

Finding Freedom in Dysfunctional Relationships

The past can linger as an unspoken, but clearly felt, barrier in your relationship. This can cause you both, no matter how much progress you've made, to fall into the ugly dance of the past as you relate or interact with each other.

Let's be candid. Starting fresh when your history involves abuse or dysfunction can launch trust issues. If that person changed once and relapsed, you may not be willing to try again.

There are also communication problems. What can you talk about? And what can you not talk about? What topics lie just below the surface and can explode like a landmine when you unexpectedly tiptoe past a hidden line?

Everyday imperfections are often magnified. An off day, a loss of temper, a bad choice—all of these might signal to you that your loved one is unstable or untrustworthy. It makes sense, because that's what happened in the past.

Your brain signals it could happen again, because it did happen once. This fails to account for the fact that everyone has off days. We all lose our tempers and make mistakes. It also sends the message to a loved one that perfection is required and there is zero tolerance for error. It's life without parole for both of you. Your growth is stunted as you react, respond and relate with that person as if you were still a child or entangled in the past.

So, how do you create a new way of relating?

You create a new groove.

Let me explain. Not long ago, I rode a bus through the Swiss

Alps between Austria and Italy. It was snowing, though it was spring. The mountainside was majestic. Thirteenth-century fortress-like dwellings jutted out of the mountainside above, and small farms dotted the valley below. Waterfalls spilled down from the mountaintop, and the snowcapped mountains reached into the clouds.

It was the waterfalls that captured my attention. Somehow, though snow covered the vast mountaintops, the water knew where to go. It didn't rush down the entire mountain; it followed familiar paths carved over generations.

Our brains are much like those waterfalls. We create familiar grooves in our brains. We have our go-tos. When we get angry or feel bad, we respond in a certain way. When we get defensive, we respond in a common pattern. So, when we relate to that person who once caused us pain, we fall into a familiar groove.

In the Alps, if you move one large rock, suddenly the water has room to go in a new direction. It will, at first, go toward the old, deeply grooved path it always follows; but over time, a new path will emerge. A little wider. A little deeper.

You and I, with God's help, can form a new groove in our brains. But it's not going to feel normal at first. It's a conscious choice rather than a natural response. We begin to respond in a different way. We begin to see that person in a new light. Over time, the new groove becomes deeper and more of a natural response while the old groove—left dry and unfilled—dries up.

A New Rhythm in Your Relationship

Reconciliation in itself is like a dance in the beginning.

You expect disappointment.

Harsh words and lashing out have always been the way you've communicated.

You are used to walking on eggshells.

It's what you have grown to expect; and yet, now that person is showing up when she says she will. She is doing what she promised. She responds with grace or an attempt at grace. She isn't perfect, but she is different, and it's hard to know what to do.

In a sense, you are waiting for her to mess up.

That is awkward at best.

I understand awkward. My husband (sorry, babe) has no rhythm, but that doesn't mean he doesn't love to dance. When he first approaches me with his untraditional dance moves, I laugh every time. I can't help it! If everyone else is moving to the right, my husband is going to bust a move to the left, and do it with enthusiasm. I don't try to correct him anymore; I just go with it and have fun.

Maybe you aren't sure whether to go right or left. It takes time to develop a rhythm that works together.

A couple of years ago, my mother was in the hospital. She suffers from chronic asthma, and every winter the battle gets fierce. When she was admitted to the hospital and treated with heavy doses of steroids and medication, I received an unintelligibly frantic phone call from my mother and raced to the hospital. She rose from the bed and tumbled across the room, crying.

I recognized the old dance moves. They were all there.

Weeping.

Depression.

Anger.

Lashing out.

Out of control.

"I'm doing it again," she said. Even in the fog of medicine she recognized the instability.

For just a second, old memories flooded in from the past. But only for a moment. I put my hands on my mom's shoulders. I wish I could explain that beautiful moment as I stood there with my hands on her shoulders. The past fell away. Yes, I recognized the instability; but as an adult she and I had a new relationship. When I was a kid, she had screamed for help and no one had listened.

That was a dance move from the past that I could change.

I explained that the medicine was making her feel out of control. "We're right here. Dad is here. Mindy and Ron and Randy are on their way. I'm here," I said, pulling her close. "You don't have to be strong right now. You just have to get better. The medicine is clearing up your lungs, but it's also making you feel like this. It's going to get better."

If I had remained stuck in the dance of the past, I would have felt threatened. But as an adult, I had noted all of the changes—the strength—in my mom. Because of reframing her past, I recognized the fear that overwhelmed her at a situation beyond her control.

That changed everything! She felt safe; I didn't feel threatened. We truly knew each other for who we are today.

This is an excerpt from **Suzie Eller's** latest book, *The Unburdened Heart: How to Find Freedom In Forgiveness (Regal)* that will be released in February. Suzie is a Proverbs 31 speaker and author with a heart for ministering to women. The

book is based on her own powerful story and the stories of other women who have learned to leave pain, leave regret and leave the past to live fully in the present with the help of God's Spirit.