

Motherhood - Is It For Me?

*The Comprehensive and Acclaimed
Program for Making a Life-defining Decision*

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Your Step-by-Step Guide to Clarity

Denise L. Carlini & Ann Davidman

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Foreword by Mardy S. Ireland

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MOTHERHOOD – IS IT FOR ME?

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Reference book's website for updates, additional resources, and to access narrated audio files of the 13 guided visualizations contained herein. www.motherhood-is-it-for-me-the-book.com.



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Motherhood Is It For Me?

Your Step-by-Step Guide to Clarity

In Praise of Motherhood – Is It For Me?

Your Step-by-Step Guide to Clarity

“Most women struggling to decide whether or not to have a child make this choice alone, rarely sharing their doubts and fears with anybody because of the shame and anxiety involved in even considering motherhood an option rather than an imperative. Now, they will find the wise, thoughtful and non-judgmental advice they need in *Motherhood – Is It For Me?*, the systematic program designed to guide any woman to the life choice that is right for her.”

~ **Jeanne Safer, PhD**, author of *Beyond Motherhood:*

Choosing a Life without Children

“Welcome to a contemporary guide for the contemporary woman! No longer is it to be assumed that there is a ‘maternal instinct’ in a framework of moral judgment. In this book conflict and ambivalence are accepted as a normalized rite of passage to self-acceptance. From a neutral and nurturing point of view regarding the choice, the authors provide a graceful, twelve-week encounter a woman can make with herself. The writing is accessible and the techniques relevant, all with the goal to help a woman gradually uncover hidden, unconscious parts of herself – echoes from the past – that when integrated into her sense of herself can move her forward regarding a choice about motherhood. This book provides a well recommended journey for the questioning woman.”

~ **Phyllis Tobin, PhD**, author of *Motherhood Optional:*

A Psychological Journey

M O T H E R H O O D - I S I T F O R M E ?

“Motherhood – Is It For Me?” is a book that will help so many women to find their way to peace around whether to have children or not. It is much needed as it addresses one of the core social taboos that make having a frank dialogue about this so difficult – ambivalence. Many involuntarily childless women who seek the support of Gateway Women often come to the painful realization that one of the reasons they didn’t pursue motherhood more actively was because of unexplored ambivalence, often stemming from childhood experiences that left them confused about what motherhood ‘meant.’ I believe that ambivalence is quite normal, yet the prevailing view of society’s pronatalism is that women ‘just know’; a belief that fails to recognize that modern women’s lives and opportunities, including access to birth control, have created choices that make ‘just knowing’ a thing of the past, if ever it truly existed. As a society, we’re only just beginning to create a space and a language for how to navigate these choices, and this thorough, intelligent, empathic, non-judgmental book takes us a big step forward. Whether you wish to explore and be sure of your reasons for choosing to live childfree, or to understand what’s blocking you from actively pursuing the path to motherhood, this book will be your friend and guide. I know many women who will wish it had been around twenty years ago, and I am grateful to Denise and Ann for making it available to the generations of daughters that come after us.”

~ **Jody Day**, founder of Gateway Women and author of
*Living the Life Unexpected: 12 Weeks to Your Plan B for a
Meaningful and Fulfilling Life without Children*
www.gateway-women.com

“When I became a father 35 years ago I made a list of pros and cons of becoming a parent. Although *Motherhood – Is It For Me?* is written for women, I wish I had this book when I was trying to decide if having a child was for me. This is ‘the book’ for a couple that wants to explore all the ‘normal’ ambivalence that every woman (or man) struggles with in making this life-changing decision to become a parent. The open-hearted, non-judgmental approach Ann and Denise have developed offers the most intimate path to your own deepest feelings to discover whether being or not being a parent is right for you. If you read this book you’ll know, for the rest of your life, you seriously answered the question for yourself... is being a parent for me?”

~ **Bruce Linton, PhD**, founder of the Fathers’ Forum,
author of *Finding Time for Fatherhood:*
Men’s Concerns as Parents and *Becoming a Dad:*
How Fatherhood Changes Men

“Becoming a mother is a radical transformation. If you are called to it, if you know you must have a child, then by all means do it. Raising a child is one of the most creative endeavors you could possibly engage in. But if you’re not sure that motherhood is your path, this book – filled with wisdom and compassion – is a sure guide to clarity. The stories and exercises are inviting and inspiring in their depth of understanding. Every word of this carefully constructed program lights your way to the life that is right for you and yours.”

~ **Shoshana Alexander**, author of *In Praise of Single Parents*
and co-author with James Baraz of *Awakening Joy:*
10 Steps to Happiness

M O T H E R H O O D - I S I T F O R M E ?

“Motherhood – Is It For Me?” is the first of its kind! It offers an inward focused, self-directed process designed to put aside outside influences, tend to places inside that may be in the way of inner knowing, and reveal your true desires about whether you want to become a parent. Denise L. Carlini and Ann Davidman’s valuable tool will skillfully help you uncover the roots of your ambivalence and guide you on your unique path to clarity.”

~ **Laura Carroll**, author of *Families of Two* and *The Baby Matrix*

“In Motherhood – Is It For Me? I’ve encountered one of the best examples of what a serious piece of process work can look like. You get this occasionally in many psychology books, but I’ve never encountered anything so thorough or providing such containment. It reminds me of a book I’ve used on how to work with dreams, except this book has so much ‘holding power’ for the feminine reality.”

~ **Carol Shoopman, MFT**, psychotherapist

“As parenthood moves from an assumption to a decision, it’s important to give yourself some reflective time, away from all the external chatter, to examine your motives, stories, and history and decide for yourself whether being a birth parent or adoptive parent is an appropriate role for you. Motherhood – Is It For Me? is your invitation to be an independent decision maker and the creator of your rich experience of life as you make the choice to be a parent or to remain contentedly childfree.”

~ **Laura S. Scott**, author of *Two Is Enough:*

A Couple’s Guide to Living Childless by Choice, and director of the Childless by Choice Project

IN PRAISE OF MOTHERHOOD – IS IT FOR ME?

“This insightful and invaluable book helps women decide what is possibly the biggest decision of their life. I am forever grateful to Denise and Ann for guiding all the women who read this in a way that is thoughtful and very user-friendly.”

~ **Henriette Mantel**, actress, filmmaker, and author/editor of
No Kidding: Women Writers on Bypassing Parenthood

“I’m delighted to see such a fine program in print. I’ve been aware of this program since it was developed over twenty years ago and I know how much it has helped others. My ex-partner and I consciously chose to adopt an infant girl over two decades ago and today I’m a proud grandfather of two. I worked for many years in child protective services and had direct contact with families, often witnessing the pain that comes from neglect and abuse. I’ve also seen parents who lacked skill become more capable as they developed resources to better care for their children. *Motherhood – Is It For Me?* is a valuable contribution toward a better future for all. Thank you Denise and Ann!”

~ **Peter Barrett, MFT**, retired CPS manager, father and grandfather

“I heartily recommend the wise and well-paced approach of *Motherhood – Is It For Me?* The authors respectfully explore the many layers and angles of ambivalence about choosing to become a mother; readers are treated to exercises that are accessible and truly helpful; the personal stories open the heart as well as bring clarity to the mind. A real gem.”

~ **Linda Graham, MFT**, author of *Bouncing Back:*
Rewiring Your Brain for Maximum Resilience and Well-Being

Participants of the Motherhood-Is it for me?[™] program acclaim:

“Motherhood-Is it for me? helped me realize that what was holding me back from seeing what I wanted had nothing to do with the question of whether I wanted children or not. Once I was freed of that paralyzing thought pattern I was able to seek out what was true for me amidst all the clutter, an experience that changed my life for the better and helped me gain clarity on many levels.”



“The program helped me understand what had shaped my hesitation throughout my life. Meeting other women struggling with the same issue was comforting, since I always felt very alone with this before. My partner told me that I became much calmer during the program, which I regarded as the first step of a process.”



“The program was a powerful reminder of who I am amid all of life’s uncertainty and complications. Instead of being overly focused on what I can’t control, I have found that I am really enjoying shaping my life and being grateful for the gifts it brings. I am not at the mercy of my feelings, because I have new tools for understanding, sharing, and moving towards what I want.”



M O T H E R H O O D - I S I T F O R M E ?

“After going through the program, I had a very clear internal sense of direction. I particularly appreciated the approach, which recognized that we had all tried an analytical, ‘pros and cons’ problem-solving approach to answering the question and that hadn’t worked. This process was extremely valuable to help me uncover – and overcome – fears I didn’t even know I had about becoming a mother.”



“I gained invaluable self-awareness and insight and started on a road to self-healing that went far beyond the decision around whether to become a mother. I realized that my ambivalence and doubt is rooted deeply in issues of self-esteem and confidence, which was a revelation.”



“The biggest revelation/blessing I received was the understanding that deep down, I really DID know the answer. It was just that there were some blocks in my life that I had to work through in order to get to the clarity and wisdom that was already there.”



“I was 50/50 and just couldn’t decide. The 12-week program helped heal childhood wounds and identify my true desires amid a confusing array of societal expectations, hopes, fears, wants and needs. My decision feels right and good, and it has freed up tons of energy that was going into a daily see-saw over this.”



