



RECLAIM

BY CASAUNDRAS HOPE BAKER

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This book is not a substitute for therapy, medical care, or professional mental health services. The practices and reflections offered are intended for personal exploration and educational purposes only.

Dedicated to my children, who gave me courage when I needed it most. And to my husband
Chris, who has been my Number One fan since the day we met.

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Introduction:

This Is Not Just a Self-Help Book

If you're reading this, chances are you've already tried to fix yourself.

You've read the books. You've gone to therapy. You've analyzed your patterns.

You may even be able to explain, with startling clarity, why you are the way you are. And yet ... something still isn't moving.

Maybe it shows up as anxiety that hums beneath your skin like a live wire, never quite shutting off. Maybe as numbness. Maybe as sexual dysfunction. Or emotional shutdown that leaves you watching your own life from behind glass. Or a body that never fully relaxes. Or maybe it's quieter than that, maybe a sense that you're living from the neck up, managing and coping and surviving, but not actually inhabiting your life.

Going through the motions.

Performing competence.

Waiting to feel something real.

If that's you, I want to say this clearly from the start: You are not broken. You are not failing at healing. And you are not doing it wrong. It's just that you have a nervous system that learned, at some point, that survival required adaptation.

It learned how to brace against the next blow, how to shut down before the pain could reach you, how to stay alert when sleep should have come, or how to disappear entirely while remaining physically present.

Your body became brilliant at keeping you alive.

This book isn't about becoming a better version of yourself. It isn't about bypassing pain with positivity or affirmations that feel hollow in your mouth.

This book is about coming back into your body through the door of your sexuality. Slowly. Honestly. With respect for everything it's carried you through.

I learned this the hard way.

A little background about me, your guide. I didn't arrive at this work because I had it all figured out. I arrived here because what I was doing wasn't working. Because I had tried everything else. Because I was running out of ways to survive.

I was raised in a world where my body was never truly mine. As a Jehovah's Witness, I learned early that obedience mattered more than autonomy, that purity was paramount, and that questioning authority, especially as a girl, was dangerous.

My voice didn't belong to me. My choices didn't belong to me. My body certainly didn't belong to me.

I was pulled out of school and homeschooled, isolated from peers and from any real access to education that might have shown me another way.

When my mother went back to work, I became the caretaker in the house, cooking, cleaning, raising my baby sister while trying to teach myself from outdated textbooks. I was only eleven.

I was intelligent, but the isolation and sexism woven into my upbringing ensured I never really knew it. I learned to make myself small. Useful. Quiet.

When I was thirteen, a twenty-six-year-old neighbor gave me a ride. I thought I was going on a ride so I could smoke the cigarettes he bought me until he unzipped and pushed my head into his lap. I was in shock, disgusted, and scared all at the same time. I would never be the same after that. I started smoking to cope with the pain in my body that had no name. The pain I didn't understand. The violation that felt numb and sharp at the same time.

There was no one to talk to. My father was consumed with his dream of owning a business, even though he was more dreamer than businessman. Meanwhile, my mother worked to keep the family afloat. This caused so many fights between my parents. My mother yelled at him, and us, night after night. So I kept it to myself.

I started rebelling in every way I could: wearing clothing that was not Jehovah's Witness-approved, talking to worldly people, and listening to hard rock music. Then one day my dad smelled the

cigarette smoke in the bathroom at his hardware store. It couldn't be blamed on a customer or the other two guys working there because we had just closed. He was pissed. He trashed my room when we got home looking for my "stash." I was ready to explode. So I ran away.

After one night sleeping in a friend's tent, I was ready to come home. My parents were so afraid I'd run away again, they loosened their grip. And then, I met a boy.

He was older, persistent, certain of what he wanted. He pressured me into sex the first day I met him, and I caved. Not because I wanted to, but because I didn't know how to say no.

My religious conditioning told me that losing my virginity meant I was now bound to him, that I was ruined for anyone else. So when he proposed, I said yes.

I was sixteen in 1996, the year I got married. Then pregnant before my seventeenth birthday.

We moved eight hundred miles away—from Florida to Virginia, away from my family, away from any support system I had. Control arrived slowly, like water rising. Then it became emotional abuse. Isolation. The kind of manipulation that makes you question your own reality.

Then I got pregnant again. In an attempt to feel something, anything, I cheated. And I got pregnant again. That's when I learned my first lesson about shame.

I would later learn that those times he held me down to take what he wanted from my body, it was rape, despite him being my husband.

By the time I was barely out of my teens, I had three babies and a marriage full of hate, fear, and resentment. I was drowning in a life I never chose, in a body that felt like a cage.

Eventually, I left. I moved back to Florida with my daughters, but by then everything had fractured. My parents had divorced. Divorce is forbidden in the Bible, and as a result, they were disfellowshipped. The whole family was treated like we were disfellowshipped. We were cast out of the only community we'd ever known, shunned by everyone we'd grown up with.

I was completely on my own. My ex-husband refused to pay child support. He terrorized me, showing up unannounced at my door, calling relentlessly at all hours, making sure I never felt safe, never felt like I could breathe.

I had no idea how to survive as a single mother with three small children and no resources. No safety net. No Plan B. So I did what I had to do.

I became a stripper.

I learned to perform desire I didn't feel, to move my body like it was separate from me, to smile while men looked through me. When that wasn't enough to keep us fed and housed, when the rent was due and the electricity was about to be shut off, I occasionally prostituted.

I drank to numb the shame that lived in my throat. The fear that never left my shoulders. The bone-deep exhaustion of being in a body that performed but never felt safe.

I found myself in relationships that mirrored the chaos I had learned to tolerate—men who controlled, who took, who kept me small and convinced me I deserved it.

This pattern went on for years. A decade of surviving, not living. My drinking habit turned into addiction before my kids hit their teens. I hit rock bottom more than once. I tried medications that made me feel like a ghost. I went through detox twice, shaking and vomiting and promising myself this time would be different. I spent time in two different state-run treatment centers, surrounded by women whose stories sounded too much like mine. Nothing stuck.

Until it did.

In 2014, I stood at a crossroads: Continue down this path and die, or get sober and live. I chose to live.

I thought sobriety would bring relief, clarity, peace. What it brought instead was awareness of my body: fully awake for the first time in years, no longer numbed by alcohol, holding years of grief, rage, shame, and fear that I had never learned how to feel safely.

Sobriety didn't bring peace at first. It brought shaking hands. Sleepless nights. Intrusive memories that arrived without warning. A mind that replayed every regret, every moment of humiliation, on an endless loop.

I didn't have wealthy parents to fall back on. After fourteen years of single parenting, I was broke. Worse than broke, I was homeless.

My daughters went to live with their father so I could focus on getting better, a decision that tore me apart but felt like the only option.

A year into my sobriety, they told me something that shattered me. Their father had been abusing them—physically, emotionally, sexually—while I was in treatment trying to save my own life.

While I was learning to stay sober, they were learning to survive him.

That truth could have destroyed me. My heart broke in ways I never knew possible.

I wanted to escape. I wanted to disappear. Instead, it became the reason I committed to deep, relentless healing. Not just for me. For them.

For the generations that would come after.

I threw myself into every healing modality I could find. Some of it was crap, and some was euphoria-inducing. Kept what worked, dropped the rest. Some of what worked:

AA meetings where I learned humility, honesty, and how to speak my truth out loud.

Somatic therapy to learn that healing happens in the body, not just the mind. I learned how to sit in discomfort and remind myself I'm safe.

I discovered just how shut down I was, emotionally and sexually. This discovery led me to study tantra, an ancient practice designed to help me feel more connected to myself and others. I was determined to understand the mechanics of pleasure, shame, and trauma. Pleasure, something I knew how to give expertly but something I had no idea how to receive.

I trained with a veteran dominatrix, learning how to hold space for power, desire, and the parts of myself I'd been taught to exile. How to say yes and mean it. How to say no and hold the boundary.

I learned how to sit with rage without letting it consume me.

How to feel grief without drowning in it.

How to reclaim desire without shame.

Slowly, painfully, imperfectly, I came back to myself.

I'm still sober and I have relationships with my three daughters that I once believed were impossible. Real relationships, where we can speak honestly, where repair is possible, where love isn't conditional.

I have seven grandchildren who know a version of me I didn't know existed, a grandmother who is present, embodied, safe.

I met my husband in 2020, a man I can be fully present with, fully embodied with, fully myself with. Not performing. Not managing. Just being.

And I built a practice guiding others through the same terrain I once thought would kill me.

This book is the map I wish I'd had. Not to bypass the journey, you can't.

But to help you trust that your body knows the way home.

The Arc of This Work

The process you're stepping into unfolds in phases, each one building on the last.

These phases exist because expression without safety overwhelms, and insight without embodiment doesn't last.

These phases will guide you into:

- Feeling safer in your own skin as years of held emotions come to the surface.
- Understanding your triggers and inner parts.
- Reclaiming boundaries, desire, and agency.
- Integrating shadow without shame.
- Developing an internal compass rooted in your own values—not survival strategies.
- Returning to intimacy, sexuality, and power from a place of choice rather than compulsion.

How to Read This Book

I don't recommend rushing. Some chapters may land gently while others may stir something you didn't expect.

If your body tightens, pause. If you feel emotional, slow down. If something resonates deeply, sit with it.

You don't need to do every practice. You don't need to agree with everything I say. You don't need to get it "right."

What matters is that you stay in relationship with your body, your sensations, your truth. This book is an invitation.

An invitation to stop overriding yourself.

To stop managing symptoms.

To stop asking, "What's wrong with me?"

And instead begin asking:

What did my body learn?

What has it been carrying?

What does it need now?

Phase 1: REGULATE

Learning to Feel Safe in Your Body

If you've ever been told to "just relax" and felt an almost irrational surge of frustration or shame, there is nothing wrong with you.

Your body isn't failing you. It's responding exactly as it learned to.

Why 'Just Relax' Never Worked

If relaxation were a choice, you would have chosen it already.

For a long time, my nervous system lived on high alert. Hyper vigilance wasn't something I did, it was who I was. My body scanned for danger before my mind had time to catch up. I braced for impact even in calm rooms, with people who loved me. Rest wasn't restorative. It was unfamiliar.

I tried to regulate the only ways I knew how.

Alcohol helped me shut off. Sex helped me feel something when I was numb, or escape when I was overwhelmed. Neither actually worked, because both were attempts to override my nervous system instead of listening to it.

So when people said, "Just relax," it felt impossible. Like being told to breathe underwater. My body didn't know how. Not because it was broken, but because it had learned that being alert was safer than being open.

This is the first thing I want you to understand as you read this:

Relaxation is not a mindset, safety is not positive thinking, and regulation is not willpower. Regulation is a felt experience in the body. And until your body feels safe, no amount of insight, discipline, or self-improvement will make it soften.

Before you can feel pleasure without tension ... before intimacy stops feeling like pressure ... before emotions move instead of flooding or disappearing ... your body has to learn one thing first:

It is safe to be here.

Your Nervous System Is Not the Problem

I want to slow us down here, because this is where many people turn against themselves. Your nervous system is not your enemy. It has been protecting you, often brilliantly, based on what it learned about the world.

Your nervous system doesn't care how successful you are, how spiritual you are, or how badly you want to be present. It asks one question, over and over:

Am I safe right now?

And it answers that question using memory, much of it stored outside of conscious thought.

So when you experience anxiety, sexual dysfunction, numbness, shutdown, or an inability to stay present, your body is not malfunctioning.

It is remembering.

It remembers moments where vulnerability cost you something. Moments where boundaries were crossed. Moments where being open led to betrayal, shame, rejection, and hurt.

Your symptoms are not random.

They are patterned responses shaped by experience. Once you see this, something shifts.

Instead of asking, *What's wrong with me?* you begin asking, *What did my body learn?*

The Three States You'll Learn to Recognize

You don't need to memorize *poly vagal nervous system theory* or learn new language to "get this right." What actually matters is learning to recognize where you are, moment to moment. Your body is always giving you information. This work is about learning how to listen.

Think of these states as weather patterns inside you. They change. They pass. And none of them means something is wrong with you. Once you can recognize the weather predictions inside you, you can stop blaming yourself for how you feel. Instead, you start responding with care, in the same that way we don't blame the rain for raining, we just bring our umbrella.

These three states are autonomic nervous system states. Your nervous system is always working, with or without your permission. These three states are the primary ways your system organizes energy, attention, and sensation. They are not good or bad. They are each an intelligent response to your surroundings. The goal is not to be in only one state forever, but to recognize where you are and understand what your body is telling you.

Ventral Vagal—Safe & Present

This is what regulation feels like.

When you're in this state, your body experiences enough safety to stay open. You're here. You are not bracing, collapsing or trying to manage the moment. You're simply present.

When you're in ventral vagal, you may notice:

- Your breath moves naturally, without effort.
- Your body feels grounded and alive.
- Eye contact feels possible instead of threatening.
- Pleasure feels accessible rather than pressured.
- Emotions move through you without overwhelming you.

This is the state where connection happens. Where intimacy feels mutual instead of effortful.

Where healing happens because your body is receptive. In this state, you don't have to force openness. It emerges on its own.

Sympathetic—Fight or Flight

This is activation. Your body senses danger, even if your mind can't name what the danger is.

In this state, your system is preparing you to act, perform, protect, or escape. It's not wrong. It's responsive. But it's not a state where deep connection can unfold.

You might notice:

- Your thoughts are racing or looping.

- You feel tightness in your chest, jaw, or shoulders.
- Your breath is shallow or held.
- You experience a feeling of urgency, pressure, or intensity.

In intimacy, if our sympathetic nervous system is activated, this often shows up as performance anxiety. Rushing. Trying to do things “right.” Hyper-focusing on your partner’s reactions. Feeling like you’re being evaluated instead of met. The body isn’t available for pleasure here, it’s busy scanning for threat.

Dorsal Vagal—Shutdown

When activation doesn’t feel survivable, the body pulls energy inward. This is not weakness. It’s protection.

Instead of mobilizing, the system conserves. It disconnects. It goes quiet.

This can feel like:

- Numbness or emptiness
- Mental fog or dissociation
- Disconnection from sensation or emotion
- Going through the motions without presence

Many people mistake this for calm. It isn’t. It’s safety through absence. And for those who learned early that intensity, closeness, or conflict was too much, this state can feel familiar, even normal.

If you recognize yourself here, pause for a moment. Nothing about this is a personal failure. Your body learned a strategy that helped you survive. This work is about gently rebuilding enough safety, so your system doesn’t have to disappear to protect you.

Learning to recognize these states is the beginning of regulation. Not changing or judging them. Just noticing. From there, your body can begin to trust that you’re paying attention, and that’s where real change begins.

You’ll see I often refer to our nervous system as “regulated” and “dysregulated.” Let’s define what these terms mean.

A regulated nervous system can respond to life without being hijacked by it. When you are regulated, your body feels safe even when things are imperfect, emotional, or unclear. You can stay present, still think clearly, and feel your emotions without being overwhelmed.

Regulation doesn't mean being calm all the time. It means you can stay flexible to move into stress, excitement, or intensity, and return to balance without getting stuck.

A dysregulated nervous system is stuck in survival mode. You are responding to stress and overwhelm as a threat, even when there is no real danger. Dysregulation can look like over-activation (anxiety, anger, or urgency) or even under-activation (shutdown, dissociation, exhaustion). Either way, the body struggles or just can't return to balance very well.

