

These Spiritual Steps Will Help You Move Beyond 'Single at Christmas'

Christmas is only a day away—and you're alone. Well, not really alone—not totally. But you're single. There's no one to kiss on Christmas Eve, no one to share a hot chocolate with in front of the fire, no one to walk with hand-in-hand through the snow. Being single at Christmas is just not cool.

I know what that's like. There were many Christmases when I was a young woman where I longed to have someone to truly share the holiday with. The popular portrayals of Christmas as a time for family only made my single status more painful. And now that I'm single again since my husband died, the holidays make being alone even more challenging.

And yet I'm not sad this year. Oh yes, there are big parts of me that miss my husband! But my mood is not dark. I've learned how to deal with the holiday blues and to make Christmas a special time, even as a single person.

Here are a few steps you can take right now that will make "single at Christmas" a meaningful time.

1. Focus on becoming.

It's only in a Hallmark movie that you get a "boyfriend for Christmas." If that's the gift God blesses you with, awesome. But it's much more likely that His gift to you this Christmas will be the chance to move forward in becoming—being—the person He created you to be.

Whether or not you desire a relationship and marriage, becoming the person God needs you to be is the only way to make the next season of your life possible. Take the

opportunity this Christmas to focus on *becoming* more than always *doing*. Embrace the hardships you are experiencing, bring them into God's presence and invite Him to use them to change you, shape you and mature you.

Consider what will nourish you this holiday season. Play the Christmas music. Put up the decorations. Light the candles. Drink the hot chocolate. Whatever is meaningful to you, do it! Even if you're alone.

2. Raise your sights.

Navel-gazing on your own disappointments or problems will make you depressed. Leverage a part of your holiday season for the benefit of others. I gathered a group of ladies in my home for a Christmas celebration recently. The majority of them are single and lonely. Blessing them for an evening lifted my own spirits!

Think about what you do have to share. There is always someone more lonely or in need than you are. Give of yourself in some generous way, and you will be blessed.

Take some Christmas goodies to someone who lives alone. Bring a few other singles together for an evening of conversation and joy. Invite someone for a meal who would never be able to invite you back. Give one or two or several anonymous gifts to those who don't have a family to share with. Come up with your own way to share, but just do it!

3. "Go there" with Jesus.

Christmas is about the birth of a baby, *the* baby. Invite Him to be born in you anew this Christmas season. There is almost certainly some place in your heart where you need Him to do some work. Some betrayal, abuse, disappointment, rejection, lack, frustration, painful memory, hurt, something. Invite Jesus to "go there" with you.

When the angel announced the coming of Jesus, he said, “they shall call his name Immanuel ... God with us” (Matt. 1:23, ESV).

He is *with* you in your singleness, in whatever places you are wounded and need healing. Take some quiet moments, intentionally, during this Christmas season to invite Jesus to be *with* you in those places where you so much need Him.

May the Christ-child be born in your heart again this Christmas.

Your Turn: How much has your mental focus been on yourself? In what ways are you going to use this Christmas season to raise your sights beyond busyness to becoming, blessing others and being with Jesus? Leave a comment below. {eoa}

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 Jesus came to bring us. Visit her website at .

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Choose to Find Healing for Your Broken Heart at Christmas

The little olive wood creche was special to me ever since I purchased it at a little tourist shop in Bethlehem. Travel and several moves later, it was badly broken, not much more than a pile of wooden pieces. But I couldn't get rid of it.

The first Christmas after my husband passed away, the only piece of Christmas I wanted in my home was my little wooden creche. I got the bag of pieces out of the drawer and carefully glued Joseph, the sheep and the other pieces back together. It felt like I was trying to glue together the pieces of my broken heart.

If you look carefully, there are significant scars in my little wooden creche. The lamb's ear, Joseph's foot—the broken pieces were too small to repair. But the creche still holds the most honored place in my home at Christmas, reminding me of both the healed scars in my heart that I never want to forget, and the birth of a baby that first Christmas who came to heal our broken selves.

Perhaps you have a broken heart at Christmas as well. Are those places healed scars? Or are they still raw wounds? Complicated relationships, failed expectations, memories good and bad, loneliness—the holiday season makes them feel even more painful. Places you might have been able to successfully keep hidden at other times get opened up at Christmas.

Therefore, don't waste this opportunity to find healing.

Choose to Find Healing

We all get wounded. Some of those wounds are things others do to us, some are wounds we bring on ourselves and some come simply from living in a sinful, messed-up world.

God does not force healing on any of us. Like the work of a surgeon's knife, sometimes the healing process feels painful. It may mean opening up wounds you had tried to keep hidden, wounds covered over by scabs but that are still raw inside.

Perhaps God is inviting you to another round of healing this holiday season.