“I went on a personalized, nourishing and spiritual journey to not only discover my true feelings about motherhood but also who I am as a woman at a deeper level.”

~ for all women

The Road Not Taken

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

—Robert Frost¹

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Foreword

As a woman there are very few things in your life that, if *they happen* or *they don't happen*, profoundly shape and color your adulthood. I believe that first among these “few things” is the staking out your territory and relationship to “motherhood.” Regardless if you make motherhood happen – or you don’t – the arc of your life will be significantly etched by this decision. This decision is such a “big deal” that some women simply deny it and pretend it’s not something they have to deal with and external circumstances will decide for them. Yet there is no escaping this decision’s life-orienting effects because “motherhood” – to this very 21st century day – still remains a defining feature of how society understands what a woman is – and so a woman will have to answer for her decision or non-decision sooner or later. The bottom line is that as a woman you can take this decision up *actively* or *passively*, but you cannot avoid the life-shaping influence of this thing called “motherhood” – whether it is a yes or a no. And that is why this book is so vital for you if you have not staked out your territory and relationship to motherhood! Let me tell you why.

Foremost is that you, the reader, are not going to feel like you are having to make such a huge decision completely alone, even if you do read this book unaccompanied by others. The authors, who are both therapists, have spent over two decades of work creating this program. They have woven a web of emotional holding into the content of everything that is important to consider in making this decision for yourself. While they

are guiding you step by step through the very salient topics in each of the chapters, you feel their presence with you.

The program topics are organized so they – and you – evolve over twelve weeks such that by its very structure, important time is built in for the unfolding of your personal truth. In each chapter the authors help you learn to trust your own process of unfolding and to honor it, starting with the first chapter, in creating your psychic working space, drawing your family map, and constructing a reliable “comfort place” for yourself to be used throughout the rest of the book. This book is not a simple analysis and list of the crucial elements when considering motherhood – yes or no. In each chapter you *experience yourself*; you don’t just think your way through something. Through guided visualizations, slowly, you plumb your deeper self and then gather that experience into your net by writing about it (and I would offer writing the old fashioned way versus a computer will gather it better!).

Self-care is also a crucial element tended to in each of the chapters’ topics – from the little girl in you (Week 3) and her concerns – to meeting and talking with your mother and father (Weeks 5 and 6) looking for things transmitted across the generational line. Thus, you learn from cumulative experiential processes, a series of writings, and art projects, where your initial yes or no may be coming from inside. You “try on” each decision fully, living with it for a while, and in doing so discover where the fault lines may be in your understandings of motherhood and yourself. By Week 10, the building of your experiences across the ten weeks of work allows the “wise woman” inside you to be more accessible and more ready to speak. And maybe you thought you didn’t have a “wise woman” in there!

F O R E W O R D

If you can read this book with others it will certainly augment your discoveries and emotional experiences, but it is not necessary to do so. You can experience this journey fully because the authors in their writing, and how they guide you through their program, have created a thoughtful, sensitive, and empathic sojourn toward one of the most important decisions you, as a woman, will ever make. I recommend this book to any – and every – woman who has yet to face this decision!

Mardy S. Ireland

Introduction

There are few places women can go to explore their ambivalence about motherhood without being judged or told what to do. Do *you* want to be a mom? It's a simple enough question, unless it's not. If you're ambivalent about this choice, the reason is multilayered, and it can be a lonely struggle with indecision.

Are you struggling with not knowing if you want to have children? Does it seem like everyone else *just knows*, and you don't? Do you need the answer yesterday, if not yesteryear? Or do you simply want to clarify once and for all whether becoming a mother is your calling in life?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, *Motherhood – Is It For Me?* is written for you. We offer this book as your oasis, your sanctuary – a place for you to explore, discover, and know your deepest truth. You might be single, partnered, or married, and of any age, cultural background, or sexual orientation. You might be struggling with conceiving. You might be considering adopting or becoming a biological parent, single parent, part-time parent, co-parent, or step-parent. You – or your partner – might already be a parent and you're considering having another child. Perhaps you've already decided but have mixed feelings that you want to explore.

What if you don't have to figure this one out alone? What if you could know the answer and be at peace? What if you could make your decision without having to impress anyone or make anyone else happy?

M O T H E R H O O D - I S I T F O R M E ?

Whatever the circumstances that brought you to be standing somewhere between *yes* and *no* on the question of motherhood, we've learned that your uncertainty is complex and likely accompanied by powerful feelings such as fear, ambivalence, doubt, confusion, sadness, and shame. Experience has taught us that a deep *knowing* of what you truly *want* must precede making a clear and informed decision.

We're confident that through the step-by-step approach delineated in this book, you'll arrive at the other side of ambivalence just as numerous women already have with the Motherhood-Is it for me?™ program.

You've likely heard someone say, "How can you not know?" with a tone of incredulity that leaves you feeling badly about yourself or just plain angry. But deciding whether or not to have a child is a complex issue; most societies hold strong collective views regarding motherhood, and women who question or reject this path can be subjected to strong judgments. It's very possible that as you explore your fears and wishes about motherhood, someone close to you is finding it hard to understand your need for resolution.

Rest assured that there isn't one place in *Motherhood – Is It For Me?* that you'll be told what you should or shouldn't do. We have no agenda other than helping you find the clarity you seek. *Only you can know what is true for you.* You are the definer of you. You are the expert on you.

We advocate conscious choice because we believe it is the basis of personal freedom. We want you to have the internal freedom that comes with true knowing while offering you the confidence to explore and make discoveries without pressure or judgment. This one-of-a-kind program provides you with a haven for the in-depth exploration of all your feelings associated with the choices around motherhood. Every step of the way we want you to feel validated and safe.

I N T R O D U C T I O N

We present our program in an easy-to-follow format. You'll find pertinent explanations and tried-and-true guidance in addition to fun, creative exercises designed to stir up whatever is inside you that's been blocking your path to clarity. If you want valuable tools to help you heal and enhance your life, this book is for you. If you want guidance through your ambivalence and confusion to find the clarity that has eluded you, this book is for you.

With an open heart and a lucid mind, it will be much easier to make the life-defining decisions you want to be able to make. So no matter where you are on the *yes-no continuum*, we wish you a fruitful journey.

How to Use *Motherhood* – *Is It For Me?*

You're about to embark on a unique process that will almost certainly transform your life. It promises to be a gradual unfolding rather than a process of digging around or overthinking to get what you need; of slowing down internally to catch up emotionally; of allowing the pertinent information to fall into place like the pieces of a puzzle. It's supportive and gently asks you to take risks. The program is based on the premise that your clarity is already there; it's just buried. We're confident of this. *Trusting your process is key.* We know from experience that you can't do it wrong.

The Different Ways to Work This Program

Working on Your Own

The majority of readers will work through the program on their own, and it's designed especially for you to do so. You can go at your own pace, in the safety and comfort of your home. If you've done some introspective work or have had counseling or therapy at some point in your life, you might find that helps here; but it's by no means necessary.

Working One to One

Sharing your discoveries with another woman who also wants to do this work can be very powerful. When considering your choice, make it someone who'll allow you to explore without judgment and give you the space you need when you need it. Will she respect that you have your own path to travel? Is she a reasonably good listener? It can be someone you know, but you might feel less constrained working with someone you don't know or don't know well. Mostly you want to be able to have your *own* uncensored process.

Working with a Group of Women

Many women feel isolated as they struggle with not knowing whether they want a child or children. Working the program with a circle of women who are all exploring this issue can provide invaluable support. If you're fortunate enough to be able to gather together a small group of like-minded women (three to six works best), you can meet weekly in a self-facilitated group.

Working with a Professional

If you're already working with a counselor, psychologist, or psychotherapist, you can take this book to your regular sessions and ask for guidance with the weekly material. It can be very healing to be witnessed and supported through the program by someone who's already earned your trust and wants what's best for you.

Some women who aren't already working with a professional feel, as they progress through the program, that this is the time to find one. Even though the program is designed to provide an ample "container" with its step-by-step guidance, it's possible to become flooded with emotions or

experience a higher-than-anticipated level of distress. If this happens, we recommend that you consider finding a competent professional for support as you complete the program.

Working with Your Spouse or Partner: Not Recommended

If you're partnered, it might occur to you to work the program together, especially if you're both uncertain whether or not you want to become parents. But sharing the details of what you learn with your intimate partner can make the experience more complicated than it needs to be. Discovering your true desire is a deeply personal experience, and it's so very easy to censor yourself unconsciously in the face of your partner's opinions or fears.

What can work is this: Each of you work the program separately but simultaneously, *not* sharing the details with each other as you go along. After both of you complete the program, use the guidelines in Appendix I to help you share how the experience unfolded for each of you. Please note that this book is written for women, so if your partner is male, he'll have to adapt the exercises to fit a male perspective.

To avoid repeating "spouse or partner" each time we refer to your significant other, we use the word *partner* throughout the book to mean the person you are intimately sharing your life with.

Other Special Circumstances

While the majority of women who've used this program over the years were trying to figure out whether or not they wanted children, women with a variety of personal circumstances have found it to be beneficial in decision-making. The program is so adaptable that you

can use it even if you're already well on your path of choice. If you feel unresolved about this path or what led to it, this process is an efficient and gentle way to consider and identify what still needs to be resolved. If you've already become a mother, you can use the program to look back and consider whether your personal desire matched the decision you made. You can also use it to help decide if you want to have a second or third child. If you're going to become a mother and it wasn't your first choice, this program can help you get on board. Honestly!