What Dysregulation Quietly Takes from Us

For a long time, I thought I was relaxing when I drank. That's the story I told myself. It looked like unwinding, like taking the edge off ... until it looked like water bottles filled with vodka, thinking know one would know. But when I look back now, I can see something more honest. I wasn't relaxing. I was dissociating. I wasn't settling into myself, I was leaving. My body wasn't at ease. It was offline.

There was a similar pattern in how I approached sex. I used it to escape, or to feel something through the numbness. To override the quiet deadness that lived just under the surface. But even when my body was engaged, I wasn't really there. I was performing closeness without presence. I was going through the motions of intimacy while staying safely out of reach.

This is the quiet cost of living dysregulated. It doesn't always look dramatic. Often, it looks functional. Responsible. Normal from the outside. But inside, something essential is missing.

Pleasure becomes muted or unreliable. Sometimes it's there, sometimes it disappears without explanation. Sexual function comes and goes because safety is inconsistent. Anxiety hums in the background, or exhaustion settles in the bones, even when nothing is "wrong." Partners feel close and far at the same time. And underneath it all, shame grows quietly because when we don't understand what's happening, we assume it must be us.

Many people internalize this as inadequacy as something wrong with their desire, their responsiveness, their capacity for intimacy or joy. These are not character flaws. They are nervous system strategies. Intelligent ones. Adaptations that once made sense in the context of your life.

If you recognize what I'm saying, you're not alone, and you're not broken. Your body found ways to survive, to cope, to get through. This work is not about undoing you. It's about gently helping your system remember what it feels like to be here again, present, connected, and alive in your own body.

Regulation Is About Capacity, not Control

If there's one misconception I want to dismantle, it's this: Regulation is not about forcing yourself to calm down.

It's about increasing your capacity to stay present with what you feel. If you've lived in survival mode for years, safety itself can feel unfamiliar. Even moments of calm can feel edgy or wrong. So we rebuild slowly.

Not by pushing.

Not by bypassing.

But by teaching your body, through experience, that it can come back.

Awareness: Learning Your Signals

Start by noticing.

What does anxiety feel like in your body?

Where does tension collect and linger?

What does shutdown feel like when it arrives?

And just as importantly, when do you feel even slightly okay?

You're not trying to fix anything yet. You're simply learning to recognize your signals. This is about building a relationship with your body that no one ever taught you to have. It's like learning what all the flashing lights on your dashboard are trying to tell you so you can respond before something breaks down.

Grounding: Coming Back Here

Grounding is the act of coming back into your body and into the present moment. It's the difference between living inside your thoughts and actually inhabiting yourself. When you're grounded, your breath deepens, your nervous system softens, and your awareness drops out of the future and the past, and into what's happening right now. You're no longer reacting from fear, memory, or habit—you're responding from stability. Grounding isn't something you force or perform; it's something you allow by slowing down enough to feel your feet on the floor, the weight of your body, the rhythm of your breath. From this place, clarity becomes possible. Before insight, healing or change, there must be safety and grounding.

Try:

- Inhale deep into your chest and imagine exhaling down your body and into the earth.
- Naming what you can see, hear, and touch.
- Feeling your feet touch the floor.
- Running cool water over your wrists.

Breath: Speaking Your Body's Language

Your breath is a direct line to your nervous system. You don't have to think your way into calm or force your body to relax; your breath already knows how to speak that language. When your breathing is shallow or held, your nervous system reads danger. When your breath slows, deepens, and moves fully through your body, your system receives a signal of safety. This is why even a few conscious breaths can shift how you feel. You're not changing your thoughts; you're changing the message your body is receiving. Over time, learning to work with your breath becomes less about control and more about communication, listening to what your body needs and responding in real time.

Try this:

- Place one hand on your belly, one on your chest.
- Inhale through the nose for a count of four.
- Pause for a count of four.

- Exhale through the mouth for a count of six. A longer exhale tells your body: We're not in danger.

Pacing: Small Doses Build Trust

You don't need to dive into discomfort or push yourself to quickly get through any phase of healing. Healing doesn't ask for overwhelm, it asks for honesty and patience. Instead, you touch the edge of discomfort lightly, just enough to notice it, and then you return to what feels safe or stabilizing. You go back and forth. Contact, then rest. Sensation, then safety.

This rhythm is how trust is built inside the body. Each time you approach something difficult without forcing it, your nervous system learns that you are listening. Capacity doesn't grow through endurance; it grows through repetition that respects your limits. Over time, what once felt intolerable becomes workable, not because you pushed harder, but because you learned how to pace yourself.

Bringing Regulation into Intimacy

For many people, intimacy has slowly turned into a performance instead of a meeting. Somewhere along the way, sex stopped being about connection and started being about doing it right, lasting long enough, responding the right way, not disappointing, not being too much or not enough. When that happens, the body experiences intimacy not as pleasure, but as pressure.

For a lot of people, the nervous system quietly associates sex with threat. Not because intimacy is inherently unsafe, but because it's loaded with expectations and unspoken fears—fear of failure, fear of rejection, fear of shame. The body doesn't care how much we want to feel relaxed or connected. It responds to what it has learned. And if intimacy has repeatedly felt tense, rushed, or evaluative, the body prepares for impact instead of opening for connection.

This is where my work begins, not by fixing the body, but by listening to it. Regulation in intimacy doesn't look like techniques or performance hacks. It looks like slowing down. Noticing sensation. Allowing pauses. Letting pleasure arrive without chasing it. It's learning how to stay present without trying to control the outcome.

I once worked with a client who came to me with severe sexual dysfunction. The moment intimacy began, their body would go into overdrive, heart racing, breath shallow, muscles tight. Their system wasn't broken. It was protecting them. So we removed all goals. No performance. No outcome. No expectation of arousal or response.

We focused only on breath, sensation, and presence. On staying with what was happening instead of trying to make something happen. Over time, their body learned something new: It was safe to stay. And once safety was restored, function returned on its own, without force, without pressure, without being chased.

This is the core of my work: helping the body relearn safety in connection, so intimacy can become a meeting again, a place where you're allowed to arrive exactly as you are.

A Simple Daily Practice

You don't need an hour.

Ten minutes is enough. What matters isn't duration, it's consistency and sincerity.

In the morning, before you even get out of bed, take three slow breaths. Let them be unforced. As you inhale, feel your body where it meets the mattress. As you exhale, let yourself arrive. Then set one simple intention, not as a demand, but as a direction: Today, I will practice feeling safe in my body.

During the day, return to yourself in brief moments. You don't have to stop what you're doing. Just check in. Where am I right now? Notice your posture, your jaw, your breath. Take one slow inhale and one slow exhale. That's enough to remind your nervous system you're still here.

In the evening, offer yourself a gentle body scan. Move your attention slowly from one area to the next. Notice where there's tension. Notice where there's ease. You don't need to change anything. Just breathe and let your body know it's allowed to rest.

These small moments add up. This is how safety is practiced, not in big gestures, but in quiet, repeated returns to yourself.

The Truth About Regulation

You will lose regulation and that doesn't mean you're failing. We are not meant to be regulated all the time. The practice is not about staying regulated forever. It's about learning to return, without judgment. Again and again. The easier the path is back to regulation, the more peace we can experience.

This is the foundation of everything that follows. Not fixing yourself. But learning, slowly and honestly, that it is safe to be here.

One breath at a time.

Phase 2: EXPRESS

Release What You've Been Holding

If you feel like there is something inside you, pressure, anger, grief, shame, that never quite goes away, you're not imagining it.

Your body has been holding it.

And it has been holding it for a very good reason. This phase is not about becoming emotional. It's not about losing control or reliving the past for the sake of it. It's about letting your body finish what it never got the chance to complete.

The Body Keeps the Score (and It Always Has)

When I went to treatment for alcoholism, my children went to live with their father.

At the time, I believed I was doing the right thing. I was finally getting sober. I had structure. I had support. For the first time in a long time, I was tending to my body instead of abandoning it. I remember feeling proud, proud that I was still standing, proud that I was choosing life, proud that I was surviving something that had almost taken me out.

What I couldn't see yet, what my system wasn't ready to hold, was that survival sometimes comes with blind spots. While I was focused on staying alive, my children were paying a cost.

They didn't tell me at first. Not because they didn't trust me, but because they were trying to protect me. They knew how fragile early sobriety can be. They didn't want to destabilize me. They didn't want to be the reason I fell apart again. So they carried it quietly.

But home life with their father was abusive. The abuse began the moment he believed I was no longer a factor. The moment he thought I was gone for good. That I wouldn't recover. That I wouldn't come back.

I was over a year sober when they finally told me.

Something inside me broke open.

What came through my body wasn't a single emotion. It was a surge. A flood. Anger, yes, but also grief, terror, rage, and betrayal all at once. It didn't move in a clean or linear way. It moved like a wave that had been building for decades, gathering force beneath the surface, waiting for the moment it was finally allowed to crash.

The unhealed wounds inside of me felt like they all lit on fire at the same time. My own sexual abuse. Every boundary that had ever been crossed. Every moment I had frozen, dissociated, endured. And now those same violations had touched my children. This magnified every single stuffed emotion to an unimaginable size.

My body didn't think this reaction.

It remembered.

This is what people mean when they say the body keeps the score. It isn't just poetic language or a metaphor. It's physiological reality. Your nervous system does not forget what your conscious mind had to set aside in order to survive.

Your body has been storing what couldn't be safely processed at the time.

Grief settles into the chest, heavy and unspoken.

Rage tightens the jaw, the shoulders, the fists, ready to strike or defend.

Fear grips the belly, hollowing it out or clenching it closed.

Shame curls inward around the pelvis, pulling life force away from sensation and connection.

These experiences don't resolve because time passes. They wait. Quietly. Patiently. Until something touches the same thread.

And when it does, the response can feel enormous, out of proportion, sudden, uncontrollable. But it isn't random. It's accumulated. It's layered. It's the body saying, This mattered. This was too much. This was never resolved.

When we don't understand this, we judge ourselves for our reactions. We tell ourselves we're overreacting, broken, unstable. But what's actually happening is coherence, the past and present finally lining up in the nervous system.

This is somatic memory.

This is survival completing its unfinished sentences.

And learning to work with the body means learning how to slow down enough to hear the messages it's been holding all along.

Why Insight Alone Isn't Enough

For a long time, I believed that if I could just understand my trauma, I could heal it.

I went to therapy, read the books, and analyzed my patterns.

And all of that helped, up to a point.

But something stayed lodged in my body.

You can talk about your pain for years and still feel it sitting in your chest.

You can logically know that your shame doesn't make sense and still feel it burn in your gut.

That's because trauma does not live primarily in thought.

It lives in sensation.

In muscle tone.

In breath patterns.

In the nervous system.

When emotions weren't allowed to fully move at the time they happened—when it wasn't safe to cry, yell, push away, or collapse—those responses got interrupted.

Expression work is about completing those cycles by giving the body permission to do what it couldn't then.

Where Emotions Tend to Live in the Body

As you read this, I want to invite you to do something simple. Don't analyze. Don't diagnose yourself. Just notice what resonates. Let your body respond before your mind jumps in. Over the years of somatic work, I've seen the same patterns show up again and again, not as rigid rules, but as familiar places where emotion tends to settle when it doesn't have somewhere else to go.

The Chest and Heart

Grief. Sadness. Longing. Heartbreak.

That heavy, tight feeling in your chest when you're sad isn't metaphorical. It's muscular. It's breath being held back. It's the body bracing around something that mattered deeply. When loss or longing couldn't be expressed fully, the chest often learns to carry it quietly.

The Throat

Swallowed words. Silenced truth. Unexpressed anger.

This is where the things you didn't say tend to live. The moments you were told not to make a scene, not to talk back, not to be so sensitive, not to feel so much. Over time, the throat learns to constrict, to hold everything in until speaking feels risky or exhausting.

The Jaw and Teeth

Rage. Aggression. The urge to bite, tear, or defend.

Clenching here is incredibly common, especially for men who were taught that anger was dangerous or unacceptable unless it came out in controlled ways. The jaw becomes the place where fight energy goes when it isn't allowed to move outward.

The Shoulders and Neck

Responsibility. Burden. Chronic stress.

This is where "carrying the weight of the world" shows up physically. So many people live with their shoulders slightly raised, their neck tight, as if they're bracing for what's coming next. It's the posture of someone who learned early that they had to hold everything together.

The Belly and Solar Plexus

Fear. Anxiety. Powerlessness.

That gut-level dread isn't imagination. It's stored terror. The tightening, the nausea, the sense that something bad is about to happen—these are old survival signals that never got a chance to resolve.

The Pelvis and Genitals

Shame. Sexual trauma. Guilt.

This is often where pleasure gets blocked because it learned to protect. When boundaries were crossed or desire felt unsafe, the pelvis learned to go quiet. Numbness here is not a failure; it's a strategy.

The Hands and Fists

A frozen fight response.

The impulse to push away, strike, or defend that never got to complete. When action wasn't possible or allowed, the hands often hold that unfinished movement, clenched or restless without knowing why.

Nothing here is wrong.

None of this means something is wrong with you. These are maps, ways your body learned to hold what couldn't be safely expressed at the time. And once you can see the map, you can begin to move through expression with care instead of judgment.

Expression Is Medicine, not Drama

Expression work is not about forcing emotion or creating catharsis on demand. It's about creating conditions where your body feels safe enough to release what it's been holding.

I've witnessed men sob for the first time in decades.

I've heard roars from women that shook walls.

I've watched bodies tremble as years of frozen survival energy moved through and out.

And afterward, something changes. Breath deepens. Posture softens. Eyes look clearer. Not because they were "fixed." But because their body finally got to finish something.

Somatic Expression Practices: Why We Do Them and What They Give Back

Before any of these practices, be sure to regulate. Regulation comes first. This matters more than people realize. Expression without regulation can become overwhelming or re-traumatizing. Regulation creates a container. It tells the body, I am here with you. You're not alone in this.

Once that foundation is in place, expression becomes safe, and safety is what allows release to actually complete.

Breath for Release

Your breath is one of the few tools that can intentionally activate stored survival energy and guide it out of the body. When threat was present in the past, the breath often became shallow or frozen. Over time, that trapped energy stays locked inside the system. This practice gives it somewhere to go.

Shaking Breath

- Stand with knees slightly bent.
- Begin rapid, forceful exhales through the mouth.
- Let your body move or shake naturally.
- Continue for two to three minutes.
- Then pause and notice.

This kind of breathing lightly activates the sympathetic nervous system, the same system involved in fight or flight, but in a controlled, conscious way. Instead of bracing against that energy, you allow it to move. The shaking isn't something you make happen. It's something you let happen. And afterward, many people notice a sense of quiet, warmth, or spaciousness. That's the body completing a cycle that was interrupted long ago.

Sound: Giving the Body a Voice

Many of us were taught, explicitly or implicitly, to be quiet. To not make a scene. To not express pain, anger, or desire too loudly. Sound gets shut down early, and when it does, the throat and chest carry enormous holding.

Sound is one of the fastest ways to release that compression.

Primal Sound Practice

- Find privacy.
- Place one hand on your belly.
- Take a deep inhale.
- On the exhale, let any sound come.

Groans. Growls. Yells. Sobs.

Don't shape it. Don't judge it. Let it move.

The first time I did this, I struggled to even make a sound. My throat felt locked. And then, once something finally came through, the sound that emerged didn't feel familiar to me at all. It wasn't "pretty" or controlled, it was raw. And afterward, I felt lighter. More present. As if something long held had finally been acknowledged.