Healing doesn't mean you forget what happened, or that

everything is as you would wish. Healing means the infection is gone, forgiveness has been chosen and you are not chained to the past. It means Jesus has complete access to all your wounds so that He can turn any badness in your experience into bread by which others can be fed.

Invite Jesus to 'Go There' With You

The only way healing can come is for you to choose to “go there.”

Are there memories you need to deal with? Go there.

Do you need to extend forgiveness to someone or to yourself? Go there.

Is there someone you need to ask for forgiveness from? Go there.

Are there difficult conversations you have been avoiding in your closest relationships? Go there.

Are there character issues you know God is wanting to deal with you about? Go there.

And most importantly, invite Jesus to go there with you.

Allow yourself some periods of time to *go there* during this season. Imagine gathering the broken pieces of your heart in your hands and then offer them to Jesus to mend and heal. Don't rush away. Get quiet enough to listen as He speaks to you.

We each need repeated rounds of healing. The pangs in your heart may be signaling God's invitation for you to make that part of you available for Him once again. If you have a broken heart this Christmas, don't waste this opportunity to do so.

Your Turn: *What will you do this Christmas season to move toward healing? Leave a comment below.* {eoa}

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What Your Spouse Really Wants for Christmas

Gift-giving can be complicated. What does your spouse want? How much money do you spend? You may feel pressure to “top” last year’s gift or to “match” what your spouse is giving you. Some couples solve these challenges by agreeing to not give each other gifts. It may be hard to know what your spouse really wants for Christmas.

Spending money on material gifts may not be the best or most meaningful way to say, “I love you.” Even if your spouse’s love language is receiving gifts, the meaning and thought behind the gift are more important. That doesn’t minimize the importance of giving gifts; it’s just that there’s more to it than surfing Amazon for something that might fulfill your sense of obligation to have something under the tree with your spouse’s name on it.

If you know what your spouse wants for Christmas, do your best to give that! But look beneath the words they may say and consider the meaning in your relationship.

Here are some ideas that may get closer to what your spouse really wants for Christmas:

1. An experience: Studies have documented that most people remember and place a higher value on experiences over things. What are your spouse's interests? What does your spouse talk about? When does your spouse seem most happy and alive?

Do they enjoy art or music? Consider tickets to a concert or a visit to an art museum.

Is history their thing? Perhaps a history book or an invitation to an appropriate lecture.

Fine dining? Find the best chef in your area that you can afford and arrange a special meal.

Outdoors/wilderness? How about a weekend trip to a new state or national park?

Natural wellness? Think about a day at a spa or a visit to an organic garden.

Experiences can create great memories. It may involve a gift of your time; it's worth it. And even if it's something they do without you, an experience makes a great gift.

2. A learning opportunity: A chance to learn more about an area of interest is often a meaningful gift, and one that can create lasting value.

That might start with a book or online course about a subject they are interested in. But there are many other options as well.

An art class, a day with an accomplished chef, a ride-along with first responders, a music workshop, a college/university class—such things can be both an experience and a growing opportunity.

Make sure such an opportunity is something your spouse would want to do, not something *you* want them to learn.

3. Action toward change: Is there something about you that your spouse would love you to change? Simply a promise to do better is not impactful. But if you take a specific action, that can make a huge difference in your relationship.

Does he/she want you to stop smoking? Get a prescription from your doctor for Chantix or some similar helpful medication, purchase it and wrap it up with a note circling the date on the calendar when you will begin.

Does your snoring disrupt their sleep? Ask your doctor about an appointment for a sleep study and give that to your spouse.

Is your communication broken? Purchase a book on communication in marriage (here's ours) and begin reading it together.

Are they frustrated about how you deal with money? Purchase Financial Peace University.

Doing something specific to improve your relationship says to your spouse that they are important to you. That's an awesome gift.

4. A helping hand: What stresses your spouse? Where might they feel overwhelmed? Take something off their plate and offer that time to your spouse as a gift for them to do something they find nourishing.

You might take the kids for an afternoon to do some Christmas shopping that your spouse would normally have had to do.

Put up the Christmas tree, even though your spouse has normally done that.

If your spouse is completely overwhelmed, you might get so drastic as to take the kids to church yourself one Sunday and let your spouse have the morning for quietness and time alone

with God.

Wherever your spouse feels as though they have to do something, consider finding a creative way to take some of that load.

5. Time together: Find a way to enter your spouse's world in a way that's important to them.

If your husband is into hunting but you're not, offer to spend an afternoon at a sports shop or a day in the woods together.

If your wife loves shopping, spend an afternoon at the mall with her even though it's the last thing you would want to do yourself.

If your husband loves action movies, go to one with him that he would enjoy.

If your wife loves to talk, *you* plan a Saturday morning when you just meet over coffee and spend time talking.

Getting out of your comfort zone and spending time doing something your spouse enjoys is a great way to improve your connection.

