

7 Ways to Cooperate With God for Your Healing

Have you ever been hurt? Has your heart ever been broken? Have you ever felt pain so real it felt like your insides were being ripped out, sadness so deep you were sure you would drown and never see the sunlight of happiness again?

In 1993, I started my final year of psychiatric residency. I was stationed at Fort Gordon, Georgia, and in the summer of that year my first wife and I celebrated our sixth anniversary. As the New Year approached, it was supposed to be the year of celebration, the culmination of years of hard work, the year of fulfillment and achievement. But it didn't work out that way.

On Dec. 31, 1993, my wife moved out. She told me her plan was to have friends move her things out while I was at work. So I went to work on New Year's Eve with a heavy heart. Already the new year was not looking bright, and just when I thought it was bad, it got worse.

At 11 AM my pager went off: "Call the hospital operator STAT." I was connected to an emergency room nurse from a hospital in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and immediately I could tell something was seriously wrong by the tension and hesitancy in her voice. My mind tried to race through all the possibilities, but my thinking was slow, paralyzed by my emotional pain. I never saw it coming. Her words hit me like a shot in face.

"Your father is dead."

My throat closed up. I couldn't speak. I could barely breath. It felt like someone was jabbing an ice pick through my throat. I could hear her asking, "Are you OK?" but I couldn't answer. Her voice seemed to fade away as she told me my father had suffered a heart attack, CPR was done, and several rounds

of medications were given, but that he never responded.

My wife had moved out, and Dad, only 57 years old, was now dead. It was a nightmare. I didn't understand. I had been a Christian my entire life. Why was this happening? Life was not supposed to be this way. All I could do was cry.

A Choice to Heal

So I have been hurt. My heart has been broken. I have felt pain so strong that it felt like my insides were being ripped out, sadness so deep I was sure I would never see the sunlight of happiness again.

And today I can tell you that whatever your heartache, whatever your pain, whatever your discouragement, it can be healed. No matter how bad the pain, don't give up; no matter how dark the depression, don't give in; no matter how high the hellish shadows of despair, don't surrender. Because I am a walking testimony of this truth: If you put your life in Christ's hands, you can never be placed in a situation for which God has not made provision. It is God's desire to heal your wounds, mend your broken heart, remove your pain and make you whole!

Think about a physical wound. Once it has occurred, we can't undo it; we can't take it back; we don't get a redo. We have only three options: 1) treat it most effectively to bring about healing, 2) ignore it or 3) infect it.

Our hearts are the same way. When we've been hurt, when we are wounded, we can't undo the injury. We can't take back the loss or change the facts. So our options are to: 1) deal with the wound most effectively to bring healing as quickly as possible, 2) ignore it or 3) infect it.

All of us, if we're honest with ourselves, desire the first option. We want complete healing. But it's the effort it takes

to heal our hearts that often makes us give up.

The Truth About Healing

Jessica came to see me, depressed, not sleeping, not eating and crying all the time. She was 27 and had a 13-month-old child. Six months earlier she awoke to find her husband dead in bed next to her.

Jessica blamed herself. "If I were awake, I could have heard him stop breathing," she said. "If I would've woken up, I could have done CPR." She filled her mind with images of him lying there cold and blue. She put his pictures up everywhere in the house. She thought of him constantly. She told herself, "I can't go on without him. I should have died with him." She began to contemplate suicide.

Jessica was hurt, injured and heartbroken. She had suffered loss and she couldn't undo that loss. But Jessica was infecting the actual loss with lies, distortions and falsehoods that served to worsen the pain, confuse the mind and prevent healing.

Jesus said, "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32, NIV). This principle works in all situations. The truth may not be pleasant, but the truth does set free.

If you have been hurt, if you are in pain, if you have lost someone—either by death or divorce—or you have other injuries, other losses or other pain, I want to describe seven steps you can take to cooperate with God to help in the healing process of your heart here and now.

Step 1: Stand your ground and don't run, even if it's painful.

Our normal reflex is to pull back and run away.

When I was 6 years old, I attended first grade in a small two-

room Christian school in rural South Jersey. First grade through fifth grade met in one room, and sixth through eighth in another. One of the joys of recess was swinging on one of the three wooden-seated swings in our small playground. When recess finally arrived, we children would race to the swings, eager to secure one of the few coveted seats. Those of us in first grade rarely got to swing as the older children were much faster and almost always got there first.

