

Helping Your Spouse Move Past Their Past

Every human being comes into marriage with baggage. You cannot make it through a couple decades or more of life without experiencing some kind of trauma. Some of those wounds are deeper than others. What do you do when your spouse brings that baggage into the marriage? How can you help your spouse move past their past?

During courtship, emotions are high and vision is low. You and your spouse both put your best foot forward. Once the honeymoon is over (and sometimes earlier!), the wounds both of you tried so hard to keep hidden can come out in painful and destructive ways. The more you know about your spouse's past before you get married, the better. But when the rose-colored glasses come off, what then?

Some possible consequences of your spouse's past include;

- Being bullied as a child can lead to deep insecurities and potentially overwork or serious anxiety as a result.
- Physical abuse in their childhood home can lead some to become abusive and violent as a spouse.
- Sexual abuse, molestation or early exposure to unhealthy sexual messages can show up as sexual addiction, pornography addiction or sexual aversion and dysfunction.
- Serious poverty can lead to excessive reliance on money and things.
- Living in a home with substance abuse or mental illness can predispose one to be emotionally unstable and dramatic.

These are only a few possibilities. Each person who experiences trauma responds in a unique way.

So how would Jesus respond? How is He asking you to help your spouse move past their past now?

Here are some things to think about.

Seek to Understand

When challenges develop in marriage, it's easy to take things personally. But unless your spouse is an evil person, their prickliness is almost never about you. When your spouse is acting in unhealthy ways, seek first to understand what may be behind their behavior. What are they fearful of? How are they trying to protect themselves? What emptiness are they trying to get filled up? What negative experiences are they trying to keep from experiencing again?

Sometimes old wounds show up later in marriage too. Certain life stages or other circumstances can tear off old scabs and trigger long-forgotten patterns of responding and behaving.

Understanding doesn't mean you accept bad behavior. And if abuse is going on in your marriage now, please get help right away. But understanding the underlying realities your spouse is dealing with, perhaps unconsciously, will make a big difference. This doesn't mean every behavior you dislike in your spouse is the result of old trauma, but it sure pays to understand if that may be a factor.

Care for Your Own Heart

Your needs not being met, being disappointed in your spouse, feeling cheated out of the relationship you thought you were creating, feeling angry or afraid—those are understandable responses. But railing on your spouse to change their behavior is likely to only make things worse. When you notice your own heart being riled up, own your response. Evaluate what you're responding to, and take responsibility for doing something healthy about it.

You may need to talk with a trusted Christian friend—not to tell on your spouse, but to get some support and insight. You may need to invest in filling up your own soul in healthy ways. And of course, invest deeply in prayer. Ask God to show you who He needs you to be to your spouse in this season of your marriage, and to give you the grace to do so.

Become a Safe Place

One of God's designs for marriage is that it be a place where our deepest wounds are seen, understood and embraced. In that kind of safe place we can find healing. Seek to understand what would feel safe to your spouse, and invest deeply in making yourself and your marriage a safe place. That may mean giving up some of your own needs for the benefit of your spouse.

That doesn't mean becoming codependent or doing the work for your spouse. It does mean, however, that you intentionally care so much about your spouse's well-being that you put their needs first. It means you don't wound them more by responding in hurtful ways. You won't do this perfectly. But seek to be a safe place for your spouse to be themselves, to open up their wounds and to find healing.

Support Their Healing

God loves us, including your spouse, just the way He finds us. But He loves us too much to let us remain in our broken-down condition. He is after our growth, our healing, our maturity. That's the same posture to take toward your spouse.

Being supportive doesn't mean accepting bad behavior. It may mean mandating professional help, setting boundaries or having hard conversations. But you are doing all of that not to make your spouse "pay" for their shortcomings, but with the goal of finding healing and strengthening the relationship. You are building up, not tearing down. This may well be a long process; don't expect things to become perfect overnight.

Some wounds take serious work before healing happens. You will need to receive God's love deeply yourself in order to love your spouse in the way they need during this time.

The journey of walking with your spouse toward the future God has for you and your marriage can become one of the most satisfying and meaningful aspects of your life together.

Your Turn: *How can you be more like Christ in helping your spouse move past their past and find healing? Leave a comment below.* {eo}

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