Your turn: *Does anything here stimulate an idea for something you can give your spouse? I'd love to hear what gift you are planning to give. Leave a comment below. {eoa}*

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Why Your Times of Spiritual Darkness May Be Part of God's Perfect Plan

How long has it been since you walked outside at night in a dark place and really looked up at the stars? The darker the night, the better. Telescopes that look at the night sky are as far from city lights as possible. And to truly see as far as possible, you have to go to the Hubble Space Telescope—in the darkness of space! Yes, sometimes darkness might help you see farther.

Our human eyes have a limited ability to deal with light. Shine too bright a light in your eyes and you are blinded. We can't even look at the sun directly.

The same principle holds with our spiritual eyes—for now.

We think we would like to know things God knows, such as why evil exists, what happens when someone dies and details about the future. We might imagine that God is somehow holding out on us and keeping information—light—from us that we need. We get frustrated with the limited light He shines on those things, imagining that if He would tell us everything, we could understand.

But what if God is mercifully allowing us just the right amount of light so that we can see what we need to see, but also preventing the amount of light that would blind us?

Seeing in the Dark

This principle holds in many areas of human experience. When things are bright, we only look at and see what is right here,

right now. Seeing farther often requires darkness.

If you are a business owner, you're less likely to invest in improving your business if everything is going great. You're less likely to invest in your marriage if your relationship seems perfect. It's only when problems show up or pain happens that most people even begin to think about growing.

That's perhaps not how it should be, but it's how we as humans are.

Think of your own experience with God. Did you first come to Jesus because everything was going so well you just had to find someone to thank? Most of us came to Jesus in the dark, when things were going bad. It's then that our hearts are open enough to "see" what has been there all along.

I recently heard an amazing presentation by author and apologist Ravi Zacharias. What I remember most was his statement, "The problem of pleasure is much greater than the problem of pain." When things are too good, when we are too successful, it's easy to forget God completely. It takes a greater commitment to remain faithful when things are good than it does when things are bad.

That does not mean God sends bad things to us. John says, "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5b). It's not His problem; it's the limited ability of our eyes (rather, heart) to see.

Things You May See Better in the Dark

As humans, it's hard to look at ourselves. When things are comfortable, we don't feel the need to see, or change. Darkness—problems—may help you see areas in your own character that the Holy Spirit needs to change, ways in which you are harming other people or mindsets that are holding you back.

In ministry, as in other areas, success invites complacency.

But darkness—lack of response, dissatisfaction, overwhelm and so on—invites you to look further. What have you been overlooking? How can you innovate to something more effective? What skills might you need to learn?

In God's own dealings with you, think back to the times you have grown the most. It's almost certainly when things were so painful you were "forced" to do so. I've learned much more about God's ways in the difficult times than when things were easy.

A team learns most about one another when facing the toughest opponent. You learn most about your best friend or your spouse when facing challenges together. And you learn most about God when you go through difficult things together with Him.

This principle is only part of God's truth. But if things seem dark right now, consider what God might be inviting you to see.

Seeing Farther in the Dark

Tonight, pray for a clear sky. Get away from city lights, go outside and look up at the stars. Really look. Let your eyes dilate in the darkness and drink in the glory of the sky.

Every time I do that, I feel both incredibly small and incredibly important. I'm always reminded that God made all that! And I also think about how the very God who made all that came to rescue *me!*

Remember that the very God who made each one of those stars also made *you*. And if you stick around, one day you'll be able to see both God Himself and all His glorious universe, and everything about His dealings with you. The light won't blind your eyes any longer. Both your physical eyes and the eyes of your heart will be able to see it all.

And at that time, you and I will be able to say, "He has done

all things well!”

Your Turn: *Have you been frustrated or upset about the darkness you seem to be in? Consider God’s invitation, that this darkness might help you see further. Leave a comment below.* {eoa}

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‘Is My Marriage Toxic?’ 3 Ways You Can Know for Sure

How bad is bad enough? When you are unhappily married that can be a difficult question. If you’re serious about following Jesus you are reluctant to consider leaving your marriage. But evil exists in our sinful world, even within marriage. And you may find yourself wondering, *Is my marriage toxic?*

As author and Bible teacher Gary Thomas describes, the Bible is in three acts. Act 1 is the way God originally intended things to be, glorious, in the Garden of Eden. Act 3 is the grand finale, when God remakes all things new. But Act 2 is the fall. Evil—horrible, humanity-destroying, virulent and aggressive evil—entered our world and is still here. Even

though Satan is a defeated foe, we still live in a messed-up world until Jesus returns.

And the enemy rejoices when he can use the person closest to you to destroy you.

This is a hard topic. It's one that most of us acknowledge intellectually, but don't want to talk about. We don't want to consider that such things could exist in the marriage of someone sitting next to us in church or even in our own marriage.

