

Avoid Fruitless Arguments in Your Marriage With These 8 Counseling Tips

“Honey, we need to talk.” How does that work out for you? Do you end up in a screaming match? Does one of you clam up and walk away? Do you say things you later regret?

It's a rare person indeed who goes into marriage knowing how to communicate in a healthy way. We asked couples where they wanted help in their relationship, and communication was clearly the Number One issue. Communication is a learned skill, and avoiding these mistakes in communicating with your spouse will get you a lot closer to the goals you're after.

[Doing your homework before trying to communicate](#) will help prevent some of these mistakes. But here are some specific land mines to watch out for when it's time for “Honey, we need to talk.”

8 Mistakes to Avoid

1. Reacting out of Emotional Volatility

Beginning a conversation when you're ready to boil over with anger, frustration, sarcasm, or desperation is almost certain to elicit defensiveness in your spouse. The walls between you will only become thicker.

Learn to own your own emotions; no one, not even your spouse, can make you feel any certain way. Discover [healthy ways to deal with your feelings](#) that don't involve taking it out on your spouse. Cry with a friend. Go for a run. Spend some time in prayer. Let your emotional temperature cool off before trying to work toward a solution with your spouse.

2. Don't Consider the Setting

Presenting a stack of overdue bills when your spouse walks in the door after a long day at work, or expressing how unhappy you are with your sex life as you're getting into bed at night – those scenarios are only going to make things worse.

Give careful thought to when and where your spouse will be most able to hear you and respond clearly. If it's a difficult conversation you need to have, take extra care to plan accordingly. Arrange for childcare. Meet Saturday morning for coffee. Make sure your husband has had something to eat. Make sure you help your wife deal with any practical matters causing her stress. Do what you can to see that your spouse's frame of mind will be as clear and positive as possible.

3. Start with Blame and Criticism

Almost every troubled couple who writes to me says something like, "My spouse is doing this wrong, and I can't get them to change." Criticizing and blaming your spouse for your relationship problems will almost certainly cause their mind and heart to close.

Instead of saying "You always . . ." or "You never . . .", try something like, "I'm worried about our finances. I'd like us to work together to come up with a better financial plan." Or, "I miss the intimacy we had in the past. I don't want the walls between us to become even thicker. Can we work together to make our relationship better?" Focus on working on the problem, not criticizing the person.

4. Expect your Spouse to Read Your Mind

Even the most caring spouse cannot know all your thoughts and feelings. Expecting them to know what worries you, what hurts you, what you want and need – that sets you both up for disappointment.

Express clearly and succinctly how the issue is affecting you. Put simple words to your emotions; don't dump your feelings on your spouse, or blame them for how you feel. Own your own feelings. Describe the behaviors you see, and their results. If there's something you need or want from your spouse, ask for it clearly without demanding. Some problems can be solved simply by expressing to each other what you see, need, and want.

5. Think it's All About YOU

You're not the only one with thoughts, feelings, fears, worries, needs, desires, strengths, and weaknesses. Your spouse is not your slave or your master. Marriage is a partnership between two people, and how the issue affects one of you is just as important as how it affects the other.

To whatever degree you already know how the issue affects your spouse, think that through ahead of time. If your spouse is working long hours and the money is still not enough, you can express appreciation for how hard they are working and still talk through developing a better financial plan. If your spouse is having a hard time with their getting-older body, you can help reassure them how much you still care and also continue working to overcome the barriers to intimacy physically and otherwise.

6. Do All the Talking

Some spouses can listen to you vent, but the place for that is usually not with your marriage partner. If you primarily need to talk tell your spouse that up front, but don't expect simply venting to lead to a solution. You may do better letting off steam to a trusted Christian friend, or in prayer to God.

To communicate well in marriage demands much more listening than talking. If you tend to talk more, work hard to shut up

and listen to what your spouse has to say. Listen to not only the words, but the feelings behind the words. Listen intently without trying to frame a comeback in your own mind. Ask questions if you need to. Listening and asking questions like this may help your spouse understand their own thoughts and feelings better than they could on their own.

7. Demand to be Right

A critical nagging wife or a controlling angry husband makes for a miserable one-sided marriage – and no chance at decent communication. Trying to communicate in order to get your way will result in resentment and emotional distance. Even if you do get your way on an issue your relationship will be damaged.

Work hard to see yourself as standing side-by-side with your spouse, working together to solve a problem. Your spouse is not the enemy. Instead you're together addressing the bank account, the parenting problem, the health challenge, the intimacy obstacle, etc. It's not about who's right; it's about finding a solution. And if you struggle to see things from that perspective, spend some time in prayer first.

8. Fail to Seek Understanding

Seek first to understand, then to be understood. There's no communication challenge that cannot be made better by understanding. If you both are people of good will, seeking understanding will put you and your spouse on the same side. Sometimes one or both of you will need to compromise, but that's not the ideal outcome. Usually there's another solution that solves the deeper problem. Seeking to understand your spouse is the only way to get there.

You have the choice to seek understanding instead of seeking to be right. It takes listening, really listening, to your spouse. And it takes being willing to share from your own open heart in a way that feels vulnerable. Go into any

communication seeking to understand and you'll come out ahead.

See how many of these mistakes you can avoid the next time you have something to communicate about with your spouse.