Sound tells the nervous system, *I am allowed to exist. I am allowed to take up space.*

Movement and Shaking

If you've ever seen two animals get aggressive with each other and then break away, you'll see this instinctively. They shake. Their bodies tremble. And then they move on. Humans learned to stop this. We were taught to hold it together, stay still, keep composure.

But the impulse never left.

Trauma Release Inspired Shaking

- Lie on your back with knees bent.
- Bring knees together, then let them fall open slightly.
- Allow natural tremors to begin.
- Let them spread without controlling them.

This shaking is not emotional catharsis, it's neurological discharge. It's your body doing exactly what it was designed to do. Many people feel calmer, clearer, and more embodied afterward, even if nothing dramatic "happened."

This is your body remembering how to resolve stress without your mind having to manage it.

Hitting and Pushing

Sometimes, energy doesn't want to tremble or sound. Sometimes it wants to push. To strike. To defend. Especially when boundaries were crossed and the body never got to respond.

This doesn't mean violence. It means completion.

Pillow Work

- Use a large pillow.
- Strike with fists or push with force.
- Make sound if it wants to come.

- Stop when you feel complete.

This practice gives rage a safe, contained outlet. Not to rehearse anger, but to finish it. Many people are surprised by what happens afterward: relief, softness, even grief. That's resolution. Energy that no longer needs to stay armored.

This isn't about acting out.

It's about letting the body finish what it couldn't then.

Sexuality as Frozen Emotion

Sexuality doesn't exist in a separate compartment of the body. It lives inside the same nervous system that holds fear, grief, desire, and memory. When emotional energy doesn't get to move, when it's interrupted, suppressed, or made unsafe, it doesn't disappear. It settles. And very often, it settles in sexuality.

Sexual dysfunction is rarely a mechanical problem. More often, it's emotional energy that never completed its cycle.

Erectile dysfunction, for many men, is frozen fear. Not conscious fear, but the kind that tightens the chest and shortens the breath before the mind can catch up. Premature ejaculation is often frozen urgency, a nervous system that learned to rush toward completion because lingering didn't feel safe. Numbness is frozen shutdown, a protective pulling away from sensation when staying present once carried risk. For women, difficulties in arousal or staying aroused can be frozen mistrust. The body quietly refusing to open when some part of the nervous system still registers "not safe yet".

None of these are failures. They are strategies. Intelligent responses shaped by experience.

As expression work opens the body through breath, sound, movement, and release, sexual function often returns without effort as the conditions for safety are being restored. When the body no longer has to guard against unfinished emotion, sensation becomes available again.

I once worked with a client who couldn't maintain an erection. He had tried to solve it with techniques, medication, and performance strategies, all without lasting change. When we slowed down

and listened to his body, what emerged wasn't arousal, it was grief. Deep, unexpressed grief from his divorce, locked in his chest, held together by years of composure and self-control.

When he finally sobbed fully and without restraint, his body softened. His breath deepened. His chest released. And something else shifted quietly alongside it. His sexuality didn't need to be fixed. It needed space.

This is why sexual healing is rarely about doing more. It's about allowing what's been frozen to thaw, so life, pleasure, and connection can move again, naturally and in their own time.

Working with Anger Safely

Many people are afraid of their anger, and for good reason. For some, anger was dangerous in their homes. For others, it was punished, shamed, or used as a weapon. Many learned early that anger led to loss, rejection, or harm. So they learned to contain it, soften it, or turn it inward.

But anger that isn't expressed doesn't disappear. It doesn't resolve on its own. It goes underground. It becomes depression, numbness, resentment, or passive aggression. Or it builds pressure until it erupts in ways that feel out of control and deeply shaming.

The problem isn't anger. The problem is uncontained anger.

Healthy anger expression has very specific qualities. It is private, not performed or directed at someone else. It is physical, because anger lives in the body, not just in words. It is conscious, meaning you stay present with what you're doing rather than dissociating or acting out. And it is always followed by grounding, so the nervous system can settle and integrate what moved.

When anger is worked with this way, it stops being destructive. It becomes informative.

Anger is information. It tells you where a boundary was crossed, where something mattered, where you were pushed past your limits. When expressed safely, anger clarifies rather than confuses. It sharpens your sense of self. It restores internal boundaries instead of eroding them.

This kind of anger doesn't make you harder. It makes you clearer. And clarity is what allows you to show up in your relationships without resentment, collapse, or explosion.

The Grief Beneath the Rage

Often, anger is the guard dog. It stands at the gate, loud and fierce, not because it wants to hurt anyone, but because something vulnerable is being protected. Beneath the teeth and the tension, there is almost always grief.

Anger arrives first because it can. It has energy. It can mobilize. Grief, on the other hand, asks us to soften. To slow down. To feel the weight of what was lost or never given. For many people, that feels far more dangerous.

When I finally let my rage move, when I stopped containing it and allowed it safe expression, something else followed. Not immediately, and not gently at first. Grief rose up behind it, like a tide that had been held back for years.

Grief for my children.

Grief for what they endured.

Grief for the ways I couldn't protect them in the moments that mattered most.

And grief for myself. For the younger version of me who survived by going numb, by staying quiet, by doing the best she could with what she had. Grief for all the strength it took to endure, and for everything that strength cost.

Let grief come when it's ready. You don't have to force it. You don't have to analyze it. Grief has its own timing. When it arrives, it doesn't need fixing, it needs space.

Grief softens what anger has been holding together. It loosens the armor. It allows the body to exhale after years of bracing. And in that softening, something profound becomes possible: not collapse, but relief. Not weakness, but truth.

Permission to Feel

This phase isn't about effort or achievement. It's about permission.

Permission to feel what you've been holding, sometimes for years, sometimes for a lifetime. Feelings that were too much at the time. Feelings that had nowhere to go. Feelings that your body learned to contain because expression wasn't safe or welcome.

It's permission to express what you were taught to silence. The anger that had to be swallowed. The grief that had to be postponed. The fear that never got acknowledged. None of this means something is wrong with you. It means your body adapted.

This is also permission to let your body finish what it started. Survival responses don't end on their own. They wait. They pause mid-sentence. When given safety and time, the body knows exactly how to complete them.

You don't have to carry this alone anymore. You don't have to keep holding everything together. The work here is not about pushing yourself to feel, it's about allowing what's already there to have a voice.

Your body has been waiting, faithfully. Holding memory, sensation, and truth until the moment you were ready to listen.

Let it speak.

Let it move.

Let it be free.

Phase 3: COMPASSION

Meeting Your Younger Self with Tenderness

Let's slow this down.

Before we talk about healing, sexuality, or change, I want you to picture something.

Not an idea. Not a concept.

A moment from the past.

There is a younger version of you who never got what they needed.

This younger version is not a metaphor or symbolic. They're still here.

And until they are met with the tenderness they've been waiting for, they will continue to influence your relationships, your sexuality, your sense of worth, and the way you treat yourself—often without you realizing it.

This chapter is not about blame, victimhood, or turning you into someone who wallows in childhood wounds.

It's about understanding why compassion, real compassion, is not optional if you want lasting change.

The Child Who Never Got What They Needed

I remember a Thanksgiving that made this painfully clear. I was thirty-six and only two years sober. My mother was drinking. She always was. By that point, I had long stopped expecting her to be any different, but some part of me still hoped, especially on days that were meant to feel like family.

She was loud. Bitter. Locked into a loop of complaints about my brothers not being there. How they never showed up. How she was abandoned. How everything was unfair.

The room felt tight. Heavy. Familiar.

At some point, I quietly asked her if she could stop complaining. I reminded her that I was there. That her daughter was sitting right in front of her.

That was enough to set her off.

She turned on me—sharp, slurred, mean. Her words landed like they always had. Dismissing. Deflecting. Making me the problem for daring to ask for something different.

In that moment, I wasn't an adult woman with a life, insight, and hard-earned wisdom.

I was a child again.

A child watching a parent choose alcohol, resentment, and grievance over connection.

A child learning, once again, that presence didn't guarantee being seen.

That love was conditional.

That speaking up made things worse.

My body knew this moment long before my mind named it. The tightening in my chest. The heat behind my eyes. The familiar urge to disappear, appease, or emotionally shut down.

This is how these things live on.

Not as memories we replay on purpose, but as patterns encoded in the nervous system.

That child didn't learn safety through explanation or reassurance. She learned it, or didn't, through experience. Through what happened when she expressed a need. Through what happened when she asked to matter. Through what happened when she wanted attention, care, or relief.

She adapted.

She learned to scan rooms.

To manage emotional volatility.

To expect that love might come with blame or punishment.

To make herself smaller, or stronger, depending on what survival required.

And those adaptations didn't disappear just because I grew older. They showed up in my relationships. In intimacy. In the way my body responded to closeness, conflict, or emotional demand.

Here's the part most people miss:

When intimacy appears, when closeness, desire, or emotional presence enters the room, your nervous system doesn't check your age, your accomplishments, or your insight. It checks for safety.

And if the old rules get activated, that younger part steps forward automatically.

Suddenly, you're not responding from choice. You're responding from memory. Fear floods the body. Shame tightens the chest. Numbness pulls you away. Or urgency pushes you to perform, please, or disappear.

This isn't weakness.

It isn't regression.

It's protection.

Your nervous system isn't broken. It's loyal.

It learned how to keep you alive in an environment where emotional safety wasn't guaranteed. And until those younger parts are seen, acknowledged, and met with compassion instead of judgment, they will continue to reach for the only tools they know.

Healing isn't about getting rid of the Inner Child. It's about helping them finally feel what they never got to feel—safety, agency, and choice—so the adult you can stay present without being pulled under by the past.

How Childhood Shame Shapes Adult Sexuality

Most of the sexual struggles people bring into my work don't start in adulthood. They start much earlier, and often much more quietly than we expect. Not always with obvious trauma. More often with small, seemingly ordinary moments that taught the body how to relate to desire, closeness, and expression.

Moments like being told your body was gross, wrong, or inappropriate. Being punished or shamed for touching yourself. Growing up around adults who carried visible discomfort or silence around sexuality. Being laughed at or compared in locker rooms or group settings. Taking a risk, emotionally or physically, and being rejected. Learning, directly or indirectly, that feelings were inconvenient, embarrassing, or made you weak.

On their own, these moments might not seem like much. Many people minimize them. It wasn't that bad. Other people had it worse. But collectively, they leave an imprint. Over time, they shape beliefs about the body, about desire, and about what it costs to be seen.

Beliefs like:

- My body is wrong.
- My desire is dangerous or embarrassing.
- I have to perform to be loved.
- If they really knew me, they'd leave.
- I'm not enough as I am.

These beliefs don't stay in your head. They don't live as thoughts you can simply reason your way out of. They live in your nervous system. And they show up in sex, intimacy, and relationships—not as ideas, but as reactions.

Performance anxiety.

Rushing or disconnecting.

Numbness or shutdown.

Shame spirals that appear out of nowhere.

Not because you're broken. Not because you failed to "heal enough." But because a younger part of you learned how to stay safe in the only ways it knew how. And those strategies, once protective, are still trying to help, even when they no longer serve you

Inner Child Work

I know the phrase "Inner Child work" can immediately raise eyebrows.

So let's strip it down completely.

Inner Child work isn't about imagination, regression, or pretending you're someone else. It's about recognizing a simple biological reality: The parts of you that feel scared, ashamed, reactive, or shut down are not defects in your personality. They are younger versions of you that learned specific strategies to survive.

Your nervous system learned these strategies early—before you had language, perspective, or choice. And it learned them well.

So when intimacy suddenly triggers anxiety, that's not the adult you malfunctioning or "failing to be healed." It's often a younger part of your nervous system recognizing something familiar and sounding the alarm: *This feels like before. This doesn't feel safe.*

That alarm can show up in many ways:

- Shutting down or disconnecting
- Going numb when sensation increases
- Rushing to finish instead of staying present
- Performing instead of feeling
- Avoiding closeness altogether

These responses weren't random. They were once intelligent. They helped you get through moments when slowing down, speaking up, or staying present wasn't an option.

The work now isn't to eliminate these parts or force them to disappear. That usually makes them louder. The work is to meet them with compassion, and then offer something new. Safety. Choice. Presence. Time.

When these younger parts realize they're no longer alone, no longer responsible for keeping you safe by themselves, they begin to soften because your body learned something different through experience.

The Inner Child and the Inner Teenager

In this work, there are usually two younger parts that show up again and again. Not as characters you need to imagine, but as familiar states you slip into without meaning to. Understanding them doesn't require belief, just recognition.

The Inner Child, roughly ages zero to twelve, holds your earliest needs. This is the part of you that needed safety, belonging, protection, and unconditional care before you had any way to provide those things for yourself. This part learned about the world through sensation and relationship, not logic.

When the Inner Child is activated, you might suddenly feel small, powerless, overwhelmed, terrified. Or strangely needy, even if you pride yourself on being independent. These feelings can arrive

fast and without context, especially in moments of closeness, conflict, or vulnerability. That's because this part doesn't live in time. It reacts as if the past is happening now.

The Inner Teenager, roughly ages thirteen to nineteen, often forms in response to this. Where the child feels exposed, the teenager develops armor. This part learned how to protect the child when protection didn't come from the outside.

The Inner Teenager can show up as anger, rebellion, detachment, or defiance. It might push people away, shut things down, or insist on control. You might hear its voice in thoughts like, *I don't need anyone. I've got this. Whatever. Fuck it.* On the surface, this part looks tough, dismissive, or self-sufficient.

But underneath that armor is often the same child, hurt too many times to risk needing again.

Both parts make sense. Both developed for a reason. And both deserve compassion. Neither one is trying to sabotage your life. They've been trying to keep you alive with the tools they had at the time.

Healing doesn't mean getting rid of these parts. It means learning how to recognize when they're running the show—and gently bringing adult presence online so they no longer have to. When the child feels protected and the teenager doesn't have to guard anymore, the system can finally rest.

How the Inner Child and Inner Teenager Show Up in Sex and Intimacy

Sex and intimacy have a unique way of activating younger parts of us because closeness, touch, and vulnerability bypass the thinking mind and go straight to the nervous system. When that happens, the Inner Child and Inner Teenager often step forward automatically.

When the Inner Child is activated in intimacy, the body may feel suddenly small or overwhelmed. Sensation can feel too intense or confusing. You might notice a longing to be held, reassured, or chosen or, on the other side, a deep fear of being abandoned, judged, or hurt. This can show up as freezing, going quiet, dissociating, or becoming overly accommodating. Pleasure may feel fragile or unsafe, not because desire is wrong, but because this part learned early that closeness came with risk.

When the Inner Teenager shows up in intimacy, the energy shifts. This part doesn't want to feel exposed. It wants control. It may rush toward sex without real presence, use intensity to avoid vulnerability, or shut things down entirely. Detachment, sarcasm, performance, or a "whatever" attitude can appear. The teenage part may insist it doesn't care, doesn't need closeness, or doesn't want more—while quietly making sure the Inner Child doesn't get hurt again.

Sometimes these parts alternate rapidly. One moment there's longing. The next, withdrawal. One moment desire. The next, numbness or irritation. This isn't inconsistency, it's a system trying to protect itself in real time.

Neither part is the problem. They're responding to what intimacy once meant. And until the adult self is fully present in the body, these younger parts will continue to take the lead.