What We're *Not* Talking About

There is more than enough unhappiness to go around in marriage. Two sinners getting married is a setup for pain. Always. But that does not mean your marriage is toxic.

We are not talking about your spouse not meeting your needs. If your husband or wife is not engaging in sex with you that's sad and needs to be worked on—but that's not toxic. If your spouse does not show you the affection or respect you desire and expect, your relationship needs help—but that's not toxic. When your spouse doesn't understand you, or won't communicate, doesn't support your career or is not similarly interested in growing spiritually as you are, those factors do not categorize your marriage as toxic.

Ask any couple who has remained successfully married for decades, and they will tell you marriage is hard. You will feel hurt or misunderstood. You may wonder if you married the wrong person. But persistence and growth can overcome so many problems. God can use your marriage to grow you, heal you and teach you how to love well.

But we must return to the reality that evil exists. Even within some marriages.

What *Is* Toxic?

What makes evil evil?

Perhaps the most picturesque description is when Peter describes how Satan “prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Pet. 5:8, ESV).

Evil delights in destroying another. Evil takes pleasure in pain; the more pain evil can cause another, the happier evil is. Evil seeks to manipulate, control, corrupt, harm and demean. Evil seeks to “steal and kill and destroy” (John 10:10, MEV).

And when you are married to a person who persistently behaves in an evil way or has a persistently evil heart, it will almost certainly destroy you.

We must be careful here. What superficially may be somewhat similar behaviors may or may not be evil. Your spouse *will* harm you. But if your spouse *delights* in harming you, that is evil. And if they consistently persist in that delight, your marriage is probably toxic.

And just because someone claims to be a Christian does not mean they are not toxic. Some of the most destructive manipulation and abuse happens in the name of God. How He must weep! When a husband (or a wife) uses Scripture to wound and control, demean and belittle, that is toxic. And a church leader or pastor who ignores true evil and recommends that the spouse seeking help stay only adds to that toxicity.

Just as important is whether or not the person is seeking repentance, healing, change and growth. God can heal and restore anyone and anything where He is given opportunity to do so! He has restored countless people and marriages that seemed impossible, marriages harmed by violence, addiction, abuse and more. But if the person persistently refuses to allow God to do His work, there are times He may be releasing

you from this marriage.

Is My Marriage Toxic?

There are no simple answers for someone facing a marriage that seems destructive. Sometimes God calls you to stay in a bad marriage. But I don't believe He calls you to stay in a marriage that is evil and toxic.

Making any decision about what to do next is not easy. Any simple answer would be inadequate. If you are facing such a circumstance, please get some expert help! This is an area where we must help each other in the body of Christ.

But briefly, ask yourself:

-Is my spouse acting out of an evil heart? (You will need God's perspective to assess this.)

-Does my spouse delight in causing harm?

-Is my spouse persistently refusing to change or seek help?

Marriages exist where the answer to those questions is Yes. That is tragic. God weeps. And I weep with you!

If that is the case for you, know that Jesus sees you. Get some help. It may be time to walk away. {eoa}

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4 Clear Keys to More Christlike Thoughts and Feelings

GI-GO. Any old-time computer person will recognize that acronym: Garbage In, Garbage Out. If you want better output, change the input! And it's not just for your computer. It's also the key to healthier thoughts and feelings.

As a high school senior, I learned computer programming using the old 80-column paper punch cards. (I'm dating myself now!) If the printer started spitting out gibberish, it was clear some card was out of place. Even a missing or extra hole in one card (hanging chads, anyone?) could mean havoc for the output.

So let me ask you: How satisfied are you with your mind's output?

Are you able to focus on the tasks that are most important? Can you acknowledge feelings such as anger, fear or frustration while still making intentional choices about how to respond? Do you embrace new information while still maintaining your values and purpose? Are you continuing to learn and grow? Are you able to look at circumstances realistically and still choose what to do next? Is listening for God's voice part of your regular *modus operandi*?

All those things are executive functions of your mind. God has given you executive authority over your mind, to choose how you use your mind to think, feel, respond and do.

If your mind is not giving you the output of positive,

resilient, godly thoughts, feelings and responses, one of the first things to do is change the input.

These are a few of the important types of input your mind is taking in, whether you are aware of it or not.

Physical Fuel

The hardware of your mind—your brain—needs healthy fuel to function. It's a type of input easily overlooked when people struggle with anxiety, depression, or other negative or troubling thoughts and feelings.

Physical fuel for your mind includes healthy nutrition, regular physical activity and rhythms of rest.

A regular pattern of aerobic exercise has been demonstrated to be as effective as antidepressants for many people. What looks dark and impossible when you're tired may seem very manageable after a good night's sleep. An eating pattern of unprocessed foods containing balanced protein and healthy fats, and that maintains stable blood sugar, can dramatically change mood, focus and productivity.

