

Healing Emotional Pain

“He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.” (Psalm 147:3)

Healing emotional pain is not simply a matter of dismissing the past. It requires active work in each of three dimensions—the emotions, the mind, and the will. The emotions need to be freed to face and feel the hurt, the mind needs to be renewed in order to fully understand the truth concerning the hurt, and the will needs to be turned toward the task of forgiving the offender for inflicting the hurt. All three steps—(1) Facing the Hurt, (2) Understanding the Truth, and (3) Forgiving the Offender—are essential to the healing process.

Furthermore, the order of the three steps is also critical. We must begin the process of healing by facing our hurts. We cannot understand or forgive something that we refuse to acknowledge. If we try to understand our hurt before we face and feel it, we may tend to minimize, excuse, or rationalize it with statements such as, “I am sure that many others had it worse than I did,” or, “I know that they really did the best that they could.” These may be true statements, and they are important concepts that help us choose to forgive. But if they lead us to think, “I should not feel hurt;” they have diverted us from experiencing the necessary emotional aspects of our healing. Similarly, if we attempt to forgive before we have felt our pain, expressed it, received comfort, and come to understand the truth about it, our forgiveness will tend to be a product solely of the will, with little emotional depth or mental clarity. We can only truly forgive that which we have first deeply felt and truly understood.

Consider the example of Jesus as He faced crucifixion:

First, He faced His hurt, refusing to deny, minimize, or spiritualize the pain: “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death” (Matthew 26:38).

Next, He came to understand the truth about His hurt as He viewed the offense and the offenders in the light of God’s truth: “They do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

Finally, He forgave His offenders, extending to them the grace of the Father’s forgiveness: “Father, forgive them” (Luke 23:34).

As we follow this pattern that Christ exemplified, we too can find healing for our emotional pain.

Facing the Hurt

“My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.” (Matthew 26:38)

This first step in the three-part process of healing emotional pain deals directly with the emotions (although the mind and will are obviously also involved to some degree). We must fully face and feel our hurts if we hope to be able to understand the truth about the offense and the offender, and to extend genuine forgiveness. This process of facing our hurts includes three important components:

First, we must establish what is to be forgiven. A good way to do this is to spend some quiet time reflecting on your pain and recording your thoughts in a journal. What hurtful things have you experienced? Have you been despised, rejected, abandoned, ridiculed, or neglected? Which of your relational needs have gone unmet? This process of identifying your hurts often takes some time, as different layers of pain are gradually uncovered. You may wish to review the handout *Emotional Pain Over the Life Cycle* as a means of identifying potential sources of your pain.

Next, we must grieve the loss associated with the pain. To grieve is to focus on the emotions behind the pain we are experiencing, just as we would in the case of the death of a loved one. As you continue to reflect, begin recording your feelings in your journal. How did it make you feel to be despised, rejected, abandoned, ridiculed, or neglected? How did you feel when your need for acceptance, affection, attention, encouragement, or support went unmet? How do you feel as you consider the various hurts that have been inflicted on you over the course of the life cycle?

Finally, we must receive comfort. God desires to comfort our grief, and He will often involve other people in this process. Identify a special “journey mate” (spouse, pastor, counselor, family member, or close friend) who is willing to grieve with you and minister comfort. Share with this person your written reflections concerning the hurts that you have experienced, the relational needs that have gone unmet, and the feelings that these painful experiences have produced. Allow him or her to grieve with you and offer words of comfort.

Understanding the Truth

“Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” (John 8:32)

This second step in the three-part process of healing emotional pain deals with the mind. The pain that we feel as hurt is inflicted upon us and relational needs go unmet often causes us to embrace distorted perceptions of our offenders, ourselves, and God. In order to experience healing of our emotional pain, we must replace such distorted perceptions with accurate ones that reflect the truth, as follows:

Common Distorted Perceptions of Our Offenders

- They are evil villains.
- They are worthless.
- They can never be trusted.

Accurate Perceptions of Our Offenders

- They are more than villains—they are victims of the offenses of others.
- Underneath their hurtful behaviors lie unmet relational needs.
- They have a God-given worth that is not determined by their behavior.

Common Distorted Perceptions of Ourselves

- I have never done anything to deserve the hurts that I have received.
- I deserve to be treated badly.

Accurate Perceptions of Ourselves

- Like my offenders, I am both villain and victim—neither fully blameless nor fully deserving of the pain that I have suffered.
- I am capable of any sin.
- I need forgiveness of my offenses against others just as others need forgiveness of their offenses against me.

Common Distorted Perceptions of God

- God is too uninvolved to really care about my pain.
- God cannot be trusted.

Accurate Perceptions of God

- God proved his love by sending Jesus to die for me (Romans 5:8).
- Both I and my offenders have inestimable worth in God's eyes.
- God can be trusted with my needs and pain.

Forgiving the Offender

“Father, forgive them.” (Luke 23:34)

This final step in the three-part process of healing emotional pain deals with the will. After facing our pain and coming to understand the truth about the situation, we must make a conscious choice to release our pain and anger and to forgive, thus freeing both ourselves and our offenders. Before forgiveness can occur, however, several obstacles may have to be overcome. First, we must deal with any unresolved guilt by repenting and confessing our wrongdoing to both God and others and gratefully receiving forgiveness. Second, we must be willing to forgive ourselves, thus neutralizing any feelings of shame. Finally, we must counteract the fear that often serves as our defense mechanism against further hurt by receiving comfort and empathy from our “journeymates.”

Even if our guilt, shame, and fear can be successfully overcome, we may still be reluctant, for any number of reasons, to freely offer forgiveness to those who have hurt us. Listed below are some of the most common objections to the idea of extending forgiveness, along with important counterarguments:

Common Objection

- The offender has not asked for forgiveness.
- The offender has not changed.
- The offender does not deserve forgiveness.
- Punishment is appropriate, and I will give it.
- It is my right to hold a grudge.
- I will forgive when I feel like it.

Truthful Counterargument

- Forgiveness is for your benefit. Do not wait!
- What if God waited for you to change before forgiving you?
- You do not deserve forgiveness.
- “Vengeance is mine,” says the Lord (see Romans 12:19 NASB).
- Holding grudges hurts you, not the offender.
- Forgiving is primarily a choice, not a feeling.

Once such objections are successfully overcome, forgiveness may proceed as follows:

- Release your pain and anger.
- Verbalize your choice to forgive each hurt to your “journey mate.”
- Destroy your list of offenses.
- Thank God for His forgiveness, which you have chosen to extend to others.
- If possible and appropriate, express your forgiveness to your offenders.

Therapeutic Letter Writing

Writing a letter to the person that hurt you can help you process the hurt, learn to forgive the person, and finding healing. Even if you never read the letter to them it can be extremely beneficial for your own healing.

Dear Dad/Mom/Step-parent/Grandparent/Other,

I have been thinking about our relationship and about how I felt growing up and about some of the things that I needed but did not receive from you.

- Some of my earliest emotional memories are of feeling...
- I know that I really needed...
- It hurt me so much when...
- I now often feel...
- It would mean so much to me if...
- I wish I could hear you say to me...

After you have completed your therapeutic letters, read it out loud to the person it was addressed to. Remember to emotionally respond to one another.