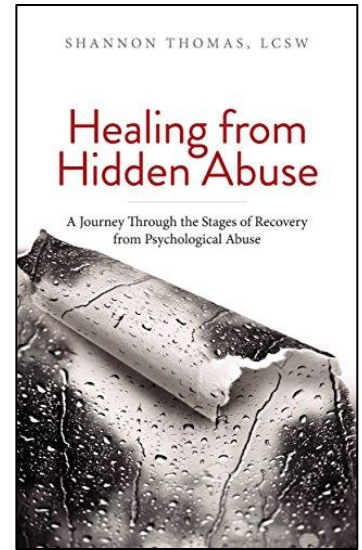


Overcoming Psychological Abuse – A summary of a book by Shannon Thomas

This article is a summary of the book, Healing from Hidden Abuse: A Journey Through the Stages of Recovery from Psychological Abuse, by Shannon Thomas, LCSW. The author is not overtly Christian; however, her writing is supportive of healthy spirituality and she gives indications that she is a Christian. The book is copyright 2016 and available from MAST Publishing House. Dan Hitz compiled this summary. He is a licensed professional counselor, an ordained minister, and the executive director of Reconciliation Ministries of Michigan, Inc.

If you've ever been the target of a psychological abuser, you know the emotional devastation they can cause. Self-doubt and shame can follow the survivor for years after the abuse and cast doubt on their abilities, their character, and even their own mental health. Psychological abusers can be family members, love interests, co-workers, employers, and even leaders within the local church. Abusers are drawn to people who can make them look good. Once trust is gained, they begin to cannibalize the victim and dismantle the very strengths they were originally drawn to. When the target has served his purpose or begins to implement boundaries, he is discarded and a new target is sought. One that can continue to serve the desires of the abuser.

In her book, *Healing from Hidden Abuse*, Shannon Thomas describes the journey a survivor of psychological abuse endures during their relationship with the toxic person, and during their recovery in the aftermath of the abuse. She describes the character traits of abusers who meet the criteria for Narcissistic Personality Disorder and Antisocial Personality Disorder (commonly referred to as a sociopath or psychopath). Thomas writes that far from being helpless victims of emotional brokenness who aren't aware of the damage they cause their victims, psychological abusers fully understand the consequences of their actions and calculate almost every move they make. Abusers know how to look good in front of others, and have "perfected their acting skills" to gain the sympathy and trust of those they want to control. They are masters of self-preservation. They are also masters at gas lighting, charisma, anger, and manipulation. Psychological abusers are often well respected by those who know them only casually. These people have only been the target of their positive public relations campaigns. They've never been allowed to get close enough to the abuser to see their true colors.



Thomas uses the following analogy to describe the differences between narcissists, sociopaths, and psychopaths on page 20 of her book:

A **Narcissist** will run you over and scold you for being in their way. They will endlessly complain about how you damaged their car.

A **Sociopath** will run you over, scold you for being in their way, and smirk because secretly they get entertainment out of the chaos they've created.

A **Psychopath** will go to great lengths and take calculated steps to ensure they run you over, laugh while doing it, and back up to make sure the most damage is done.

Thomas identifies the six stages of recovery from psychological abuse as despair, education, awakening, boundaries, restoration, and maintenance. She does an excellent job of describing each stage of abuse and guiding the reader through each stage. She provides definitions along the way to help the reader understand each step of their journey.

Stage One: Despair – Thomas explains that most survivors don't realize that they have been abused in the beginning of their recovery. They seek help because they are emotionally distressed, depressed, anxious, hopeless, and often suicidal. Recovery begins by ensuring the survivor is in a safe place and not in danger of harming themselves or being harmed by another. Next, the therapist helps the survivor look at the source of her emotional distress and her reactions to it. This can be a stressful phase for the survivor.



Stage Two: Education – Psychological abuse is well calculated and strategized. This makes it difficult for the survivor to recognize and describe. This is part of the abuser's plan. In the education stage, the survivors will learn the techniques used by abusers and gain new words to describe what they have experienced. This will help them identify what they have been through and understand how it has affected them. It will also help them understand the reaction of others who seem to be a part of the abuser's hierarchy and why no one seemed to come to their rescue.

Stage Three: Awakening – This is the point in the survivor's recovery where the light switch seems to go on and he can describe what has happened to him. The emotional fog begins to lift and he sees things more clearly. He no longer feels secluded and trapped in the abuse, and begins to feel a sense of strength in his recovery. Recovery is a long process, and many survivors find themselves fluctuating frequently between the awakening stage and despair. The survivor may also begin to experience anger towards his abuser as he begins to recognize more fully how the abuse has affected him.

Stage Four: Boundaries – This is an important stage where survivors have gained enough emotional strength to overcome the addictive sense that they had to the abusive relationship. She will begin taking steps to move away from the abuser. She may have to choose between no longer having any contact with the abuser, such as ending the relationship altogether or finding new employment; or "detached contact" in the case of those with shared custody of children. Setting boundaries with the abuser can be difficult at times, and the survivor will need support. Some survivors may get stuck in this stage.

Stage Five: Restoration – During this stage, the survivor begins to recover the important aspects of her life that have been robbed or damaged by the abuser. These include financial stability, emotional and mental health, material possessions, and life goals. Restoring these aspects of one's life is a process that can take much longer than survivors anticipate. She will need patience, and the ability to recognize how much progress she has made regardless of what remains to be restored.

Stage Six: Maintenance – In the maintenance stage the survivor feels confident enough to begin enjoying new relationships and challenges with a sense that he will be able to remain safe from future abuse. He will be able to recognize toxic people sooner and use his coping skills to avoid being victimized again. Survivors may occasionally revisit some of the earlier stages of recovery to gain a deeper healing from some of the wounds they have experienced.

If you are a survivor of psychological abuse, Shannon Thomas's book, *Healing from Hidden Abuse*, can be a helpful resource in your recovery.

Although psychological abuse is devastating, there is hope. You can receive healing and thrive through the grace and power of Jesus Christ. If you are a survivor of psychological abuse, or are currently involved in a psychologically abusive relationship, we are Reconciliation Ministries are here to walk with you in your healing journey. Call us at 586.739.5114.