

Healing the Hurts

SOMETHING SMALL HAD HAPPENED, so small I don't even remember what it was. But I was angry, defensive, arguing . . . and, admittedly, irrational. After a few moments my husband, Bernie, asked gently, "What's really going on for you? This isn't about what just happened; this is way bigger. Does this remind you of something else that happened in your life?"

He had pressed my pause button. I sat down, took a deep breath, and tried to retrace the path through my memory. I discovered a huge cavern of pain caused by the cruelty of my first grade teacher. One small event, and I had tumbled back into the fear and humiliation of that distant childhood classroom.

Life can hurt like crazy. Experiencing pain is an integral part of being human. God wants us to remember that if it wasn't good to be alone inside of Eden (Gen. 2:18), it certainly isn't good to be alone outside of Eden! Loneliness intensifies the pain, but gentle togetherness with a loving spouse can soothe the pain, heal the hurts, and bring us closer in love and compassion.

PRAY SIMPLY

When your spouse is hurting, they need your prayers. Even when they don't have the words to pray, your prayers can be a huge blessing. Hold their hands. Pray a short, focused, caring prayer, asking the God of all comfort to comfort them (2 Cor. 1:3, 4). When people hurt, short prayers



are best because it's really hard to concentrate when the emotional center of your brain is in pain. Look at your partner through God's eyes, and ask the Holy Spirit to help you pray a sensitive prayer. Pray that God will give you compassion to support and understand your partner.

EXPLORE THE ICEBERG

When your hurting spouse is talking, focus on the feelings beneath the words and behavior. Sometimes people sound angry when they are really feeling sad, frightened, frustrated, or disappointed. Instead of reacting to their words, wonder what they might be feeling. Say, "It sounds to me as if you're feeling disappointed/sad/overwhelmed. What can I do to help?"

Help them to draw a picture like a huge iceberg. On the top that's visible above the water, write what they are saying about their pain and what other people might be seeing from the outside. On the underwater iceberg, write the feelings and thoughts that are deep underneath. This can help both of you to understand the issue.

BE GENTLY CURIOUS

Whenever your spouse's emotions seem out of proportion and you're tempted to think they're "overreacting," you might be missing a story of past pain that's never been completely healed. Ask about other times when they felt similar emotions, maybe during childhood or adolescence. As they tell their painful stories, listen comfortingly, tell them how sorry you are that they went through such pain, that their hurt breaks your heart too, and that if you had been there at the time you would have comforted them by . . . (fill in

the blank with what you would have done). This kind of healing listening enables us to "mourn with those who mourn" (Rom. 12:15, NIV).

EMOTIONAL FIRST-AID

You don't have to be an expert to help a hurting person. Just ask, "When you're hurting like this, what's the best thing I can do to soothe you or to help you feel better again?"

Write a list of things that help each of you feel better when you're sad or hurting.

Comfort is . . .

- not trying to fix them.
- not telling them what to do.
- not comparing their suffering with a time you suffered.
- not changing the subject to something happier.
- not walking away and leaving them to sort out their own problems.
- not being afraid of their tears and fears.
- not trying to "jolly" them out of it (Prov. 25:20).

Comfort is . . .

- being there with them.
- listening with empathy by imagining what they might be feeling.
- accepting their feelings.
- trying to understand them.

Comfort in ways they appreciate. Be with them in their sadness and let them know that their sadness touches your heart.

MEASURING PROGRESS

Some couples find it helpful to use a simple scale from 0 to 10, where 0 is extremely sad and 10 is extremely happy. You can ask, "What's the saddest you felt today on a scale of 0-10?" and "What's the happiest you felt today on a scale of 0-10?" Be curious and wonder what was happening when your spouse felt very sad or very happy, as this can give you some clues for helping them.

Or use www.positivityratio.com/single.php to monitor your emotions every day. We need a ratio of 3:1



positive to negative emotions in our lives to help us flourish. The “positivity ratio” can help you to identify days when you’re low on positive emotions, and then you can choose to do something funny, creative, relaxing, soothing, inspiring, or interesting to help balance them out.

EXTRA HELP?

If you think your spouse might benefit from talking to a professional, try to find a Christian counselor who will see you both together. As a couples and family therapist, I have seen many people recover more quickly from their hurts when they get help together with their spouses. Talking things through together often takes their relationship to a deeper level of understanding and love.

PERFECT LOVE

Perfect love takes away fear (1 John 4:18). How can your love take away

fear and hurt? What else does your loved one need from you? Your warm and loving touch, your sensitive words, your thoughtful kindness, your helpful support, your respect for their difficult feelings, your closeness and your commitment to be with them through every challenge? Invite God to use you as a channel of His healing love to your spouse’s heart.

HEALING HURTS

- Sit in God’s lap and look at the hurting person through His eyes. Look carefully and notice how He sees their hurt and how He wants you to show them His love.
- Help them to understand that God is with them through this painful process. (Psalm 23:4 promises they are not alone.)
- Study Philippians 4. It is packed with good ideas for turning painful thoughts and feelings into positive ones.
- Ask what you can do that would really comfort and support them. Then do whatever they say.
- At the end of each day ask, “What went well today?” Help them find three things, however small, and thank God for them together.
- Make a hope candle. Fold a sheet of heavy paper in half lengthwise to make a card. Cut the top to look like a candle and a flame. Inside the card write all the things that bring hope: Bible promises, sentence prayers, past experiences, supportive and understanding people, etc.
- Do something each day that helps them to relax, laugh, and feel good. Go for a walk in nature, have a warm hug together, look at photos and video clips of funny animals, or work on a creative project and don’t worry about the end result. God gave us laughter, hugs, wonder, and creativity to release the happy hormones that can help heal our hurts. 7

Karen Holford is a family therapist and pastor’s wife living in Scotland.