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Essential Habits God-Fearing Believers Jealously Guard

I had my friend on speaker phone the other day while I was ironing Matt's preaching shirts. One sleeve was giving me grief. I ironed one side smooth and flat only to turn over the sleeve and see a new wrinkle I had accidentally ironed in on the other side.

"This is my life," I told my friend. "Trying to live well and do good, only to discover a wrinkle in character pressed in firmly on another side of me." (It had been a week of apologizing for a handful of offenses, and I was sliding into despair that I might never become a better person.)

Into these thoughts came my morning Bible reading of Psalm 36:1-4 (NIV):

An oracle within my heart about the transgression of the wicked: There is no fear of God before their eyes. For they flatter themselves in their own eyes, that their iniquity cannot be found out and hated. The words of their mouth are wickedness and deceit; they have ceased to be wise and to do

good. They devise mischief on their bed; they set themselves on a path that is not good; they do not reject evil.

David sings this message concerning the wicked, but what I hear is God's message to me about the righteous. So I've flipped David's statements, to create a clear checklist of what it looks like to follow God.

Six Things God-Fearing People Do

1. We focus our eyes on God and fear him.
2. We detect our sin.
3. We hate our sin. It grieves us.
4. We refuse to flatter ourselves (although wouldn't that be a lovely analgesic?)
5. We lie in bed at night plotting ways to live well.
6. We commit ourselves to a good course.

I watched the [video testimony](#) of a Jewish man named Ze'ev. His father survived the holocaust but lost everyone in his family. He believed there was no God. Ze'ev grew up as an atheist but then came to put his faith in Yeshua (Jesus). He described what it was like trusting in Jesus and said, "It's like I had a broken conscience and it was replaced—I received a new conscience."

Which takes me back to the ironing board and how I can spot every wrinkle in a shirt. In the same way, I can detect my sin. This is a sign that God is giving me a new, highly sensitive conscience. It reminds me that he cares about my life.

So I pray, "I see the wrinkles, Lord. Bring the steam and the heat."

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How Holy Spirit Helps You Deal With Unresolved Grief

It felt as though an elephant was sitting on my chest.

It had been like that for days; and while I knew this was normal, I just wanted a moment when I could genuinely smile and laugh as before.

“God, how do I do this? This grieving thing?”

I have a long history of pushing stuff under the rug. The problem is, your “rug” can only hide so much stuff before it starts tripping you up.

I had promised God that this time [I'd give myself time to grieve](#). I'd do it in a healthy way so that I wasn't overcome by it, but that I wasn't hiding from it either.

God answered me that day with something I read in chapter 3 of [Grieving With Hope](#).

Interestingly, I didn't read chapter 3 until just now, so as I saw the list of questions [Samuel L. Hodges IV](#) gives I smiled to myself because I knew the value in the advice he was giving.

Sometimes new grief brings back the pain of old loss.

In chapter 3 of [Grieving With Hope](#), we find that sometimes new grief can bring up the pain of old loss. This is completely normal as it reminds us of similar losses we have experienced.

The [pain of my third miscarriage](#) was so great that its intensity took me by surprise. It was far greater than the first two.

I wasn't prepared to deal with it.

In fact, I did everything I could to not have to face it. I buried myself in work and comfort food. As long as I had a distraction and kept my taste buds happy, I could pretend it had never happened.

But do you know what?

It did. And ignoring the pain of loss doesn't make it go away. It only lets it fester inside.

And I learned this when, only a year later, I had my fourth miscarriage.

I knew that I had to face both losses because the pain was too great now to ignore. I did for a time, but my escape to work and food was a lot easier than feeling.

So, when we lost my dear friend Mandy, I knew that the pain of her loss would bring up past losses—ones I'd grieved and the ones I hadn't.

Give yourself "grief projects."

I sat down with a pen and paper and began to list all the losses I'd failed to properly grieve. I didn't just list the deaths of my grandparents, or my miscarriages, but also loss of friendships, dreams, ideals, and opportunities.

When my list was complete, I went back and listed the ways I'd chosen to escape from the pain of those losses.

Upon completing this project, I asked the Lord to forgive me for turning to other things for comfort and peace, instead of Him.

Grief is an opportunity to get to know the Holy Spirit on a much deeper level.

The Comforter becomes more real to us as we allow Him to truly comfort us.

You have to deal with your past in order to be present

I think one of the reasons this generation has become so obsessed with living in the present is that our lives move too quickly to really deal with the past.

Grief takes time.

If we are unwilling to take that time to properly grieve our losses, we will never really be able to move forward.

But when we take the time to finally grieve and walk into our present, while in some cases the pain will always be with us, we'll not live in the pain.

We'll be able to enjoy our loved ones' presence and soak in those precious moments now, without letting them pass us by as we live in the pain of past loss.

If you're feeling the weight of unresolved loss, I encourage you to pick up a copy of [Grieving With Hope](#) and take the time to go back and grieve those losses, so that you can move forward in the peace and comfort of the Holy Spirit. {eoa}

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Your Spiritual Weapon to Keep Demonic Forces at Bay

Psalm 78:40-43, NKJV, burns in my heart: "How often they provoked Him in the wilderness, and grieved Him in the desert! Yes, again and again they tempted God, and limited the Holy One of Israel. They did not remember His power: the day when He redeemed them from the enemy, when He worked His signs in Egypt, and His wonders in the field of Zoan."

