

Vital Tools For  
**RELEVANT**  
**CHURCH LEADERS**

**Restoring Relationships and Building Community  
During Difficult Conversations**

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Vital Tools For  
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**Restoring Relationships and Building Community  
During Difficult Conversations**

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# Foreword

*By Christopher J. Adams*

There is no greater joy than being a pastor. Pastors are privileged to play a very unique, symbolic, and important role in people's lives. No other helping profession allows the same type of access into people's lives. Pastors get to be with people in many different contexts and very personal spaces—worship services, church board meetings, choir rehearsals, birthday parties, weddings, funerals, hospital rooms, jail cells, and courtrooms.

Pastors and ministers are the generalists, the caregivers to the whole person, family, and community. Your relationships with individuals in your community are special and sacred. People trust you, and they come to you first when they are in trouble. Long before people will approach a Christian counselor, physician, or psychiatrist, they will come to their pastor.

Clergy often express that pastoral care, counseling, and even crisis intervention are among the duties that bring them the most joy. And yet pastoral care and counseling can also become a heavy burden. Many pastors and church leaders are ill-equipped to address the complexity and severity of the issues that people bring to them, and too many attempt to function outside the scope of their competencies. This unintentional overreach happens for a variety of reasons. It is seductive to be viewed as the person with all of the answers. Many ministers and pastors also have codependent tendencies—a deep need to be needed that can lead them to overfunction. Some may have grown up in a family that was not emotionally healthy, which makes it a struggle to maintain healthy interpersonal boundaries. Most pastors find it challenging to always be required to draw the boundaries in the majority of their relationships.

I am a third-generation pastor's kid and a pastor myself. I grew up hearing my father and grandfather tell stories of church members—and many of those stories were not about pleasant encounters. My grandfather mostly served small, extremely difficult congregations in New England. At one of his churches, one member would come by the parsonage on a fairly regular basis just to yell at him. My father remembers watching this man routinely verbally rage at my grandfather until he was called away to a new church in a different city. When this man came to say goodbye, he threw his arms around my grandfather and sobbed, saying, “Thank you, Pastor, thank you, Pastor.” Confused, my grandfather did not return the hug.

This parishioner had grown up with an abusive, alcoholic father. He wasn't really angry with his pastor—my grandfather—he was really angry with his own abusive father. Thankfully, my grandfather was able to absorb this man's emotional abuse and treat him with kindness in return. I wonder how my grandfather processed the pain induced by these kinds of interactions. He died young of a heart attack, and I am convinced that his physical health issues were connected to his ministry pain.

As illustrated in this story, the way people relate to you as a pastor can easily trigger your pain and deplete your emotional resources. Research is increasingly revealing that pastors need to develop emotional and relational competencies in order to flourish in ministry over time. Cultivating resilience and preventing burnout depend on having a well-developed sense of emotional self-regulation.

## **COPING WITH PAIN**

No matter who you are or how agreeable your community is, ministry leadership will trigger your pain. Learning to be aware of your pain and choosing to practice a different response in the midst of relational complexities and stresses of ministry life are key to experiencing well-

being in ministry. This book provides an introduction to concepts and practices of Restoration Therapy, which can transform your emotional well-being and relationships *and* deepen and enhance your pastoral care and counseling skills.

The strength of Restoration Therapy, which has been developed over many years of rigorous scholarship and clinical experience, flows from understanding Pain and Peace Cycles, which are explained in depth in Chapter 1. The beauty of this model is that church leaders can apply it in many different contexts—both in your own life and in the work you do with the people you lead and serve.

Terry and Sharon Hargrave developed this book and *RelateStrong* as a resource for pastors because of their heart for the church and their heart for ministry leaders. Terry, a professor in the Marriage and Family Therapy Department at Fuller Theological Seminary, is the founder of Restoration Therapy and author of multiple books including two on the RT model. Sharon, Executive Director of the Boone Center of the Family at Pepperdine University, is the founder of *RelateStrong*. As part of *Relate Strong | Leadership Series*, they brought together experts from a variety of fields to create this book, addressing topics that you as a pastor are likely to face in your community—and in your own life. The authors offer knowledge and insight about marriage, singleness, parenting, sexual intimacy, pornography use, anxiety, depression, and addiction. Each chapter examines a particular topic and demonstrates how Restoration Therapy concepts can be used in each context to help people move from pain to peace.

