

4 Crucial Steps to Being an Emotionally Healthy Christian

We had received so many prophetic words in the years leading up to Bethel Music, words that should have prepared me for the growing pains of being a young leader in a powerful environment. But I didn't realize that when you're creating something new, there's going to be some resistance, and people aren't always going to catch the vision of going to places we've never been.

I thought things were supposed to happen a certain way, and when they didn't, I became impatient. I didn't let those prophetic words give me the patience I needed. We were devoting more time to the label, balancing our responsibilities at Bethel Church with requests to travel and lead worship, and preparing for our annual worship school.

We needed a break from the weight of it all.

Jenn and I decided to go have dinner with friends at a cabin up in the mountains. We were between Redding and the mountains when the text messages started flooding in. Some of the key artists and musicians from our team who were scheduled to help with the worship school had been booked by other church ministries.

All of a sudden, there I was in the same conversation I'd had so many times before. The frustration set in, and immediately I was livid.

Are you kidding me?

We told them that they had already committed, and we would have to scramble to fill their slots with other people who weren't as qualified. We pulled into the cabin and I told Jenn how disrespected I felt. Wasn't this the same conversation

we'd had over and over? After what felt like years of fighting this issue, why were we still fighting over the same thing? I talked it out with Jenn; at least she understood.

I immediately started texting my dad about the situation, but through the text exchange, it became clear we weren't seeing eye to eye. My world felt like a free for all, like things were happening to me, not with me. I felt misunderstood, a too-familiar emotion. Without thinking, in the middle of our text thread, I typed words to my dad that had to sting.

"I don't trust you."

I hit send, then looked at those words again.

My dad was the best man I knew, so where had this come from?

I was feeling so much hurt and pain that I hadn't even realized was there. It felt childish, and as I read that text over and over, I became more and more annoyed with myself. I was doing the very thing to him that I hated having people do to me—pouring out my emotional mess and expecting him to shoulder the load.

How could I be hurt by someone who would never try to hurt me?

Even though I knew it wasn't true, I felt hurt and angry. I was done trying to make this work or make sense. I didn't know how to win. Those words must have been a dagger to my dad, because he immediately texted and asked me where I was. He said he was headed my way and was bringing my mom.

In no time, they were there, and I exploded with my bottled-up emotions—some I didn't even know were inside me. He wasn't anxious about any of it and didn't let it put distance between us. He listened patiently as I shared the frustration, the feeling of being misunderstood, the pressures, the lack of boundaries, the pain. I even talked about my vision and excitement for Bethel Music. It was all unfiltered and raw—the

good emotions and the hard emotions. I didn't hold anything back.

Of course, I hadn't communicated how much this was affecting me before that night at the cabin. He hadn't understood the places I needed help. He apologized and shared how proud he was of me and what we had accomplished. As he shared, I felt really understood for the first time in years. I was tired and in pain, and my dad met me there.

Some things would have to change, but talking with my parents had given me what I needed: the courage to keep moving ahead.

When Buried Feelings Blow Up

I share that excerpt from my book *When God Becomes Real* to show that I was in the middle of a season where I felt consistently frustrated and misunderstood. I had always been taught to focus on what God is doing and not look at what the enemy was doing. During my childhood, this principle was one of the keys I used to get through 15 years of torment. However, I took this same principle and applied it toward other areas in my life where I was feeling frustration, disappointment or annoyance. If something was hard and painful, I would often choose to stuff those emotions and not address them.

This became my routine with difficult situations, and it was an issue Jenn and I would continually disagree about. She'd ask me to confront a painful situation, but I would usually avoid it. She could see the impact this was having on me in a way I couldn't. I didn't have words for it then, but the truth was I'd spent years burying my feelings in an attempt to manage the pressure and stress.

That night at the cabin with my mom and dad was a significant turning point. I chose to be honest about a place where I had felt consistently hurt and misunderstood. Unfortunately, it took me getting so angry that I blew up, not caring what I

said in that moment. I was lucky enough that my mom and dad didn't get defensive, but instead chose to listen past the anger in my words to hear the pain I was feeling. That moment highlighted the importance of being courageous and sharing even the hard things with the people in my life.

At that time, I didn't know that feelings buried alive never die. I assumed that if I wasn't feeling any frustration or hurt in the moment, then I must be fine. I didn't understand that there were many unresolved areas in my life that I wasn't aware of.

Some people say time heals all wounds. I know now that time just lets wounds fester.