What kind of physical fuel are you providing your mind?

Mental Message Input

Our world is media-saturated. You have endless choices about what you read, watch or listen to. Books, podcasts, music, social media, TV, movies, YouTube, internet sites, magazines—they all add input to your mind. This is perhaps the most direct input that your mind uses in producing the output of thoughts and emotions.

Superficial, sex-saturated, violent, negative, sensational or otherwise questionable media cannot help but lead to thoughts and feelings that may be entitled, angry, depressing, anxious, lustful or overwhelming. Comparatively "harmless" media such as sensational cable news or social media can increase

anxiety, impact sleep and lessen your effectiveness.

Imagine being a consultant to yourself, walking around with you for 24 hours, and noting the media input your mind receives. Only based on the media you consume, what kind of output would you predict your mind would produce? What kinds of thoughts and feelings would come from that input?

If you're struggling with troubling thoughts and feelings, clean up the messages your mind receives.

People Fuel

God designed us to grow in community. It's scientifically documented that you will become like the people you spend the most time with. Your physical health, diet, media habits, attitudes, work habits, political views, financial standing, marriage or parenting success and spiritual growth will largely mirror those of the people you hang around with.

Dr John Townsend's recent book *People Fuel* describes in detail how powerful people are when it comes to how your mind functions and responds.

"Show me your friends, and I'll show you your future." It's unclear who said that first, but it's true. And it's a biblical principle as well.

Ask yourself, who are the five people you spend the most time with? Imagine their future. Is that a future you would want for yourself?

If you don't like what your mind is doing or where your life is heading, it might be time to get some different friends.

Spiritual Nourishment

Your spirit, the part of you that impacts your mind from the inside, needs nourishment. If this part of you becomes dry and shriveled, or toxically infected, your thoughts and emotions

will become negative, dark, self-centered and generally miserable.

What kind of spiritual nourishment are you taking in? Are you expecting one sip or one bite (five minutes with God in the morning) to keep you nourished all day? Is the spiritual nourishment you take in contaminated with legalism, cheap grace or human manipulation? Are you hoping God will “zap” nourishment into you without intentionally seeking out what you need and what He offers?

Do you consume only second-hand nourishment served up by those who have gone to the source themselves? Taking in what others have said, written and so forth is super helpful. But at some point, you will need to go to the source yourself for the best spiritual nourishment.

God makes an infinite supply and variety of spiritual nourishment available. If your mind’s output could be improved, pay attention to feeding your soul.

Better Input, Better Output

Our world supplies an endless barrage of junk, more than enough negative input to lead to the output of negative thoughts and feelings from your mind.

It will become increasingly important to pay attention to what input you take into your mind. Don’t mindlessly allow culture to “feed” you. Take charge of what your mind takes in.

And that’s nothing more than God asks of you and me (Phili.4:8, 2 -5).

Your Turn: *How happy or unhappy are you with the output your mind is producing? Do you need to make any changes in the input your mind takes in? Leave a comment below. {eoa}*

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3 Lessons You Must Learn to Keep From Settling for a Miserable Marriage

Marriage affects your well-being. If your relationship is healthy you are happier, healthier and generally live a longer more productive life. If your relationship is unhealthy, your physical, emotional and spiritual well-being are at risk. The stakes are too high to settle for a miserable marriage.

That doesn't mean you can "make" your marriage happy. Trying to manipulate your spouse to get what you need or want is guaranteed to end badly. God did not promise human beings a happy marriage.

In fact marriage is not about making you happy! As a reflection of the relationship God desires to have with each of us, *marriage is about learning to love well.*

When your marriage is not happy, it's easy to settle. I can't get my spouse to do what I need. I'll either have to leave, or be satisfied with misery.

You don't have to settle. There are things you can learn that will make a difference.

1. Learn to feed yourself.

At least 90% of the people who contact me about their marriage say something like, "How can I get my spouse to ...? If they would only do ..., I would be happy."

That perspective will disappoint you every time. Yes, your spouse affects you—in many ways. But you don't get to choose for him/her; you only get to choose your own thoughts, words and behaviors.

You get to choose the mental/emotional/spiritual nourishment you feed yourself, just as you get to choose your physical food. See yourself as responsible for getting what you need. Learn to feed yourself!

That includes valuing the good parts of what your spouse brings to the relationship and inviting more connection in those areas. It also includes other uplifting positive relationships (not sexual!), inspiring growth-producing media, time with God and whatever else fills you up.

The more your soul is nourished, the more you will have to bring to your marriage and the more clearly you will be able to look at and address the very real challenges that come.

2. Learn the skills you need.

Not one of us comes to marriage knowing what we need to know. Immature, self-centered, proud, afraid—truthfully, what words would you have used to describe yourself?