### **INFORMED AND COMPASSIONATE**

People in your community are likely to test relationships in many different ways. Emotionally unhealthy people may become aggressive, manipulative, or even seductive. Without training and boundaries, pastors may unwittingly be drawn into the pain of others. Sometimes

one of the most pastoral things you can do is refuse to participate in perpetuating someone's unhealthy relationship patterns. Modeling and teaching how Christ calls us to live differently is at the heart of pastoral leadership.

How do you recognize and respond to the pain of those in your church or community? How do you lead people toward wholeness and fullness of life in Christ? How do you know your limits and recognize when you should refer someone to other helping professionals? And how do you maintain a ministry of presence and pastoral care after such referrals? This book has been created to help you recognize how pain is experienced and manifested in situations you are likely to encounter in pastoral settings and designed to equip you to respond in ways that are compassionate and informed.

I encourage you to also approach this resource with your own personal development in mind. Read through this book with an eye on two goals at once—enhancing your pastoral care and counseling skills and growing in your own emotional and social competencies. Research increasingly indicates that competencies such as self-awareness, emotional self-regulation, and emotional self-control are key to helping pastors prevent burnout, provide effective leadership, and model Christian maturity. Pastoral ministry is an enormously complex role, particularly with regard to interpersonal dynamics. No matter who you are, pastoral leadership is likely to trigger your own pain at some point. It just comes with the territory.

Dr. Archibald Hart says most pastors and ministers must wrestle with what he calls the 70/30 rule. Assuming that pastors are competent, psychologically healthy, and people of integrity, at least 70 percent of the criticism they receive has nothing to do with them—not a thing—while about 30 percent of the criticism is valid, identifying a growing edge or blind spot that all leaders have. Unfortunately, even

the valid criticism is rarely given with kindness or at an appropriate time, which blunts its effectiveness. Conversely, 70 percent of the compliments pastors receive have nothing to do with them either—while perhaps 30 percent reflect actual strengths.

What accounts for the 70 percent of unwarranted criticism and praise? I believe much of the criticism and admiration pastors receive is what psychologists call “transference”—people transferring thoughts, feelings, and relational patterns from a their past onto the pastor. Your community members unconsciously project onto you and relate to their own projections as if that is who you are. The challenge for you as a pastor or church leader, then, is to stay grounded in a sense of your actual strengths and growth areas when most of the interpersonal feedback you receive is not accurate. This dynamic is one of the reasons that pastoral ministry is lonely. Pastors do not feel that they are truly seen or known. People relate more to your *role* than to who you actually are as a *person*.

Frequent, often unfair, criticism can easily trigger your pain. If you are not aware of what triggers you and how you react, you are much more likely to react in a way that is immature, unhelpful, or even spiritually abusive. Pastors and ministers are human, and we have our own reactions to people—what psychologists call “countertransference.” Learning to manage these reactions is key to sustaining excellence in pastoral leadership. This book is designed to help you understand your reactions to pain and consider what kind of people and situations trigger you, which is the first step in developing new response patterns.

Maintain accountability in your life as you learn to live out of your Peace Cycle. Your family, friendships, and church will be transformed as a result. Learning both psychological and theological concepts embedded in common issues your church faces will change your own life and relationships while also helping you develop the skills to better help others.

## **DEPRESSION, ANXIETY, AND ADDICTION**

“Pastoral ministry is a serotonin-depleting environment.” I once heard a psychiatrist make this statement at a seminar, and I realized that psychiatrists are not unfamiliar with having clergy in their offices. Pastoral ministry can be a depression-inducing job, for a variety of reasons. The psychiatrist I heard was highlighting the physiology of chronic stress, which suppresses neurotransmitters in our brain. When our levels of these neurotransmitters, such as serotonin, are too low, we experience symptoms of depression.

Pastors are also immersed in other people’s loss, including traumatic loss. Some pastors, particularly those in urban areas, experience a high level of trauma exposure—both direct and what experts call vicarious trauma, hearing about or witnessing other people’s trauma. The emotional impact of this exposure can accumulate over time and contribute to depression.

A number of forms of grief come with pastoral ministry, and it is often ambiguous and disenfranchised grief. For example, when people leave the church there is a form of loss for pastors. The loss of ministry dreams or career opportunities can have a significant impact. Pastors may not be aware of the unresolved grief and loss they are carrying, and depression can be the result. Of course pastors, because they are human, also may have personal vulnerabilities to depression and anxiety due to genetics, temperament, family of origin experiences, etc. So, it is not surprising that most pastors experience at least mild or moderate depression symptoms at some point in their lives. Unfortunately, pastors tend to become self-critical about experiencing depression symptoms—which of course just worsens the symptoms.