"They limited the Holy One of Israel because they did not remember His power." Amazing! How could they forget the miraculous walk across the bed of the Red Sea as they walked out of bondage? I can imagine as they walked they were saying, "I'll never forget this!"

Does that sound familiar? How many times have we forgotten how God has delivered us? God understands man and his ways. In the Old Testament, He continually reminded them to build memorials so they would remember the faithfulness of God.

In Isaiah 43:26, MEV, He tells us, "Put Me in remembrance" God doesn't forget. His was for our benefit, to help us remember.

Paul tells us in Philippians 4:12-13: "I know both how to face humble circumstances and how to have abundance. Everywhere and

in all things I have learned the secret, both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things because of Christ who strengthens me.”

The key word here is “learned.” Paul learned as he walked through life, just like you and me. Paul wrote this letter while he was in prison. The central thought is simple: Only in Christ can we find unity and joy in our lives. This was a message the Philippians desperately needed to hear. The people of the church were at odds with each other, hindering the work in proclaiming new life in Christ. Paul was writing to thank them for their help in his time of need and used the opportunity to put them in remembrance of the real purpose in life.

Paul shares his secret of being content in chapter 3, verses 13-14: “Brothers, I do not count myself to have attained, but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal to the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.”

This really caught my attention: “One thing I do.” This had to be important! Forgetting those things which are behind. “God,” I cried, “how do I do this? The devil is always reminding me of my past failures and mistakes.”

He immediately answered my cry, “Remember.”

“Remember?” I questioned, as I pondered this in my heart. “When you remember, you are choosing your thoughts,” He revealed to me. Then I understood. When you choose your thoughts, the devil cannot fill your head with his thoughts.

Your mind is the battlefield. Second Corinthians 10: 5, NIV, tells us, “We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.” How do you take a thought captive? You replace it with another

thought! If you are not choosing your thoughts, the devil is going to take advantage of you and fill your mind with condemnation and guilt.

Your memory is designed by God as a tool to keep the devil away. Psalm 37:3, NKJV, says, "Trust in the Lord, and do good; Dwell in the land, and feed on his faithfulness" Remember the faithfulness of God. This leads you to a heart of thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving turns your heart to God and prepares the way for your miracle. Thanksgiving is the voice of faith!

Purpose to remember. Just like Paul, we must forget the past and press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus by remembering His faithfulness.

As a child of God, you also have a Helper, the Holy Spirit. "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you" (John 14:26, NKJV).

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Squelch Loneliness and Confusion With This Sacred Truth

“Are you okay?” he said. “You seem down.”

Daaaaaah! How does he do that? I was going to keep my blues to myself, so I acted all cheerful, but he knew. I don't know how, but he knew after three seconds. “Seems like you're carrying a weight,” he said.

“Yes.”

“I like you,” he told me. “I think you're awesome.”

His comments hit the target of my I'm-a-failure-at-most-everything heart. Of course, way up north in my head, I knew I wasn't a failure at most everything, but somehow in the more central region of my soul, there was a pervasive uneasiness that I was disappointing the Lord and my people in most directions.

Matt said he knows. He feels that way lots of times, too.

Well, after he left for work, I put something away in the pantry and spied a leftover fortune cookie from Panda Express. In a show of no self-control, I picked it up and cracked it open.

My fortune (which I don't believe in but childishly enjoy reading) said:

YOU WILL BE HAPPILY SURPRISED BY A LONG-TIME FRIEND

I popped the cookie in my mouth and threw the fortune in the garbage. A few minutes later, I was fishing the fortune back out of the garbage.

“Happily surprised by a long-time friend.” Hmmm.

Friends are people who like you. Just 'cause.

I've been thinking about this a lot, because Matt and I have been watching *Andy Griffith* in the evenings. Is there any better show of friendship than what Andy and Barney have? I told Matt flat out that he is Andy and I am Barney. Night after night we watch Andy endure Barney shooting a hole in the floor of the jail house with his gun. Andy puts up with a whole lot, and he works to protect Barney's dignity like nobody's business.

So the Lord spoke to me, while I was standing over the garbage with the fortune paper in my hand. He said to me, “I'm your friend.”

I no longer call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master does. But I have called you friends, for everything that I have heard from My Father have I made known to you (John 15:15).

I thought about Matt seeing my heavy heart and mending it with the simple words, “I like you.”

Yessirreee (in voice of Andy Griffith), on our blue days, when we keep using our one bullet to shoot a hole in the floor, we shore do need a friend.

I've got your long-time friend right here. His name is Jesus. He likes you, and he puts up with a whole lot. {eoa}

Christy Fitzwater is an author and pastor's wife living in Kalispell, Montana. She is the author of [Blameless: Living A Life Free from Guilt And Shame](#) and [My Father's Hands: 52 Reasons to Trust God with Your Heart](#). Find her devotional writing at christyfitzwater.com.

Why You Might Be Listening to the Wrong People

My life has been relatively public over the past few years. Sometimes I feel like I (and my family) live in a fishbowl with the rest of the world watching. During Steve's battle with ALS, the number of eyeballs looking into our world multiplied exponentially.

