

# THE TRY SOFTER GUIDED JOURNEY

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A Soulful Companion to Healing

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AUNDI KOLBER MA  
LPC

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*Think Well. Live Well. Be Well.*



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*The Try Softer Guided Journey: A Soulful Companion to Healing*

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# INTRODUCTION

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THE OTHER MORNING I AWOKE BEFORE THE SUN. An anxious thought was twirling in my mind and wouldn't quit reverberating. It wasn't about anything I could actually change, mind you. Just one of those pesky in-between-sleep-and-consciousness ideas. Though it was a Saturday and I had no need to wake for some time, I almost decided to get out of bed just to make it stop. Then as I sat up in a morning haze, a calm inner voice said, *It's okay, Aundi. You don't need to figure it out right now. You can rest.*

Wordlessly, I laid my head back on the pillow and felt my body exhale as sleep found me once again.

Truth be told, I'm not sure whether the voice I heard was from the Spirit or my own compassionate inner self. These days, they work together quite frequently. Regardless, it was exactly what I needed in those early morning hours. Later that day I shared the experience with my husband, Brendan, and tears unexpectedly filled my eyes. For me, seeing the continuation of all

the ways we can heal and move toward wholeness felt like a tiny Ebenezer of God's faithfulness. I don't think there will ever be a time when I won't feel deep gratitude for learning to show up differently in the world.

Learning to try softer—that is, to cultivate compassionate attention for our whole selves—has been a crucial element of that healing. Even as I write today, our country is neck-deep in a global pandemic, issues of racial injustice, and political unrest—and for the first time ever, my husband and I are considering homeschooling. We are grateful and privileged to have the opportunity to consider how we educate our kiddos. Yet it's still a bit overwhelming. In the midst of so much individual and collective turmoil, I'm finding that I need the message of “try softer” more than ever. I need to remember it's okay to honor and attend to the information my body gives me. I need to recall that my value is not, and has never been, based on what I produce. It's essential I remember that embodying a gentle posture with myself allows me to more deeply and attentively love others in my life too.

The reality is, I won't ever graduate from trying softer. This is the work of my life—of being alive. And this, too, is grace. It is a gift to know we are constantly invited into a compassionate posture, not so we can stay stuck, but so we can live into who God created us to be. And while it may seem like a paradox, I believe now is exactly the time when we need to cultivate tenderness and compassion for the pain that exists in the world—not only for others but also for ourselves.

I want this for you, too, dear one. If you're reading these words, you're likely on the same path as I am: a nonlinear journey of hard-earned steps toward wholeness, compassion, and inner healing. Whether you've read *Try Softer* and feel ready to dig deeper into its principles or you've been doing this work for a while and are looking for more guided support, I welcome you. I hope you see these pages as a gentle and accessible invitation to further learning. I pray this work feels like an exhale to your soul, and that you, too,



can learn to be with yourself differently. And most of all, I hope that when tender wounds from your life surface, you'll steward grace toward them in the same way our good God already does.

## A GENTLE GUIDE

If you'll allow me to be blunt, I'm not typically a big fan of workbooks. I know, I know . . . here I am writing one. But here's why I've tended to stay away from them in the past: They don't always lend themselves to the flexibility that's needed to attune to each of our stories, bodies, and spirits. The questions or exercises presented can sometimes feel like rigid tasks we have to complete even if they feel overwhelming, like measures or standards we *have* to meet by the end of the book in order to truly heal. And as you may know from reading *Try Softer*, white-knuckling like this—forcing ourselves to engage when our bodies and spirits don't feel safe to do so—often only ends in staying stuck, or at worst, experiencing further trauma and pain.

With this in mind, you will notice that I do all that I can to give you as much choice as possible as you engage with this material. This is not by accident. As we talk about in *Try Softer*, choice is crucial to learning to pay compassionate attention to oneself; as you move through this content, I want you to feel free to make it work for you.

In each session, you'll find several invitations to help you more deeply process the content—invitations that are designed to engage and explore your inner world, your creativity, and your hopes for the future. As much as you're able, listen to the information and wisdom that your body is communicating, and honor that. Give yourself permission to go slow; if you feel overwhelmed, you can skip questions—even entire sections!—and come back to them if or when you can.

Trying softer can be empowering, freeing, and life-giving. And yet some elements of the journey can be difficult, deep, and heavy. My prayer is that

the words and practices ahead will empower you for the fullness of the *sacred* work before you. May this guided journey be a gentle support, a companion helping you come home to yourself as you decide the route and set the pace for your journey.

Here's a more detailed look at what you can expect along the way.