Pastors can also self-medicate, like anyone, and addictive behaviors can develop as a way of attempting to cope with pain. Pastors are particularly vulnerable to “process addictions”—becoming addicted

to the brain's own internal chemical processes. Workaholism, food addiction, technology addiction, and sexual addiction all work this way as people become addicted to the adrenaline, dopamine, and other chemicals that engaging in a particular behavior releases in the brain. Knowing your own Pain and Peace Cycles and having accountability in your life can help you avoid addictive pitfalls.

This book, particularly Chapters 6, 7, and 8, will equip you with an understanding of anxiety, depression, and addiction so that you can identify risk factors in others and yourself. If you find yourself struggling with any of these issues, I encourage you to respond to yourself the same way you would respond to a suffering parishioner—with grace and compassion. Seek help from a psychotherapist and a psychiatrist. Make some lifestyle changes. Understand how your Pain Cycle may be involved and develop Peace Cycle habits. Ensure supportive accountability in your life. You are too important to too many people to not stay healthy.

## **SINGLES, COUPLES, PARENTS**

Church life is often oriented around marriages and families, and many people will come to you with marital difficulty or parenting concerns. In addition, single adults—those who have never been married and those who are single again due to divorce or death of a spouse—make up a growing portion of our society, and our churches. For most of Christian history, singleness was the elevated status in the church. Only in the last several hundred years has marriage been elevated to a place of prominence. Chapter 2 of this book provides powerful insights about the needs of single adults—a sometimes overlooked area of pastoral care.

Pastors have a key role in helping people think through a theology of marriage, which I believe is based on a theology of singleness. One of my favorite pastors likes to ask couples in premarital counseling,

“How will the two of you getting married to one another at this point in time enhance the kingdom of God?” I like this question because it places marriage in the context of a larger story—the story of God. It places marriage in the context of Christian discipleship, which is one of the reasons pastors uniquely grieve when marriages end. Pastors and church leaders can also be powerful agents of insight and healing when equipped well. Theologian Martin Luther wrote about three images for marriage: a school, a hospital, and a mission station. He wrote that marriage is a school of character. When Christian marriage is at its best, it is a means of grace—a way through which God makes us more Christlike. Luther suggested that marriage is also a hospital—a place where we can receive healing from childhood emotional wounds that cause us pain. Christian marriage is inherently therapeutic. Luther also described marriage as a mission station—the place from which children are sent into the world to participate with God’s redemptive work.

Pastoral ministry places unique benefits and demands on clergy families. Many pastors’ families describe a deep joy in sharing ministry together and having a wonderful support system in the congregation while also describing the experience of living life “in a glass house” or a “fish bowl.” They are aware of being scrutinized, as people have unrealistically high expectations for a pastor to have the perfect marriage and children. Pastors’ spouses and kids can be expected to fill their role in uncomfortably stereotypical ways and often experience profound loneliness.

I am convinced that in some ways it is even more difficult to be the spouse of a pastor than to be the pastor. Pastors’ spouses can feel a profound sense of helplessness to intervene in the relational complexities of church dynamics and may face high expectations that they will serve as an “unpaid associate pastor,” but with very little status or compensation. And too often, pastors demonstrate what one counselor calls the “St. Elsewhere syndrome”: a saint everywhere else

who comes home too emotionally depleted to be fully present with spouse or kids.

Chapter 1 of this book is designed to give you insights into marriage so that you can help provide marital enrichment and marital crisis intervention to your community. It can also help enrich your own marriage and family, while Chapter 3 can give you new insights on parenting that can be helpful in your church and also in your own family.

## **SEXUALITY**

We live in a sexually confused culture. You are likely to encounter sexual brokenness in people's lives in ways that are surprising and intense. Pastors are often the first person to hear someone's story of sexual abuse, and they often hear confessions of compulsive or addictive sexual behavior, such as pornography, affairs, and more unusual behavior. The shame that is typically connected to sexuality can become entangled in Pain Cycles in complex kinds of ways. Chapter 4 will help you recognize the role of sexual intimacy in a healthy marriage, while Chapter 5 addresses the growing dangers of pornography use in our culture. Both will help you as a pastor to guide people into finding healing from shame and serve as a bridge to more specialized forms of care and treatment when needed.