My Own Compassion Work

When I discovered that my children had been abused while I was in treatment, something inside me didn't just hurt, it shattered. It was as if every layer I had carefully built to survive cracked open at once. There was no single emotion. There was an eruption.

Every old wound ignited.

My own sexual abuse.

Every boundary that had ever been crossed.

Every moment I had learned, directly or indirectly, that my safety didn't matter.

The rage was immediate and consuming. So was the grief. And underneath both was a familiar, quieter voice: How did I not see this? How did I let this happen? What kind of mother am I? Shame tried to rush in and claim the moment. It would have been easy to turn that pain against myself. To make it all about me.

But in the middle of that storm, something else became clear. I couldn't abandon myself again. I couldn't pile blame onto a system that had already been trained to carry too much. If I was going to survive this, and show up for my children and help them heal, I had to turn inward in a way I never had before.

I had to meet the little girl who learned early to stay small, to submit without questioning, to disappear when things felt unsafe. The teenager who was violated for the first of many times and learned that resistance only made things worse. The young woman who discovered that her sexuality could be used as currency—and that numbing herself with alcohol was the fastest way to escape the shame that followed.

For the first time, I didn't try to fix them. I didn't explain anything away. I didn't rush them toward strength or resilience. I stayed.

And I said words I had never heard.

“You didn't do anything wrong.”

“You were surviving.”

“I see you.”

“I've got you now.”

Those words weren't affirmations. They were interventions. They interrupted decades of self-blame that lived not just in my thoughts, but in my muscles, my breath, my posture, my sexuality.

This work didn't just change how I thought about my past. It changed how my body held it. The tension softened. The constant bracing eased. Sensation began to return in places that had gone quiet long ago. I walked through that fire no longer screaming and bracing for the burn, but letting myself feel every single bit of it. I knew, if I wanted to help them, I could only do it if I could show myself the bravery they needed from me.

Compassion didn't erase what happened. But it gave my nervous system a new ending. And that changed everything.

Common Inner Child Wounds

Over years of working with individuals, I've seen certain patterns repeat. Not because people are the same, but because shame teaches similar lessons, regardless of gender. The details differ, but the nervous system often learns in familiar ways.

You may recognize yourself in one or more of these patterns.

The Shamed Child

Curiosity, desire, or pleasure was labeled wrong, dirty, or inappropriate. As an adult, pleasure may be tangled with shame, hesitation, or self-judgment, even when you want to enjoy it.

The Abandoned Child

Closeness once led to loss, inconsistency, or withdrawal. Now intimacy can feel risky. You may crave connection while simultaneously bracing for it to disappear.

The Criticized Child

Nothing was ever quite good enough. Love or approval felt conditional. As an adult, sex or intimacy can turn into performance, trying to get it right instead of allowing it to be felt.

The Invisible Child

Your needs didn't register. You learned to stay quiet, adaptable, or low-maintenance. Later in life, you may struggle to ask for what you want, or even to know what that is.

The Violated Child

Physical, emotional, or sexual boundaries were crossed. The body learned to freeze, disconnect, or leave when closeness appears. Dissociation isn't weakness here, it's protection.

None of these are flaws. None of them mean something is wrong with you. They are stories of adaptation, ways your nervous system learned to survive in the environments you were given.

And what was once necessary doesn't have to be permanent.

Meeting Your Younger Self

This practice is not about reliving trauma or forcing yourself back into painful memories. You are not trying to re-experience what happened. This work is about presence, bringing your adult nervous system into contact with parts of you that were once alone.

You are meeting the memory with safety, not being pulled back into it.

Move slowly. There is no right pace.

Step 1: Visualize

Find a quiet place where you won't be interrupted. Sit or lie down comfortably. Let your breath slow just enough to let your body know you're here. Then imagine yourself at a younger age. You don't

need a clear image. You may sense a presence, a feeling, or a posture instead. Simply notice them. Notice how close or far away they feel.

If at any point this feels overwhelming, open your eyes, feel the surface beneath you, and remind yourself that you are here, now.

Step 2: Speak

You may speak to your younger self in different ways.

1. Pen and paper. Nondominant hand writes on behalf of the child; dominant hand writes on behalf of the adult.
2. Mirror. Look yourself in the eyes as you talk.
3. Just speak into the ether.

Now speak to this younger part—not as a therapist or a domineering parent, but as a steady adult presence. Say the things that were missing when they mattered most. Simple language is enough.

“I see you.”

“You didn’t deserve that.”

“You’re safe now.”

You don’t need to force belief. You are offering something new and letting it land however it does.

Step 3: Listen

Then pause. Let this younger part respond in whatever way they do. Sometimes there are words. Sometimes there are sensations, emotions, images, or shifts in the body. Tightness. Warmth. Tears. Resistance. All of it counts.

Listening here doesn’t mean understanding. It means staying present without leaving.

Step 4: Offer What Was Missing

Ask yourself what was needed then and wasn’t received. Protection. Permission. Comfort. Validation. Someone to say no. Someone to stay.

Offer it now. You might imagine holding them, standing beside them, or simply staying with them without rushing. The form matters less than the felt sense: You're not alone anymore.

Step 5: Integrate

When you're ready, gently bring your attention back to your adult body. Feel the room around you. Place a hand on your chest or belly. Take a slow breath. Let yourself fully arrive here.

Integration is essential. This is how your nervous system learns that touching the past does not mean losing the present.

This practice works not because of imagination, but because your body recognizes presence. Each time you meet a younger part without abandoning yourself, something updates. The past doesn't disappear—but it no longer runs the moment.

Reparenting Yourself

Compassion is not indulgence.

It's leadership.

Reparenting yourself means becoming the steady presence you didn't always have. It's learning to speak to yourself with respect instead of criticism. Allowing feelings to exist without shaming them or rushing them away. Setting boundaries, internally and externally, so your nervous system knows you're paying attention. Resting when you need to, not because you've earned it, but because you're human.

One client said something to me that captured this perfectly:

“I realized I talk to myself the same way my father talked to me. I would never treat my son that way.”

That realization changed everything, not because it brought guilt, but because it brought clarity. Once you can hear the old voice, you can choose a different one. And over time, that choice becomes the way your system learns what care actually feels like.

Compassion in Intimacy

When compassion enters sexuality, everything begins to shift. The inner dialogue softens. Instead of asking, *What's wrong with me?* you start to ask a different question: *What does my body need right now?*

Instead of pushing yourself with, *I should be over this*, there's room to say, *This makes sense. There's a reason my body learned this. There's a reason it's responding this way.*

Healing doesn't accelerate through pressure or self-correction. It unfolds through permission, permission to feel, to pause, to listen. And when the body feels met rather than managed, intimacy becomes a place of repair instead of another place to perform.

Working With Shame

Shame survives in silence. It grows when it stays hidden. Compassion is what loosens its grip.

When shame shows up, slow down. Name what's happening without judgment. Notice where it lives in your body. Breathe into that place gently. Speak to yourself with the same kindness you would offer someone you love. And when you can, reach out, because shame cannot be healed in isolation.

You don't heal shame alone.

Protector Parts

When anger, sarcasm, or resistance shows up, pause and acknowledge it. These parts didn't appear by accident, they developed to keep you safe. You don't need to fight them or push them away. You need to recognize their role and take the lead.

Protection doesn't disappear when it's understood. It relaxes when it knows it's no longer alone.

A Daily Compassion Practice

This practice isn't about doing more. It's about creating small moments of care that your nervous system can rely on.

In the morning, before the day pulls you forward, place a hand on your heart. Take a slow breath and set a simple intention: I will be kind to myself today. Not perfectly. Just intentionally.

During the day, begin to notice moments of harsh or critical self-talk. You don't need to eliminate it, just soften it. Rephrase the thought the way you would speak to someone you love. Even small shifts matter.

At night, take a few moments to reflect. You might journal or simply sit quietly and ask yourself, *What did my younger self need today?* You don't have to answer it fully. The question itself builds relationship.

Over time, these small acts of compassion become the tone your body begins to trust.

The Truth About Compassion

Compassion is not weakness.

It is strength without armor.

It is the courage to stay present.

That younger part of you has been waiting.

Meet them.

They deserve it.

And so do you.

Phase 4: LOVE

Loving the Parts You Thought Were Unlovable

You cannot shame yourself into wholeness. Although most of us have tried.

We punished our bodies for not working the way we thought they should. We denied our desires. We told ourselves we were broken, too much, not enough, damaged beyond repair. We believed, sometimes without realizing it, that love was something we had to earn through performance, control, usefulness, or self-denial.

And if shame worked, it would have worked by now.

But it didn't.

What it did was deepen the split between who we are and who we believe we're allowed to be.

This phase is where the work stops being about fixing and starts being about loving.

Not in an abstract, inspirational-quote way, but in a lived, embodied, sometimes uncomfortable way.

This is where everything changes.

The Radical Act of Self-Acceptance

Each part of me that I once labeled as shadow turned out to carry a hidden intelligence. What I had been fighting wasn't brokenness, it was protection. When I finally learned to slow down and focus on one part at a time—one emotion, one reaction, one sensation—I stopped being hijacked by myself.

That slowing down changed everything.

Instead of spiraling when I felt upset, sad, angry, or triggered, I learned to pause and turn inward. Not to analyze or fix, but to listen. I began asking different questions: What's really happening right now? What part of me is activated? What does it actually need? Those questions created space. And in that space, choice returned.

This shift from judgment to curiosity wasn't dramatic or instantaneous. It happened in small, repeated moments. A hand on my chest when I felt overwhelmed. A softer, inner voice when shame tried

to take over. A willingness to notice my self-talk and gently rephrase it instead of letting it run unchecked.

At night, a simple reflection: What did my younger self need today, and did I offer any of it?

These weren't grand healing gestures. They were daily acts of compassion. And over time, my nervous system began to trust them.

Because the truth is, you are not fragmented because you're defective. You're fragmented because you learned to survive. Different parts of you learned different strategies at different times, and they've been trying often clumsily, often desperately to keep you safe ever since.

Healing doesn't happen through force or self-discipline. It doesn't come from pushing parts of yourself into silence. It happens through love through presence, patience, and the willingness to meet yourself where you are. When compassion becomes your default response, integration follows naturally because your body finally felt safe enough to come back together.

Why Self-Love Feels So Damn Hard

For many people, self-love doesn't feel warm or inspiring. It feels indulgent or even unsafe.

When you hear the phrase "self love", something inside you tightens instead of softening.

That reaction didn't come out of nowhere.

Most of us were taught, directly or indirectly, that loving yourself was arrogant. That softness was weakness. That being too gentle with yourself would make you lazy, selfish, or unmotivated. We learned that worth had to be earned, measured, proven.

Love became conditional.

Be successful; then you're lovable.

Be strong; then you're respected.

Be useful, attractive, competent, or composed; then you're chosen.

Under those rules, self-love starts to feel like breaking a contract. Like skipping steps. Like letting yourself off the hook before you've done enough to deserve it.

So the idea of loving yourself without fixing anything first?

It feels wrong. Disorienting. Almost irresponsible.

But here's the truth your nervous system already understands, even if your mind resists it: Love is not something you earn through performance. It's something you allow through safety.

Your body doesn't need to look different to be worthy of care.

Your sexuality doesn't need to function perfectly to deserve gentleness.

Your desires don't need to be normal, impressive, or convenient to be valid.

Self-love isn't a reward for healing. It's the condition that makes healing possible.

And that's why it feels so hard. Because it asks you to stop striving. To stop proving. To stop waiting for permission that may never come from the outside.

You are worthy of love right now.

Not when you've healed enough.

Not when you've improved.

Not when you've become someone easier to love.

Now.

And learning to let that land slowly, imperfectly, one moment at a time is not weakness. It's a radical act of nervous system repair.

When Love Enters the Body

Up until now, most of the work you've likely done has lived in your head. You've understood things. Made sense of your past. Had insights. Maybe even developed compassion at a conceptual level. And all of that matters, it laid the groundwork.

But Phase Four asks for something different.

This is where love moves out of theory and into lived experience. Because self-love that stays intellectual doesn't actually change how you breathe, how you touch, how you receive. It doesn't soften the places that learned to brace. It doesn't reach the parts of you that learned to go numb.

Embodied love does.

When love enters the body, it becomes sensation. Warmth. Permission. Presence. It changes how you inhabit yourself, not by force, but by invitation. The body begins to learn what the mind may have known for years: I am safe enough to feel.

One of the most misunderstood, and powerful, ways this shift happens is through how you relate to your own pleasure. Not pleasure as performance. Not pleasure as escape. But pleasure as information. As feedback. As a direct line into what your body trusts and what it doesn't.

Pleasure is where love becomes real. It's where self-acceptance stops being an idea and starts being something you can feel in your skin. When you learn to meet your own pleasure with curiosity instead of judgment, with patience instead of demand, love finally has somewhere to land.

This phase is about repair, and letting your body experience what it may never have had the chance to experience before: care without agenda, sensation without pressure, love without conditions.

And once love enters the body, everything else begins to reorganize around it.

Self-Pleasure as Self-Love

For many people, self-pleasure has become mechanical. Something done quickly. Something done to release tension, distract from discomfort, or quiet the body long enough to get through the day. Sometimes it carries shame. Sometimes numbness. Often, it's disconnected.

It becomes something you do to yourself, not something you share with yourself.

So let me ask you a different kind of question.

What if self-pleasure could be an act of devotion?

What if touching your body wasn't about getting somewhere, finishing, or fixing—but about staying? Staying with sensation. Staying with breath. Staying with yourself.

What if pleasure didn't need to be earned, rushed, or justified?

What if it could be slow enough to listen? Gentle enough to feel safe? Spacious enough to allow whatever arises—warmth, tenderness, emotion, stillness—without needing to name or control it?

This is about intention.

It's about approaching your body the way you would approach someone you love, with curiosity instead of demand, patience instead of urgency, respect instead of expectation. When pleasure is met this way, it stops being an outcome and becomes a conversation. A quiet, intimate reminder that your body is not an object to use, but a place you live.

And in that kind of presence, something shifts.

Not because you forced it.

But because love was finally allowed to arrive.

The Practice of Sacred Self-Pleasure

When I went through sixty days of inpatient alcohol treatment, my counselors used to repeat the Four M's for healthy recovery: Meetings, Medication, Meditation, and Masturbation. At the time, it sounded clinical, almost blunt—another tool for regulation, another way to discharge tension. But what I've come to understand since then is that this practice was never really about sex.

It was about relationship.

A relationship with your own body.

A relationship with sensation.

A relationship with presence.

This is not something you squeeze into the margins of your life. It's not a rushed moment stolen between responsibilities. It's an intentional meeting with yourself.

Step One: Create Space

Choose a time when you won't be interrupted. Let this be deliberate. Dim the lights. Light a candle. Put your phone away. Close the door if you need to. Let your environment quietly communicate something your nervous system rarely hears:

I matter. I am worth slowing down for.

This isn't indulgence. It's orientation.

Step Two: Arrive

Lie down comfortably. Place one hand on your chest and one on your belly. Let your breath move naturally, without trying to control it. Feel the surface beneath you holding your weight.

Do not rush toward sensation.

Do not go straight to your genitals.

Let yourself arrive fully in your body first. Let your nervous system register that nothing is being demanded of it. This moment is not going anywhere.

Step Three: Touch Without Agenda

Begin touching your body the way you would touch someone you care about. With curiosity. With tenderness. Without expectation.

Your arms.