How to Get the Most from the Program

A Body-Mind Approach to Discovery and Healing

The Motherhood-Is it for me? program uses an experiential body-mind approach to the discovery and healing that occur as the weeks go by. The program is *experiential* in that your embodied experience might elicit a thought in your mind, or a thought in your mind might evoke emotion (we use the words *emotion* and *feeling* interchangeably). Some emotions feel big while others feel small or subtle; either way, emotions are felt through all the cells of your body. Each of the exercises in these pages is designed to help you get in touch with your felt experience of *thoughts and emotions* to access the crucial information you might not otherwise discover. You cannot solely *think* your way to clarity, but you will be able to *feel* your way, step by step, toward knowing your true desire. When you isolate your *desire* first, and then weigh it carefully against your personal circumstances, it's easier to make your *decision*.

Distinguishing between thoughts and feelings can be confusing, and you might have trouble finding the right label for what you feel. If you're new to naming your feelings, think about using the acronym

MeGSS, which stands for Mad, Glad, Sad, or Scared (the *e* is for emotion). These four feelings cover the broadest categories and can, of course, be expanded on. But if labeling feelings is new to you, this shortcut can help.

If you've had a difficult personal history, some emotions can feel dangerous or scary. You may hold a belief that if you let a little emotion out, it will just keep coming, overwhelming you. While this fear is common, it is not what happens. In fact the opposite is true: Constructively releasing pent-up emotions helps you feel more at ease in your body, more emotionally and cognitively receptive and responsive, and less reactive.

“Having Children” and “Becoming a Mother”

We use the expressions *having children* and *becoming a mother* interchangeably throughout the program. It's important that you know what we mean by them. The short answer is this: anything you can think of. The long answer includes adoption, surrogacy, becoming a step-parent or co-parent, and conceiving through reproductive medical intervention. For the purposes of this book, “having children” and “becoming a mother” are not limited to their narrowest meanings.

The Externals

To help focus exclusively on your internal process, we ask that you temporarily set aside all of life's current external circumstances that seem intertwined with your decision. You will receive precise guidance to help you do this. Some of you are thinking about finances, career, relationships, health issues, family pressures, cultural messages, and more. Whatever your *externals* are, they're real and not to be discounted

or minimized. However, for the time it takes to complete the program, you'll need to put them aside and pretend to the best of your ability that they don't exist. Even though this can feel like an impossible task, we ask that you try to do it anyway. Your externals don't play a part in the first step, which is discovering what you truly want for yourself. Thoughtfully and realistically considering your externals is part of step two – making your decision, which comes at the very end of the process.

Containing Your Process

Containing your experience of the program within a specified period of time and space offers you the same feelings of predictability, support, and safety that we'd be cultivating if you were doing this introspective work in person with us. We recommend setting aside the same day and time each week to complete your reading and the related exercises. Pick a physical space for this work that's quiet and free from outside distractions, and set aside at least thirty to forty-five minutes for each time you sit with this book or your journal. You'll benefit if you spend more time than that, even if you use the additional time just to rest. You and your psyche will become accustomed to this regularity, and the rhythm will support you.

There's another aspect of optimal containment that's an extremely important one. We ask that for the entire duration of the program, you refrain from discussing with anyone – especially your partner if you have one – the specifics of what's happening for you. You can of course let others know you're engaged in a program to help you better understand what you want for yourself; just be sure to clarify that you'll be happy to share specifics *after* you finish. We call this aspect of containment *honoring your process*. If you're working with a group, this means

respecting the privacy of the others by not discussing their process with them or others outside the group meeting.

Why do we ask you to contain your experience? The most important reason is that you're engaging in a process that stirs up sensitive and intimate aspects of your inner life. These deserve and need to be protected, especially in the early stages. Sometimes an important piece of information needs time to completely unfold, and sharing it prematurely can disrupt the unfolding. Also, even the most well-intentioned feedback from others can disturb the feeling of safety you've been creating for yourself and push you off track.

If you feel that keeping things from your partner will be difficult for you, ask them to help you keep up the *containment wall*. If you'd like extra support on how to do this, we've included a template in Appendix I that you can use to structure this conversation. You can certainly choose to share all the details once you've completed the program, but for now you're entitled to protect your privacy.

Encouragement When the Going Gets Rough

We just talked about the benefits of not sharing the details of your process while you're in it. That doesn't mean you can't share with a trusted friend or your partner that you're feeling anxious or sad because of something that came up during an exercise. We certainly don't want you to feel isolated. It's always best to ask for support when overwhelmed by uncomfortable feelings. It's when you share specific details that there's room for another person's feelings of concern or unintentional judgment to get in the way of what's unfolding for you. Staying vague about the feelings you're having even while you're seeking emotional support allows for connection without interference.

As you journey along, there will most likely be some bumps in the road. It's quite natural to feel anxious, scared that an answer won't come, discouraged, bored, sad, heartbroken, hopeless, angry, hopeful, or delighted – and everything else in between. It's also natural, at times, to feel more physically tired than you otherwise would. Allow more time for sleeping at night and resting during the day if you can. Remember to make time for nourishment. Use the self-care suggestions presented at the end of each week.

You might also experience what some people describe as *big feelings*. These could surprise you in their intensity, which is often in proportion to how much they've been hidden or pushed down. Try to the best of your ability to let these feelings come forth when you can. Give yourself dedicated time, in a safe place, just to *feel*. If feelings arise when you are at work or tending to important life concerns, even a five-minute private time-out to feel whatever's asking to be felt can be sufficient. You can more carefully tend to your feelings when you have more time.

About three-quarters of the way through this process, some women find themselves with a sense of knowing less than when they started. We've witnessed it over and over again. Each week a significant amount of exploration occurs. By the time you've completed Weeks 8, 9, and 10, so much has been stirred up that you can feel there is too much to fully resolve, leaving you a bit unsettled and wondering if clarity will ever come. If this happens, hang in there. If it doesn't happen, that's perfectly natural too. You're still sorting out all the puzzle pieces that you turned over. You *are* making progress. You *will* resolve the issues that surface and can trust that clarity is on its way. We'll remind you of this when it's appropriate.

For some it becomes too overwhelming to get through the twelve weeks without the help of a professional counselor or psychotherapist. Seeking help does not mean you have failed – quite the contrary. Asking for help can be the most self-caring and wisest choice if you feel you're having trouble with what is emerging. It's natural and normal for intense feelings to arise. If you happen to find yourself repeatedly flooded with feelings or experience constant high levels of distress that do not ebb and flow, we suggest finding a competent counselor or psychotherapist in your area for support as you continue through the program.

Setting the Pace

This program was carefully designed to take at least twelve weeks, and can easily take a few weeks longer. The passage of time is necessary to support the process. It just doesn't work to try and move it along more quickly. Think of yourself at the start as a tight bud that over time and under the right conditions opens to a full and glorious flower. The beauty of that unfolding should never be rushed.

We ask that you put on hold any decisions about the circumstances of your life for the entire time you're engaged in this program. Slowing down may indeed feel uncomfortable at first, but we've learned that allowing yourself time and space to examine and accurately perceive the various aspects of your life is far more effective than generating those pros-and-cons lists that only seem to keep you stuck in an endless loop of indecision. The payoff for slowing down is big: clarity!

Even though the presentation of the program is highly structured, your internal experience will most likely not take a linear path. You can find yourself all over the map with all kinds of feelings and thoughts as

the weeks go by. But however circuitous your process seems, it *is* realistic to expect that at the end of the program you'll know more than you do now. Though the end may not seem grand like a fireworks finale (though it is possible), at the very least you will have embraced many subtle internal shifts that over time add up to something sizeable.

Our Agenda: Your Clarity!

Our only agenda is to help you move from confusion to clarity, from exhaustion to ease, from internal struggle to internal softness. We're not taking a stand on whether or not you should have children or become a mother or participate in raising the next generation. Only you can figure out and finally know what is right for you.

What to Expect Each Week

Except for Week 1, each week is structured similarly. We begin with a brief check-in to help you get grounded and prepared for the week's activities.

Next we ask you to partake in an experiential activity by either reading a guided visualization or recording it so you can listen to it later with your eyes closed. The other option is to have someone you trust read it to you or record it for you. The guided visualizations are the backbone of the program. Their element of surprise is so important to the process that we don't provide a lot of explanation beforehand. Some will feel more valuable to you than others; your response to one might feel flat while another feels so powerful that it's a "game changer." Over the course of the program they assemble a more complete picture than you have now.

Then we ask you to write. The writing exercises allow for greater integration of your experience. If your emotional state feels unmanageable after a writing exercise, we direct you through easy-to-follow steps that help reconnect you to the present moment while grounding you.

Next we discuss specific topics relevant to the week's activities, followed by additional assignments, many of them writing exercises. Some prefer to do their assignments right after completing the guided visualization, and others like to wait until later that week. What's important about the writing assignments is that you *actually write*, and longhand is preferable to using an electronic device, though for additional journaling and organizing your work, feel free to use an electronic device if you prefer. This doesn't mean you will miss something if you use your computer or tablet, and if that's less physically demanding for you by all means do so, but the intimacy with your words that comes from handwriting can add a dimension to your experience. You can even experiment with using your less-dominant hand – yet another dimension to explore.