I sometimes wonder if parishioners and pastors alike believe that pastors are supposed to be "asexual" somehow. Pastors are often ambivalent about their sexuality or try to repress it to an excessive degree. And yet pornography use is an epidemic among clergy, and the rate of sexual misconduct among clergy is alarmingly high when compared to other helping professions such as doctors, lawyers, and therapists. Many pastors have not psychologically integrated their own sexuality in a healthy way and so find themselves caught off guard by their own desires and behaviors. They may find themselves

experiencing loneliness and criticism and realize too late that they have neglected their marriage due to the demands of ministry.

Intimacy can develop in a pastoral relationship that crosses boundaries inappropriately, violating trust. Pastors are too often not prepared for parishioners to have sexualized transference—to be attracted to them, offer themselves sexually, or even actively seduce their pastor as the “forbidden fruit.” In addition, pastors can engage in sexual behavior as a way of self-medicating their own pain. These kinds of scenarios are all too common and very destructive on a number of levels.

This book includes information and resources to help you understand the deeper dynamics of human sexuality so that you can provide better pastoral care for those who are struggling. It can also provide benefits for you personally if you find yourself struggling with these issues. I invite you to engage in honest self-assessment. You are human. You have a sexuality. Are you moving toward wholeness in this area of your life?

### **A DUAL RESOURCE**

I am thankful to be a part of the team of professionals who have worked together to create this resource for leaders in the church. I encourage you to access the material in this book along both pathways, professionally and personally. May the God of peace bless you as you care for God’s people.

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**CHRISTOPHER J. ADAMS**

Rev. Christopher J. Adams, PhD, is the Executive Director of the Center for Vocational Ministry at Azusa Pacific University.

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# ONE

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## RelateStrong: Ministry and Marriage

*By Terry Hargrave*

If you have logged any time in ministry or leadership with faith-based organizations or churches, you know the country is facing serious problems with relationships and families. These problems have been growing in our culture for quite some time, and it has become quite easy to numb ourselves to the sheer reality of the statistics indicating the depth of our problems.

Fewer people are marrying worldwide; we now see only about 2.3 million marriages each year in the U.S.—down from over 4 million in the 1990s. Although there is some reason to believe the divorce rate is stabilizing, the reality is that about 42 percent to 45 percent of marriages will end in divorce. Add in the number of couples who permanently separate without divorcing, the failed marriage rate still approaches the 50 percent mark in the U.S. Divorce rates are much lower among college-educated and socioeconomically advantaged families, but if your community does not fall into those demographic categories, you probably continue to witness high rates of family break-ups.

On top of that, about 56 percent of people cohabitate before marriage. In fact, cohabitation rates are about 7.3 million per year—

almost double the marriage rate. Only half of these cohabiting couples will eventually marry, even though 40 percent of them will have children together while not married. More people than ever are also choosing to stay single, and current estimates predict one in four adults will have never married by the time they turn 50. Those who do eventually marry are staying single longer, trusting their marital partners less, and depending on themselves more.

The numbers leave little doubt: Marriage and family are in an age of decline. The late Pope John Paul II warned, “As the family goes, so goes the nation and so goes the whole world in which we live.” Few would argue this point, but we can also safely say, “As marriage and the family go, so goes the *church*.”

The numbers are disturbing enough, but you likely know the pain of a seemingly happy couple coming in to see you—a couple who has been dedicated to serving in the church, helping others, and perhaps even supporting your ministry—and announcing they are devastated by an affair, trapped in a cycle of domestic violence, languishing in an unhappy relationship, or giving up and divorcing. Numbers can be ignored; culture can be ignored; but the couple in front of you cannot be ignored. As a leader in your church or organization, you are keenly aware that every ministry and every person and every relationship in your community will be weakened by the loss and pain of the couple in front of you.

What will you do in that moment? In fact, what will you do with all the overwhelming relationship problems that come to you in the forms of parenting issues, unrealized family expectations, sexual problems, addictions, anxiety, or depression? And if shepherding your people through these tremendous difficulties is not difficult enough, what will you do when you and your own family are dealing with such issues?

RelateStrong | Leaders was created specifically to give pastors, ministers, and other church leaders tools to help you strengthen marriages, families, and other relationships in your communities. While you cannot do everything, we know that leaders, pastors and ministers powerfully shape yourselves and the people you minister to. In fact, *we believe you have more power than you think!* We want to help you help your people by equipping you with a simple model called Restoration Therapy (RT), a tool you can use consistently to address some of the difficult problems you face in your faith community. With it you can help strengthen marriages, teach new skills to parents, help single adults understand their value, and support people struggling with addiction, sexual problems, pornography, depression, anxiety, and other issues.

