

lying in bed. Then I could go into the office to counsel. This pattern happened on and off for about eight months. I spent an inordinate amount of time, money, emotional energy, and thinking trying to figure out why and how I had developed these migraines.

I conducted a great deal of research on migraines. As a result, I scheduled an appointment with my primary care physician, met with a neurologist, did a sleep study, had an MRI, met with my dentist, saw an orthodontist, and started seeing a chiropractor to figure out the cause of my migraines. All of my results came back as normal. I was completely fine, and, in fact, very healthy, but I was frustrated.

There must be a reason! I was scared. I feared the migraines would never go away or that eventually they would worsen and affect my counseling practice and my life. What if my migraines worsened so I couldn't meet with clients? What if I couldn't pay my bills? In reality, this never was the case; it was my anxiety speaking. In addition to the anxiety, I felt ashamed. Somehow I falsely believed these migraines were my fault, so I had to fix them and find a reason. I was embarrassed to tell people I had them because I felt I had done something wrong. I was suffering.

A couple of months later, I was at church and bumped into one of the pastors there. She asked how I was doing and I explained I was having a problem with migraines. She sat me down and said, "Let's pray about this and see what Father God has to say."

As she prayed over me, she saw a vision of God turning on a faucet, which represented my emotions, which I had turned off while I was experiencing the migraines. That resonated deeply with me, and I told her, with tears streaming down my cheek, that I was angry with myself for having migraines. Sounds silly, but that is what I was feeling.

She said, "I feel you need to ask your body for forgiveness." That was the last thing I expected her to say! It felt odd and

awkward, but I trusted her. She led me through a prayer, and I asked my body for forgiveness for being so mean and cruel to it, for judging it, punishing it, and being angry with it for the pain I was experiencing and for trying to control it. My migraines ceased completely and I've never had one since!

After that miraculous day, I developed an intense sadness. As I sat with that emotion and processed it, I realized it was associated with how I treated myself during the migraine months. I grieved over the way I treated myself. I was operating in the defense of projectizing—attacking myself. This shame manifested in expending so much time and energy trying to find a reason for my migraines instead of being compassionate and loving during a painful time in my life.

I created unnecessary suffering by being cruel and mean to myself. I judged myself for having migraines. I treated my body as if it was a machine or a robot that wasn't working properly and I wanted to fix it. Beneath the surface I was sad. Instead of feeling my sadness, I developed anxiety, which fueled my need to know why, because if I knew why, I could stop the pain. But instead of stopping the pain of my migraines, I wanted to stop the shame of believing they were my fault, that I had done something wrong, and I feared they would never go away.

I realize now, looking back at all my research, doctor appointments, time, and money, that everything was being fueled by fear in an attempt to control my pain. Control is always rooted in fear, and I was operating under a fear of pain. For me, pain equated to shame. I had failed. And it was my fault.

Additionally, for me the pain equated to feeling responsible. I felt a heavy, oppressive, mentally tormenting, and exhausting burden to fix it. It was isolating and lonely. So pain in this case created much anxiety for me due to this false pressure I was placing on myself.

For those reasons, it was not the actual pain of the migraine that was the issue; it was both the shame and the burden of trying to fix it that was the issue (the cuckoo) and the real source of my pain.

I developed this mindset due to my painful childhood; it was an all-too-familiar pattern that was occurring unconsciously beneath the surface of my migraines. It was not due to having unhealed issues; it was simply an old pattern trying to subtly manifest itself in a new way. Anytime I experienced emotional or physical abuse as a child, I was ashamed because I was told I did something wrong, even though I didn't, or I wasn't told anything at all and was punished for no logical reason.

I learned a valuable truth through this experience about my fear of pain and how it was causing me tremendous, unnecessary suffering. Being cut off from my emotions when I experienced pain that I did not understand was my pattern. This pattern caused me to ignore and dismiss my body, not have compassion on myself but rather try to force it to stop hurting.

Releasing my sadness was healing and freeing for me because it was a moment of beautiful conviction. Experiencing the reality of my emotion of sadness opened the door for truth to enter, to be comforted by God, and to hear him speak to my heart. *I never wanted to be mean or cruel to myself again when I was truly hurting. Instead of demanding an answer or a reason, I will choose love rather than making myself a project to fix, and I will nurture myself, believing the truth that the problem is not my fault.*

The most interesting truth of all was recognizing the reality that was actually occurring during those months of migraines. When I felt a migraine coming on, I would take my medication and rest in bed, and within a couple of hours it was gone and I was quickly back on my feet. All of the fears and what-if statements of not being able to counsel my clients or pay my bills one day

because I feared the migraines would never go away was not my reality.

The truth that led to my freedom was that I was OK and my life was not disrupted. The suffering I put myself through was the result of:

- Blocking out my reality and my emotional pain via the defense of projectizing.
- I lacked compassion and couldn't give myself permission to have some type of physical pain that most of the population has experienced at some point in their life.
- I was no exception and it was not my fault.

Essentially, my need to know why and to fix my migraines became a cuckoo that consumed my thought life, exhausted me emotionally, stole my joy and peace, and created shame.

It was this experience that led me to create the term *projectizing* as a defense mechanism in treating my clients so I could put a name to what was creating so much suffering for so many. The defense of projectizing is the most common yet most deceptive of all the defense mechanisms I witness in counseling. We have enough cuckoos in our life to deal with already; let's not become our own cuckoo!