

Transcript of Faithful Brain Foundational Knowledge Lesson 9

Hello I'm Dr. Leonard Matheson.

Today's lesson is a brief introduction to childhood sexual abuse with a focus on my work with a mature woman.

In an earlier lesson I presented two case studies that focus on childhood sexual abuse with young women. Today I like to present an anonymized case study that illustrates one of the subtle but instructive long-term consequences of childhood sexual abuse. I will call my client Candace with the understanding that this is not her real name and that significant aspects of her case have been changed to protect her anonymity.

Candace is a 50-year-old recently married executive recruiter who has been twice divorced. Candace's father died in an auto accident when she was five years old. Her mother was an executive secretary who married her boss a few years later. As a 14-year-old, Candace escaped from her home to live with her grandmother after being encouraged to participate in group sex with her mother and her stepfather and her stepfather's friends. She had a relationship with one of her stepfather's friends that lasted a few months before her grandmother learned about it.

Grandmother stepped in and took Candace to live with her. As she tells it "*grandma save my life*". Except for a few brief visits with her mother, this ended Candace's relationship with her mother for the next 30 years. Candace lived with her grandmother until she married at age 19. She has a daughter and a son from her first marriage. She is estranged from her children and is not permitted to have access to her three grandchildren principally due to the alienation of their father she divorced at age 23.

Her first husband was five years older than Candace and ended the marriage because of what she described to me as our sexual differences. She reported to me that she had difficulty enjoying sex with him unless she was at least slightly inebriated. She described her first husband as boring in bed and reported that both of them had begun secret affairs after the birth of their second child.

Candace married the man with whom she had the affair that broke up her first marriage but they divorced three years later. During her second marriage, she was able to begin attending college and obtained a degree in business after she

and her second husband divorced. Candace lived as a single mother for the next several years raising her children with child support from her first husband who had remarried and taken a job working in the oil industry in Venezuela and Saudi Arabia.

The children traveled with their father during school vacations each year but otherwise she had full responsibility for raising them. When her children were teenagers, Candace and her first husband began to share custody after he returned to the United States as a mid-level executive in an American oil company. Unknown to her, this began their alienation from her apparently actively supported by the children's stepmother. An additional factor was that the lifestyle of the children when they were with their father and stepmother was quite different. Living with three younger stepsiblings in an upscale neighborhood in a much larger home with a big backyard and a swimming pool and receiving their own automobiles on their 16th birthdays.

Candace's new husband is also 50 years old, is a high school teacher with two adult children whose wife died of breast cancer a few years before, I'll call him Dylan. Candace and Dylan are both Christians who met through an online dating website. They participated in premarital counseling at the church they both attended, following the church's requirement that they postpone sexual intimacy until marriage. An important issue in their premarital counseling was the differential between their incomes. Because of her success as an executive recruiter she earns substantially more than her husband.

Candace and Dylan were married about one year before they came in to see me for couples counseling. Both Candace and her husband report that their finances are a major source of friction between them. Before their marriage, they setup a prenuptial agreement that she requested in order to maintain her financial independence. They do not pool their income and are unable to make joint financial decisions that exceed his ability to share 50% of the financial burden. They both report that Candace is very focused on her work she finds very rewarding. Candace's husband reports that she is emotionally distant which she had knowledge is and is concerned about. Candace does not want to get divorced again, but is unsure whether or not she will be able to she puts it get over myself and trust him fully.

“Dylan is much more trustworthy than any other man I've known but I just can't fully give in I'm amazed that the money issue is so important to me and I wish we had dealt with it better before we got married. The prenuptial agreement is

necessary, but it's also a thorn in his side which I fully understand I've got a much nicer car than he does and I want us to buy a nicer home than where living in now but he just can't afford his half on his salary as a teacher. I'm just not sure that I can go all in."

Candace's emotional distance that they both acknowledge shows up in their bedroom. As it was when she was a younger woman, she has difficulty relaxing and enjoying sex without alcohol. Unfortunately, she sometimes drinks too much and falls asleep as he is becoming aroused which is very frustrating for Dylan.

In addition to his frustration with their sex life, Dylan is frustrated about their finances. Although he understands Candace's reluctance to pool their resources, he doesn't want to insist on it due to his concern that she will misunderstand. As he reports to me in front of her,

"Candace's money is her least attractive characteristic. She's beautiful inside and out but I feel like I'm in a Catch-22 whenever we discuss finances, because that's the one thing that I think most causes her to not trust me. We almost can't talk about it because it never ever ends without her withdrawing and me getting angry."