### **WE KNOW YOU ARE NOT A THERAPIST**

We are not asking you to be a therapist. Restoration *Therapy* is simply the title of a model that can help you provide pastoral care that not only will help your people psychologically, but also spiritually. We are simply asking you to be yourself—a powerful person who is able to listen to the stories and narratives of the people you serve and direct them by your pastoral knowledge to a deeper level of sound relationships and spiritual growth. Of course, you will still utilize the resources of therapists, psychologists, doctors, and other experts, but you will also be empowered to better support your community from the pulpit, in one-on-one settings, through small-group interactions, or in whole-church programming. RelateStrong and the restoration model are not about you becoming a therapist but about you learning a language that helps you assess and understand the community of people you serve. And perhaps most important, you will learn about yourself and your own relationships.

RelateStrong and this model teach that humans—all humans—are built to be relational with one another. In other words, we can only develop fully and optimally *within the context of relationship*. Relationships are built on two foundational pillars that we absolutely require to function properly: *love and trust*.

### **Importance of Love**

Chances are you know a thing or two about love already. There are so many great things about love, but one of the most essential keys to understanding humans is to understand that *everything we know about ourselves was taught to us by the way we were—and are—loved*. Simply stated, one of the essential ways we understand ourselves is to discern whether we matter to the people who are in relationship with us. We face tragic and long-lasting consequences if we do not experience this love from the very beginning of our lives. If caregivers do not love and attach to an infant, the child will fail to develop in a normal manner; in worst-case scenarios, without the basic bonding that lets babies know they are important and belong, they will fail to thrive and may even die. Touching, cuddling, and comforting stimulate the brain in infancy and are essential to love, attachment, and eventual identity.

But of course, the story of love in shaping a person's identity extends past infancy and throughout a person's life. We like to think that love is expressed in three fundamental ways: romantic love, companionate love, and sacrificial love. You will notice that these three types correspond closely to the Greek terms for love: *eros*, *phileo*, and *agape*.

We most often think of *eros* love as an erotic love fitting for romantic relationships. But actually, it is more closely aligned with the feelings we get when we are fascinated and consumed by thoughts of a beloved—almost to the point of being unable to imagine life without him or her. For instance, I could use the concept of romantic love to

describe my feelings toward my young grandson. And when I hold my grandson and sing to him, tell him how special he is, and focus exclusively on him, he begins to think, “I must really be something, and I can get this person to do *anything* for me.” In other words, my romantic infatuation with my grandson makes him feel *special, unique, and important*.

Of course, parents and family members love their children in this infatuated, all-encompassing way, even if we don’t always describe it as “romantic” love. And God also expresses this kind of love toward us. “Those who were not my people I will call ‘my people,’ and her who was not beloved I will call ‘beloved’” (Rom. 9:25; see Hosea 2:23). The loving thoughts and actions of our family members and God communicate to our identities that we are *special and prized*.

Identity is also greatly influenced by companionate or *phileo* love. Think about your best friend for a few moments. Chances are, you will have stories that come to mind that illustrate how your friend is faithful, loyal, fun, and spontaneous. Even if you do not live close to your friend or talk to him or her often, you likely still feel that he or she “gets you” and would be there in an instant if you asked. Best friends “have our backs.”

This kind of companionate or friendship love teaches our identities that *we are not alone* and that *we truly belong in the context of relationship*. You see this kind of love expressed beautifully in the relationship between Ruth and Naomi. Ruth says, “Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried” (Ruth 1:16-17). Ruth affirms, “I am with you to the end and you are not alone.” Romantic love teaches us that we are special and unique, and companionate love teaches us that we belong.

The third kind of love that shapes our identities is sacrificial love, which is kin to the concept of *agape*. We live in a culture that sometimes teaches that *acceptance* is the highest and most important aspect of love. While acceptance is important to belonging, only sacrificial love will teach you that you are *valuable and worthy*. Sacrificial love does not spring from abundance, but rather grows in spite of neediness or want. Parents demonstrate sacrificial love when they ignore their needs in order to fulfill their children's desires. In sacrificial love, the lover ends up bearing the cost of the love at his or her own detriment. Imagine two people in a concentration camp who are starving to death. Somehow, they come across enough food for only one. If they split the food, both will die. Sacrificial love means one turns to the other and says, "You eat the food." Why in the world would a person love another in such a way? It is really quite simple. The lover sees the beloved as more valuable than even self.