Over the years we've heard, "Oh, I didn't do the writing, but I gave it a lot of thought." Thinking is good, of course, but so much more happens when you write. The writing itself takes twists and turns in a way that thought processes can't, creating a fertile environment for more and more to emerge. We cannot count the times we've heard women say, "I had no idea I was going to write *that*."

If you find yourself resistant to doing the writing assignments, you might think you're not doing the program correctly or even that you're failing in general. This is not the case. If a writing assignment seems to want to open you up to a feeling you're not quite ready for, write about that – how it is to be in *that* place. Write from where you are and give yourself permission to be exactly where you are at that

moment in time. As you let yourself go with the writing, it will begin to flow more easily.

Following the assignments, there's a section to help you explore what you discovered in more depth. This section starts with reading what you wrote, and we strongly recommend that you do this out loud, slowly, noticing any and all changes in your bodily sensations – physical and emotional. Check in with yourself to see which phrase, sentence, or section feels loaded, juicy, or weighty, or has the most energy. Reading your writing out loud truly takes the experience to another level; you'll know what we mean when you try it.

Next we offer optional exercises to meet your particular level of curiosity. Many of these activities are fun, and they take you deeper into your feelings, but you'll still get the benefits of the program if you don't do any of them. We also suggest something to think about or hold inside for the week, such as “notice how you feel whenever you say no to someone.” These suggestions help you set your intention.

Last, but not least, we remind you to do some self-care that week, and provide some suggestions just in case you need a little help remembering what brings you pleasure, joy, and ease.

Working with the tools we provide in each chapter – guided visualizations combined with writing and other creative exercises – helps unlock unconscious messages and deeply buried feelings to which you don't have everyday access. Keeping a journal readily at hand will benefit you greatly because the more you write, the more thoughts and feelings come to you, revealing more pieces to the puzzle.

At times you may wonder what a particular exercise has to do with deciding whether or not to have children. We ask you to suspend judgment and trust that there's a method to our madness. Every single

activity of this program offers up an essential piece to the puzzle, and each one builds on what's gone before. There's something useful in every reaction or response you have, even when an exercise is hard or seems to fall flat. Bring intention to your process while you suspend judgment, and trust that on a deeper level something is happening. Over time every effort you make serves your path to clarity.

Weeks 2 through 11 end with the stories of two women who struggled in their quests to make a decision. They completed lengthy questionnaires to let you know you're not alone. Reading the stories can feel very validating and comforting; or they might feel like a distraction from your journey, in which case you can choose to go back and read them after you've completed Week 12. You decide how to make them most helpful and useful to you.

This program works! We understand it can be really difficult at times and that it requires ongoing courage. While we refer to it as a passive process – one that requires you only to follow the guide – you have to stay actively engaged to allow and witness the unfolding as it occurs. It's a little like bringing focused attention to relaxing: On the one hand it can seem like not a lot is going on; but on the other, a whole different state is emerging, and you can miss the nuances of it if you aren't paying attention! The more intentionally engaged you can be and the more you show up for yourself, the more you'll discover.

Good luck, and let the journey begin!

The Twelve-Week Program

Week 1



Preparing for Your Journey

*“At the center of your being you have the answer;
you know who you are and you know what you want.”*

–Lao Tzu²

Welcome! You’ve decided this tried-and-tested program is for you. The introduction described in detail how to get the most out of this program. Refer to it anytime you need to. Let’s jump right in after highlighting these important reminders:

- Trust your process; you’ll get more out of it if you do. Let half-clues and stray puzzle pieces exist even if you don’t understand what they mean. Sometimes their meaning isn’t clear until the very end.
- Pace is important. The program is deliberately designed to take a minimum of twelve weeks. Percolation time is built into it. Your psyche and your heart need this time. If you try to speed things up, it will work against you. You might lose ground rather than

gaining time. You can decide to take longer than twelve weeks, which works just fine.

- Try to the best of your ability to be open to uncertainty. Let yourself be okay with not knowing what you will ultimately decide. Most women find that once they grant themselves permission to *not know*, they feel less fatigue and have more energy for exploring. You'll read more about this during Week 2.
- Remember the importance of not sharing the details with others until you complete the program. While this sounds unusual and perhaps not what you're accustomed to, it is for your protection. Containing your process inside yourself, as best you can, reaps greater rewards. If you have a partner, it is especially important to wait until the end to share your experience to avoid clashing with their feelings or agenda about this topic. These could be disruptive to your process or steer you in a direction that is more about them than you.
- At times during the program the content overlaps. It's all intentional, as well as unavoidable. We want to be sure everything is covered in depth so you gain the clarity you want to make a decision you'll feel good about!

What Happens in Week 1

This opening week lays things out in preparation for a successful and fruitful journey. It presents essential information you'll need in the weeks that follow. It's in a slightly different order than subsequent weeks. For example, this "What Happens" section is presented first for orientation. If you feel that two weeks is a more realistic time frame to complete the

groundwork of Week 1, by all means take the time. It's more important that you feel in step with yourself rather than driven by the calendar.

First we talk about your journal and why you need one. Then you'll be directed to create a family map. We introduce four women whose life stories serve as examples. And we invite you to identify what we call the *externals* in your life. Every week we include a guided visualization, and in this first week there are two specially designed to ensure that your initial experience of moving through the process is as gentle as possible. Assignments and writing prompts follow the guided visualizations. In this first week, the writing helps you identify any fears that might be getting in the way of making a decision.

Your Journal

Find a notebook to write in. Or embark on a more purposeful ritual of shopping for and selecting a special journal. Give yourself permission to indulge a bit here. Maybe you'll find something that's already perfect, or choose a journal with a blank cover you can embellish with images and words that speak to you personally. Of course you can't beat the convenience of a laptop or tablet if that's what you prefer.

You'll use your journal in a variety of ways in the coming weeks. Each week we ask you to write after guided visualizations and to complete core writing assignments. We ask you to create a section in your journal called "Things to Revisit Later." No doubt issues will surface and not get fully processed when they arise. They will likely need your attention at another time. We invite you to review such sections later on, so it makes for an easy reference to have one place to look. Keep your journal nearby to record thoughts and feelings that come to you unexpectedly throughout the day.

While the program uses a combination of listening, feeling, experiencing, and writing activities to create the internal stirring that leads to clarity, the approach is weighted toward writing. We have no doubt that much is discovered through thinking things through, but it doesn't compare to what you can access when you're writing in your journal or typing on your computer. When we think, our thoughts can be circular. When we write, new information tends to come forward. The more you write down, the more fresh material emerges.

In addition to using a journal for writing, you can draw pictures, scribble, rant, rave, or record dreams and even daytime fantasies. Pay special attention not only to the storylines of your dreams but also to their feeling and tone. Besides writing, you can work three-dimensionally by making collages, drawings, paintings, cartoons, or doodles. There are no limits except your time and inclination. Use your imagination and give yourself access to images, crayons, paints, pencils, and paper. If you are new to working this way, remember that every child is an artist, and deep inside we all have a child yearning to play. Through writing, creative play, and working with images, more pieces of the puzzle reveal themselves. Whether you write or draw, make sure you use your journal to record your experiences in a physical and concrete way rather than merely thinking, imagining, or meditating.

You might be surprised by the insights that come to you as you fill the pages of your journal. We often hear women say, "I had no idea I was going to write this – it's not what I set out to say." The insights you access can feel like they're coming out of nowhere. They're not – they're coming from your wellspring at the source of your personal desire. At the end of the program you might find it

interesting, enlightening, and helpful to revisit your entire process, from the bubbling up of initial thoughts and feelings to the eventual emergence of clarity. Your journal will help you do this.

Your Family Map

We know from experience that creating a family map will bring you immense benefits, and we strongly recommend that you complete this project using the instructions below *before* engaging in the following weeks. Your family map is a *genogram* – a family tree with additional details – that includes psychological and emotional attributes of your family members. There are plenty of resources available on the internet about family maps if you decide you want to delve deeper than the instructions we provide here.

When your map is complete, you'll have a complex, in-depth picture of your family of origin, one that reveals the web between family members and their possible influences on you. Seeing your family's dynamics represented on paper can help you appreciate just how many people are involved, on both a conscious and unconscious level, in your deciding whether or not to have children. Over the coming weeks you'll likely discover more influences, so you might add to your family map later as well.

Set aside anywhere from forty-five to sixty minutes to create your map, depending on family size and complexity. The larger the paper you use, the easier it will be, especially if you have a large family or many extended family members to include.