The great part about that is it created an army of pray-ers who truly helped to get us through that treacherous season. The challenging part was that those looking in often had opinions about how we should fight, treat symptoms, pray, believe, speak and live. Opinions aren't bad, but it's impossible to listen to all of them.

My blog readership during that time of our lives varied from 10,000-10 million. Literally, *million*—not the figurative way I usually use it like “I would like to have a million donuts for breakfast tomorrow.” Again, I'm so thankful for the concern that was expressed and the care shown, but along with it came a lot of feedback that initially shook me to my core.

I found myself investing precious time and resources responding to emails of people I had never met or hadn't spoken to in 20 years, defending our treatment choices or any number of other things. Honestly? I regret every minute I gave to that pursuit. It was entirely unsatisfying and completely unnecessary.

After Steve died, I began facing my new life as a widow and a single woman, and I made the very intentional decision that I would not steer my choices toward the cheers or away from the jeers of the crowd. I would invite a few wise and trusted

voices into my life, I would tell them everything and give them permission to tell me anything. I would then weigh their counsel together with what I felt the Holy Spirit was saying and I would move confidently in that direction. That is what I have done. I am the one on the field; the only one with the responsibility to actually live out my life in a way that honors God and blesses the world. There are coaches around me who give input—but they are not on the field. And there will always be people in the cheap seats and they are also not on the field, but—wow—they can be pretty dang loud.

These good souls have strong opinions and some of those opinions are built on truth, some on their own experience, some on pure fiction. I could spend a lot of time weighing out the motives of the shouters, I could investigate all their claims, I could stop the action on the field and shout back to them to make sure they understand why I'm doing what I'm doing and how there are so many things of which they are unaware.

I could tell them that I really am open to instruction and wisdom, and my life is absolutely lived in accountability relationships to good people, just not to all people. I could go sit with them a while and try to convert them to my way of thinking in an attempt to protect my public approval rating. But that sounds exhausting and unproductive and very much like defending the game rather than playing it.

Instead, I've decided to let the cheap seats be the cheap seats. They have opinions, and that's fine. Their opinions may even turn out to be better than mine, and that's also fine. Jesus is at work in me and He's not dependent on me getting everything right in order to make my life truly good. I can trust Him, and the people He's put in my life—and so can the people in the bleachers.

If you also have been swayed by the roar of the crowd, I have a few tips for living true to yourself and your God:

1. **Identify the voices of influence in your life.** Pick a few friends who you will trust with your heart and whose advice you will welcome. How many? I don't know. More than 1 and less than 20 maybe? I really don't know. I have different coaching crews for different areas of my life, but the weighty voices around me number about a dozen. As I began dating, I invited four women—one who knows both of us—to speak into the entire process, no holds barred. And they have. And I value them more than I can say. I made the decision that unless they all agreed, I would not move forward. I don't think that's absolutely necessary for everyone, but I'm glad I had that level of security moving into a new relationship.
2. **Write down the names of your people of influence.** See that list? Draw a circle around it. Seriously—draw the circle. You need it, because everyone outside that circle? Cheap seats. These are not cheap people; they're mostly wonderful and valuable—they just have faraway seats. You'll still hear those voices, but you won't give their opinions the same weight because if you let everyone tell you who to be and what to do and how to do it you will lose your ever-loving mind and you will become unstable in everything you do. If someone from outside my circle expresses an opinion that is particularly intriguing or worrisome to me, I run it through the names inside the circle. I don't try to figure it out on my own. And so far, that process has worked like a dream, and the cheap seats comments have always been tossed.
3. Perhaps the most important thing I've learned in dealing with the Cheaps is to become really, really aware of the fact that for most people, I'm in the cheap seats, too. The more you focus on the way you shout your opinions (even inside your own head, because you know you do) and the more you realize: *Hey, I can just be wildly encouraging here because I don't have to answer for the way that person plays their game*—the more you'll know

how to respond to the weird words that are flung your way.

This has been my year for learning how to love unconditionally and encourage relentlessly, knowing that even if someone is veering wildly off track, I'm too far from the action (and, alas, not omniscient) to give meaningful correction or to understand what's happening behind the scenes. When I can't cheer on their decisions, I mostly just cheer the fact that I know the One who is crazy about them will be there if they screw it all up, just like He's been there when I screw it all up. This is my comfort: We don't have to be perfect to be loved and accepted and encouraged.

I've always said my life goal is to make Jesus proud and famous, but hidden inside that was a third idea—that if I did that just right, people would like me, and I am a huge fan of being liked. I like it almost as much as I like donuts and cute shoes. But as I'm beginning to die to the need to please all the voices. I have come newly alive to the voice of the one who holds the world and my world in His hand. I am unendingly grateful for the way He uses the human voices in my life to speak direction and wisdom and joy to me. And I'm thankful for those far from the action—cheering or jeering—because I know God uses them to build my character and to refine my obedience to His will.

And He is doing that. I will trust Him with you if you will trust Him with me. {eoa}

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Holy Spirit's Uncomfortable Key to Help You Obey Mark 12

"Do you love Me with all your heart?" I was just reading my daily Bible reading like a good girl and then, He had to ask me that question. I squirmed. The question caught me off guard.

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" (Mark 12:30a).