Let me push the pause button here and talk about the interaction of faith and neuroscience in Candace's life and in this marriage. I'd like to begin by quoting from the apostle Paul's first letter to the Corinthians: *"Love is patient, love is kind of love does not envy it does not boast, it is not proud. love does not dishonor others it is not self-seeking it is not easily angered it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth love always protects always trusts always hopes always perseveres. love never fails."*

Now whenever I read these words I wish Paul had introduced this by saying, *"Listen up, this is God honoring love, this is how you were designed to love, pay attention."* Coupled with the importance that Jesus put on loving the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength and loving our neighbor as ourselves, these words are crucial for understanding how to be full human beings, how to be fully alive, how to be fully engaged with love and move closer to God. And if we'd had that introduction, I think we'd take more seriously the importance of oxytocin in bonding love, bonding us to each other in moving us into the future that God's created.

Oxytocin is not merely the cuddle hormone, I hate that phrase. Oxytocin is crucial for human relationships starting with, love the Lord your God with all your heart

and with all your soul with all your mind with all your strength and love your neighbor as yourself and then loving each other in a covenant relationship as Paul's describing it in first Corinthians.

As an infant Candace first experienced love in the moments after birth held by her mother. The powerful love of Candace's exhausted mother was created by a flood of oxytocin in her mother's body at birth as she began to nurse Candace. Oxytocin is a very small neuropeptide that powerfully bonds the brain of the mother to the child so that she would give up her life to protect her child, that is its purpose. Let me say that again because I want you to understand the amazing potency of this brain mechanism and let me say it now about Candace. Oxytocin powerfully bonded the brain of Candace's mother to Candace so that she would give up her life to protect Candace. Oxytocin produces a sacrificial covenant relationship between mother and child. Oxytocin says daughter you are my beloved I will die for you. This is what the brain of Candace's mother tried to do during the first hours and days of Candace's life outside the womb.

I'm wanting to be dramatic about this part of my talk and give it emotional salience so that it will stay with you because this is so central to the God designed experience of exalted human love. Our brains are designed so that we have a pure memory of sacrificial love that begins to be created with our very first breath. The initial neural networks are primed to be devoted to sacrificial covenant love with our first breath.

Oxytocin tries to initiate a relationship between mother and child that mirrors the sacrificial relationship described in the fifth chapter of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, *"Follow God's example therefore as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."*

And so her mother's brain was flooded with oxytocin at her birth and as Candace started to nurse in an attempt to create in Candace's brain a terrifically high standard of unadulterated compelling and protective love.

And so, what went wrong? The shortcomings of Candace's mother that led her to allow her new husband to groom her daughter for childhood sexual abuse and pimp her daughter to his friends probably extend back many generations before Candace was born which is a story for another time. For today I want to focus on how this affected Candace's brain and how the inadequate parental love that Candace experienced led to her inadequacies in adulthood as a wife and mother herself.

But before I get into the neuroscience more deeply let's take a look at the next few verses in the fifth chapter of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, *"But among you there must not even be a hint of sexual immorality or of any kind of impurity or of greed because these are improper for God's holy people."* Having read that, I don't think I need to expand on your understanding of how the Bible provides us with guidance about how we are designed to fit into God's created reality and what we need to do to honor that design also, what Candace's mother did not do which dishonored that design.

The developmental brain basis of Candace's difficulties as a wife and mother today should really be expected rather than be a surprise. I think you'll have a better understanding of what I mean by this if I now tell you that oxytocin is also involved in sexual orgasm. After childbirth, the next most potent experience of oxytocin in both the female and male body is provided by sexual orgasm.

One of my theories for adolescent development gone wrong is that we yearn for a return to the iconic love to which we were introduced at birth. We experience a constant falling short of finding that powerful bonding sacrificial covenant love experience for which we yearn. As teenagers and young adults, we can only withstand this yearning with supernatural assistance to maintain celibacy and find a mate and life partner with whom we can re-create the bonding through sexual orgasms within a covenant love.

I take this as a fact of life in which neuroscience is helping us to return to the Bible for very helpful guidance. Because I was only a nominal Christian as a teenager and rejected God entirely as a young adult, I didn't have the supernatural assistance available to me. My failures as a husband in those years sometimes weigh heavily on me. I did eventually find a mate and life partner with whom we re-created God honoring bonding with orgasms within a covenant love as I committed myself to Christ.

Now as a counselor and teacher I attempt to guide others to that wonderful opportunity and also to help parents appreciate the critical importance of protecting the neural circuits devoted to God honoring love until that love can be fully cultivated and realized within a covenant marriage. And by the way this is an important example of how pastors are limited in teaching the full impact of a God guided life in the public square at least in America. The taint of Puritanism that limits our ability to talk about our sexual lives in public cannot be denied.