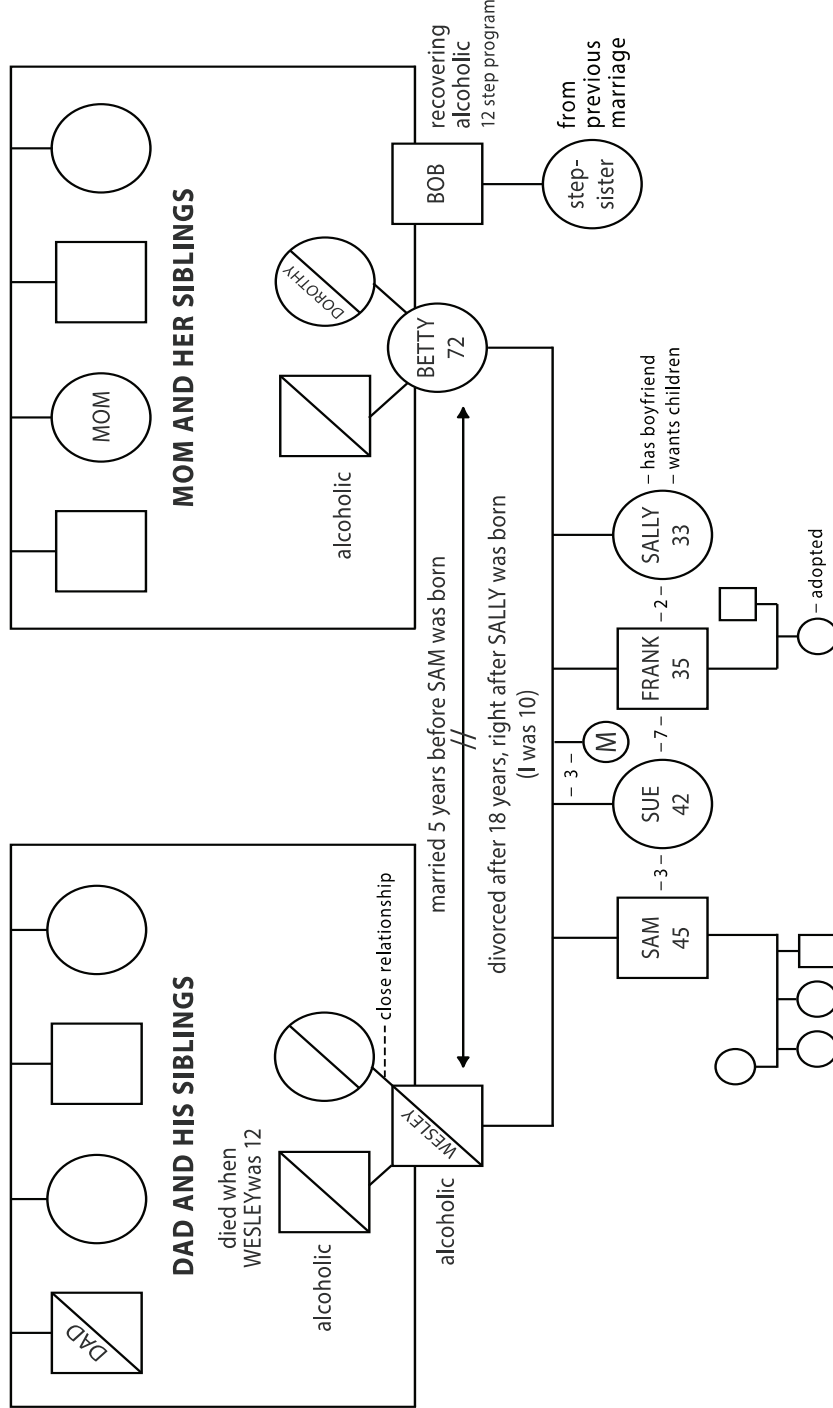
The instructions direct you to create a map of your family of origin. If you find you're foggy on some details, just include what you can, noticing what you do and don't know about your family's

history. The questions are meant to expand your knowledge about the members of your family.

Refer to the sample illustration on the next page before getting started. It's Sue's family, and she is one of the four women we reference throughout the book. You'll be introduced to her shortly.

Sue's family map is just one way a family map can look. You can see that Sue is forty-two. Her parents divorced when she was ten years old. She is the second of four siblings, just like her mother, Betty. And just like her mother she has an older brother, a younger brother, and a younger sister (squares are males; circles are females). Betty had a miscarriage when Sue was three years old (the small circle with the M in it), and was very depressed for about nine months. Four years after the miscarriage, Betty gave birth to Frank. About two years later, Sue's sister Sally was conceived in hopes of saving the marriage, but shortly after Sally's birth Sue's parents divorced (hash marks between Betty and Wesley signify the divorce). Sue added a list of where her mother and siblings currently live. (Diagonal lines through squares and circles indicate that those people have died.)

There are other details that Sue could have included in her family map. For example, names and ages of her aunts and uncles and their offspring, and whether or not they have children. The more details you add to your map, the more likely you will uncover emotions that could factor into your decision-making process. The goal is not to get stirred up for no reason, but rather to see if any emotions remain unresolved so you can tend to them and begin healing. Creating your family map might uncover something that has obstructed your clarity, or you might become aware of connections you hadn't discerned previously.



CURRENTLY LIVING IN:

- BETTY - Arizona, USA
- SAM - Arizona, USA
- SUE - Virginia, USA
- FRANK - New York, USA
- SALLY - Arizona, USA

(M) = MISCARRIAGE, when I was 3

SUE'S FAMILY MAP

Creating Your Family Map

1. Drawing yourself and any siblings you have (using Sue's family map as a template)
 - Begin by placing your piece of paper in landscape orientation.
 - Draw a horizontal line across the page one-quarter of the way up from the bottom of the page.
 - Under this line, on the far left, write the name and age of the first-born among you and your siblings. If you are an only child, simply write your name in the middle of the page below the line. Continue adding the names and current ages of your siblings, from left to right, following birth order from oldest to youngest. Include any step-siblings and half-siblings. Do this in a way that makes sense to you.
 - Now draw circles around the females and squares around the males. When the map is complete, these circles and squares will help you identify patterns.

Note: The common symbol for females is a circle and a square for males, but notate sexuality in any way that makes sense to you. If you or anyone in your family is questioning their gender, in transition, or transgender, reflect that on your map. Possibilities for designating transgender are to draw a circle in a square or a square in a circle. Remember that this map is for your benefit and it only needs to make sense to you. Be consistent so you can identify patterns.

- If someone is deceased, draw a diagonal line through the circle or square. Write down the year of their death or their age at death, as well as the cause of death, if known.

- Are/were you married or do you have a partner or significant other? Draw a circle (for a female) or a square (for a male) beside your name for that person and do the same for your siblings. Add any children of this generation. Notice on Sue's map that her brother Frank is married to his male partner and her brother Sam is married to his female partner.
- Draw short vertical lines connecting the circles and squares to the horizontal line.

2. Drawing your parents

Above the horizontal line, write your parents' names and current ages. Traditionally the male is on the left and the female is on the right. Write these at the far ends of the line to provide space for what's to come. Since there are many different types of families – for example, same-sex parents, single parent, blended, foster, and adoptive families with many parents involved – draw your family configuration in a way that works for you. Draw circles around females and squares around males. Indicate anyone who is deceased. Draw connecting lines as needed following Sue's example.

3. Drawing grandparents

- Write the names of each set of grandparents above each of your parents' names. Again, draw circles around females and squares around males and indicate anyone who is deceased.
- Draw lines to connect your grandparents to your parents.

4. Drawing aunts and uncles

- Draw horizontal lines above each of your grandparents' names, about one-quarter of the way from the top of the page. This is where you'll add the names of your parents and their siblings.
- Under that line, on the far left, write the name and age of your father's oldest sibling (if you drew your father to the left of your mother as suggested above). If your father is an only child, simply write his name under the middle of the line.
- Continue adding the names and current ages of your father's siblings, from left to right, following birth order from oldest to youngest. Include any step-siblings and half-siblings.
- Repeat these directions with your mother and/or other parent(s) and her siblings. Repeat as many times as needed for each person you identify as a parent.
- Draw circles around females, squares around males, indicate anyone who is deceased, and draw connecting lines as on Sue's map.

5. Adding details to yourself and any siblings

Beneath your name and your siblings' names, write the names of their children and their current ages, from left to right, following birth order from oldest to youngest. Include any step-siblings and half-siblings. Draw circles around females, squares around males, indicate anyone who is deceased, and draw lines connecting the children with their parents. If it's important to you, write the name of the place where each sibling resides. You may want to list these details to the side as Sue did. Perhaps geography plays a part in your family dynamics. You can also acknowledge sexuality where it's relevant.

6. Adding other important details

- If your mother had any other pregnancies, note on the line connecting you with your siblings what occurred (miscarriage, terminated pregnancy, stillborn birth, etc.) and when.
- Add the same information about pregnancies for yourself, your sister(s), your grandmothers, and your mother's sister(s).
- Note any surprise children or unplanned pregnancies.

Now take an overall look at your map so far. As you do, you might notice emotional sensations beginning to bubble up to the surface or you might make a thoughtful connection with something in your map that you hadn't realized before. This is a good time to record either in your journal.

Answering the following questions is helpful to further develop your family map. They facilitate inquiry and introspection and help you paint a more in-depth picture of your family of origin. Add to your map as much information as you can while exploring the questions, notating details in a way that makes sense to you. Use Sue's map as an example, and use your journal to record your answers. Some of these questions are not relevant if a single parent or parents of the same sex raised you.