## Holding Space for Our Stories

One of the most beautiful concepts I've come to learn, both professionally and personally, is that stories change and move us. Not only that; we also carry our own stories of lived experiences in our bodies. At the beginning of each session, to help us more deeply combine and integrate concepts from *Try Softer*, you'll find a short personal reflection to help you continue processing concepts learned in the corresponding *Try Softer* chapters. You can also find free, short video introductions for each of these sessions on my website—[aundikolber.com/videos](http://aundikolber.com/videos).

## Body-Centered Exercise

The work we do in *Try Softer*—it's not for the faint of heart. It can be hard and painful, deep soul work that requires compassion and gentleness. We learned in *Try Softer* how to check in with ourselves and our bodies, and while I invite you to do this throughout the guide, each session will also have space to explicitly focus on our bodies. These practices are an extension of what you'll have learned in the corresponding chapters of *Try Softer* and are meant to help you more deeply anchor the content we're working through in your whole self. With that said, safety is key: You'll notice that I often provide cues to make sure we're accessing body work in a way and pace that feels doable to you. Please know that regardless of the extent to which you engage in the practices I provide, by just honoring the pace of your body, you are already beginning to try softer.

### Invitation to Reflect and Discuss

While much of the work we do with trying softer is individual, we also know that God wired our bodies for interpersonal connection and coregulation. If you want to do this work in an authentic and supportive group environment, you can adapt and facilitate accordingly. These questions are meant to spark introspection and reflection—as well as conversation and sharing to the extent that you feel comfortable. Because this is such vulnerable and personal work, I’ve included a short guide, “Guidance for Group Leaders,” in the back of this book to highlight core components of trauma-informed communication. Especially in groups, creating and maintaining safety is of utmost importance. Be intentional about cultivating a space of trust—and give each other permission to participate and interact with the material *as you personally choose to*. You are the best judge of how much of your story and your experience feels helpful to disclose. My hope is that hearing that you are not alone on this journey of trying softer will be a balm of encouragement to your soul.

### Invitation to Journal

Much of the deep work of compassionate attention happens squarely within your mind, body, and psyche—and this journaling section is one way to continue to attune to your own story. Many of the prompts I’ve written for you here are similar to questions and activities I would delve into if we were sitting in my therapy office. My hope is that as you engage with these questions, they will provide a springboard toward gently holding and honoring the complexities of your personhood.

### Invitation to Create

Have you ever noticed that some experiences are hard to describe with words? Or have you ever felt like words weren’t enough? This can happen to all of us from time to time, but it can be especially true when parts of our stories

have been distressing or traumatic. This is why I want to invite you to use art to gently tap into your right brain, which researchers note is connected to imagery, symbolism, emotion, and sensation.<sup>1</sup> Even when parts of our stories aren't distressing, finding ways to access the right brain can be helpful for continuing to move toward integration and wholeness—for it is from a place of deeper integration that we can continue to pay compassionate attention to the wounds that are still aching.

In the “Invitation to Create” section, you'll find a few ideas for prompts. As always, feel free to adapt these so they best empower you as you honor your story. And as a sidenote, many of us wouldn't consider ourselves artists, and that's okay! As with all our work, the process of creating is as important as what we've created, no matter how it turns out.

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Reader, if I could look into your eyes at this exact moment, this is what I'd say: “I am so proud of you. I am proud that you are willing to engage in this sacred work.” Having counseled many folks and walked on this path for many years myself, I know it's not easy to lean in where it aches. My greatest and audacious hope for you, dear one, is that the work ahead will help you sink deeper into the truthiest truth I know: You are beloved. And because that's true, you can come to these pages knowing that no matter what your story holds, you are already loved by the God of the universe. May this give you profound courage, and may it ground you in goodness as you grow.

YOU  
ARE  
BELOVED



THE GOAL OF TRYING SOFTER  
ISN'T TO BRING ABOUT A QUICK FIX, BUT TO  
EMPOWER US WITH THE FREEDOM TO LIVE IN  
THE HERE & NOW WHILE STILL HONORING  
& TENDING TO THE WOUNDS OF OUR STORIES  
THAT HAVE KEPT US DISCONNECTED FROM  
OUR EXPERIENCES.

*TRY SOFTER, PAGE 20*

## SESSION 1

# THE STORIES WE HOLD IN OUR BODIES

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A Deeper Dive into Chapters 1 and 2 of *Try Softer*

SEVERAL YEARS AGO when I worked with a young woman named Lindsey,<sup>1</sup> she would come into our sessions explaining how excited she was to be in therapy. Some of her friends had given her feedback that at times she seemed disconnected from her emotions, and she wanted to fix that. She wasn't an emotional person, she declared, but she often got heartburn or stomachaches when life was intense. During our initial intake, Lindsey often summarized her family when she was growing up as "pretty perfect" and "super supportive." However, as we processed together in the sessions that followed, Lindsey's emotions curiously remained flat as she shared how "great" her parents were.