Even though I knew the verse like the back of my hand, I also knew if God was asking me a question, it wasn't because He was He didn't know the answer. It was because He was about to teach me something. That probably meant I didn't know the answer as I thought I did.

Heart

"Do you really submit your emotions to Me and let Me take care of them?"

The heart is said to be the seat of emotions, but according to the *KJV Bible Dictionary*, it is a lot more. It is defined as "the seat of the affections and passions and the chief part; the vital part; the vigorous or efficacious part." The heart is what makes everything else in the body work together. It also holds our will, our real intentions, our conscience, character, understanding and spirit.

The heart and our emotions are a big deal. Our emotions and how we handle them reveal the true intents of our heart.

Instead of an automatic, "Yes of course, Lord," I realized there are times I think I can handle this little bit of frustration. Then it grows into large angst and then full-

blown anger, all because I didn't take that first little frustration to God. It was a small cloud that I allowed to grow into a thunderstorm with tornado watches being called. Had I gone to Him when it was just a small gray cloud, it would have been easily dispersed and taken care of.

"No, Jesus, I admit. At times, I let tornado warnings be sounded around me. When I do that, loving You doesn't even appear on the radar screen."

Mind

"Do you love Me with all your mind or do you use your mind to question everything I do?"

OK, this time He was stepping on my toes. I was a born refiner. That means I question everything at least once. I call it researching all my options. But to love Him with all my mind means I follow without question.

At this juncture of my life, God is asking me not to lay aside my mind, but to use it to allow Him to fill it with things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy (see Phil. 4:8, NIV).

I hung my head thinking knowing I had allowed my mind to think about too many wayward things. They might be tame by the world's standards, but I knew God's Word tells me to "not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of [my] mind" (Rom. 12:2a). It all starts with the input I allow to occupy space in my mind. Even if it takes up a small space, I am not loving God with all my mind.

Soul

"Do you love Me with your soul, your very character? When I ask you to do something do you do it right away revealing a faithful character?" I had never thought of the soul as my character.

The online dictionary defines character as “the personality, nature, disposition, temperament, temper and makeup of an individual.”

The KJV Bible Dictionary defines soul in much the same way. “The spiritual, rational and immortal substance in man, which distinguishes him from brutes; life; power; spirit or essence.”

This felt like a repeat of the other two. I am prone to take some time to think and weight my options. However, I was beginning to see that God was asking me to follow His lead as my soul’s first response to Him.

I had to admit that the thought of doing that instead of wandering through the minefield of my heart, mind and soul was becoming more and more appealing.

Strength

“And do you love Me with all your physical strength, taking care of your body in every way possible?” I sat uncomfortably counting the ways I didn’t do that.

I definitely felt I could give myself credit for taking of my body better than say, even 10 years ago. I asked Him to show me what more He wanted me to do. He’s been talking to me about resting more and taking a Sabbath every week.

I have been resisting the Sabbath concept. Yet if God Himself worked six days creating the world and everything in it and then rested for a day, why do I think I shouldn’t? Last weekend I took a complete Sabbath, 24 hours without emailing, typing or even taking care of clients. I let others do that and I intentionally rested by enjoying time with family and friends.

At the end of my Sabbath, I took an hour to fully complete a book proposal and get it emailed for the Monday-morning

deadline. I had a rested, less confused mind, soul, heart and body. Had I not taken the day off, I'm sure I would have worked all day and not gotten as much done as I did in that one hour. God showed me exactly what to fix, add and change. He is my strength.

God Questions

I love God's questions because they always lead to answers I haven't even asked yet. God wanted me to understand that He is aware that even the things I consider small will lead me away from being fully sold out to Him if I allow them into my life. I'm so glad He wants ALL of me, every single part, fully abandoned to Him.

We just celebrated Easter, the day that Jesus demonstrated His overwhelmingly great love for us. That alone should be cause to pause.

I chose to sit quietly and ponder why He did that and what my actual response should be to what He did. Even the little parts of me I tend to hold back from Him are like daggers thrust into His side. Those things are the reason He died all those years ago.

The truth is if I had been the only person alive, He would have still come to suffer, die, rise again and ascend to heaven that I might one day join Him there.

That alone should be enough to make sure I love Him with every single part of me.

Selah. Sit quietly and ponder what your response should be to Him. {eoa}

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[Change:True Stories of Transformation](#). Get a free chapter of all her books, plus many other free resources on her blog at [Teresa Shields Parker.com](#). Connect with her there or on her [Facebook page](#), [Twitter](#), [Pinterest](#) or [Instagram](#).

Helping Your Teen Discover Their God-Given Talents

Differences between middle schoolers and high schoolers were obvious. Sadly, they almost always are.

During a recent chapel at an impressive Christian school, one group eagerly raised their hands to answer my questions. The other group did not. Can you predict which was which?

Who likes to write?

Who enjoys discovering truth on your own and exploring?

Who thinks body smart is one of your strengths?

More middle schoolers than high schoolers eagerly raised their hands. It's not because high schoolers don't know themselves. Most do. Rather, it was as if these students didn't want anyone to know their strengths or that they liked anything. This should not be embarrassing.

Some high schoolers raised their hands high. Some raised them only in front of their faces and made eye contact with me and smiled. Others just made eye contact with me.