This is one of the reasons that I am so excited about the ongoing development of Christian counselors as they begin to learn about the interaction of faith and

neuroscience. Obviously Christian counselors need to also be proactive and not simply called on after the fact to pick up the pieces and try to mend broken marriages. I hope that those of you who are listening who work with youth in churches can begin to get serious about developing rational arguments for celibacy built on a foundation of neuroscience that can help young people make the right choices “*just say no*” is useless.

I get very frustrated by the sequestration of Christian counselors to the sidelines of the local church. My own pastor is an exception because he began his career as a Christian counselor and God led him to pastoring. But even he must parse his messages for the lowest common denominator of the sensibilities of his listeners which allows him to maintain a large following that he can gradually guide. But that same pace of pastoral guidance really should not be applied to the work of youth pastors because adolescent development is so brief.

The window of neuroconsolidation of the adolescent's values needs to be feared and respected, with youth pastors feeling a sense of urgency that I hope would compel them to be courageous enough to broach these topics and make the case for celibacy until marriage.

Speaking from my own experience, the depth of love reinforced by the sharing of oxytocin and the other bonding neurochemicals during loving sexual intercourse greatly eclipses the love available outside of a covenant relationship especially one that is sexually active. We develop spurious neural networks that takes some time to overcome as we work later in life to abandon ourselves to sacrificial covenant relationships.

Returning to my client Candace and her difficulties as a wife and mother and her concerns about her limitations in her relationship with Dylan a man who is much more trustworthy than any of the other man that she has met, what can we do as counselors. Well it's pretty clear that Candace has had some horrible experiences as a teenager that have caused her to have difficulty with trusting others.

Her mother and her stepfather trampled all over what should have been covenant relationships with her. This brought about a natural self protective response that led to ambivalent emancipation and her first marriage. I call it ambivalent emancipation because, on the one hand she had a strong desire to take care of herself as an independent person, while on the other hand she yearned to have a trusting loving relationship with her husband.

In her first marriage she tried to resolve this ambivalence by facilitating sexual intimacy with the use of alcohol. She got pregnant and delivered two children which again introduced her to oxytocin but she had already developed several protections and limitations in her relationship with her husband that neurochemicals couldn't bridge because she did not call upon God to help her.

Candace yearned for that completion outside of her marriage and thought she had found it in an affair that resulted in her second marriage, but was sorely disappointed in became divorced soon thereafter. Candace eventually drifted back to the church and began to renew her relationship with God and became baptized in her late 40s. But she had given up on love when she found herself at middle-age, lonely and estranged from her children and grandchildren and she turned to the Internet that God used to introduce her to Dylan.

By the way, I actually believe that God used the Internet to introduce Candace to Dylan and I told her so. Candace laughed, but couldn't dismiss God's supernatural activity in her life because she had started on a rational faith journey guided by a healthy church family with good teaching pastors and an active church community that explored the Bible and other books that helped her unpack healthy Christian living.

At the time she met Dylan, it was clear to Candace that celibacy before marriage was necessary and finding Dylan willing to honor that she entered into a deeper relationship that led to their marriage. But now, in their marriage she finds herself with some ancient neural networks that are been impaired by her imperfect parents extending back generations compounded by her first two marriages.

Before I continue with Candace, I just want to ask you to consider how all of us have imperfect parents extending back generations. I want you to do this because unless we take responsibility for what limits us in our relationships it's not reasonable to expect that we can actually resolve those issues and move closer to synchrony with God's created reality even if we have a spouse who is more trustworthy than our imperfect parents.

So what did I do with Candace who was now married and has a spouse who is much more trustworthy than her imperfect parents. Well first of all, I affirmed her willingness to change, her maturity and approaching the difficulties in her marriage proactively. In my experience, most people wait until it's too late and want to feel better rather than get better. Candace was refreshing in this regard.

So following the faithful brain model we began Candace's neural reintegration by inviting God to direct it. I had her study the song of Solomon, Ephesians and First Corinthians in the Celebrate Recovery Bible. There is tremendous depth in these books concerning marriage and sexuality. My purpose in having her study these was to get her to begin to rely on them for guidance helping her begin to turn to the Bible for a new standard for love and marriage.

The Celebrate Recovery version of the NIV Bible was developed at Saddleback church to facilitate the celebrate recovery program. It provides excellent examples of characters in the Bible as well as people in modern life that we can use to deepen our faith and become more like Christ. After we made progress over several weeks with the Bible study, I used the healthy hippocampus exercise with Candace. Among the 24 character strengths, Candace identified bravery as a low level character strength on which she wanted to work. The healthy hippocampus exercise required her to identify three episodes every day in which she was more courageous today or more brave today than she was yesterday and to recall those episodes just before she drops off to sleep. This puts information regarding her growing courage and bravery into her hippocampi without information to compete with it increasing the likelihood that neuroconsolidation will help strengthen her neural networks devoted to bravery and courage. She began doing this every night with an assignment to continue for 30 nights.