Once, as we neared the holidays, I asked Lindsey about how her family celebrated together.

"Hmm," she mused thoughtfully. "Well, I was such a deep feeler as a kid. My mom says I cried all the time. I think it drove my parents nuts. In fact, my dog died when I was eight, and I nearly ruined Christmas because of it."

“Can you tell me more, Lindsey? What do you mean when you say you ‘nearly ruined Christmas?’” I asked.

“Well, when I found out how Max had died, I started crying, and I, well, I guess I couldn’t stop. We had to get to church, so my dad started yelling at me,” Lindsey recalled. “Gosh, I really messed that night up. I can’t believe I overreacted so much. My dad really didn’t like it when I cried, and I’m pretty sure he didn’t like Max that much.” She shrugged matter-of-factly. “So yeah, I mean, pretty typical stuff.”

“Lindsey,” I said to her, as her face remained stoic, “the story you just told me about your family feels incredibly sad—and I’m honored that you’d share it with me—but I’m noticing you don’t seem to have any emotion about it. While you are the only one who can identify what you’re feeling, I’m curious to see if there may be something else going on in your body as you share it.”

“Hmmm. I mean, yeah, I see what you mean. It is a sad story, but I just feel disconnected from it. I guess I feel like I should just be over it by now,” Lindsey explained.

“Okay—would you be willing to try something with me for a second?” I asked her.

“Sure,” she said, nodding.

“Could you take a moment and scan your body, and as you do, can you tell me if you’re noticing any sensations or emotions?” I asked.

As Lindsey did, she shared with me that she felt almost nothing in her body at all. Which, as discussed on pages 32–33 in *Try Softer*, is in itself important and helpful information about Lindsey’s nervous system. As she talked, I tracked and closely attuned to Lindsey’s body language; as a therapist, this is one of the most important ways I can listen. I said something that felt quite bold at the time, but I had a hunch it was accurate.

“Lindsey, feel free to reject this if it doesn’t resonate—but are you sensing any heat or tension in your upper chest?” I asked.

The room was quiet for twenty to thirty seconds before she answered, “Yes, yes, I am. Wait—what? That’s strange . . .”

I asked Lindsey if she could assign an emotion to the sensation she was feeling, and finally she was able to say that a mixture of sadness and shame was coming up for her.

It was a turning point. As our work continued, Lindsey gained the tolerance and skill to be with her body differently and to recognize that her experiences from childhood were significant not just twenty years ago, but even now in the ways her body continued to express her pain. Eventually Lindsey was able to grieve and process the fact that her parents often shamed her for her emotions and the way it shaped her inability to feel emotions in her present-day life.

Our bodies *do* communicate with us; even if we *feel* disconnected, our bodies are holding and witnessing the experiences of our lives—and if we can learn to listen, if we can learn to speak the language of our bodies, we can unlock a whole new understanding of how we move through the world. I talk a lot about my own story in *Try Softer*, how I white-knuckled and ignored what my body was telling me in order to survive. It’s not to say all those experiences from my childhood were bad, but I was often on my own emotionally. White-knuckling became my default reaction—my body did everything it could to get me through a childhood peppered with interpersonal trauma.

My own healing work has centered on finding ways to be grateful for my body, grateful that I was able to figure out how to survive. Even now, I recall with fondness the younger me who truly was doing her best without the kind of support she needed. You see, I didn’t have a choice but to be strong; this is why at that time I had to push myself so hard. But white-knuckling your way through life is akin to having a carrot on a string placed in front of you, while never being able to touch it. You never arrive; it’s never enough.

I realize that it’s incredibly simple to write these words, and a whole different thing to live them. It’s easy for me to tell you that we don’t have to

white-knuckle our way through our lives. It's an entirely different—and more difficult—posture to extend that compassion to myself in moments when I am living as though I were defined by my old narratives.

Sometimes learning the language of our bodies and confronting our stories in this new way can feel scary. It can seem easier to continue white-knuckling our way through life, pushing and pushing; even though we're disconnected, at least we're surviving, right? If we embrace our stories and allow ourselves to feel our feelings, admitting that we're overwhelmed, does that make us weak?

