



## WHEN LIFE HURTS

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**W**hen James came home after the board meeting, Sarah could see he needed some comfort. Hardly anyone at church knew that his brother was dying, that his father was in the initial stages of dementia, and that he'd been up all night at the police station with one of the church teenagers. She hugged him warmly and handed him a hot drink. Then she led him to the sofa by the fire and sat with her arm around him, giving him space to talk.

Luke knew that his wife was feeling down. Cindy hadn't been able to find work in their new church district, and her mother had just been diagnosed with cancer. She was feeling sad, lonely, and discouraged. He canceled all his appointments for the day so he could be with her. Cindy needed his ministry, too.

God gave us the gift of marriage so that we could take away each other's aloneness and comfort and support each other through challenges and hurts. The English wedding service describes marriage as a place where we "may find strength, companionship, and comfort."

When we comfort each other well, we recover more quickly from the hurts of life, we grow closer to each other, and our love matures. When we

don't know how to comfort each other or how to ask for comfort, our hurts can linger, and our lonely sadness can push us apart, encouraging us to look for comfort in inappropriate places, such as on the Internet and through other relationships and addictions.

### WHAT'S YOUR COMFORT STORY?

So that each can understand where the other is coming from, husbands and wives should discuss what they learned about comforting and sadness when they were children. Here are some questions to talk about:

- Who comforted you as a child? What did he or she do and say that was helpful?
- When you were growing up, what did you learn about being sad, being comforted, and comforting other people?
- Which messages about sadness and comfort that you received as a child came from your culture, your family, or your faith?

As you talk together about your comforting experiences, it's important to remember that different families and cultures believe they are doing their best to help prepare children for a painful world. In many cultures, boys are actively dis-

couraged from crying and are less likely to receive comfort from their caregivers, which can make it harder for them to tell their wives about their distress and more difficult for them to offer comfort to their wives. But we know that Jesus wept, and He knew what to say and do to comfort the sad and suffering people He met.

### COAT-STEALING

Solomon wisely warned us about being careful with the feelings of those who are distressed. Not only did he say that there's a time to weep and a time to laugh (Eccl. 3:4), he also said that when we sing cheerful songs to a sad person, it's like taking a coat away from him or her when it's bitterly cold (Prov. 25:20). Clearly, this isn't a very helpful way to comfort someone who is sad, yet we often respond like this because of our own experiences, culture, fears, and ideas about sadness and comfort. When people experience many uncomforted losses, they may become depressed or build a strong, defensive wall around their feelings to protect themselves from further hurts.

Here are some common responses to other people's sadness that often contribute to their distress:

- Minimizing their sadness: "Oh, it's not really that bad!" or "Don't be sad. Look at all the good things that are happening."
- Invalidating their feelings: "Stop crying! You've been sad long enough! It's time to get on with your life again."
- Spiritualizing away their feelings: "Don't be upset—just have more faith. You need to trust God more. You know He'll make everything work together for good. Don't you believe in the resurrection?"
- Competing with their feelings: "You think that's bad? You should hear what happened to me!"
- Fixing them: "To feel better, you just need to \_\_\_\_\_."

To someone who is sad, these responses are neither understanding nor comforting. They imply that sad people aren't good enough, happy enough, strong enough, or spiritual enough. If their pain hasn't been heard and comforted, discouraged people may emphasize their sadness, trying to get their partners to take their distress seriously. But this may cause their partners to work harder at minimizing the sadness, thus leaving sad people feeling even more alone, as if someone had stolen their coat on a freezing day.

## SOMETHING TO TRY:

### CREATING A COMFORT MENU

Make a list together of all the things that could be comforting. When you see that your spouse is upset, ask him or her to choose something from the comfort menu and then do whatever is asked.

