Case Study:
Harper Wrestles with Other-Imposed Shame

Harper grew up in a tight-knit, small town community. In her family, nobody moved away. They all stayed local and gathered for lunch every Sunday after church. In her early years, it was wonderful. She knew everybody and everybody knew her. Until she was 10 years old, Harper thought the world was a safe place to explore and that it was fun to be curious about people. She had no fear in asking questions, because she wasn't afraid of what people might ask her in return.

It was common for family members to babysit when Harpers parents took one of their frequent business trips. Harper's uncle was a frequent babysitter. She loved it at his place. Her uncle had lots of animals and a big backyard to explore. Then he started to make her uncomfortable.

It began with awkward compliments about her appearance and body. She didn't like how he smiled when he said these things. There were innuendos that she didn't understand. This made her feel stupid and more uncomfortable.

When the touching started, he blamed her, "Why do you tempt me? Why do you make me do these things?" When the abuse moved beyond fondling, her uncle used intimidation to silence her, "You're stupid, little, and insignificant. No one would believe you if you said anything. If you say anything, they'll send me to jail and your mother (my sister) will never forgive you. You would be the one who broke up our family."

These messages might seem irrational to an adult, but to a 10-year-old they ring true. Harper was small. At her age of cognitive development, it was natural for Harper to be afraid anything she was a part of was her fault. People did often give a placating smile to Harper's fanciful thoughts and playful what-ifs.

The abuse from her uncle lasted for 3 years. It became predictable and rhythmic; each time her parents were out of town, her uncle volunteered to babysit, and more abuse happened. It was as predictable as her school routine and the rhythm of services at church. The predictability of it made Harper wonder if she should be okay with it. She wondered: *If this was bad, wouldn't somebody do something?*

At age 13, Harper mustered the courage to confide in her mother and ask if she could not go to her uncle's house anymore. Tragically, her mother's response was to prioritize the family's reputation over Harper's wellbeing. Her mom said, "You shouldn't say things like that about your uncle. What an awful thing to say! You don't understand what can happen when you say things like this." Harper felt guilty for talking about the abuse.

But that is when the abuse stopped. Harper wasn't allowed at her uncle's house anymore. She was so stunned by her mother's rebuke that Harper didn't realize this meant that her mom (at least partially) believed her.

Over the next couple of years, as Harper was in church, she heard many sermons and youth group messages about purity. Every time she felt ashamed. She believed she had already lost her purity. In her 14-year-old mind, the logic was clear, "The Bible says I shouldn't do that. I did that. God is mad at me." No amount of

repentance could make the sense of condemnation go away. If God was anything like her mother, even her prayers were offensive to God.

At age 17, Harper began to date. She really like the guy. There was part of her that was relieved that a guy would be interested in her after what she had done with her uncle. They dated for 10 months and even started to say, "I love you." On dates, she and her boyfriend would kiss. He started to touch her in ways comparable to how her uncle had initially touched her. She froze. Her boyfriend felt rejected. Harper felt bad for making him feel bad. He pressured her to go further. Over the next couple of months, they crossed several lines Harper didn't want to cross.

Harper's boyfriend argued with her resistance, "I have needs… A good girlfriend would care about my needs… Why are you being such a prude? It's like you don't even enjoy kissing any more... [Harper cries] I'm sorry. I'll try to be more understanding if you'll try to be more affectionate… You kissed me first this time, so why are you pulling back… You shouldn't dress so pretty if you don't want me to find you irresistible." Finally, he broke up with Harper said it was because, "You're just no fun anymore."

Harper was brokenhearted. More than her first breakup, she felt defective and rejected. Ever since things started with her uncle, she doubted whether a good guy would like her. This proved her doubts were true. Even when a good guy liked her, she couldn't keep him happy. Now, she had crossed more lines, and this made it even less likely that a good guy would ever be interested in her.

In college, Harper started to pay attention to the news more. Frequently there was a news story about a famous person who was involved in some form of sexual misconduct. If he was a conversative man, conservative news networks vilified the motives of the woman coming forward. If he was a liberal man, liberal news networks did the same. Either way, the message was clear: the women like her were bad and deserved rejection.

Harper's mood grew dark. She felt dirty, like she contaminated any social circle she was in. Her conscience was too strong to enjoy the party crowd. Her conscience was too loud to feel a sense of belonging with the Christians groups on campus. Harper became isolated, depressed, and haunted by thoughts of self-harm. She looked in the mirror and saw a damaged girl unworthy of love, so she started to avoid mirrors and her reflection in windows as she walked to classes. That meant she looked at the ground a lot.

Eventually, the pain of living this way compelled her to reach out for help. She remembered you from church. She remembered that you were nice and pleasant toward her. She remembered you were someone that other people said was easy to talk to. Harper tells you her story and in a hollow voice asks, "Can you help me? If you think you could, what would help even look like?"

Exercise: Read through this case study again. Mark each point where shame enters Harper's life. Notice the multiple people and events which imposed shame, and the number of ways shame is compounded by others or reinforced by Harper. Considered the normal parts of Harper's life that begin to reinforce the other-imposed shame that she feels.