Dear heart, let me assure you—it does not. God is tremendously kind to us and doesn't shame us for our inability to be less than human. Paradoxically, I've learned that our capacity to be with ourselves and our stories is part of what allows us to pay compassionate attention to our experiences. This is why honoring the process matters so deeply; it paves the way for the truest healing.

## BODY-CENTERED EXERCISE

When we notice that we're overwhelmed or disconnected from our bodies as we engage with our stories, one practice we can employ is reaching for things that bring us comfort and ground us in the present moment.

For this exercise, you'll create your own sensory toolbox to have on hand—a collection of some of your favorite things. As you fill your sensory toolbox,<sup>2</sup> think about what feels nurturing to you, what you can focus on to bring you back to the moment after doing the hard work of embracing your story. In my own life, I've learned there are a few tried-and-true treasures that ground me when I'm feeling overwhelmed. If it helps, imagine me doing this work with you as I gather my own nurturing items: decaf chai tea, eucalyptus essential oil, several ridged seashells from the Oregon coast, a beige candle, Sandra McCracken's music playing in the background, and finally—a picture of the Pacific Ocean. And in case you need a reminder, you're worth this kind of care, dear one.



## SESSION 1: THE STORIES WE HOLD IN OUR BODIES

Here are some ideas for your Try Softer sensory toolbox:



**Taste:** gum, mints, tea, etc.



**Sight:** a picture or written words reflecting something that is soothing or nurturing, such as a photo, painting, poetry, Bible verse, or quote. (I love the ocean, so I put a picture of that in my toolbox!)



**Hearing:** instrumental music, hymns, a sound machine, a voice recording or podcast, etc.



**Smell:** essential oils, a tea bag, herbs, etc.



**Touch:** flannel, silk, a rock, sand, sculpting clay, etc.

Throughout our journey together, you can feel free to use your sensory toolbox at any point. Please remember you don't have to wait until you're overwhelmed to utilize this resource—it can be a form of ongoing self-care!

## INVITATION TO REFLECT AND DISCUSS

1. Where do you see that you may be white-knuckling in your life right now? How do you know?

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2. Do you have a sense of what has kept you from engaging with your story until now? If you can, briefly summarize what those reasons might be. Feel free to use one-word descriptions such as *trust* or *support* if this topic feels too overwhelming to dive into.

3. What does it mean to embrace your story? What does safely embracing your story look like in your life?

## SESSION 1: THE STORIES WE HOLD IN OUR BODIES

4. On pages 13–14 of *Try Softer*, I tell the story of Erica, who journeys to find the spaces of her story where she learned to avoid or minimize pain. How does this kind of avoidance show up in your life? Take note of the specific situations where you find yourself frequently minimizing your own experience.

5. What parts of your story do you struggle to believe really matter? What's one step you can take to begin the journey of embracing your story?

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6. On page 15 of *Try Softer*, I say, “The stories we weave and the meaning we make from them create templates for how we understand God, life, others, and ourselves.” In what ways does your story color your experience of God?

7. Where in your story do you feel proud of yourself for what you’ve made it through or how you’ve adapted to change?

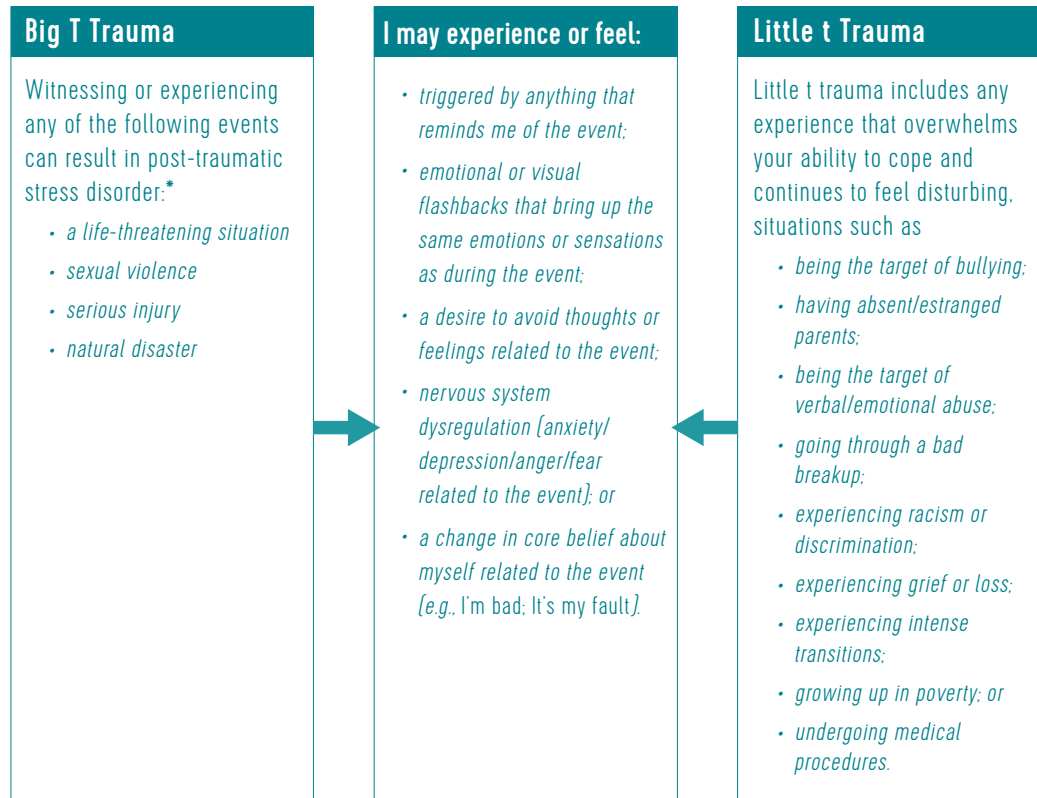
## SESSION 1: THE STORIES WE HOLD IN OUR BODIES