Talk with your children/students. Do they know their strengths and what they enjoy and don't enjoy? If they don't, observe

them more closely and let them know what you see. Provide evidence for your opinions. Prioritize developing their self-awareness by strengthening their self-smartness.

If they do know what they enjoy and what they do well, but don't want their peers to know, ask them why. Have they been teased? Embarrassed? Prideful? Talk about this with them. It's good for peers to acknowledge friends' strengths and interests. There are ways to encourage one another without building pride.

The night of the chapel talk, I met many of the students' parents at an event. Over and over again, I heard how middle schoolers *and* high schoolers loved learning how they are smart. I thought high schoolers were definitely listening and enjoying the presentation. I was encouraged they told their parents about it and how they're smart.

Young people who know their interests and strengths are more likely to use them and further develop them as a source of their joy. They'll acknowledge they're relevant to how they can leave the world a better place.

When they know how peers are talented, they can form groups for class projects, service projects and more. They can identify who can help them with a weak area. They can identify who they can help. It's good for the group dynamic.

Make sure your children/students know what they do well so they'll do things well. {eoa}

[Dr. Kathy Koch](#) is the author of *Screens & Teens: Connecting with Our Kids in A Wireless World*.

5 Wise Steps to Take if You Find Your Spouse in an Emotional Affair

It might seem simpler, though even more devastating, to walk in and find your spouse in bed with someone else. Emotional cheating is squishier. You—and your spouse—may find it easier to come up with excuses and rationalizations. You may wonder if you're the problem. You may find it difficult to trust your own intuition or senses. But if your spouse is emotionally cheating, ignoring the problem won't make it go away.

Emotional affairs are real and dangerous. They often lead to physical affairs, but that's not the point. Both men and women are vulnerable here. Rationalizations are easy: "He meets my emotional needs in a way my husband doesn't." "We're helping each other spiritually and praying together." "She understands and validates me professionally."

But your heart is drawn away. Whether or not your clothes eventually come off, the damage to your marriage and to your own soul is significant. That's what Jesus meant when He said, "But I say to you that whoever looks on a woman to lust after her has committed adultery with her already in his heart" (Matt. 5:28).

The state of your heart matters.

Protecting your own heart from an emotional affair is only possible through God's grace. But this is especially for husbands and wives who suspect—or know—that your spouse is doing the emotional cheating.

What Is Emotional Cheating?

First, what's the criteria for emotional cheating? Are all

friendships with someone of the opposite sex, other than your spouse, forbidden? What about work colleagues, church friendships or ministry partners?

That could take a long time to answer. But here's the bottom line:

Never allow emotional, physical, or [spiritual intimacy](#) with anyone to become as great as or greater than the emotional, physical and spiritual intimacy between you and your spouse.

That means if your marriage is struggling in one of these areas, you and your spouse will have to take extra precautions to preclude closeness with anyone of the opposite sex. Ferociously guard your heart. Only be vulnerable with another person not your spouse if they are a same-sex believer or a professional helper. (And a professional helper the same sex as your spouse can also be dangerous. Be careful even in choosing professional helpers.)

That may seem extreme, but the results otherwise are too dangerous.

So now, what do you do if you know or suspect your spouse is emotionally cheating?

What You Can Do

- **Check Your Facts**

Facts may seem hard to come by when you're dealing with emotional cheating, but they're important. Why do you suspect your spouse is emotionally cheating? What are the indicators? Do you see text messages or other clues? Is your spouse investing less in your relationship than they previously did? Are they spending more time and energy at work, church or online than previously? Are they being secretive when you ask about certain things? Are there other things going on in your spouse's life that would adequately explain any changes you

are noticing?

Realize that your own feelings and intuition are often the most sensitive indicator, but they are just that—your feelings and intuition. It's possible to be overly jealous and controlling. It's also possible to miss or ignore warning signs for a long time. Do your best to step back and evaluate your own assessment of your marriage and your spouse's behavior.

If necessary, get some feedback from a trusted Christian same-sex friend. Don't ignore your own heart in the situation; it's possible your own intuition may be God's way of alerting you to something you can address in your marriage before things deteriorate further.

- **Check Your Own Heart**

Before you confront or blame your spouse, take a look at your own emotions, investment in the marriage, personality and spiritual sensitivity. Your spouse is always responsible for his/her own behavior, but in the same vein, you are also responsible for your own.

Ask yourself questions such as: Am I being unreasonably jealous or controlling? Have I contributed to [making my spouse feel unsafe](#) or diminished in our marriage? Am I working to address any barriers to intimacy I brought into the marriage? Am I [harboring bitterness or anger toward my spouse](#)? Am I increasingly [learning to rely on God first to meet my needs](#) instead of looking to my spouse to give me what they do not have to give?

Your honest answers to these kind of questions do not absolve your spouse from their responsibility, but your self-assessment will help you approach the issue with humility, honesty, openness, courage, respect, and love.

▪ Talk

Oh, the dreaded “We need to talk.” Yes, you will have to go there. Choose the time, place and setting where you know your spouse will be most able to listen and communicate. Go into the conversation prayed up. If you feel the need, have a trusted Christian same-sex friend praying for you as you do so.