Your chest.

Your legs.

Your face.

This is not sexual touch yet. It's relational touch. It's the kind of contact that says, I'm here with you. Notice where sensation flows easily. Notice where it feels distant or numb. Neither is wrong. Both are information.

Stay interested. Stay kind.

Step Four: Slow Everything Down

When sexual touch begins, slow down far more than feels natural. Almost unbearably slow. If urgency, escape or disassociation comes up, pause.

That urgency is not desire.

It's conditioning.

Breathe. Stay. Let the wave pass without chasing it. You're teaching your body something new here: that pleasure doesn't have to rush to be safe.

Step Five: Speak Love

This part often feels the most uncomfortable. That's okay. Discomfort doesn't mean you're doing it wrong.

Try speaking softly to your body. Out loud, if you can.

Thank you for carrying me.

I'm sorry I've been harsh with you.

You are worthy of pleasure.

I love you.

If grief surfaces, let it. If shame arises, meet it gently. This isn't failure. This is thawing. This is sensation returning to places that learned to go quiet.

Step Six: Release the Goal

Orgasm is not required here. Presence is.

If orgasm happens, let it be unforced.

If it doesn't, nothing is wrong.

This practice is not about achievement. It's about relationship. About learning how to stay with yourself without abandoning your body the moment sensation deepens or emotion stirs.

Over time, this kind of presence rewires more than pleasure. It teaches safety. It teaches trust. It teaches your body that love is not something that comes from outside, it's something you can offer yourself, slowly, patiently, again and again.

And that changes everything.

Rewriting the Stories Shame Told You

Every one of us carries stories about our bodies, our desires, and our worth. We didn't sit down one day and choose them. They were absorbed quietly, over time, through tone and reaction, through what was praised and what was punished, through what was allowed and what was shamed. Most of these stories were written by someone else.

Parents who didn't know how to talk about bodies or feelings.

Religious teachings that confused control with morality.

A culture that objectifies and judges at the same time.

Past partners who projected their wounds onto you.

Porn that taught performance instead of presence.

None of these voices were neutral. And none of them were written with your nervous system in mind.

Phase Four is where something shifts because you begin to question the authorship of the stories you've been living inside. You start to notice the difference between what you were taught and what your body actually knows.

The old story says: My body is broken. The new truth is quieter, steadier: My body adapted to survive.

The old story says: My desires are wrong. The new truth responds: My desires are human.

The old story says: I must perform to be loved. The new truth offers relief: My presence is enough.

This isn't positive thinking. It's accurate thinking. It's the kind of truth that doesn't shout, it settles. And once it settles, shame starts to lose its authority.

You don't have to erase the old stories all at once. They may still show up. They may still speak. But now, you're no longer mistaking them for the truth. You're learning to answer them. To write alongside them. To choose a language that doesn't punish your body for surviving.

Write your own story. One that includes context. One that honors adaptation. One that leaves room for tenderness and growth.

Love speaks differently than shame ever did.

It doesn't threaten.

It doesn't rush.

It doesn't demand proof.

It tells the truth—and then it stays.

And that's how the rewriting begins.

Loving the Body You Have

Your body is not an aesthetic object. It was never meant to be evaluated, graded, or compared. It is a living record of everything you've survived. Every season you've moved through lives here. The scars. The softness. The tension. The changes that came with age, stress, love, loss, childbirth, illness, recovery. None of it is accidental.

Your body tells the truth of your life.

We're taught to look at our bodies as projects, something to fix, tighten, improve, or apologize for. But when you strip away the cultural noise, what's left is something much simpler and much more sacred. This is the body that carried you through it all.

Try this practice slowly.

Stand naked in front of a mirror. Not to inspect. Not to judge. Just to see. Notice how quickly the impulse to criticize arises. The scanning. The narrowing. The urge to look away or mentally list what you'd change. Don't argue with that impulse. Just notice it.

Then place a hand on your heart. Feel the warmth of your own touch. And say, out loud if you can:

This body is mine.

It's been through so much.

I choose to love it.

You may not believe the words at first. They may feel awkward, stiff, or even dishonest. That's okay. You're not trying to convince your mind. You're introducing your nervous system to a new tone. A new relationship.

Love doesn't always arrive as a feeling. Sometimes it begins as a decision. Sometimes it begins as restraint—choosing not to attack yourself. Sometimes it begins as neutrality. And sometimes it begins with simply staying in the room with your reflection a few seconds longer than usual.

If it feels fake, that doesn't mean it isn't working. It means your body is unfamiliar with being met this way. With time, repetition, and gentleness, something softens. The mirror becomes less of a battlefield and more of a meeting.

It's about honoring what your body has carried.

And letting that be enough.

Love in Daily Life

Self-love is a series of small, embodied choices, made again and again, about how you relate to yourself in ordinary moments.

It looks like eating in ways that nourish you instead of punish you. Not because you're being "good," but because your body deserves care. It looks like moving your body because it feels good, because it stretches, wakes you up, settles you, not because you're trying to fix or fight it.

It looks like resting when you're tired, even when a part of you insists you should keep pushing. It's saying no when something drains you, without needing a dramatic reason. And it's saying yes when something lights you up, even if it doesn't make sense to anyone else.

Love shows up in how you touch yourself: with patience instead of urgency, with kindness instead of criticism. It shows up in how you speak to yourself when things don't go well whether your inner voice punishes or supports, shames or steadies.

These moments may seem small. They're not. They're how your nervous system learns what love actually feels like. Not as intensity or performance, but as consistency. As reliability. As being on your own side.

This is what love looks like in practice.

Not grand gestures.

Not perfection.

But a thousand quiet choices that say, I matter to myself.

Love in Intimacy with Others

When you stop trying to earn love, intimacy changes in quiet but profound ways. The pressure eases. The inner monitoring softens. You're no longer asking, *Am I doing this right? Am I enough?*—because the question itself is no longer running the moment.

You stop performing.

You stop scanning your partner's face or body for approval.

You stop bracing for rejection or trying to manage the outcome.

Instead, you arrive.

Presence replaces effort. Curiosity replaces urgency. You're able to feel what's actually happening rather than racing ahead to where you think you're supposed to go. Intimacy becomes less about proving your worth and more about sharing your experience.

One client described this shift perfectly:

“I used to have sex like I was taking a test. Now it feels like sharing a gift.”

That difference matters. A test demands perfection. A gift asks only for honesty.

When love is no longer conditional, when you're not trading performance for belonging, your body relaxes. Sensation deepens. Communication becomes simpler. You're more able to notice when something feels good, when it doesn't, and to trust that both can be spoken without threatening connection.

This is where intimacy becomes mutual instead of transactional. Where desire can ebb and flow without panic. Where closeness doesn't require losing yourself to keep the bond.

Love, in this form, isn't something you give to be chosen. It's something you share because you're already here. And from that place, intimacy becomes less about earning and more about meeting, two people present, responsive, and allowed to be real.

When Love Brings Grief

Sometimes, when you begin loving yourself, grief rises unexpectedly because something long held is finally allowed to move.

You may grieve the years you didn't know how to be kind to yourself. The ways you pushed, ignored, or punished your body because you didn't yet have another language. You may grieve how harsh your inner voice was, how relentless the standards, how little room there was to rest or soften. And you may grieve the love you never received—the tenderness, protection, or reassurance that should have been there and wasn't.

This grief can feel confusing. You might wonder why it's showing up now, when things are finally improving. But grief often comes after safety, not before. It arrives when the nervous system realizes it no longer has to stay braced.

Let it come.

Grief doesn't mean you've failed yourself. It means you care. It means love has finally found enough space to move where it once had to be locked away. Grief is not the opposite of love, it is love that was delayed, love that didn't get expressed, love that's finally being acknowledged.

You don't need to fix this grief or rush it through. You don't need to make meaning of it right away. Let it wash through in its own time. With each wave, something softens. With each tear, something unravels that no longer needs to be held together.

This is part of the healing.

This is part of loving yourself.

And you don't have to do it alone.

For years, loving myself felt impossible.

Not abstractly difficult—morally impossible. How do you love yourself when you remember how you treated your children while you were drinking? Leaving them home alone. Passing out. Forgetting. Losing time. Losing presence. Loving myself felt obscene compared to the weight of that truth.

And then there was the other layer. The one that almost broke me.

Learning about the abuse they endured while I was away getting treatment, while I was finally doing the thing everyone said I needed to do to get better. Holding the knowledge that while I was trying

to save my life, they were being harmed. That kind of grief doesn't move cleanly. It doesn't resolve with insight. It floods.

There were moments when it was simply too much to carry. Moments when the shame felt so total, so consuming, that I wanted to turn it inward. To hurt myself. To disappear. Loving myself felt like a distant language spoken by people who hadn't lived inside this kind of reckoning.

And yet, this is the part that matters, I learned something I never expected.

Self-love didn't arrive as forgiveness.

It didn't arrive as self-esteem.

It didn't arrive as feeling better about myself.

It arrived as not abandoning myself further.

I couldn't love myself in those moments—but I could choose not to punish myself more. I could choose not to add another layer of harm. I could choose to stay sober, to stay present, to stay in my body even when it hurt.

And slowly, so slowly it was almost imperceptible, that became love.

Not the kind that says what you did was okay.

But the kind that says you are still here, and that matters.

The kind that understands that survival leaves wreckage, and that wreckage still deserves care.

This is the truth about love that no one tells you:

Self-love does not mean perfection.

It does not mean absolution.

It means worthiness.

It means choosing to treat yourself as someone you care about even when you are carrying unbearable grief, regret, and responsibility. Even when you are ashamed. Even when you don't yet know how to forgive yourself.

And when you begin to do that, when you stop turning the knife inward, something shifts.

Intimacy deepens because you're no longer hiding from yourself.

Pleasure expands because your body senses less threat.

Shame loosens its grip because it's no longer being reinforced.

You don't erase the past.

You don't minimize the harm.

You come home to yourself with it.

I didn't learn to love myself by feeling worthy. I learned by staying. And that staying, day after day, breath after breath, became the love I thought I didn't deserve. You are worthy of your own love.

Not because your story is clean.

Not because you did everything right.

But because you are still here.

Not later.

Not once you've healed more.

Now.

Exactly as you are.

Phase 5: ACCEPT

Your Shadow Isn't Your Enemy

The parts of you that seem the darkest aren't trying to ruin you.

They're trying to be seen.

Every desire you've hidden. Every fantasy you've judged. Every urge you've pushed down and told yourself was "too much," "wrong," "perverse," or "unacceptable." None of those parts are enemies. They're not signs that something went wrong in you.

They're signs that something vital got exiled.

Shadow work is about ending the internal war. It's about reclaiming parts of yourself that were pushed into the dark so you could belong, survive, or stay loved.

This is where integration happens. This is where shame finally starts to lose its grip. This is where you stop splitting yourself into "good" and "bad" and start living as a whole human being.

Facing What's Been Hidden

Most people think their shadow is something ugly.

What I've seen, again and again, is that the shadow is usually something powerful that was never given a safe place to land.

Desire. Anger. Dominance. Vulnerability. Hunger. Curiosity. Sexuality. Want.

You didn't wake up one day and decide these parts were unacceptable. You learned that lesson slowly—through religion, culture, family dynamics, early relationships, ridicule, punishment, or silence.

So you adapted.

You learned what parts of yourself were rewarded and which ones were dangerous to show. You learned how to split—how to present the acceptable version of yourself while burying the rest.

That split takes enormous energy.

And eventually, it shows up as anxiety, depression, compulsive behavior, secrecy, sexual dysfunction, or a persistent sense of disconnection.

Not because you're broken—but because no one can live at war with themselves forever.

What We Mean When We Say 'Shadow'

Carl Jung used the word *shadow* to describe the aspects of the psyche that live outside our conscious self-image.

Not just what is dark—but what is disowned.

Your shadow may include:

- Sexual desires you were taught to feel ashamed of
- Fantasies you never speak out loud
- Rage you learned to swallow
- Jealousy you judge yourself for
- A need for power, control, surrender, or intensity
- Tenderness or dependence you were told was weak

None of these are inherently bad.

They became dangerous only because they were never integrated.

When shadow is ignored, it doesn't disappear, it bleeds out slowly into your everyday interactions. It leaks through:

- Projection (judging in others what you can't accept in yourself)
- Self-sabotage (destroying what you want most)
- Compulsion (acting without choice)
- Shame cycles that reinforce secrecy and self-hatred

The goal of this phase isn't to purify yourself.

It's to know yourself.

Making Peace with What I Was Taught to Fear

For a long time, I believed my shadow was proof that something was wrong with me.

I didn't call it "shadow" back then. I called it temptation. Weakness. Sin. A flaw in my character that needed to be controlled, prayed away, or overridden with discipline.

I was raised in a religious system that taught me very clearly which parts of me were acceptable and which were not. Obedience was virtue. Desire was suspect. Curiosity, especially sexual curiosity, was dangerous. Anger was rebellion. Power belonged to God, to men, to authority, not to a girl with a body and opinions and hunger.

So I learned to split early.

There was the good version of me: compliant, polite, self-sacrificing, emotionally contained. And then there was everything else—my intensity, my sensuality, my anger, my hunger to feel alive. Those parts didn't disappear. They just went underground.

When I eventually left that world, I didn't emerge whole. I emerged fractured. The parts of me that had been exiled didn't come back gently. They came back loud, raw, and untended.

I spent years swinging between extremes, trying to outrun desire on one end and letting it run me on the other. I mistook suppression for virtue and indulgence for freedom, not yet understanding that both were reactions to the same split.

What I didn't know then was this: My shadow wasn't trying to destroy me. It was trying to survive.

The parts of me that wanted intensity, power, sexuality, and truth had never been given language, guidance, or safety. They had been treated like enemies. And like anything treated as an enemy, they learned to fight back.

It took me a long time to see that my story wasn't one of corruption, it was one of exile.

The anger I felt wasn't pathology. It was a boundary that had never been honored.

The sexual hunger I carried wasn't perversion. It was vitality that had been shamed out of conscious expression.

The pull toward power dynamics, dominance, surrender, and depth wasn't damage. It was a psyche trying to find structure for energies that had never been mirrored or held.

Even my addiction, something I once saw as proof of moral failure, made more sense when I stopped moralizing it. It was an attempt to regulate a nervous system that had been living in conflict for decades. It was a way to numb the war inside me when I didn't yet know how to end it.

Acceptance didn't happen all at once. It wasn't a single moment of clarity or forgiveness.

It happened in small, uncomfortable truths.

Admitting, "This exists in me," without immediately trying to fix it.

Letting desire be named without rushing to act on it, or annihilate it.

Allowing anger to be felt without turning it into harm or self-loathing.

Recognizing that my shadow carried intelligence, not just impulse.

The more I stopped fighting these parts, the less dangerous they became.

Not because they disappeared, but because they were finally in relationship with the rest of me.

This is the paradox most people miss: What we reject gains power over us. What we acknowledge gains context.

When I stopped trying to purify myself, I became more ethical, not less.

When I stopped trying to be "good," I became more honest.

When I stopped splitting myself into holy and broken, I became whole.

Acceptance didn't turn me reckless.

It made me responsible.

Because once desire was conscious, I had choice.

Once anger was integrated, it had direction.

Once power was acknowledged, it could be held with care instead of leaking through control or collapse.

My shadow didn't need to be conquered.

It needed to be met.

And that meeting quiet, sober, embodied, is what finally ended the war.