1. Looking more closely at your parents:

- Were they married to each other? Are they still married? How would you rate the quality of their marriage/partnership/relationship?
- Was there a death, divorce, or separation, and if so, how old were you when it happened? Did anyone remarry or re-partner?

MOTHERHOOD - IS IT FOR ME ?

- If your parents divorced/separated, how did this impact you and each of your siblings?
2. Looking more closely at yourself and any siblings:
- If you have siblings, do you have the same parents?
 - If your siblings are in relationships, how would you rate these relationships? Consider how having children or not impacts these relationships.
 - Are you aware of any opinions your siblings have about whether or not you should have children?
 - Which of your siblings are you closest to? Which siblings are you not close to? Are any of your other siblings close to each other?
 - Do you have any memories of life before the sibling directly younger than you was born?
3. Looking more closely at your mother:
- How old was your mother when you were born? If your mother is postmenopausal, and her symptoms have subsided, how old was she when they did?
 - Which of her siblings was/is she closest to? Who was she close to when you were young? Where do her siblings live? Does or did your mother play an important aunt role in her nieces' and/or nephews' lives?
 - Did you know your mother's siblings while growing up? Did you like each of them? If you know them now, has your regard for them changed?

- Did or do you like your mother's parents? Did or does your mother like her parents? Is there anything special, either negative or positive, about those relationships that you want to write down?
 - Did your mother have more or fewer children than she wanted? In your opinion, were there consequences of this?
4. Looking more closely at your father:
- Did you know your father's siblings while growing up? Did you like each of them? If you know them now, has your regard for them changed?
 - Does or did your father play an important uncle role in his nieces' and nephews' lives?
 - Did or do you like your father's parents? Did or does your father like his parents? Is there anything special, either negative or positive, about those relationships that you want to write down?
 - Did your father have more or fewer children than he wanted? In your opinion, were there consequences of this?
5. Looking at family influences and patterns:
- Were you close with any of your first or second cousins on either side of your family?
 - Was your family of origin religious? What are your current religious beliefs or practices and how do these compare with those of other family members?
 - Who on your family map has/had the greatest positive influence on you? And the greatest negative influence?

M O T H E R H O O D - I S I T F O R M E ?

- Was/is there drug or alcohol use in your family? Was anyone identified as being an addict or having a drinking problem? Do you consider yourself an adult child of an alcoholic? Do you use or abuse alcohol or drugs for recreation or to self-medicate?
- Are you aware of any emotional, physical, or sexual abuse in your family while you were growing up, or in the generations before you?
- Is there anything that has not yet been asked or that has not been included in the family map that would make it more complete for your situation, such as important accomplishments, big career changes, physical and learning disabilities, diseases and hospitalizations, socioeconomic struggles, education anomalies, homophobia in the family, suicides or attempted suicides, mental illnesses and hospitalizations for such, institutionalized family members, hysterectomies, post-partum depressions, family secrets, sudden deaths, injuries, major accidents, jobs or professions you deem significant? Think about these topics and write about anything that pertains to your family.

Congratulations! You've made it through the lengthy instructions for creating your family map.

How do you feel now? Your map is a valuable tool, though it can bring up a lot of emotions and even be a bit overwhelming. If that feels true for you, take a deep breath now and place one hand on your heart and the other on your stomach. Close your eyes and feel your body's movements as you breathe. Relax for as long as you want to before proceeding.

Now it's time to take an overall look at your completed map. What stands out? Do you see any patterns? Does anything surprise you? Does something make you proud? Are there any buried emotions beginning to arise? Does something bring up sadness? What other thoughts and feelings surface? Are you getting in touch with things that feel good? Are you aware of any anger – brand new or forgotten until now?

Here's a sampling of some additional themes and trends you can observe: Notice the number of siblings and the birth order of each generation. Notice the ages of the mothers at the time their first children were born. Notice if relationships changed after negative or positive big events. Look for repetitions of particular behaviors across generations. Look for anything else that you might not have been aware of previously. Are there relationships that you wish were better than they were or are, either your own or those of other people?

Stay as open as you can with yourself and the family information represented on your map. Sometimes by looking at your family represented this way you can glean information that wasn't obvious before. For example, as you can see in Sue's map, she realized that each of her parents had a total of four children in their family. That possibly contributed to their choice to have their fourth child, Sue's younger sister, Sally. Sue also saw a generational pattern of alcohol dependency on both sides of her family in a way she hadn't before. She also remembered learning that her mother's sister had an abortion (illegal at the time) at a young age.

Don't be surprised if you feel caught off guard with your feelings or thoughts. Use your journal to record them. It's perfectly normal to feel a sense of heightened emotion or sensitivity after creating a family map. If it feels overwhelming, do your best to absorb your findings incrementally by putting the map aside for now and referring to it again later.

As you progress through the activities of this program and discover new information about your family, revisit your map. Over time you may have insights or notice new patterns or influences that you want to add to it. Keep your map with your program paperwork so it can be easily referenced.

Meet Four Women

Now we introduce four women who are composites of the characteristics of women we've worked with over the years. As Sue's family of origin helped demonstrate the construction of a family map, at times we also refer to the experiences of Samantha, Birgit, and Holly to help you understand certain themes or activities.

Sue, at forty-two, single and heterosexual, is leaning toward not having children. She is happy and well adjusted, without any major life issues. She spent some time gaining personal insight through 12-step programs and individual psychotherapy. From her map we know that alcoholism existed in her family, and she identifies as an adult child of an alcoholic. She is the second of four children, and her parents divorced when she was ten years old.

Samantha is forty-four, in a same-sex relationship, and leaning toward wanting to have a child. She and her partner, Elise, who is forty-five, have been in a stable and committed relationship for nine years. Samantha is feeling a bit of time pressure on deciding. She has

one older brother she isn't emotionally close to. Both her parents are deceased. Her mother was bipolar, but the condition had not been diagnosed while she and her brother were growing up, so she was not taking medication that could have tempered her mood swings. Samantha experienced her father as being emotionally unavailable. For Samantha, a saving grace in her family of origin is her Aunt Bea, who has always loved Samantha dearly and treated her as a beloved child. Samantha's partner, Elise, also worked the Motherhood-Is it for me? program, a little after Samantha did.

Birgit is thirty-three, heterosexual, and in a stable marriage of six years. Her husband, Jeff, says he'll go either way on the decision and wants Birgit to decide what's important to her. He says he is happy to father their two Labrador retrievers. Birgit has focused on developing her career and is leaning toward not having children. She was treated successfully for breast cancer at age thirty-one. She has two siblings, one older and one younger, neither of whom have children. Birgit's parents live near her home and haven't kept it a secret that they would like to become grandparents. Birgit and her husband both feel some pressure as a result.

Holly is thirty-seven, single, heterosexual, and still looking for lasting love. She is leaning toward wanting to have children, but she wants to share that experience with a partner rather than being a single mom. Holly is the only child of parents who were older than average when they had her. Her father died when she was a young teen, but her mother is still living. Alcoholism was present on both sides of the family in her grandparents' generation. Holly's aloof mother might have had a personality disorder that made it difficult to see her daughter as a separate being with separate needs and desires.

A Little More about the Externals

The current circumstances of your life – finances, health, age, relationship status, and so on – are what we call the *externals*. For this process to work well, it's important that you try to the best of your ability to mentally put these factors aside for the time you're engaged in the program. As much as possible, we want you to pretend your externals simply don't exist.

Of course we're asking you to do the impossible as you face the daily realities of your life. Setting the externals aside can feel counterintuitive because financial woes, lack of a relationship or one in conflict, lifestyle challenges, health concerns, age, career, or fears of all kinds can be perceived as the very reason you can't decide if you want to have children.

We're not saying your externals are unimportant; rather they're unimportant right now. What needs to be known first is what you want for yourself *regardless of the circumstances of your life*. When what you want becomes clear, and it's time to think about your decision going forward, some of the details of your life will be relevant and others will no longer play an active part in your decision. In the meantime, trying to make a decision based on your internal emotions and the externals in your life at the same time creates all kinds of pressure. Another way this can be said is that trying to figure out your *desire* and your *decision* at the same time creates gridlock.

At this point, please stop reading, have a heart-to-heart chat with yourself, and get your journal or whatever you're using for writing. Make a list of all the externals in your life that feel worrisome or about which you feel conflicted. They might not be clear-cut; that's fine. Just write down the ones that keep swirling around in your head. Then put

this list aside for now. You'll be asked to refer to it later this week in an assignment.

Throughout the weeks ahead, keep pushing the current circumstances of your life to the outskirts of your mind. You'll likely find that you have to make frequent, conscious efforts to do this. Even though it does get easier as the weeks go on, we'll offer you tools this week and in Week 2 to help with this seemingly impossible task.

Working with Guided Visualizations

A guided visualization is presented each week, and no previous experience is needed to receive its benefit. All that's required is allowing whatever occurs to happen. Trust that your attentive mind will go where it needs to and that you will become aware of the information that needs to surface. We recommend having someone read the guided visualizations to you so you can benefit from the element of surprise; or have them record them for you. If that's not possible, record them yourself so you can listen with eyes closed to deepen the experience of where the exercise takes you. Closing your eyes engages a part of your brain that isn't easily accessed when your eyes are open. If you read the visualizations to yourself, read silently and very slowly, and at the very least close your eyes every few sentences to take in the experience. All of this said, there's no wrong way to do them. What's most important is that you do what works best for you.