I've learned many lessons about myself and how to do conflict after my nervous breakdown. In life, you're going to have situations where misunderstandings and conflict happen. When these situations happen, what matters is how you handle them. It's never easy to have these conversations, but the more you avoid them, the more difficult they become. These conversations require courage, but they're worth it in the end.

Here are four keys I've learned to live an emotionally healthier life for myself and my family.

1. Lower the stakes.

I used to bottle up my frustration. When I finally communicated, I would blow up, making the conversation high stakes. The situation might even be minor, so my reaction would feel like an overreaction, which would only cause people to get defensive. Instead of just confronting the present situation, I would bring a case full of "evidence" from the past into the current issue.

It's easy to bring years of past disagreements into the situation, but it's not fair. You don't want the past

consistently brought against you, and it's not fair to bring it against others.

You have to lower the stakes in your confrontations and conversations. When you're in a disagreement, only talk about the current issue.

When you've had years of disagreements with a family member or friend, it can feel like you'll never have a healthy relationship. You need to have a "win" with that relationship where you both feel heard. If you can keep the conversation focused on just the matter at hand, it lowers the stakes for both of you.

2. Don't make assumptions.

Danny Silk always says, "I get to tell you about me, and you get to tell me about you." This is crucial for long-term, healthy relationships.

I will judge myself by my intentions but someone else by their actions. I always get the benefit of the doubt. When I feel like someone is misunderstanding me, the worst thing I can do is make assumptions about what they are thinking or believing—but it's such an easy thing to do.

However, when I'm tempted to assume, the best thing I can do is to ask open-ended questions about the situation. Some questions that have been helpful for me are:

Are you doing OK? I feel like you are upset.

I'm feeling misunderstood in this conversation. This is what I'm wanting to communicate...

I feel like we're missing each other in this conversation. Can you tell me what's going on?

Can you tell me what you need from me in this conversation?

It's so easy to get defensive and make assumptions, but asking open-ended questions will help diffuse many conversations so the stakes don't get high.

3. Choose forgiveness.

When I was in the darkest place of my nervous breakdown, God intervened on a drive home from Napa with Jenn. She and the Holy Spirit led me in an intense time of forgiving others and forgiving myself. There were feelings I had buried deep in my heart that were locking me up. I didn't even know they were there. Choosing to forgive people in that moment was a turning point for me that helped me not only get well but stay well.

When we've been hurt or betrayed, our anger and judgment feel completely justified. And by the standard of this world, we are absolutely justified to hold onto anger and bitterness. But Jesus gave us a new standard as well as the grace to step into it. If initially you can't forgive others for their sake, do it for your own, so that your soul can be free from the torment that unforgiveness and bitterness traps you in.

If you don't want to forgive someone or don't feel like you can, instead say, "I choose to forgive." As you continue to daily choose forgiveness, eventually your emotions will catch up with your words, bringing you freedom and peace.

4. Create healthy boundaries.

I'm one of the fortunate ones to have a family that values healthy relationships, but that doesn't mean we don't have misunderstandings and conflict. Boundaries help protect your "yes" for yourself and your family.

Henry Cloud says, "When we begin to set boundaries with people we love, a really hard thing happens: they hurt. They may feel a hole where you used to plug up their aloneness, their disorganization or their irresponsibility. Whatever it is, they will feel a loss. If you love them, this will be

difficult for you to watch. But when you are dealing with someone who is hurting, remember that your boundaries are both necessary for you and helpful for them. If you have been enabling them to be irresponsible, your limit-setting may nudge them toward responsibility.”

In the past, I would not set boundaries with people and let things build up. I’d then get angry and just cut that person off, completely avoiding them. Neither option was a good choice for me or for them. Learning to have healthy boundaries throughout your relationships is key to loving yourself and loving the people in your life really well.

Ultimately, it takes courage to pursue your emotional health. Initially, it may require more of you as you learn new habits. It can feel unnatural as you learn how to do this. But I urge you to keep fighting for yourself, your family and your relationships. It’s worth the cost to live a life where you are powerful and thriving. {eoa}

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Brian Johnson is the co-founder, with his wife, Jenn, of Bethel Music and WorshipU. Together they have been integral in the production of more than 15 albums that have influenced worship across the global church. He has helped pen such renowned anthems as “Living Hope,” “Have it All,” “We Will Not Be Shaken” and “One Thing Remains.” His latest book, When God Becomes Real (Bethel Book Publishing), is a journey through some of the darkest times of his life as he battled depression and anxiety. The Johnsons reside in Redding, California, with their four children.

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