As children often do, we began to think of other imaginative ways to have fun, and soon we discovered the excitement of running under the swing while an older student stood on the seat swinging powerfully back and forth. Lines quickly formed in front of each swing. One by one we would dash under the swing, timing our move just right to avoid getting hit. Soon it was my turn. I raced forward as fast as my first grade legs would carry me, but my timing was off and *BAM*, the swing smashed full force into my forehead, cutting a gash from which the blood started to pour.

I was knocked backward to the ground and began screaming in pain. My memory of the children shouting, the principal carrying me into the school and my mother driving me to the doctor are all vague and blurry. But I have a sharp and clear memory of being on the doctor's examining room table and seeing him coming at me with a needle that appeared, at least to my 6-year-old eyes, to be 5 feet long. As he drew closer, pushing that needle toward my forehead, it looked like he was going to stick it right in my eye.

I wanted to run away as fast as I possibly could because I was afraid. But my mother held me tight. I tried to squirm free, I begged, I cried, but Mother would not let go. She loved me too much.

It was only by standing firm—something my 6-year-old self couldn't do—that healing could happen. In the same way, we must use our God-given judgment—and maybe even the judgment of

those around us whom we trust—to choose to stand firm and not run, even if it hurts.

Step 2: Be truthful. Seek the truth. Don't let feelings determine your beliefs.

We must be truthful about ourselves and our situation. This was one of Jessica's problems. She felt guilty rather than grief-stricken. She hadn't done anything wrong, so the guilt she felt was a false guilt. It was a way of taking responsibility, of trying to "control" events in attempt to "fix" or change the situation, rather than accepting the painful truth. She wasn't being truthful that it wasn't her fault and that there wasn't anything more she could have done.

We must be truthful about the facts. Many of my patients who are divorced are tempted to feel like they are failures when their marriages end. But such a conclusion is a lie. The truth is that your marriage may have failed, but that doesn't mean you are a failure as a person. What determines whether our lives end in success or failure is our current choices, not our past choices.

Step 3: Enlarge your perspective.

A pastor friend of mine grew up on a farm in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan in the 1950s. It was a quiet, rural area with great distances between family farms, but the neighbors were friendly, and everyone knew each other by name. His closest neighbors had several children. The youngest, Bobby, was age 5 when the following events transpired.

From an early age Bobby was difficult. As an infant, he was inconsolable. As a toddler, he would frequently throw tantrums and, as a child, he was out of control. When told to pick up his toys, he didn't or did so with back talk. He was frequently caught stealing cookies or candy between meals, and he often took toys that were not his. He was instructed

repeatedly by his parents to never ever play around the farm equipment. They even threatened him with spanking if they ever caught him near the dangerous machinery, which they had to enforce on more than one occasion. But Bobby was an unruly, disobedient child.

One day my friend received word while working in the fields that "Bobby has been injured. The neighbors are asking that we come and pray for him." Bobby had been playing around the farm equipment and sustained serious, life-threatening injuries. In the 1950s in Michigan's Upper Peninsula there was no 911 to call, no Life Force helicopter to swoop down from the sky, no emergency responders waiting close by. So the family did the only thing they knew how to do: They called their neighbors, formed a prayer circle around Bobby and asked for God's intervention.

My friend told me of his vivid memory of that day. One by one, neighbor after neighbor prayed for Bobby with prayers that went something like this: "Lord, Bobby is hurt. His life is hanging in the balance. We know You can heal, You can restore, You can save his life. We come to You humbly now and ask that if it be Your will, please restore Bobby to health."

Prayer after prayer ended just like that. "If it be Your will, Your will be done."

Then it was time for Bobby's mother to pray. She said simply, "God, I don't care what Your will is. If You don't heal my son, I will never speak to You again."

What happened after that is a matter of history, so allow me to report it to you. Bobby survived and grew up to be a bane on that family and community. He was constantly in trouble, disobedient to his parents and rebellious at school. He got into vandalism, truancy, petty theft, alcohol and drugs. He stole money and property from his parents and neighbors and pawned it for drugs, and he was in and out of jail his entire

life.

We are not currently privileged to see with perfect eternal vision. We don't know whether God intervened to save Bobby or whether Bobby recovered on his own. But this story gives us opportunity to ask questions, to explore possibilities, to consider life from a larger view.