If after experiencing a guided visualization you feel nothing has happened for you, this might not, in fact, be true. The mind is very powerful. With time and a little percolation, something will surface

– if not this week, then the next or the week after. Even if you don't experience anything right away, trust both yourself and the process. Some guided visualizations feel more powerful than others, but each one is important.

Week 1 has two visualizations, both important for establishing support as you begin your journey of discovery. The first, "Creating Comfort Within," helps you create an environment in which you feel safe, protected, and nourished – one that you can choose to return to over and over again. As you cultivate the practice of returning to this place, you strengthen your inner resources and resilience.

The second visualization, "Creating Your Circle of Support," allows you, in your imagination, to invite others for support as you need it. They'll be your consultants and comfort, always there for you in the background. They'll support you and perhaps, at times, offer very active advice. Call on them anytime, or simply rest in the knowledge that you have reinforcements who care deeply about you and who want only the best for you.

WEEK 1 FIRST GUIDED VISUALIZATION

These visualizations are like jewels, and their function is to bring into awareness information from your unconscious that will ultimately help you on your journey of discovery.

With all of the guided visualizations, there are two things to remember: the experience you have is what matters most; and there's no wrong way to do them. Have your journal and writing tool nearby so you can record your impressions and images immediately.

To prepare, choose a quiet place where people and noise won't disturb or distract you, and a time when there's nothing else for you to do and no one who needs your attention; this time is solely for your benefit. Either sit comfortably in a chair or, if you prefer, lie down on the floor.

Creating Comfort Within

Now that you're ready, become conscious of your breathing. Let your eyes close gently as you take a deep breath and exhale. Inhale and hold your breath for five counts. Then exhale until most of the air has left your lungs. Inhale again and slowly exhale, letting out an audible sigh through your mouth while you count silently from ten to one. Continue breathing slowly and deeply. As you breathe, you relax. Allow your natural breath to bring a deep sense of peace and well-being. Feel your body relax and let your mind free-associate. B-r-e-a-t-h-e.

Now's the perfect time to create a place in your mind that feels safe and protected, and where you can be completely yourself. Here you feel uninhibited, completely at ease, and, most of all, free from all judgments – your own and those of others. This is a place to visit anytime you need or want to rest, renew, regroup, or receive deep nourishment.

Visualize your place now. It can be a place you've been before or one you invent in your imagination. This place touches your heart and soul. It might be a warm beach, a sunny meadow in springtime, a beautiful mountain, or something else entirely. See what presents to you and trust it. This is a place where you can say, "Yes, yes. This is where my heart and soul can rest."

M O T H E R H O O D - I S I T F O R M E ?

Using all of your senses, explore your place and discover it completely. If you're on a beach, listen to the waves. If in a field of flowers, absorb their delicate scent through your nose. Find a spot to settle in for a while if you wish. Whether you continue to explore or settle in one spot, keep enjoying a deep state of relaxation and well-being. Allow all the pleasant sensations to permeate your being. Embrace the serenity that is generated.

Say to yourself, "I am open to establishing a safe place, my comfort zone within. I can return to it whenever I wish." With each new breath, take these words deep into your heart, your mind, and your body. Pause now for as long as you desire to enjoy the place and the opportunity to soak in every drop of nourishment available to you. There is no hurry.

Then say good-bye to your nourishing *comfort within*, and remember that it is available to you anytime.

Keep your eyes closed while you slowly return to your present environment, allowing a few moments to be with your emotional and physical sensations. B-r-e-a-t-h-e.

When you're ready, slowly open your eyes and begin to write in your journal. Record your immediate thoughts, feelings, insights, and anything else you want to about your experience.

Immediate Writing after the Guided Visualization

Writing immediately after a guided visualization is important because it helps concretize your experience. Document everything – uncensored – that comes to you from the experience, whether or not it makes sense. This program facilitates a process that unfolds over time, and pieces of information that come to you don't always stand alone with meaning.

This is why nothing should get swept under the rug or dismissed as unimportant as you go along. Write it all down! Take as long as you wish. When you finish journaling, continue reading. If you continue reading without having written at all, part of your experience will fade away and not be available to you later, as happens when you awaken in the morning from a dream and get up too quickly before recording it. The dream content and its essence evaporate and are irretrievable.

Did an image of a location come to you right away, or not at all? Were you surprised by your thoughts, images, or feelings? If there was abundant detail, did you describe it? If there were no clear images for you during this initial visualization, don't be surprised or disappointed. We believe they will come. In the meantime, simply describe what occurred for you. The purpose of the visualizations is to stir up memories, thoughts, and feelings.



Be Curious: Assignments for Week 1

Your first writing assignment is designed to help you identify the fears that live inside you. The second is designed to help you access the assumptions you live with about your future. As you write, let your mind free-associate. The writing doesn't necessarily have to make sense, be linear, or even be in complete sentences. Yours may look more like pictures or diagrams. This stream-of-consciousness writing allows your unconscious to be unleashed. There is no wrong way to do the writing assignments. Not only that, you will be surprised by what surfaces as you answer the questions we present to you.

We provide a detailed explanation of each assignment. What you do with them is your choice. If you need to tweak the exercise to get

more drawn into it, please do so, although we encourage you to try the suggested assignment first. When there are multiple writing assignments, we ask that you follow the order in which they are presented. When you begin to write, let your writing flow uncensored.

1. It is helpful to recognize fears because they often run the show from behind the scenes when they haven't been identified. The question below is intentionally vague. Interpret it the way you need to. Trust that. There are no appropriate or inappropriate fears. There are only the fears that live inside you for good reason. This is your time to give a voice to what they are and let them out. Write from any point in time in your life. Resist the urge to second-guess what we are asking.

As you face making this decision, what is your biggest fear in deciding?

When you finish writing your answer, continue.

- 2a. Consider the next question from the perspective of any time in your life. You might think about it from several points of time as your views change. Notice what comes to mind first. There is no wrong way to do this.

I always thought that by now my life would look like...

After you've answered question 2a, walk away from it. Take anywhere from an hour to a day or two, then reread what you wrote and go on to 2b.

- 2b. How does it feel to read what you wrote? The writing prompt in 2a is about your thoughts. Now pay attention to your feelings and write about them.

As I read what I wrote, my feelings about this are...

3. Begin to collect words and images from various sources like magazines or the Internet. You may be drawn to them either because they make you feel good or because they elicit uncomfortable feelings. Either way, don't think too much about it. Trust that they caught your eye for a reason. Start by cutting out words and images and putting them in a box or folder. If you are so inclined, carry around a small camera and take pictures of things that move you, either positively or negatively. These will all be used later in the program for other exercises.



Further Exploration and Discovery

This is the section where we help you take what you've written to the next level, digging deeper into the meaning of what you wrote. Read your written responses out loud. It might feel funny or awkward when no one is around to listen, but try doing it regardless. Reading your writing aloud can give it new meaning. It can also connect you emotionally to the content. When we work with women one on one or in a group, we have them read their writing out loud. Another suggestion is to record and then listen to your written words. As you listen you might hear something you didn't notice while you were recording.

Your Checklist for Reflection (below) consists of questions designed to help you consider more carefully what you've written. Use this checklist throughout the program as a guide only. Don't stop at these questions, especially if you're inspired by your own.

❖ ***Your Checklist for Reflection:***

- ☐ What do I feel as I read out loud what I wrote?
- ☐ Does anything that I wrote surprise me? What new information has come to me?
- ☐ Is there anything I wrote that I want to write about some more? (If so, by all means go ahead!)
- ☐ When I reread slowly what I wrote, do I notice emotional and physical sensations or changes in my body? Which phrase(s) and sentence(s) feel loaded, feel juicier or weightier than others, or have more energy than others?
- ☐ Is there something that doesn't make sense to me that might make more sense later?
- ☐ Do I feel shame from anything I wrote?
- ☐ Is there something that I've not thought about for a long time?
- ☐ Is there anything I might want to discuss with a psychotherapist, counselor, coach, mentor, spiritual advisor, or supportive friend?

If you struggle with a specific assignment, be gentle with yourself. Don't add additional pressure to push through it if it feels extremely difficult. Your discomfort could be related to a forgotten experience that might surface later in the process. Being patient and compassionate with yourself is the best way forward. That said, at times you might want to

motivate yourself to push through a bit of resistance to access feelings on the other side. Ideally we want you to strike a balance between challenging yourself and creatively reworking an exercise when that's the only way you can complete it.

Now let's look more closely at your first writing assignment: your biggest fears in deciding. Humans don't carry around fear for the fun of it. You can assume that your fears exist for some reason. They are usually reactions to something that happened long ago. They can linger on or persist because at the time they initially arose, no one was there to help you make sense of what happened and the incident went underground into your subconscious.

People tend to believe their fears are rational and reasonable. Fears certainly feel real, so it might not occur to you to question or examine them. "Of course I feel afraid of making the wrong decision and regretting it," you might declare. "Who doesn't?" Or, "Of course I'm afraid I won't be a good enough mother. I have every reason to feel that way." Most of us are under the impression that we need to live with our fears and the best we can hope for is to manage or cope with them.