And when you get married, you're expected to know things such as healthy communication, intimacy (physically, emotionally, spiritually), handling conflict and more. Or at least learn those things quickly. Is it any wonder so many marriages struggle?

A great many things that make marriage work can be learned. You can learn to communicate. You can learn how to have

difficult conversations. You can learn how to invite intimacy, show respect, and give and receive support. You can grow to become the kind of person God needs you to be to your spouse in this season.

3. Learn to love well.

Since the bottom line of marriage is learning to love well, this is the most important thing of all to learn.

That implies that you and I don't go into marriage knowing how to love well. You may have seen and experienced ways of relating that pretended to be love, but were really control or manipulation or subservience. You may have been wounded such that trying to come closer together seems to further hurt both you and your spouse. You may instinctively be looking for something from your spouse that they are unable to provide.

So yes, learn to love well. It takes learning.

Love does not mean weakness, or accepting abuse or other destructive behavior. Love is able to set difficult boundaries. Love has difficult conversations and insists on telling the truth. Love takes time to get filled up so you have something to give.

Learning to love well doesn't come easily. Marriage is guaranteed to uncover both your own spines or wounds, and those of your spouse. Working on your relationship can allow your spines to become smoothed and your wounds to become healed.

Don't Settle for a Miserable Marriage

Learning these things will not guarantee marital bliss. But it's the only chance you have to make things better.

And that's what God wants for you too. {eoa}

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5 Healing Ways to Help Someone Struggling With Depression or Anxiety

If the statistic is even somewhat true that 1 in 4 of us struggles with a mental health challenge, you are either struggling with this yourself or you know someone who is. And if you care at all, you'd like to truly help someone who is depressed or anxious. How do you do that?

Suicide Prevention Day reminded us that mental health disorders can be severe and life-threatening. If you or someone you know is at risk of harming him/herself now, call the Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-274-TALK (1-800-273-8255).

But there are many, many people who are in deep distress but are not at that moment of crisis right now. Providing support and help may prevent them from ever getting to that point.

While public policy and mental health services are important, what can you do as an individual? These are a few things to

keep in mind.

1. Practice the ministry of presence.

There is rarely a more powerful ministry than that of presence. If you've ever been anxious or depressed yourself, remember how alone you felt. Pain often feels terribly isolating.

Jesus came to be *with* us (Matt. 1:23). He called His disciples that they might *with* Him (Mark 3:14).

If someone you care about is in a pit, you don't shout at them from the top, "Come on! Get out!" You get down there with them. You enter their world. They may struggle to believe you are *with* them, that you truly care. But you do it anyway. And you don't swoop in for a moment and then run away. You stick around. (Keep reading. Hint: You don't stay there.)

2. Seek to understand.

You may never fully understand a hurting person's world and story, but you try to. You put your own preconceptions of the world on hold and look at things through their eyes.

What beliefs do they hold? What traumas have they experienced? What challenges have they faced, or do they face now? What past experiences have led them to respond as they are now?

This is usually "all of the above." There are physical elements involved such as lifestyle, biochemistry, genetics and so on. The struggling person always has a past: relationships, traumas, behavior patterns, life experiences. They have mental habits, thoughts and beliefs that shape their experience. And their experience of God—what they believe or don't believe about Him, and how they have experienced spirituality—also plays a role.

If you're not trained as a therapist, don't try to be one! But seeking to understand will help you be helpful.

3. Offer small bites.

You've seen images and videos of severely malnourished children. When such a child is brought to a medical facility, the helpers don't immediately set a pizza in front of them. When a person's system is overwhelmed, they can only take in nourishment in bite-sized doses, often in a much simpler form than a somewhat healthier person could do.

To whatever degree you have been able to understand the hurting person's world, imagine that you have jumped down into the pit with them. But what you may well have that the hurting person doesn't have is some appreciation of where the steps are to climb out.

While the climb out may seem impossible to the person, you may be able to say, "Here, take my hand. Let me show you where one small step is, and I'll take that step with you."

4. Don't be the hero.

Helpers who try to be the hero can quickly get overwhelmed themselves, become burned out and are then unable to continue to be helpful. It's important to be a good enough student of yourself that you know what kinds of mental/emotional/spiritual nourishment you need and stay filled up yourself. That's the only way you will be of help to anyone.

And it's rare that trying to play the hero to the person who is hurting will make a lasting difference anyway. You can't "fix" them; don't try! You can't force help on anyone. You cannot control whether they get better or not.

Instead, if you've been able to enter their world to some degree, you may be extremely helpful by helping them help themselves. You can notice, encourage and celebrate small efforts, small improvements, small victories. Their feelings are true, but you can help remind them of the "rest of the

truth.” You can keep walking alongside the person as you help them see and take the steps needed to climb out.

5. Help them get help.

A friend who sticks around can be life-changing for many people. The epidemic of loneliness in our society is unhealthy in many ways. You are truly helpful by simply being there.