Phase Five is about reclaiming the parts of you that were never given a fair trial.

It's about realizing that the darkest parts of you are often carrying your life force misdirected, misunderstood, and waiting for leadership.

Acceptance isn't the end of the work.

It's the moment the work becomes possible.

The Dark Triad: Power You Were Never Taught to Hold

Psychology names a set of traits that tend to make people uncomfortable: Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy, and sometimes sadism. They're usually discussed as warning signs—red flags, disorders, traits to avoid or eliminate.

Before we go any further, something needs to be made explicit.

In this chapter, we are not talking about clinical diagnoses or personality disorders. We are not pathologizing you, nor are we suggesting that harmful or abusive behavior is justified, excusable, or “spiritual.” Clinical psychopathy, narcissistic personality disorder, and related diagnoses involve rigid, entrenched patterns that impair empathy, accountability, and relational safety—and they require professional care.

What we are discussing is access to the underlying energetic capacities these traits point to.

But here's what rarely gets talked about.

Every healthy adult has access to these energies.

They are not foreign invaders. They are part of the human nervous system's capacity for power, self-protection, intensity, ambition, self-regard, and agency. The difference between harm and health isn't whether these energies exist in you, it's whether they are unconscious and reactive or conscious and integrated.

When power is denied, it doesn't disappear.

It leaks.

It acts out sideways.

It hides behind politeness, self-sacrifice, passivity, or “niceness.”

When power is conscious, it becomes choice.

Let's slow this down.

Machiavellianism: Strategy and Self-Protection

At its core, Machiavellian energy is about strategy, leverage, and knowing how to protect yourself in complex systems.

In everyday life, this shows up as your ability to read situations, recognize ulterior motives, and not hand your trust over blindly. Integrated, it looks like discernment. You know when to say yes, when to say no, and when to keep your cards close. You don't overexplain. You don't betray yourself to appear kind.

In shadow, this energy turns into manipulation or deceit—often because the person never learned they were allowed to protect themselves directly.

Sexually, integrated Machiavellian energy shows up as clear boundaries, pacing, and intentionality. You don't reveal everything at once. You notice dynamics. You choose when to deepen and when to pull back. In shadow, it can become emotional manipulation or seduction without accountability—not because strategy is bad, but because it was never acknowledged or owned.

Narcissism: Self-Regard and Centering the Self

Narcissism, at its healthy energetic core, is self-focus and self-regard. It's the capacity to experience yourself as important, valuable, and worthy of attention.

In everyday life, integrated narcissism energy looks like confidence without apology. You take up space. You advocate for yourself. You don't collapse your needs to keep the peace. You allow yourself to be seen without shame.

In shadow, narcissism becomes entitlement or lack of empathy, often because the person never experienced healthy mirroring or permission to matter.

Sexually, healthy narcissism allows you to enjoy being desired and to enjoy your own pleasure without guilt. You don't disappear into your partner. You don't perform to be chosen. In shadow, it can look like using others for validation or needing constant affirmation to feel real.

Psychopathy: Calm, Decisiveness, and Emotional Regulation

Psychopathy is often misunderstood as a lack of feeling. In reality, its healthy expression is emotional regulation under pressure.

In everyday life, integrated psychopathic energy allows you to stay calm when others panic. You can make hard decisions. You don't fall apart when emotions are intense. You can act without being paralyzed by fear.

In shadow, this energy becomes cruelty or disregard, usually because emotions were unsafe or overwhelming early in life, so they were shut down instead of integrated.

Sexually, this energy shows up as the ability to stay grounded in intensity. You don't dissociate when things deepen. You can hold strong sensation, power, or vulnerability without fleeing. In shadow, it can become emotional coldness or detachment disguised as strength.

Sadism: Intensity and the Capacity to Hold Power

Sadism is the most taboo of the group, but at its root it's about intensity and the ability to hold power without collapsing.

In everyday life, integrated sadistic energy looks like the ability to tolerate strong emotions—yours and others'. You don't rush to rescue. You don't shut things down because they're uncomfortable. You can stay present with anger, grief, or confrontation.

In shadow, this energy becomes harm, domination, or cruelty, especially when someone was never taught how to hold power responsibly.

Sexually, when integrated and consensual, sadistic energy becomes play, erotic intensity, and power exchange. It requires empathy, attunement, and responsibility. Without those, it becomes damaging. With them, it can be deeply connective and conscious.

The Real Danger

The danger isn't these traits.

The danger is pretending you don't have them.

When people deny their capacity for power, strategy, self-focus, fearlessness, or intensity, those energies don't vanish. They operate unconsciously. They leak into relationships. They show up as passive aggression, secrecy, control, collapse, or acting out.

Integration doesn't make you dangerous.

Unconsciousness does.

This work is about becoming honest. About knowing where your power lives so it doesn't have to hijack you, or anyone else.

When these energies are conscious, they stop being something you fear. They become something you can hold.

And that is what maturity actually looks like.

Exploring Desire Without Judgment

I've worked with people who carried deep shame about desires they never chose, and never stopped having.

Dominance. Submission. Voyeurism. Exhibitionism. Kink. Power exchange. Fantasy.

Here's what I know for certain:

Your desire is not the problem.

Shame about desire is.

Desires are often symbolic.

A fantasy about dominance may be about reclaiming agency in a life where you feel powerless.

A fantasy about submission may be about rest, surrender, or relief from responsibility.

When you judge the surface without listening to the message underneath, you miss the invitation.

A Practice: Speaking With the Shadow

This practice is about listening. Because what we refuse to listen to doesn't go away, it just finds other ways to be heard.

Shadow work, at its core, is an act of responsibility.

Move slowly. You're not trying to excavate everything at once. You're building a relationship.

Step One: Name It

Begin by asking yourself a simple but uncomfortable question: What part of me have I been most afraid to acknowledge?

Don't edit the answer. Don't make it palatable. Don't try to frame it in spiritual language or turn it into a lesson. Just write it down as honestly as you can. This isn't a confession, it's a recognition.

Often, what we fear naming already has power over us. Naming it brings it into the light.

Step Two: Get Curious

Now shift from judgment to curiosity. Ask: What is this part actually trying to give me?

Is it trying to offer power where you once felt powerless?

Safety where you felt exposed?

Expression where you were silenced?

Rest where you were pushed beyond your limits?

Control where things once felt chaotic?

Freedom where you felt trapped?

Most shadow parts aren't malicious. They're protective. They formed in response to something real.

Step Three: Speak With Compassion

This is where the tone changes. Instead of attacking or suppressing this part, try speaking to it directly, quietly, honestly.

I see you.

I'm listening.

You're part of me.

You're not agreeing to act on anything. You're acknowledging existence. And that alone can soften the intensity. When a part no longer has to scream to be noticed, it often becomes more reasonable.

Step Four: Choose Integration

Finally, ask yourself: How can this energy be expressed with integrity, consent, and alignment?

Integration means finding a conscious, responsible channel for the energy behind it. Sometimes that means boundaries. Sometimes it means creativity, movement, or honest conversation. Sometimes it simply means awareness.

Not every desire needs action.

But every desire needs acknowledgment.

When you listen instead of exile, you regain choice. And choice is what turns shadow into wisdom. A power that's no longer hidden, no longer leaking, no longer running the show from the dark.

This is how you become whole.

When Shadow Work Feels Scary

Sometimes, when you begin listening instead of suppressing, what emerges can feel intense. Rage you didn't know you were carrying. Dark images. Impulses or fantasies that startle you and make you wonder what they say about you.

This can be frightening and it's important to say this clearly: The fear itself does not mean something is wrong with you.

It means you've been carrying unprocessed power.

When energy has been denied, silenced, or moralized for long enough, it doesn't soften. It condenses. And when it finally has space to surface, it can feel sudden or overwhelming, often because it's unfamiliar and unintegrated.

The part of you that frightens you most is often the part that was never allowed to be conscious.

The unconscious shadow is what acts out.

The conscious shadow becomes choice.

Awareness doesn't make these energies stronger, it makes them containable. When you can see what's arising, you're no longer at its mercy. You can pause. You can breathe. You can decide how to respond instead of being hijacked.

That said, this work does not have to be done alone. If what comes up feels overwhelming, destabilizing, or too intense to hold safely, that's not a failure, it's information. It means the material

deserves support. Working with someone trained to hold this kind of work creates containment, perspective, and safety for both you and others.

Shadow work isn't about unleashing what's inside.

It's about bringing it into relationship.

And relationship is what turns fear into agency, and intensity into integrity.

You don't become dangerous by looking at your shadow.

You become dangerous when you refuse to.

Kink, BDSM, and Conscious Shadow Work

First, let's discuss what kink and BDSM are and how they connect to shadow work.

Kink is any sexual desire that falls outside of what's considered normal or "vanilla" sex. Kink can be physical, psychological, emotional or purely imaginative.

BDSM is a subset of kink that focuses on power exchange and/or sensation play in a consensual way. BDSM stands for bondage, discipline, dominance, submission, sadism, and masochism.

When kink is practiced with consent, boundaries, and clear communication, it can become one of the most direct ways a person learns to hold power consciously, without leaking it into manipulation, secrecy, or shame. Not because kink is "better" than vanilla intimacy, and not because it's necessary for healing. But because, done well, it creates a structured container where people can meet parts of themselves that they were taught to exile.

A lot of people carry shadow material around sex and power: the desire to lead; the desire to surrender; the desire to be intense; the desire to be claimed, held firmly, or let go. These desires are often not "bad", they're simply charged. And what makes them charged is usually history: family conditioning, religion, shame, objectification, past trauma, cultural scripts, and the deep fear of being judged.

So the question becomes: If I admit what I want, what does that say about me?

And for many, that question is terrifying.

Conscious kink reframes it. What if desire is not a verdict? What if it's information? What if it's energy asking for a healthy channel?

Dominance is not abuse. Submission is not a weakness.

This is worth saying plainly because so many people confuse these categories.

Dominance, in a conscious context, means taking responsibility for structure, pacing, and safety. It is leadership plus attunement. A Dominant is not “allowed to do anything.” A Dominant is trusted to hold the container, honor limits, and keep consent alive.

Submission, in a conscious context, means choosing to yield within agreed boundaries. It’s not helplessness. It’s discernment and bravery. Submission requires deep self-awareness: What do I want? What do I not want? What do I consent to? What do I need to feel safe?

And surrender can be power because it’s chosen. It can be the most potent form of agency a person has ever practiced, especially if they spent their life controlling everything as a survival strategy.

Likewise, control can be a gift when it’s offered responsibly. For some people, being held in structure, clear rules, clear agreements, clear leadership feels like relief because their nervous system can finally stop scanning and managing. Structure can be soothing.

Kink as Shadow Integration: Why It Can Work

“Shadow” isn’t only darkness. Shadow is anything you had to disown to stay safe, loved, or accepted. For many, that includes:

- Wanting to feel powerful without guilt.
- Wanting to be desired without performing.
- Wanting intensity without chaos.
- Wanting to submit without shame.
- Wanting to lead without becoming cruel.
- Wanting to receive without earning it.

Kink, when conscious, lets you practice those energies with clarity and containment. It says: We’re going to name what’s here, agree to what it means, set limits, and stay present.

That process alone dissolves a lot of shame, because shame thrives in secrecy and confusion. Consciousness brings light, language, and choice.

The Shame Dissolves when Desire Is Met with Consciousness

Here's what that really means in human terms:

- Instead of hiding what you want, you learn to name it.
- Instead of acting from compulsion, you learn to choose.
- Instead of using intensity to escape your feelings, you learn to stay present with your feelings.
- Instead of reenacting old power dynamics unconsciously, you learn to design dynamics intentionally.

When people stop treating their desire like evidence of brokenness, they stop splitting themselves in half. And wholeness is inherently regulating.

Why Some People Reclaim Vitality and Authenticity Through Kink and BDSM

Many people, especially those who've lived inside "good person" conditioning, have spent years being dissociated from their own hunger. They've been trained to be appropriate, polite, accommodating, or "normal." They may be functional, successful, even admirable ... and internally flat, numb, or secretly resentful.

When they finally give themselves permission to explore desire consciously (not recklessly), something wakes up:

- Vitality returns because the life force is no longer being suppressed.
- Confidence returns because truth replaces self-betrayal.
- Authenticity returns because they stop performing who they think they should be.

This isn't about kink "fixing" anyone. It's about ending the internal war.

The Nonnegotiables: Consent, Boundaries, Communication

Consent

Not assumed. Not implied. Not negotiated in the heat of pressure. Clear, ongoing, and revisitable.

Boundaries

Limits are not mood-killers—they're what make intensity possible. Boundaries create the safety that allows surrender.

Communication

Before, during (as needed), and after. Not just about what happened, but about how it landed.

A simple way to say it: Intensity without communication becomes chaos. Intensity with communication becomes intimacy.

Negotiation Is the Therapy Session Before the Scene

A conscious dynamic usually includes some version of:

- What you want to explore and why (the emotional “yes,” not just the activity).
- Limits and hard no's.
- What words or signals mean stop/slow down.
- Triggers, sensitivities, trauma history as relevant (without oversharing).
- Aftercare needs (what helps you come back to baseline).
- What “success” means (often: presence, not endurance).

Negotiation is where you turn shadow into choice.

Aftercare Is Where Integration Happens

A lot of people think the “important” part is the intensity. But in conscious practice, the integration is often the most important piece. Aftercare is not babying. It's nervous system wisdom. It's the recognition that powerful experiences can open deep places, and the body may need help settling. Aftercare can look like: quiet, reassurance, hydration, warmth, grounding touch (if wanted), talking, journaling, or simply space. The point is: We don't abandon the body afterward.

Red Flags to Name Clearly

Red flags include:

- Disregard for consent or pressure disguised as “you'll like it.”
- Punishing boundaries or use of safe words.
- Refusal to discuss limits or aftercare.

- Using kink to bypass emotional intimacy while calling it “connection.”
- Humiliation used to wound rather than consensually play.
- Anyone who frames “no” as rejection or weakness.

You can say this simply: Anything that erodes consent is not kink. It’s harm wearing a costume.

Trauma and BDSM: A Careful, Mature Framing

Many people with trauma are drawn to kink, and that’s not automatically a problem. Sometimes consensual power exchange can feel reparative. Sometimes it can become reenactment. The difference is consciousness and support.

If exploration consistently leads to dissociation, panic, self-harm urges, or emotional destabilization, that’s a sign to slow down and work with a trained professional. Not because desire is wrong, because the nervous system is asking for more containment.

The Deeper Point: This Is About Relationships, not ‘Acts’

Conscious kink, at its best, is not a collection of activities. It’s a way of relating:

- to power
- to trust
- to surrender
- to boundaries
- to intensity
- to truth

It can become a profound practice of self-knowledge: What do I want? What do I fear? What do I need in order to feel safe while I expand?

And that, fundamentally, is shadow work.

Acceptance Is Not Approval

This distinction matters more than almost anything else in this work.

It means being able to say, *This exists in me*, without immediately trying to justify it, suppress it, spiritualize it, or destroy it. It’s an act of honesty, not indulgence.

Acceptance means *This is part of me.*

It does not mean *I act on everything I feel.*

You can accept aggression without committing violence. In fact, when aggression is acknowledged consciously, it often becomes boundary, clarity, and self-protection instead of explosion.

You can accept desire without causing harm. Desire that is seen and understood tends to become more nuanced, more relational, more full of choice.