The reality is that fear is a feeling. Fears are not facts. Feelings and fears will continue to get stirred up each week during this process. This is natural. Instead of trying to figure out how not to have your fears, or how to manage them, for now just notice what it's like to have them. See if you can breathe into them and feel they exist. Bask in them if you can. See if you feel any sadness or anger about having them. Do your best to notice them without judgment.

Below are some common fears we've heard repeatedly. Do any sound familiar?

M O T H E R H O O D - I S I T F O R M E ?

“I fear time will slip by without my having made a conscious decision.”

“I fear I’ll resent my partner if I go along with what they want.”

“I fear I’ll say yes (or no) to motherhood without fully knowing why, and later realize it was for the wrong reason.”

“I fear my free time will evaporate.”

“I’m so afraid of pregnancy and giving birth that I fear my desire to be a mother won’t prevail.”

“I love my dog more than anything. This love is spontaneous. I fear that loving my child won’t come naturally.”

“I fear being perceived as non-feminine and non-maternal if I decide not to have children. I don’t want to be socially ostracized.”

Now add all the fears that came up to your list of externals. Now that you’ve identified your fears, we want you to do your best not to acknowledge them for the duration of the program. Various activities in the program will help you work through your fears, especially those standing in the way of deciding about motherhood. By the end of the program you’ll likely find that you’ve moved through and greatly minimized your greatest fears.

Here’s a suggestion that will help you keep your fears and the externals you don’t want to think about right now a little bit further away. Find a jar with a very tight lid in your kitchen, or buy one and decorate it for this purpose. Have fun with it. Write one fear on a strip of paper and place it in the jar. Continue doing this with each fear, and then with each

external. Include everything you want to put aside for now. Then close that lid and put the jar away out of sight. Feel free to add to the jar during this process, putting it away and out of sight each time. This physical activity helps you move forward less encumbered.

Now take a closer look at your responses to 2a and 2b, *I always thought that by now my life would look like...* and *My feelings about this are....* Was envisioning the life you thought you'd have easy, or was it challenging? Some women find that they've never thought about their future. Others feel that all their ducks are in a row except for the decision about children. Sometimes doing this exercise drives home that your life isn't at all what you thought it was going to be – for better or worse. It's really important not to evaluate yourself, but to simply notice how you feel. Be curious, without judgment about what or how much you wrote. You might find yourself feeling sad or discouraged. Each week we want you to get more and more comfortable with unearthing all your feelings. Hang in there! Answers will come, and your load will lighten.

WEEK 1 SECOND GUIDED VISUALIZATION

This is another opportunity to get in touch with your inner resources, which will help you feel grounded throughout this process-oriented program.

As already mentioned, there are two things to remember: the experience *you* have is what matters most; and there's no wrong way to do the visualization. Have your journal and writing tool nearby so you can record your impressions and images immediately.

To prepare, choose a quiet place where people and noise won't disturb or distract you, and a time when there's nothing else for you to do and no

one who needs your attention; this time is solely for your benefit. Either sit comfortably in a chair or, if you prefer, lie down on the floor.

Creating Your Circle of Support

Now that you're ready, become conscious of your breathing. Let your eyes close gently as you take a deep breath and exhale. Inhale and hold your breath for five counts. Then exhale until most of the air has left your lungs. Inhale again and slowly exhale, letting out an audible sigh through your mouth while you count silently from ten to one. Continue breathing slowly and deeply. As you breathe, you relax. Allow your natural breath to bring a deep sense of peace and well-being. Feel your body relax and let your mind free-associate. B-r-e-a-t-h-e.

Picture yourself situated in a cozy, peaceful place, real or imagined, that is different from the one you created in the previous visualization – your comfort within place – as that place is yours only. You will be inviting others to join you in this new place.

Once you have your place in mind, let yourself enjoy the sensations of calm and comfort before you invite others to join you. These others can be human, animal, real, imagined, fictional, mythical, living, dead, young, or old. You get to choose exactly who and how many get invited. Invite those who will add value as you move through your exploration. Who will accept and support you without question? Who will give you the space to find your truth? Who will encourage you to be true to yourself always?

How many guests you invite is ultimately your choice. You can even decide to stay solo in your place. Take a few minutes to invite exactly whom you want to be with you.

This is your *circle of support*. Allow yourself to bask in their presence. Imagine each member of your circle of support telling you what they appreciate about you, or sit quietly and simply enjoy their silent company. If you chose to be alone, feel the support you have for yourself as you embark on this journey.

The sole purpose of this exercise is to feel that you are supported with care, respect, and love. You can call on your circle of support at any time throughout this process. It's always there in the background offering encouragement. You can return at any point along the way to add or dismiss members.

Keep your eyes closed while you slowly return to your present environment, allowing a few moments to be with your emotional and physical sensations. Breathe.

When you're ready, slowly open your eyes and begin to write in your journal. Record your immediate thoughts, feelings, insights, and anything else you want to about your experience.

Immediate Writing after the Guided Visualization

Write as much as you can right now to help internalize the experience you just had so you can reach for it when you want to. Do this now, before you continue reading.

Notice if you're surprised by who showed up in your circle of support – or who didn't show up. Even though the visualization is over, you can add or remove your invitees or re-create anything about your circle of support until it feels just right for you. The point of your circle of support is to have an internal resource when you need it. Anytime you feel alone or need help, you can conjure it up in your mind. Again, it doesn't have to be rational or make sense; if it feels good and is helpful, it's right.



Be Even More Curious: Optional Exercises

If you stop here, you'll have completed the core activities for Week 1. However, if you have the time and you feel moved to do more, below are some additional assignments to help you get even more out of the first week. You can do these any time in the program.

1. Scan your life from birth until now and create a timeline of the significant events. Include births, deaths, divorces, separations, marriages, relationship beginnings and endings, moves, career changes, successes (emotional and physical), pregnancies, abortions, miscarriages, etc. As you chart this timeline, write in your journal about where there are emotional charges.
2. Make a timeline of only the most wonderful highlights of your life, and keep it in an accessible place. When you're feeling a little challenged, stuck, or hopeless, this timeline can be used to redirect your attention to when things have been good.
3. Use your journal to describe your dreams. Paying attention to them can be another powerful tool for unearthing what you're allowing to happen. You might notice your dreams changing as you work through this process.
4. Look at what you wrote regarding your biggest fears. Is there anything there you can draw or turn into an image? Draw or paint your fear(s).

What to Hold Inside This Week

Be curious and interested in all your thoughts and feelings, no matter what they are. Don't assume anything. Do trust that plenty is happening internally. A small amount of writing doesn't mean little progress. This approach has proven to be effective over and over again. We trust this, and you can also. Everything that's percolating inside you will reveal itself in time.

Notice what it's like not to share the details of your journey with others. It's important to have your own contained, private, and uncensored process.

Pay attention to your thoughts and feelings about your family map. Add any new information as it comes to you.

Keep your journal nearby to write the thoughts and feelings that arise throughout the week. Don't underestimate what has already taken place and how much has been stirred up. Be gentle with yourself.

If you find yourself not thinking about any of this at all until you sit down to begin the activities for Week 2, that's completely all right. It can even prove to be beneficial. Forgetting about the exercises after you complete them is just fine. There is no wrong way to do this process.

Self-Care

Self-care is a practice that most of us need to teach ourselves and cultivate over time until it becomes habitual. Few people, especially women, come naturally to this. Women are culturally trained to think of others first, and they often care for themselves last, if at all. What's more, difficulty giving yourself *permission* to

care for yourself is a recurring theme for many women. Cultivating good, regular self-care is as important as brushing your teeth. Really! Each week there are recommendations and ideas about how to take extra good care of yourself.

Carving out even a few minutes from a busy day to slow down, tune in, and reconnect with yourself goes a long way in supporting you through this process. Good self-care helps maintain overall mental and physical health while nourishing your soul. At the very least, embrace the self-care suggestions offered – everything from a few stolen moments of breathing with awareness to a day out in nature or at a spa. Work toward a commitment to carve out “me-time” *every* day. It helps to schedule it at the same time each day, when you’ll be less likely to bump it; perhaps when you first arise in the morning or the very last thing before bed. How much time you spend is not as important initially as making the switch from the external world to your internal world. Me-time is *not* selfish; rather it is essential to sustaining relationships and staying engaged in spite of the challenges of a busy life. Build a repertoire of personal self-care practices that speak to you and benefit your exploration while enhancing your regular daily activities.

Why not make your favorite meal one evening this week and eat it by candlelight? Enjoy.

W E E K 1

The self-care I did for myself this week was...

Whether you take our suggestion or come up with something more to your liking, record your weekly self-care rituals in your journal. You may end up with a lovely list by the end of the twelve weeks.



Congratulations! You've come to the end of Week 1.

Check in with what's happening for you right now. How do you feel as you embark on this journey solely focused on you? Open up your journal and write down a few sentences about this right now. You might find it interesting to reread your initial thoughts and feelings at the end of the program.

Good luck with all the discoveries that are about to unfold as you come to *your* truth that only *you* can know.

To continue reading, [buy *Motherhood - Is It For Me?*](#) from your favorite bookstore.

For more information about working with Ann and the Parenthood Clarity Courses, visit motherhoodisitforme.com.