8. How do you feel when you're hyperaroused, or in "fight/flight/fawn<sup>3</sup> mode"? What about when you're hypoaroused, or in "freeze mode"?

9. My definition of trauma is broad and wide-reaching. On page 34 of *Try Softer*, I define trauma as "anything that overwhelms a person's nervous system and ability to cope." While big T trauma tends to be more obvious (and certainly requires care), sometimes little t trauma is overlooked and minimized. Do you feel like you've had instances of little t trauma in your story? If so, spend time reflecting on those instances to the extent that feels helpful to you. How does your body respond to the reframing of your story through the lens of trauma? See the graphic on the following page for helpful prompts.



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\*Please keep in mind that this is not meant as the full diagnostic criteria for PTSD. If you suspect you may have PTSD, please see a mental health professional for a full evaluation.

## SESSION 1: THE STORIES WE HOLD IN OUR BODIES

10. What does it feel like (physically or emotionally) to be disconnected from your body?

11. Reflect on a time when you felt like you weren't just surviving—you were truly *thriving*. What were the circumstances? What do you notice in your body as you remember that time?

## INVITATION TO JOURNAL

As you are comfortable, write out the scene of a time when you white-knuckled your way through something. I encourage you to get as descriptive as possible to really put yourself in the moment. This way, you can begin to become more aware of how you uniquely respond to stressors and overwhelm. (If at any time this exercise feels overwhelming, you may always stop and/or utilize your sensory toolbox to bring you back to the present in a nurturing way.) As you write, take a moment to notice your body. What do you observe? Does it feel tight, warm, tingly, etc.? For now, just notice.

## SESSION 1: THE STORIES WE HOLD IN OUR BODIES

If you feel able, take a moment and pause to consider the reality that your body has been working hard to keep you safe and protected your entire life (even when you haven't felt that way!). God designed our bodies to need and want safety, and this is important and necessary. For many of us, this essential safety was lacking in childhood or in other important relationships later on. When those basic emotional or physical needs are not met, we are designed to adapt in the best way we know how—which may result in experiences like Lindsey's from the beginning reflection. This is a completely normal reaction in the context. When you've finished, I invite you to take a moment and place your hand on your heart, stomach, or head and simply acknowledge—either out loud or to yourself—the work they have done. As you do this, simply notice what it's like to pause.

## INVITATION TO CREATE

Take a moment to pull out the timeline you were asked to create on page 21 of *Try Softer*. Pick an event on the timeline, and give yourself permission to draw a picture about the event as you're able. As you do, consider what colors you are drawn to and whether there are shapes or images that feel appropriate for what you're expressing. Do you want to take up a lot of space or a little on the page?

Another option to consider for this exercise is to draw the entire arc of your story artistically, almost like a bird's-eye view of your entire experience. As with the first option, consider what colors you are drawn to. Are they dark or light? How much of the page do you want to take up? Would it include people, or would it focus more on a place?

Finally, as you create, I want to invite you to be mindful of your body. Are you tense or relaxed? Notice if you feel grounded or disconnected. As always, you can engage to the extent that feels helpful for you.



I HOPE YOU FIND  
SOMEONE WHO SPEAKS  
YOUR LANGUAGE SO YOU DON'T  
HAVE TO SPEND A LIFETIME  
TRANSLATING YOUR SPIRIT.

DR. THEMA BRYANT-DAVIS