This is where many people get stuck. They believe that if they admit something, it will take over. That if they name it, they'll lose control. But the opposite is usually true.

Acceptance creates relationship.

And relationship creates regulation.

When a part of you is acknowledged, it no longer has to scream. It no longer has to hijack behavior to get attention. It can be negotiated with. Integrated. Guided.

Denial, on the other hand, creates compulsion. What is disowned doesn't disappear, it operates from the shadows. It shows up indirectly, impulsively, often in ways that feel out of alignment with who you want to be.

Acceptance doesn't weaken you.

It gives you leverage.

Because once you can say, *This is here*, you can also say, *And I choose how I respond.*

That's not loss of control.

That's maturity.

Acceptance is how you become whole without becoming harmful.

The Gift Hidden in the Shadow

Your shadow isn't empty. It isn't just pain, fear, or darkness. Very often, it carries the exact energy you've been starving yourself of.

Assertiveness that learned it wasn't allowed.

Creativity that felt too much or too strange.

Sexuality that didn't fit the rules you were given.

Wildness that had nowhere to go.

Authenticity that risked rejection.

These parts didn't disappear because they were wrong. They went underground because they weren't welcome. And when vital energy is exiled, something in you goes quiet. Flat. Overcontrolled. Or secretly resentful.

Shadow work isn't about becoming reckless. It's about reclaiming what was disowned so it can be lived consciously. When you stop fighting these parts—when you stop shaming, suppressing, or pretending they aren't there, you don't become less safe.

You become more trustworthy.

Because people can feel when someone is hiding from themselves. They can feel the gap between what's being presented and what's actually there. Integration closes that gap. It brings coherence. What you feel, what you want, what you say, and what you do begin to line up.

An integrated person doesn't spill their shadow onto others. They don't act it out unconsciously or project it onto relationships. They know where their power lives, and they take responsibility for it.

This is the real gift hidden in the shadow: not indulgence, but vitality. Not chaos, but truth. When shadow becomes conscious, it becomes fuel for creativity, for intimacy, for clear boundaries, for a life that feels honest instead of managed.

You don't lose yourself when you integrate your shadow.

You recover yourself.

And that recovery is what allows you to show up whole without pretending, without splitting, without leaving parts of yourself behind.

Simple Daily Shadow Practices

Shadow work doesn't have to be intense or dramatic to be effective. In fact, it works best when it's woven into ordinary moments, approached with curiosity rather than force.

Journaling

Once a day, or even a few times a week, ask yourself: What part of me am I afraid to show today?

Write without censoring. This isn't about being eloquent or insightful. It's about honesty. Often what appears first is discomfort, not clarity. Stay with it long enough to let the truth surface.

Mirror Work

Take a moment to look at yourself in the mirror, not to evaluate or correct, but to acknowledge.

You might say quietly or out loud: I see all of you, and you are welcome here.

If resistance or embarrassment arises, that's part of the practice. You're not trying to feel confident; you're practicing inclusion.

Creative Expression

Give your shadow form. Let it move through your body, your hands, or your voice. This might look like free movement, drawing without a plan, writing unfiltered, or making sound. Don't aim for meaning or beauty. Let expression be the point. When shadow has a form, it no longer has to act out.

These practices aren't about fixing yourself. They're about staying in relationship with all of who you are. And with consistency, that relationship becomes less charged, more honest, and far more spacious.

The Truth About the Shadow

Your shadow is not the enemy.

It is the part of you that was never allowed to come home.

It learned to wait in the dark because there was nowhere safe for it to belong. It carried what couldn't be spoken, felt, or wanted out loud. And from that place of exile, it learned to knock in other ways.

When you welcome the shadow with awareness and responsibility, something profound happens. It no longer has to control you from the edges. It no longer needs to surprise you or act through compulsion. Seen and held, it softens. It becomes an ally offering honesty, vitality, and depth instead of disruption.

Nothing about you is broken.

You were never too much or not enough.

You were taught to fear your own wholeness.

But wholeness is not chaos.

It is coherence.

It is power with presence.

It is truth without exile.

And it is time to reclaim it.

Phase 6: INTEGRATE

Bring All Parts Home

By the time you arrive at integration, something subtle but profound has already shifted.

You're no longer trying to escape yourself.

Earlier in this journey, everything required effort. Effort to calm your body. Effort to feel without being overwhelmed. Effort to stop judging yourself. Effort to face parts of you that felt frightening, shameful, or overwhelming. Healing felt like work because, in many ways, it was.

Integration feels different.

It's quieter. Slower. Less dramatic. And because of that, people often miss it.

Integration doesn't arrive like a breakthrough or an emotional release. It arrives like relief. Like exhaling after holding your breath for years. Like realizing you're no longer bracing for impact.

This phase isn't about doing more. It's about living differently.

From Survival to Wholeness

For most of your life, your inner world has been organized around survival.

Parts of you took on roles early, roles that made sense at the time. One part learned to stay small. Another learned to perform. Another learned to fight. Another learned to disappear. Each of them stepped in when you didn't yet have choice, power, or safety.

Those parts didn't coordinate with one another. They didn't need to. Their only job was to get you through.

But survival strategies don't naturally evolve into thriving.

What once protected you can later feel like sabotage. The critic that kept you sharp now keeps you exhausted. The protector that numbed pain now numbs pleasure. The performer that earned approval now won't let you rest.

Integration is the moment when survival gives way to leadership.

Not external leadership, but internal.

You Are Not One Voice

One of the most liberating realizations in this work is also one of the simplest:

You are not a single, unified voice inside.

You are a system.

There are parts of you that feel young and frightened, still scanning for safety. Parts that feel angry, defiant, unwilling to be hurt again. Parts that are tender and hopeful. Parts that are strategic and watchful. Parts that crave pleasure. Parts that carry shame. Parts that hold memory in the body. Parts that reach for meaning, connection, or transcendence.

All of them are you.

For years, you may have thought something was wrong because you felt pulled in different directions. One part of you wants closeness, while another panics the moment it arrives. One part longs for sex, while another goes numb or disappears once it begins. One part knows you're exhausted, while another calls you lazy and pushes harder.

That inner contradiction isn't a flaw.

It's what happens when different parts of you learned different survival strategies, and never got the chance to integrate.

Each part believes it's protecting you. Each one carries its own logic, shaped by timing, memory, and experience. When they don't know about each other, they compete for control. The result feels like confusion, self-sabotage, or inner conflict.

Integration doesn't mean silencing these voices or forcing them into agreement. It means learning how to listen without being overtaken. It means allowing each part to be seen, understood, and guided by a grounded adult presence.

When parts are integrated, they stop fighting for the wheel. They begin to cooperate. Fear softens when it's reassured. Anger becomes boundary instead of explosion. Desire becomes choice instead of compulsion. Shame loosens when it's no longer alone.

Wholeness isn't about becoming one voice.

It's about becoming a good listener inside yourself.

And from that place, coherence replaces chaos, because they finally learned how to belong.

Meeting Your Inner Village

Think of your inner world like a village that's been living under chronic stress for a long time.

Everyone is talking at once. Some are shouting. Some are whispering from the edges. No one feels fully heard. The loudest voices of fear, urgency, self-criticism tend to dominate because they learned that volume was the only way to survive. Meanwhile, the most wounded parts retreat, hide, or get locked away entirely because it didn't feel safe to speak.

And there's no clear adult presence guiding the system.

No one is making decisions with the whole in mind.

No one is slowing things down.

No one is saying, *I see what's happening. I've got this.*

Over time, this creates chaos inside. You feel it as anxiety that won't settle, indecision that keeps you stuck, patterns of self-sabotage you don't fully understand, emotional reactions that feel bigger than the moment. You may describe yourself as "fragmented" or "all over the place," wondering why it's so hard to feel aligned or at ease.

But what's actually happening isn't dysfunction, it's mismanagement.

Your inner village has been running without leadership.

Each part stepped in when it had to. Fear learned to scan constantly. Anger learned to push. Shame learned to control. Desire learned to sneak. Withdrawal learned to disappear. None of these parts were trying to ruin your life. They were trying to keep the village alive during difficult times, using whatever tools they had.

Integration begins when you stop trying to exile these parts and start listening to them.

Listening says, *I want to understand why you're here. You don't have to shout anymore to be noticed. I'm here now.*

This is the moment the inner adult begins to emerge as a steward. Someone who can hear fear without being ruled by it. Someone who can feel desire without acting compulsively. Someone who can acknowledge shame without letting it decide your worth.

When parts feel heard, they soften. When they soften, cooperation becomes possible. The village quiets because everyone finally knows they belong.

This is what integration actually looks like. Not perfection. Not uniformity. But relationship. A system that knows how to communicate internally, how to pause, how to respond instead of react.

And slowly, the inner village becomes a place you want to live in.

A place with rhythm instead of chaos.

With leadership instead of emergency.

With belonging instead of exile.

Because every part—even the ones you dislike, even the ones you fear—has been trying, in its own imperfect way, to help.

And when you finally listen, they no longer have to do it alone.

The Common Inner Parts (Revisited)

You've met many of these already, but integration asks you to relate to them differently now.

The Inner Child carries your earliest needs for safety, comfort, play, and reassurance. When activated, this part feels small, overwhelmed, or desperate for connection.

The Inner Teenager formed to protect the child. This part may be rebellious, shut down, sarcastic, or defiant. It learned that needing others was dangerous.

The Critic believes its job is to prevent failure. It uses harsh language because it learned that pressure equals safety.

The Protector steps in when things feel too much. It may numb, distract, withdraw, or escalate to keep pain at bay.

The Performer equates worth with productivity, success, or sexual competence. It's always chasing the next standard.

The Exile holds the memories and emotions that once felt unbearable shame, grief, terror, longing. This part has waited the longest.

And now, increasingly present:

The Integrated Adult, the part of you that can listen without panic, feel without drowning, and choose without force.

Integration isn't about letting the Integrated Adult dominate.

It's about letting it lead.

When Parts Stop Competing

Before integration, parts tend to polarize.

The Child wants closeness. The Protector says it's not safe.

The Performer wants success. The Exile feels unworthy no matter what.

The Shadow wants expression. The Critic brings shame.

This internal tug-of-war is exhausting.

It's also why so many people feel stuck, even after years of insight.

Integration doesn't mean these tensions disappear.

It means they no longer hijack you.

You begin to notice the conflict without being consumed by it. You can hear multiple needs at once. You can make decisions that consider the whole system instead of reacting from the loudest part.

That's maturity.

Integration Is Embodied

This is important:

Integration is not an intellectual achievement.

You don't integrate by understanding your parts better.

You integrate by feeling them without fragmentation.

The body is where integration lives.

When parts are unintegrated, the body tells the story with tightness, numbness, agitation, collapse, sexual shutdown, chronic tension.

As integration deepens, the body softens.

Breath moves more freely. Sensation becomes tolerable. Pleasure becomes accessible. Rest feels possible.

You don't feel perfect.

You feel present.

An Everyday Integration Practice

When you notice discomfort, pause and ask:

What part of me is activated right now?

You don't need to get it "right." Just notice.

Then ask:

What does this part need?

Often, the answer is simple: reassurance, rest, expression, boundaries, permission.

Finally, check in with the Integrated Adult:

What choice supports the whole of me right now?

This small pause changes everything.

Integration in Sexuality

Sex is one of the clearest mirrors for integration because it asks so much of us all at once.

Presence. Sensation. Vulnerability. Power. Surrender. Memory. Desire. It bypasses our stories and goes straight to the nervous system. There's very little room to fake coherence there.

When parts are fragmented, sex becomes complicated, not because something is wrong with your body, but because different parts of you are trying to manage the moment at the same time.

One part reaches for connection, closeness, merging.

Another part tightens, fearing exposure or loss of control.

One part wants to feel deeply.

Another wants to rush, numb, or disappear.

Inside the body, this feels like a contradiction. Desire paired with anxiety. Arousal followed by shutdown. Longing tangled with shame. You may feel confused by your own responses, why you want sex but struggle to stay present, why pleasure appears and then vanishes, why your body reacts in ways that don't match your intentions.

This is why sexual dysfunction is so often about internal conflict, not physical failure. The body isn't betraying you. It's responding to mixed signals inside the system. When parts don't trust each other, the nervous system stays vigilant. And vigilance doesn't allow surrender.

As parts begin to integrate, sexuality changes. This change does not happen dramatically at first, but subtly, unmistakably.

You can feel desire without panic rising alongside it.

You can surrender sensation without losing your sense of self.

You can hold power without needing to dominate or defend.

You can be vulnerable without collapsing or disappearing.

Sex stops feeling like a negotiation between opposing forces and starts feeling like a shared experience inside yourself first, and then with another.

One client said something that captured this shift perfectly:

“For the first time, I feel like the same person before, during, and after sex.”

That's integration.

It's continuity. It's coherence. It's the absence of internal whiplash. Nothing is being left behind. No part is being sacrificed for another. The body doesn't have to split to survive the moment.

And from that place, sexuality becomes less about managing reactions and more about inhabiting yourself fully. You're not performing, monitoring or bracing for what comes next.

You're here. Whole.

Present.

That's what integration feels like in the body.

Integration Doesn't Mean No Conflict

Integration does not mean you'll never struggle again.

You will still get triggered.

Parts will still flare up under stress.

Old patterns may resurface.

The difference is what happens next.

Instead of spiraling into shame or self-attack, you recognize what's happening. You respond with care. You repair more quickly.

You trust yourself to handle what arises.

That trust is everything.

When Integration Feels Out of Reach

Sometimes parts are deeply polarized. The critic is relentless. The protector won't soften. The exile feels too fragile to touch.

This doesn't mean you're failing.

It means you learned these strategies under conditions that didn't allow choice.

Working with a therapist or guide can be invaluable here because some systems need support to reorganize.

No part wants to remain stuck.

They just need to know it's safe to change.

The Role of the Integrated Adult

The Integrated Adult is not cold, it is firm and kind at the same time. Steady enough to hold complexity. Soft enough to stay connected.

This part of you can listen to every internal voice without being ruled by any single one. It doesn't panic when fear speaks or collapse when grief appears. It doesn't shame desire or rush to shut

anger down. Instead, it sets boundaries that protect the whole system. It allows grief, anger, pleasure, and rest to exist without turning any of them into emergencies or moral failures.

The Integrated Adult knows the difference between hearing a part and obeying it. Between honoring a feeling and letting it take over.

It's the part that can say:

I hear you.

I understand why you're afraid.

And I've got this now.

That phrase—I've got this now—isn't dismissal. It's reassurance. It tells the younger parts they don't have to run the show anymore. That someone capable is present. That they're not alone.

This is what internal authority feels like.

A grounded, responsive presence that can choose wisely, act responsibly, and stay in relationship with yourself. even when things are difficult.

A Gentle Daily Rhythm

This is not a routine to perform perfectly. It's a rhythm to return to—a way of staying in relationship with yourself as you move through the day.

Morning

When you wake up, before the day gathers momentum, take a moment to check in. Ask yourself, *Which parts of me are awake today?* You might notice eagerness, resistance, anxiety, hope, or fatigue. You don't need to resolve anything. Just notice. Then ask, *What do they need?* Sometimes the answer is reassurance. Sometimes it's pacing. Sometimes it's simply being acknowledged before the world asks anything of you.