There is a subtly manipulative aspect of the healthy hippocampus exercise. Identifying three episodes every day in which we demonstrate more of the character strength today than yesterday is actually fairly difficult. Keep in mind that this is a relatively weak character strength. We can do one of those or perhaps two without too much difficulty but getting to three requires that we actually change our behavior and of course it's not adequate simply to change our self-image our self-image has to be consistent with our behavior.

As character strengths develop, our research shows the quality-of-life gradually improves because character strengths are positive aspects of our makeup that tend to make us better people.

As Candace made progress with developing her character strengths of bravery and courage, I began the Values-Based Goaling exercise with her. This turned out to be pivotal in her life. In goaling we take the position as the scribe for the client to ask the question, "*what do you want most out of life?*" and carefully listen to the client's responses, to record them verbatim. After 12 to 15 goal statements

are recorded, we help the client sharpen the statements to make each statement's meaning clear and then go through a process of reverse prioritization from least important to most important.

Among the 15 goals, Candace had two that were especially interesting. *"I want to have a God honoring and successful marriage"* and *"I want to maintain my financial independence"*. The reverse prioritization process that followed was exciting and upsetting and illuminating for Candace. Remember that values-based goaling leads us to a closer examination of the client's core values.

For Christians who are active in their faith as was Candace over the last several years, these core values reflect the image of God. Some of the values provide a bright reflection and others provide a dim reflection. The impact of allowing Jesus to be our guide after we have accepted him as our Lord and Savior shows up in the prioritization of our goals. To the degree that the Christian client is able to implement God honoring goals that reflect their core values he or she more easily fits into God's created reality and her quality-of-life gradually improves.

So let's take a look again at those two goals of Candace and let me ask you to imagine their juxtaposition one to the other. *"I want to have a God honoring and successful marriage."*, *"I want to maintain my financial independence."* Both of these reflect important core values. Their juxtaposition made Candace very uncomfortable. She came face-to-face with the difficulties that she was having with trusting God and so I slowed us down and asked her to take two weeks off praying about her goals each morning.

I prohibited her from sharing her progress in goaling with anyone including Dylan. I wanted her to develop as much clarity as she could to resolve the juxtaposition in order to make a commitment to proceed. As it turned out, when she returned from a two-week hiatus from our counseling she had developed clarity about the importance of both of these goals juxtaposed to her other 13 goals, but could still not make a commitment to put one of these above the other. As she told me, *"I just can't go back!"* I seized on this and affirmed her fear commenting that I'm delighted that you recognize that you don't need to go back just forward into the brighter life that God has in store for you, and then we prayed. As is often the case with me and my clients I don't remember what we prayed but I'm sure I thanked God for being fully engaged with us in our turmoil and loving us in spite of ourselves.

After we prayed I asked Candace to reflect on how the healthy hippocampus exercise was being integrated with values-based Goaling. I pointed out to her

that these were simply tools that she had chosen to use and the guidance to the tools and interwork with the tools was within the context of her relationship with God. As such, the use of these tools was promoting vertical integration to allow her to be more comfortable in her own skin, horizontal integration to give her more clarity of thought and creativity in approaching her new life differently than her old habits dictated, and coronal or social and relational integration to engage her with Dylan and other healthy people who respected her and loved her and would be much less likely to selfishly trespass on her sexuality and her emotionality that she had experienced as an adolescent and young adult.

We discussed this at a conceptual level, but I could see that she was consolidating this information much more deeply. I suggested to her that she imagine a conversation in our office with her grandmother long since dead. I had her play both roles, switching from one chair to the other using the empty chair technique. As she got into the exercise her face and body lightened and she abruptly stood up straight and stared with eyes wide open out the windows of my office, barely breathing. *"I feel so alive, so light, so aware. Thank you grandma"* and she began to softly cry standing there looking out the window.

I sat there quietly as she cried and then began to giggle and then began to laugh and then I began to laugh with her. I asked her if she was ready to have a conversation with Dylan and she said, *"Yes I am, I'm still not real sure but I want to move forward and I'm going to ask him to pray with me."*

Candace and Dylan met with me several more times and have gone on to have what they report to me is an exciting covenant marriage. She now touches base with me every several months and has gone on through two annual iterations of the Goaling process.

Notice that have not told you how she resolved the juxtaposition. That's because her resolution of the juxtaposition is between her and God and her husband. I know that she will hear this lesson and I want to keep out of their way.

Even without knowing the resolution that she chose, I think you can still see the value of the faithful brain tools and the importance of putting God first to begin our vertical integration.

Thank you for listening. I hope these lessons are helpful to you.