Your goal in this conversation is to understand, not to blame or belittle your spouse. Use your own words, but the message you convey should be something like this: “Honey, I love you and I want our marriage to be strong and thriving. I’ve been concerned about some things I’ve noticed recently. I’ve noticed you [simply state any behaviors or changes you’ve noticed]. I’m having a difficult time putting this together, and I don’t want to let this become a bigger wall between us. Will you help me understand what’s going on?”

Then listen. Listen to both the words and non-verbal communication your spouse presents. Your goal is to understand. If your spouse puts up a major roadblock to communication, that itself may help you know what’s going on. If they offer reasonable explanations and demonstrate openness to working on intimacy together, you may have saved your marriage from further hurt. If they admit to an emotional affair and ask forgiveness, you know [what you need to work on to rebuild trust](#).

▪ Set Healthy Boundaries

If your talk reveals areas in your relationship where you and your spouse can work together, you’re in a very good place. If you need some professional marriage help, get it. If you can both commit to shoring up the intimacy between you, do so.

If your talk reveals that your spouse is having an emotional

affair and is unwilling to work on your marriage, or if there is no effective communication at all between you, don't feel you are powerless. [Setting healthy boundaries in a relationship as intimate as marriage](#) may seem counterintuitive, but it's important.

You have many choices. You can state clearly and without anger the steps you will take until and unless your spouse commits to working on your marriage. You can get help for yourself—online resources, books, therapy from a pastor or counselor and so on. You can invest in your own growth and maturity regardless of what your spouse does or doesn't do.

- **Stay on Your Knees**

Regardless of the results of the previous steps, you will need God's intervention in your own heart and in your marriage. Pray before, during, and after every step in this journey. Pray that your own eyes are open to what is going on in your marriage, the part your own behavior may or may not be playing, and the best way to communicate with your spouse. Pray that any unreasonable jealousy or control in your own heart be changed, for freedom from false guilt or shame, and that you conduct yourself with your spouse in the way God needs you to do so. Pray that the Holy Spirit will intervene in your spouse's heart and mind as only He can.

Every single marriage will go through challenges. Every relationship is vulnerable to emotional cheating. The important question is, what will you do next? Who is God calling you to be to your spouse right now?

God can and does restore marriages where humanly speaking there was no hope. Remember, both you and your spouse have a vote. You cannot control the outcome.

Staying on your knees will allow God to do His work in your own life and in your relationship. Don't move forward without

Him.

Dr. Carol Peters-Tanksley is both a board-certified OB-GYN physician and an ordained Doctor of Ministry. As an author and speaker, she loves helping people discover the **Fully Alive** kind of life that Jesus came to bring us. Visit her website at drcarolministries.com

Clearing Clouds of Confusion in Your Darkest Hour

Thoughts are powerful and at times cause us to feel and act in ways we wouldn't normally. In fact, they can become so powerful that if left unchecked, they end up controlling us rather than the other way around. When our thoughts and feelings are largely negative in nature, those pessimistic ideas infiltrate our lives—and our faith—making it increasingly difficult to live with joy. In *Unsinkable Faith: God-Filled Strategies to Transform the Way You Think, Feel and Live* (David C Cook), Tracie Miles offers practical, life-changing strategies for those who struggle with negativity, leading them to discover how the transforming of their minds can transform their lives.

Q: Your new book, *Unsinkable Faith*, opens with details about a difficult conversation you had with Jesus. What led up to that conversation, and how did it lay the foundation for this book?

After almost 26 years of marriage, my husband decided he wasn't happy and chose to leave my children and me. It was as if my whole world fell apart in an instant, and the life I had always known abruptly ended. Anyone who has gone through any type of marital crisis, separation or divorce, long-term relationship breakdown or extremely difficult circumstance knows not only do our thoughts and emotions begin to feel

overwhelming and in control, but we can also begin to wonder why God let these circumstances happen to us. Our negative thoughts take over, and we might begin to question our faith and feel abandoned by our heavenly Father. We're hurt, and hurt wreaks havoc on our hearts and minds.

One day, a few weeks after my husband left, I finally broke down and cried like a baby for three solid hours, asking Jesus, "Why?" Why did He not answer my prayers to save my marriage and change my husband's heart? Why did my children and I have to go through this? I found myself in fervent prayer as never before when I felt like Jesus whispered a question to my heart: "Do you still love me?" It came out of nowhere, and my immediate answer was, "Yes, Lord." Honestly, my answer caught me off guard, but it was a turning point for me to pick myself up and lean harder into Jesus instead of letting this situation shake my faith. It allowed me to invite Him to help me transform my thoughts from negative into positive to transform and reclaim my life, even if that meant starting over. It wasn't easy—it didn't happen overnight—but it did happen.

Q: Our thoughts can cause us to feel as if we're sinking and can often sink our faith as well. When this happens, how can readers who find themselves feeling as if they're drowning in their problems and negative thoughts learn to stay afloat?

The real question is how can we develop an unsinkable faith that carries us through life with a hopeful, positive attitude no matter what life throws at us? When our thoughts and attitudes get better, our lives can too, even if our circumstances remain the same. We can't always control how we feel, but we can always take authority over our own minds and change the way we think. When we do this, it changes the way we view and experience life overall, preventing us from sinking in hopelessness, discouragement and despair. There is always hope for a positive attitude, a stronger faith, a heart full of joy and a happier future when we put our hope in Jesus and choose not to let life cause us, or our attitudes, to sink. Negative attitudes cause us to sink, while positive ones help us keep our heads above water when life is trying to pull

us down. A negative mind will never lead you into a positive life.