Throughout the Day

As you move through your day, pay attention to moments of tension or reactivity. When something tightens in your body or your mood shifts suddenly, pause if you can, even for a breath or two. Name the part that's activated: This feels like fear. This feels like pressure. This feels like anger. Naming

brings distance without disconnection. Then offer reassurance from your adult presence: *I see you. We're okay. I'm here.*

You're not trying to make the feeling go away. You're letting the part know it doesn't have to escalate to be heard.

Evening

At the end of the day, return to reflection. Ask yourself, *Which parts showed up today? Did they feel heard, or did some get pushed aside?* It's about noticing patterns. Sometimes just naming what didn't get attention is enough to soften it.

Weekly Check-In

Once a week, give yourself more time to listen deeply. Journal if that helps. Speak out loud if that feels more natural. Let your inner family know you're available. You might ask, *What's been hard this week? What needs more care?* You don't need perfect answers. Your willingness to listen is the intervention.

Over time, this rhythm builds trust inside. Parts stop shouting because they know there's a place for them. And slowly, the inner system settles, because nothing is being ignored.

Bringing It All Home

Integration is the quiet miracle of this work. The kind you feel in your body when things stop fighting inside. It's about becoming fully yourself, nothing added, nothing erased.

All parts included.

All voices welcomed.

All needs considered.

What once felt like a contradiction begins to feel like complexity you can hold. The parts that were exiled find their way back. The ones that shouted grow quieter. The ones that hid step forward. And the one who listens, the steady adult presence, learns how to lead with care.

You are no longer a battlefield, constantly negotiating ceasefires between opposing forces. You become a home. A place where different energies can exist without threat. Where fear doesn't have to run the show. Where desire doesn't have to hide. Where anger can become boundary, grief can become truth, and pleasure can become nourishment.

From that place of feeling steady, embodied, whole, you can meet the world without abandoning yourself.

This is the gift of integration. A life lived from the inside out, with yourself as an ally rather than an obstacle.

Phase 7: MASTER

Embody Presence; Live from Your Center

Mastery does not mean you stay centered all the time.

If that were the requirement, none of us would qualify.

Life is messy. It's loud. It's unpredictable. People disappoint us. Our bodies get tired. Old wounds get poked. Stress piles up. You will lose your footing. You will get reactive. You will shut down, snap, overextend, or disappear sometimes.

That's not failure.

That's being human.

Real mastery is about knowing when you've drifted and trusting yourself to return.

This final phase is a way of living. It's what happens when everything you've learned stops being something you "do" and starts becoming how you move through the world.

What Mastery Actually Is

For a lot of people, the word *mastery* brings up images of control, discipline, or dominance. Like you're supposed to rise above emotion, desire, and messiness.

That's not what we're talking about here.

Mastery means:

You notice what's happening inside you instead of being overtaken by it. You feel emotions fully without drowning in them or acting them out sideways. You can pause instead of react. You know how to come back into your body when your mind runs away. You set boundaries without collapsing into guilt or exploding into anger. You show up in intimacy as yourself. You can hold your shadow consciously instead of letting it drive from the back seat.

You live from your Integrated Adult more often than from your wounded parts.

Mastery is not about dominance. It's about relationship with your body, your emotions, your desire, and your life.

Losing Your Center Is Inevitable

I want to normalize something most healing spaces don't: You will lose your center. Not once, over and over again.

A hard conversation.

A stressful workday.

A comment that hits an old wound.

A moment of rejection.

A stretch where you're overtired and under-supported.

Old patterns will surface, and you may catch yourself thinking, *I thought I healed this.*

You probably did.

Healing doesn't mean something never shows up again. It means when it does, it doesn't run your life.

This is the real shift that comes with mastery. Instead of spiraling into shame—*What's wrong with me?*—you recognize what's happening and name it:

I'm off center.

That recognition alone is mastery.

The Practice of Returning

This may be the most important practice you carry forward from this work. Not staying centered, that's unrealistic, but returning.

Returning is a skill. And like any skill, it's built through repetition, not perfection. You don't master it by never drifting. You master it by noticing when you have drifted and coming back without turning that moment into a problem.

Here's what returning looks like in real life.

You're in the middle of your day and suddenly you notice your jaw is clenched. Your breath has gone shallow. Your thoughts are racing. You're replaying a conversation from earlier or planning what you're going to say later. You feel tense, reactive, pulled out of yourself.

That's information.

Instead of pushing through it or judging yourself for being "off," you pause. Even briefly. And you say, internally or out loud, I'm off center.

That simple acknowledgment matters. It shifts you from being inside the reaction to being in relationship with it.

Then you slow things down. Not dramatically. Not in a way that draws attention or requires special conditions. Just enough to come back into your body. You take a breath. You feel your feet on the floor. Your weight in the chair. The physical fact of being here, now.

From that place, you ask one gentle, honest question:

What part of me is activated right now, and what does it need?

Sometimes the answer is rest.

Sometimes it's movement.

Sometimes it's expression—writing, speaking, releasing.

Sometimes it's a boundary.

Sometimes it's reassurance.

And then you respond. Not perfectly. Not heroically. Just honestly. You do the next right thing for your system.

That's returning.

Not fixing yourself or forcing calm. But choosing to come back to yourself, again and again.

And over time, that return becomes familiar. Trustworthy. Something your body knows it can count on.

That's where real regulation lives.

Mastery Is Built Through Boundaries

One of the clearest signs of embodied mastery is how you hold boundaries. Not as rigid walls that keep everyone out, but as something lived, felt, and steady.

Clear boundaries are how you protect your center. They're how you honor your limits without apology or explanation. They allow you to stay connected to yourself while still being in relationship with others. Without them, you may stay connected, but at the cost of yourself.

Most people were never taught how to do this. They learned to say yes when their body was already saying no. They learned to tolerate discomfort to avoid conflict. They learned to smooth things over, keep the peace, and manage other people's feelings even when it meant abandoning their own.

Mastery is unlearning that pattern.

It's learning to pause long enough to notice what's true for you, and to trust that truth. It's recognizing that boundaries aren't rejection or punishment, they're self-respect. They say, *This is where I end and you begin*. And that clarity actually makes relationships safer, not colder.

When boundaries are clear, resentment has less room to grow. Intimacy deepens because you're not showing up half-present or quietly bracing. You're there by choice, not obligation.

This is what mature connection looks like: staying in relationship without losing yourself. And that's not hardness, that's mastery.

Practicing Boundaries in the Body

Boundaries aren't just something you say. They're something you feel. If your body has never learned that it's allowed to say no, or yes, then words alone won't hold when it matters most.

Boundaries are embodied.

Your nervous system needs direct experience of self-protection that doesn't lead to punishment, rejection, or danger. That's why this practice starts in simple, low-stakes moments often when you're alone.

Begin by practicing out loud. Not in your head. Let your body hear you say the words.

"I need space right now."

"That doesn't work for me."

"I want to slow down."

"I'm not available for this conversation."

“Yes, I want that.”

“No, I don’t.”

Notice what happens in your body as you speak. Maybe there’s relief. Maybe tightness. Maybe fear. All of it is information. You’re not trying to feel confident, you’re teaching your system that expression is allowed.

For many people, saying “no” triggers old survival responses: guilt, anxiety, the urge to explain or soften. That doesn’t mean you’re doing it wrong. It means your body learned long ago that boundaries were risky. This practice gently updates that belief.

When you practice boundaries somatically through voice, breath, posture, and sensation, your nervous system learns something essential: Self-protection does not equal danger. Choice does not equal abandonment. Saying what’s true does not automatically cost you connection.

And as that learning settles in, something changes. Your *yes* becomes cleaner. Your *no* becomes steadier. You stop negotiating against yourself before anyone else even speaks.

That’s mastery. Not dominance. Not control. But the quiet confidence of knowing you can honor yourself and stay connected at the same time.

Sustained Awareness (Not Hypervigilance)

Mastery involves awareness, but not the kind that keeps you on edge. This isn’t about scanning for problems, monitoring every thought, or watching yourself so closely that you never relax. That kind of vigilance is just another form of tension.

What we’re talking about here is relaxed attentiveness.

It’s the kind of awareness that feels spacious rather than tight. You’re simply noticing what’s happening. And because you’re noticing early, things don’t have to escalate.

You begin to sense when you’re performing instead of being real. You catch the shift in your body before you react from a wounded part. You feel when your attention starts to drift or your body begins to leave, and you gently bring yourself back, without panic or self-criticism.

In intimacy, this looks like staying present instead of disappearing into your head. Feeling sensation as it unfolds rather than evaluating it. Letting yourself remain connected even when vulnerability deepens.

This kind of awareness isn't exhausting. It doesn't drain you or make you rigid. It's stabilizing. It creates a sense of ground beneath you, a steady reference point you can return to.

It's the difference between being tossed around by waves and realizing you're the ocean they're moving through. The waves still rise and fall, but they no longer define you. And from that place, you can meet whatever comes with far more ease and choice.

Embodied Confidence

Confidence isn't something you think your way into. It's something your body comes to know through experience.

After years of this work, people don't just feel different, they move differently. You can see it before they say a word. Their posture softens and steadies at the same time. Their breath drops lower, fuller. They make eye contact without bracing or performing. They speak without shrinking themselves or puffing themselves up to feel safe.

This isn't arrogance.

It's alignment.

It's the quiet confidence of someone who trusts themselves. Someone whose body knows it doesn't have to defend, impress, or disappear in order to belong.

And this kind of confidence isn't built through big moments. It's built through small, consistent practices that your nervous system can absorb.

Standing in a way that feels grounded, not rigid.

Letting your breath move deeply instead of holding tension in your chest.

Speaking from your belly instead of pushing words out from your throat.

Allowing yourself to take up space physically and emotionally without apology.

Each of these moments sends a message to your body: I'm here. I'm allowed. I'm safe enough to be seen.

Your body leads your mind, not the other way around. And when confidence is embodied, when it's lived rather than performed, your nervous system believes it. From that place, confidence stops being something you try to have and becomes something you simply are.

Mastery in Intimacy

Intimacy is where everything converges.

It's the place where your nervous system, your history, your desire, your shame, your tenderness, your power all meet in the same room. You can do a lot of growth in private. You can read books, understand patterns, practice self-awareness. But intimacy has a way of revealing what's actually integrated, because it asks you to stay present while being seen.

That's why intimacy is such a great teacher.

Without mastery, intimacy often becomes performance—even when you don't mean for it to. You try to be impressive. You try not to fail. You try to manage your partner's experience, their reactions, their pleasure, their approval. You become a mind working overtime inside a body that's trying to keep up. Even if things “work,” you may still feel oddly absent like you weren't really there, just doing what you thought you were supposed to do.

And the cost of that is subtle but real: Pleasure gets thin. Connection gets conditional. Your body stays vigilant instead of receptive.

With mastery, something changes. Not because you become flawless, but because you become available.

Intimacy stops being a performance and becomes a conversation. A real-time exchange between two nervous systems. Two bodies. Two truths.

You're present. You communicate. Not with scripts, but with honesty.

You feel pleasure without guilt or the need to justify it.

You set boundaries without shame because your “no” is no longer a threat to love.

You stay regulated even when intensity rises, because you know how to return to yourself.

You can be vulnerable without losing yourself, because you've learned that closeness doesn't require self-abandonment.

And here's the surprising part: Mastery doesn't make intimacy colder. It makes it safer. And when it's safer, it gets deeper. Because the body relaxes when it knows it won't be forced, performed, or overridden. Safety is what allows surrender. Safety is what allows real pleasure to expand.

When You Forget Everything

There will be moments, sometimes whole days, sometimes weeks, when it feels like you've forgotten everything you've learned here. You'll catch yourself reacting instead of responding. Old patterns will sneak back in. You might lose your center right when it matters most and think, *I should know better by now.*

That moment can feel discouraging. Like all the work disappeared.

It didn't.

Forgetting doesn't erase what you've built. It's part of how this work actually settles in. Healing isn't a straight line where you graduate and never struggle again. It's cyclical. You drift. You remember. You return. And each return strengthens something deeper than memory.

Every time you come back, every time you pause, breathe, and reorient, you reinforce a pathway in your nervous system. You're teaching your body something essential: We know how to come home. Even when we wander. Even when we lose our footing. Even when we forget who we are for a moment.

That knowledge doesn't vanish when you're activated or overwhelmed. It goes underground. It waits. And when you return again maybe a little slower, a little kinder than last time, it deepens.

So when you forget, don't use that moment to turn against yourself. Let it be a reminder of what's already true: You've learned the way back. And knowing how to return is far more powerful than never leaving at all.

The Return to Yourself: Living the Seven Phases of RECLAIM

I want you to pause for a second just to notice yourself.

Notice how you're sitting. Notice your breath. Notice what it feels like to be here, in this moment, having made it to the end of this book.

You may not feel radically different. You may not feel healed, confident, or finished. In fact, if you're honest, you might feel a little quieter than expected.

That's not a problem.

That's actually the point.

RECLAIM was never meant to give you a dramatic before-and-after story. It was meant to give you something far more useful: a way back to yourself.

What This Process Was Really About

On the surface, you just moved through seven phases: Regulation. Expression. Compassion. Love. Acceptance. Integration. Mastery.

But underneath all of that language, something deeper was happening.

You stopped abandoning yourself.

You learned how to feel your body instead of bracing against it.

You let emotion move instead of locking it down.

You turned toward the parts of you that learned to survive instead of judging them.

You practiced loving yourself without needing to earn it.

You stopped fighting your shadow and started listening to it.

You brought your inner world into conversation instead of conflict.

And finally, you learned how to live from your center—not perfectly, but honestly.

That's the real work.

Not fixing yourself.

Not transcending your humanity.

Belonging to yourself again.

Bringing It All Together

Before you leave this book behind, I want to be very clear about something.

The seven phases of RECLAIM are not a ladder. You don't climb them once and move on.

They're places you return to—over and over—throughout a living, changing life.

Some days you'll need regulation.

Some days something old will surface and need expression.

Some days you'll meet a younger part of yourself again.

Some days you'll forget to love yourself and remember halfway through being harsh.

Some days your shadow will show up in a new form.

Some days you'll feel fragmented and need to slow down and integrate.

Some days you'll drift so far from center you won't even notice at first.

That doesn't mean you're failing.

It means you're alive.

Each time you return to one of these phases, you do it with more awareness than before. More choice. More self-trust. The work doesn't repeat because you're stuck—it deepens because you're ready.

Where I Am Now

I am no longer trying to fix or fragment myself.

Sobriety taught me how to stay: inside my body, my emotions, and my life. Not to escape what's uncomfortable, and not to exile parts of myself to survive. Today, I live with an internal honesty I didn't know was possible. The strong parts, the sexual parts, the grieving parts, the protective parts, and the parts that once struggled all belong. Nothing in me needs to be erased to be worthy of love.

As a mother, I lead with presence instead of guilt. As a grandmother, I move with more patience and less urgency, aware of the long arc of life and my place within it. I no longer need to control what unfolds—I get to witness it.

As a wife, I understand intimacy as truth, not endurance. Love is no longer something I perform or sacrifice myself for. It is something I inhabit.

As a certified sexologist, my work is grounded, embodied, and honest. I don't offer fantasy or bypass pain. I guide people back into relationship with their bodies, their desire, and their nervous systems, where real intimacy lives.

I am still learning. Still human. Still becoming.

But I am no longer at war with myself.

Now, if it feels right, place a hand on your chest.

Take one slow breath.

And say quietly or out loud:

I'm here.

Not healed.

Not perfected.

Here.

That's enough.

Welcome home.