But there are many people who need and can benefit from additional help. A hurting person may struggle to reach out for help; you can help them do that. You can perhaps help them find a Christian coach through your church, a Christian counselor or pastor, or a mental health professional if needed. In some cases it may help for you to actually take them to their appointment.

And of course help them experience God’s intervention. When someone is hurting and feeling isolated, prayer must not be trite or overly religious. Invite Jesus to be present, and continue to do so. It’s only in His presence that lasting transformation happens anyway.

You may be someone’s lifeline. Take care to get your own nourishment along the way. And enjoy the privilege of being the hands and feet of Jesus to one of His children.

Your Turn: *Is someone you care about struggling with anxiety or depression? Have you tried to help? Does this framework help you understand better how you can help? Leave a comment below.* {eoa}

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 Jesus came to bring us. Visit her website at .

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For more stories of God’s healing work in mental illness,

Check out Charisma's new e-book, *Healing From the Inside Out*, available at [this link](#) for just \$.

When Your Spouse Hurts You, Try These 4 Spirit-Fueled Responses

You will be wounded in your marriage. It's not a question of *if*, but *when* your spouse hurts you.

But the more important question is: What will you do next?

Two sinners becoming one in the covenant of marriage is a setup for pain. Always. Without exception. If one or both of you have not been following God's ways, the pain that comes is likely to be much more destructive. If you did your homework and both you and your spouse are seeking to be the people God wants you to be, the pain will be much less, but it will still be there.

But remember that there is a difference between hurt and harm. The dentist who drills the cavity in your tooth to prepare for a filling may hurt you, but he is not harming you.

When your spouse hurts you, your natural response may be to lash out in anger or to isolate and withdraw. Instead, look at these aspects of the situation, and be more intentional about how you respond and what you do next.

1. Evaluate the wound.

Reasonably evaluating how you are affected will be important. Let the emotions cool down, and assess the damage. How bad is it, really?

A huge amount of the “stuff” that irritates you in marriage is likely to be “small stuff;” ways in which your personality is different from your spouse, missing expectations and so on. Growing up, you learned ways of doing life that you never thought about, and those are very different from your spouse’s ways.

Parts of you are vulnerable. Life happened to you for years before you married, and those old wounds will heighten your response when your spouse acts in certain ways. Your own responses to your spouse may also make things worse.

You may need some outside perspective to help you see things realistically. Ignoring or minimizing truly destructive behavior is unwise and unhealthy. Abuse happens! But focusing on a “speck” in your spouse’s eye while the “log” is still in your own is also unhealthy (Luke 6:42).

2. Look at your spouse’s heart.

This is such a critical piece to understand.

Some people feel so desperate for love that they overlook truly destructive behavior, or blame themselves for their spouse’s truly harmful words or actions. “It’s not that bad. If I hadn’t provoked him/her, he/she wouldn’t have become angry (or cheated on me or whatever).”

Other people expect their spouse to meet all their needs, read their minds and overlook their faults while responding perfectly at all times. When the husband doesn’t pay enough attention, or the wife is not interested in sex often enough, they see themselves as devastatingly harmed.

Yes, God designed husband and wife to be connected—physically, emotionally and spiritually. But it makes a huge difference whether your spouse is acting out of an evil heart or from a place of being distracted, tired or overwhelmed. Ask God to show you His perspective—on your own heart and your spouse’s heart.

3. Seek resolution.

Decide right now that you will no longer look to your spouse to fulfill your deepest needs that only God Himself can fill. Learn to feed yourself; look for and choose to take into your being the healthy godly mental/emotional/spiritual nourishment you need.

And then work to strengthen the relationship with your spouse. (If your spouse has an evil heart, get some help! You may need to get away.)

Ignoring the problem or trying to manipulate your spouse into doing what you want never works. Learn to have those difficult conversations. Stretch yourself to be vulnerable (as long as your spouse is not actively destructive). Take the time to listen. Set boundaries if you need to.

The important thing here is to focus on building the relationship.

4. Grow!

Regardless of how you get wounded in your marriage, God wants to use that to grow you. In my own marriage, that included learning what was most important, how to talk about difficult things and loving unselfishly. It also meant learning to accept love in ways I had not previously experienced.

How might God want to grow you through your marriage? What wounds from your past are being triggered by your spouse’s behavior? Where do you need to seek healing yourself?

What might you need to learn? To let some things go? To trust your own intuition more? To listen? To be vulnerable? To be courageous? To allow yourself to be loved? To love unselfishly? To set healthy boundaries? To function as an adult? To trust God with things you can't control?

And there could be many more things you might need to learn in marriage. Most of the time, we only learn and grow when something is painful. Don't minimize your pain, but do use it to learn and grow.