Here is a list of ideas that other couples have suggested:

- Someone who listens to me without trying to fix me
- A warm hug
- Someone just being close to me for a while
- Going for a long walk together
- Going to bed with a hot water bottle my spouse has filled
- Sitting in a café together eating dessert
- Having someone to hold me when I cry
- Someone else doing my chores for a few days
- Doing something fun and interesting together
- Hearing or reading comforting words from people who care for me
- Someone making my favorite drink as a surprise
- Receiving a bunch of flowers or a thoughtful gift
- Being prayed for in a comforting way
- Reading encouraging and comforting Bible verses
- Doing something kind and caring for someone else who is hurting
- Having someone with me when I'm likely to feel extra sad
- Being able to let those who love me know just how sad I am
- Knowing that my spouse is comfortable listening to me when I talk about my pain
- Knowing that my spouse can anticipate my sadness or tell when I need extra comfort, without my having to say so
- Having time to do something that lifts my spirits, such as a hobby, spiritual activity, exercise, being with friends, walking in nature, etc.



**LIKE TAKING SOMEONE'S  
COAT IN COLD WEATHER  
OR POURING VINEGAR IN A  
WOUND."**

Proverbs 25:20, NIV

Their "coat" is their natural human need to grieve a loss of some kind, and denying this need can add to their suffering instead of relieving it. When someone asks for a coat, Jesus suggested that we give him or her two coats! So we need to work doubly hard at comforting our spouses when they are sad.

**TALKING ABOUT SADNESS**

It's not always easy to talk about sad feelings because many of us have had bad experiences when we've spoken of our distress to others. Here are some things that have helped other couples begin to talk more about their hurts:

- Telling your spouse about your sad feelings:
  - I feel sad because . . .
  - I feel most sad about . . .
  - I'm most likely to feel sad when . . .
  - It's hard for me to talk about these things. Can you just hold me and listen while I try?
  - When I'm sad and need comfort, I'll let you know by . . .
  - Some things you do that I find really helpful and comforting are . . .
  - I appreciate the things you have done to try and comfort me such as . . .
  - I'd like to help you comfort me. I'll let you know the most helpful thing to do, so that you don't have to guess what I need.
  - When I'm feeling comforted, I'm more likely to be able to support you by . . .
- Responding to your spouse's sad feelings:
  - I'm so sorry that you're going through this pain. Tell me more about how you feel so I can understand it better.
  - Your sadness touches my heart, too, and I feel sad with you because I love you.
  - I hurt because you're hurting.
  - I care so much about your pain. What can I do to show you how much I care?

- It sounds to me as if you are really upset/sad/hurting/distressed. I'm so sorry. What's the best thing I can do to comfort and support you?

When your spouse talks about his or her sadness, listen and let him or her know that you've really heard these feelings and concerns. Trying to cheer someone up too quickly can leave him or her feeling even sadder and lonelier. Being sad *with* them will actually help them to feel happier more quickly. This follows Paul's wise advice to "mourn with those who mourn" (Rom. 12:15, NIV) and Jesus' promise to mourners that they will be comforted (Matt. 5:4).

**MOURNING WITH**

When I miscarried our first baby, Bernie and I promised each other that we wouldn't cry alone. We tried hard to be sad *with* each other, so we could share our sorrow and our comfort. This brought us even closer together at a time when we could have found ourselves drifting into separate, sad, and lonely lives or searching for comfort in ways that damage marriages, such as addictions, online relationships, and affairs.

**WHY COMFORT MATTERS**

Being able to soothe another person's distress and pain is a vital responsibility for every Christian, especially within marriage. Ministry marriages are particularly vulnerable because our congregations include many people who are hurt, sad, and distressed. Pastors can be so busy comforting others that they don't have the emotional energy and time to comfort their own spouses. And spouses can feel that everyone else's needs for comfort are more important than their own.

Expressing your own need for comfort, your desire to comfort one another, and finding practical ways to soothe each other also helps you to manage the distress and conflicts in your relationship. These experiences can help you feel closer to your spouse so that you can discover more of the "one-flesh" experience that God intended marriage to be.



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