Why was Bobby, at age 5, in a life-threatening situation? Did God act to threaten Bobby's life, or were his injuries a direct consequence of his own actions? Is it possible that God intervened to save Bobby's life? Is it possible God knew the heart of that mother and understood that she would close her heart to Him if He didn't save Bobby, and because God didn't want to lose her, He intervened? Is it possible that if the mother would have trusted God and prayed, "God, I don't want to lose my son, but I don't know the future. I don't know how life will unfold; I don't know what is best. But I do know You always do what is best. So, Father, I trust You. Please heal my son if it is in Your will," that Bobby might not have survived?

We don't know whether God intervened to save Bobby, but this story gives us opportunity to step back and enlarge our perspective when dealing with pain, trauma and loss in our lives. When we're experiencing trials like these, one action that can help is stepping back and taking a larger view.

Step 4: Move on and say goodbye.

When we lose someone, something or some ability, we feel like life will never be the same again. We can be tempted to sit down in the middle of the road of life and quit, vowing that we won't go on until that person or thing comes back to us.

Anne, 43, came to see me 10 years after the death of her child. Each morning for those 10 years, she got up, went into the child's room and held the child's teddy bear and cried, staring at the ceiling.

Imagine walking in a remote national forest with a loved one and the loved one suddenly collapses and dies. There are no cell phones, no radios and no immediate help available. What do you do? You might sit down with your loved one in the trail for a while, but eventually you have to make a decision: get up and go on without this person or lie down and die with him or her.

Many people who experience loss go through the motions of life but their heart is no longer in it. Paul tells us, "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" (Phil. 3:13-14).

As Christians, we press forward toward the prize, to the day when all pain, all loss and all suffering will be removed, and we will be restored to complete wholeness.

Step 5: Be hopeful—hopeful while you're here and hopeful for eternity.

This is helped by perspective, by stepping back and seeing a larger view and by knowing the truth about God and His character of love.

A few years ago I attended the funeral of the mother of a good friend of mine. As I expressed my condolences, he said, "It's OK. I know where she is, and I know I will see her again."

This stood in contrast to a patient who lost a parent and didn't believe in God and told me, "I will never see my mother again."

"We have this hope as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, which enters the Inner Place behind the veil" (Heb. 6:19).

Step 6: Forgive and learn.

When injury or loss occurs from some wrong—either another's or our own—healing requires that we forgive. Forgiveness is a powerful force that can release healing, even when the “oppressor” doesn't change or when past failures remain past failures. You can't rewrite history, but you can forgive. To bring about full healing, we must forgive others and forgive ourselves, and we must learn from experience.

Then as we stand our ground; as we pursue the truth; as we enlarge our perspectives; as we move on, pressing toward the mark; as we are hopeful; and as we forgive and learn from experience, we must follow the next step.

Step 7: Put God first and keep your focus on knowing Him.

Get to know God, His methods, principles and motives. Try to understand what He is trying to accomplish. Realize that He is working to heal all of us, and then, as His intelligent friend, join Him in His work. Seek to help others. Choose to follow Christ, who didn't think equality with God was something to grasp, but humbled Himself in order to help us; who, when crucified, kept His focus on others: “Father, forgive them.”

Become a giver; engage in ministry; be of service to others; seek to use yourself, your energies, your resources, your talents and your education to benefit others. Take the focus off your injuries, your losses, your emptiness and your heartache, and seek to lift up others, heal others and minister to others as God directs you. In doing so, we move from victory to victory and are freed from fear and the domination of selfishness. We are freed to become real friends of God, revealing Him in our lives.

Have you ever been hurt? Has your heart ever been broken? Have you ever felt pain so real it felt like your insides were being ripped out? Sadness so deep you were sure you would never see the sunlight of happiness again?

I can tell you that whatever your heartache, whatever your pain, whatever your discouragement, it can be healed. No matter how bad the pain, don't give up; no matter how dark the depression, don't give in; no matter how high the hellish shadows of despair, don't surrender.

But remember, if we put our lives in Christ's hands, we can never be placed in a situation for which God has not made provision.

Whatever our situation, we have a divine helper to lead us to peace. Whatever our problems, we have the Counselor to comfort our hearts. Whatever our sorrow, difficulty or heartache, we have a sympathizing friend.

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