Your Turn: *It's certain you have been hurt by your spouse. What have you done next? Has your response been healthy? What kind of response are you going to choose next? {eoa}*

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 Jesus came to bring us. Visit her website at .

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Why Your Prayers May Be Too Small

If it seems as though God is not answering your prayers, it's probably not because your prayers are too big. Instead, are your prayers too small?

What do you pray about? Have you listened to yourself when you pray? What percentage of your words are asking God to "fix"

something? *Please make my spouse be nicer to me. Let this business deal go through. Help me find a parking spot. Bring me a job. Take away my physical pain. Make the storm go somewhere else.*

Even when you pray for someone else, doesn't it sound something like this? *God, please heal my mother's cancer. Give my child a good teacher this year. Make my husband's boss give him a raise. Let my wife pass her certification exam. Bring a buyer for my friend's house.*

If what you wanted works out, hopefully you thank God! And if it doesn't, you may feel tempted to believe prayer doesn't "work," or that God doesn't like you.

God wants us to bring Him our troubles, as a child would do to a loving parent. "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" (Phil. 4:6, ESV). He is interested in everything that concerns us. He is pleased when our first response to trouble is to invite His intervention.

But think about this. How healthy would your relationship with your spouse or best friend be if every time you spoke, they had a list of things they wanted from you? Pretty soon you'd feel "used and abused" instead of like a spouse or a friend.

What God Desires Most

Are you perhaps viewing God as a heavenly vending machine—put in a prayer, get out a blessing?

Please don't stop asking God for things! Jesus taught us to do just that; "Give us this day our daily bread" (Matt. 6:11, MEV). "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" (Matt. 7:11).

But remember that God is not all about your comfort. While God

loves to see His children happy, He has much bigger things in mind.

Would Joseph ever have become second in command in Egypt if he had not been sold by his brothers and ended up in an Egyptian prison?

Would David have ever killed Goliath if he had not been challenged with the lion and the bear while caring for the sheep?

Could Peter, James, and John have ever become witnesses of Jesus' Resurrection and apostles of the early church while having a prosperous fishing business along the Sea of Galilee?

Could Paul have "turned the world upside down" by enjoying a "healthy, wealthy" life in Tarsus, Jerusalem or anywhere?

Would Jesus have been able to save humankind without going to the cross?

Of course, the answer to all of those is no.

Perhaps it seems your prayers rise no higher than the ceiling because you're focused on things that are too small. Yes, God cares about your car payment, your child's grades in school and whether you have a fulfilling job. But friends, He wants so much more for you!

Big New Testament Prayers

Look at a few of the prayers those who came to know Jesus best prayed during the early years after He returned to heaven.

- "Now Lord, look on their threats and grant that Your servants may speak Your word with great boldness" (Acts 4:29).
- "Having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the

saints,” (Eph. 1:18, ESV).

- “That according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being” (Eph. 3:16).
- “Accordingly, it is my earnest expectation and my hope that I shall be ashamed in nothing, but that with all boldness as always, so now also, Christ will be magnified in my body, whether it be by life or by death. For to me, to continue living is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:20-21).
- “At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison— that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak” (Col. 4:3-4, ESV).

God wants a bigger life for you, He has a bigger purpose for you, than looking pretty, feeling comfortable, and dying in your sleep in old age—with the world not being much different as a result of you being in it. If that’s all there is, “eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die!”

Look up! Look beyond your current problems or desires. There’s something bigger going on.

Praying Bigger Prayers

Those Bible heroes? They almost certainly had no idea, while in the middle of their mess, that they were *becoming* who they needed to be for God to use them for a bigger purpose. And you may well have no idea what God is preparing you for right now.

If your life seems small or pointless, be faithful. Perhaps you are parenting a child who will make a big impact for the kingdom of God at the end of time. Perhaps your story will somehow be told, as that of the widow giving her “two mites” in the offering (Luke 21:1-3).

If your life seems hopelessly tragic, keep walking. Perhaps

God is using this very tragedy to build in you a resilience that He will need you to have in pushing back the kingdom of darkness in some way.

If it seems you've messed things up too badly, give God full permission to change you. Perhaps your story will impact others, like Paul's story of killing Christians and then becoming God's emissary, carrying the gospel to the Gentiles.

If you're lonely, keep shining. You may be the only light someone else sees.

If you're tired, get a little rest and keep going. Your endurance muscles are growing.

If you're confused, overwhelmed or frustrated, pause briefly if you must, but don't quit.

Are Your Prayers Too Small?

As a gospel song says, "God's got a bigger thing going on than these little old eyes can see."

Pray bigger prayers. Keep your eyes on eternity. You've got a role to play in this epic drama. Can we count on you?

Your Turn: *As you think about your own prayers, do they seem "big enough?" How do you think God might be preparing you right now for something yet to come? Leave a comment below.*
{eoa}

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