Q: How does negativity become a stronghold in our hearts, and what are the consequences?

Negativity usually happens gradually, and sometimes we don't even realize we have become a negative person. It's like a poison that seeps into our hearts and minds so slowly we fail to realize what is happening until it's too late. In our defense, we are all bombarded with outside negative influences every day, from the media, politics and even friends and family. On top of that, if we are going or have gone through some difficult or painful circumstances, our own negative thoughts influence our mind and well-being. Throughout time, negativity can become a stronghold on our entire perspective about everything in life. When this happens, we fall into a habit of thinking negatively so much it simply becomes who we are. The consequences of living with a negative mindset are we lose the ability to look for the good side of things and always focus on the doom and gloom of any situation, which eventually steals our peace, joy and happiness.

Negative thought patterns will always lead to a negative life pattern. Unfortunately, sometimes the poison even seeps out of our hearts and minds, turns into actions and spills out onto those around us, negatively impacting relationships. It's a vicious cycle, one we can't afford to take lightly. True joy and a positive attitude come from choosing to change your thoughts, not from a problem-free life.

Q: Aren't some people simply "wired" to be more pessimistic or optimistic than others? What encouragement do you offer to those who find it more challenging to think positively?

Every person is unique, but I don't believe some people are wired to be more pessimistic or optimistic. It is true, however, that upbringing, outside influences and circumstances can impact the way people learn to think and train their minds. Science has proven most people are generally optimists. Nobody wants to go around with a doom-and-gloom attitude, but

if we aren't careful, life and adversities can cause us to have one.

What's encouraging is it's been proven through amazing brain research by scientists, such as Dr. Daniel Amen and Dr. Carolina Leaf, that science has finally caught up with Scripture. It is possible to transform our brain physically through positive thinking physiologically, but we can also transform our thought patterns by asking God to help us be more aware of negative thoughts when they creep in and turn those thoughts around. Their research has proven this to be true time and time again with their patients. Everyone is capable of changing their thought patterns; and when they do, their lives will change too.

Q: You write, "We can't always control how we feel, but we can always take authority over our own minds and change the way we think." How do we balance working to change the way we think with allowing the Holy Spirit to transform us?

We all know feelings are powerful and at times cause us to think or even do things we wouldn't normally do. In fact, sometimes our thoughts are so powerful they are controlling us rather than us controlling them, and that's never good.

Romans 12:2 (NLT) says, "Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think." This verse is telling us not to let the world or our circumstances conform our thoughts, but to let the Holy Spirit transform us instead. The balance comes in realizing we can't change our minds without the help of Christ and an intentional decision to do so. Being conformed is what happens to us when external influences impact us internally, but being transformed happens when we choose intentionally to ask the Holy Spirit to shape us and our thoughts instead.

We must first have the desire and willingness to change. Then, we need to ask the Holy Spirit to help us be more aware of each negative thought that cause us to feel pessimistic, fearful, mad, sad and overwhelmed. From there we need to

rephrase those thoughts into something positive or, at a minimum, stop listening to the negative thoughts when they arise and reject them completely. As our awareness of our thoughts grows, a transformation begins to happen.

Join Tracie Miles on

[April 25th for a Facebook Live event](#)

where she will talk about the book and answer reader questions.

Q: What advice can you offer the person living in so much hurt their vision is too clouded to see Jesus?

Life is hard for everyone, but it is harder for some than others. However, none of us have to let the hardships of life harden our hearts and minds. Emotional pain is one of the strongest emotions there is, and it can not only cloud our thinking but also our faith. It's often the misconceptions we build in our minds rather than our circumstances that cloud our ability to see Jesus. I would tell them even though they may have a million valid reasons to feel negative or pessimistic, all those negative thoughts will never lead to a positive life.

All of us want to be happy, fulfilled and optimistic about the future. We all have had pain in our past or are facing difficult situations that are hard to be optimistic about, but all things are possible in Christ. Every believer has the power to choose optimism, and doing so is life-changing.

Q: What type of person will benefit from reading *Unsinkable Faith*?

Not one person is alive who doesn't feel overwhelmed with negative thoughts from time to time, whether due to a painful memory of the past or a current challenge. Every one of us will start feeling bossed around by our feelings, as if we don't have control of our emotions and actions. However, deep down, we desperately want to gain control again, so it's a topic everyone can benefit from.

More specifically, it may benefit those who:

- have convinced themselves they're doomed to be unhappy and have just accepted it because they know their circumstances will never change.
- grew up in a pessimistic home and think they are fated to carry on that negative legacy.
- struggle with depression and discouragement and feel true happiness and optimism are entirely out of reach because they've tried other methods and medications to help them feel happy, but they just haven't worked.
- are generally positive people but are going through a difficult situation, such as myself.

Anyone who wants to be a more happy, optimistic person—regardless of the root cause of their negativity—can benefit from learning how to reshape their thoughts, transform their minds and begin steering their life in a more positive direction.

Learn more about Tracie Miles and *Unsinkable Faith* at www.traciemiles.com, on [Facebook \(p31traciemiles\)](#) and via [Twitter \(@traciewmiles\)](#).