Many of our parents *tried* to provide this sacrificial love, and some did succeed. But parents are only human, and many times they kept strict records of their sacrifices of money, dreams, or desires and somehow expected children to "pay it back" eventually—in love, care, respect, or further sacrifice. There is no "payback" expected in authentic sacrificial love—it is love simply given because the beloved is seen as valuable and worthy of such sacrifice.

This sacrificial love, of course, is exactly what God provides in the sacrifice of Jesus. "God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:16-17). Followers of Jesus were bought at a precious and high price. Knowing this, we can conclude only that we are of immense value because we were salvaged by a loving and sacrificial God.

If you have received these kinds of love—romantic, companionate, and sacrificial—from your family, peers, church community, or others, your identity is probably marked with feelings that you are special, not alone, and worthy. We would say you have a pretty healthy sense of identity. Unfortunately, none of us grew up with perfect caregivers, and we certainly did not always receive the love we needed from peers, teachers, coaches, and mentors. All of us, therefore, have flawed identities, and at times we carry a painful burden of questioning our value, belonging, or specialness. Even if you grew up in a great family in a supportive community, you still have some of these fault lines in your identity because you are human and imperfect yourself. And the idea that you are imperfect, unworthy, and possibly unlovable is the message and feeling your brain retains long past the moments and instances where you were not loved.

### **Importance of Trust**

Love is such a good thing that we are sometimes tempted to say it is the *only* really important thing. In reality, we also need to experience trust in order to grow into healthy human beings capable of functioning in relationships. Trust is essential in relationships because it teaches us *we are safe with the world and others*. Identity is not the only factor involved in attachment in the human brain: safety teaches us how to go about relating to one another. And like the fault lines that exist in our identities, all of us have developed imperfect senses of safety. In relationships, there are three essentials that build trust: *reliability*, *justice or balance*, and *openness or honesty*.

The first essential in building trust and safety is reliability. Simply stated, reliability is tied to how much you can count on a person to do what he or she says and how much you can expect he or she will be a person of character from one situation to the next. How reliable does a person have to be before we will lean into relationship with him or

her? Remarkably, with human beings, it is quite high—approaching 90 percent reliability. In other words, a person must prove trustworthy nine times out of ten before we trust her or him. If someone falls short of this threshold, you simply will not trust the person. Imagine hiring a construction company to build a house when you know the builder has successfully completed previous houses only 70 percent of the time. Seventy percent may look like an overwhelming majority, but when it comes to relationships, it is far too low to yield a sense of safety. If someone is unreliable, others in the relationship will likely move to protect themselves by withdrawing, limiting vulnerability, depending only on themselves, or, worst of all, hoping against hope they will not be taken advantage of again this time.

The second essential in building trust and a sense of safety is justice or balance. All relationships require at least two people who are engaged in mutual giving to and taking from one another. For instance, people who are friends expect to give care in the midst of pain, celebration in times of joy, and loyalty in tough times. If one of the friends consistently gives to the other but receives nothing in return, it will not be long before the giver feels that the relationship is unfair and that he or she is being taken advantage of and receiving no benefit. The giver would feel used, abused, or betrayed by the other. Why? Because he or she is in fact being used, abused, and betrayed by the lack of justice and the imbalance in the relationship. All human relationships have this balance of give-and-take, and this balance over a period of time builds a sense of trust and safety in relational partners.

We are all born with this innate sense of relational balance, like an internal gyroscope to let us know when things are out of balance in relationships. Just as we are born to give and receive love and the need to attach to another human being, we also are born with this sense of justice. Like love, justice is universal to the shaping of safety in all

cultures. We are built for safe relationships because without them, we are cast into isolation, fearing we will be taken advantage of or becoming overaggressive in an attempt to take care of ourselves.

But when there is a sense of justice and balance, we have the freedom to lean into one another as we give and do our part because we trust our relational partner to give and reciprocate. Solomon put it this way in Ecclesiastes 4:9-12:

*Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken.*

You may look at this concept and see how it works for building a house or creating relationships between equals such as friends, spouses, or employers, but what about parents and children? Does the same balance or justice of give and take exist in the parent/child relationship? Yes, but it plays out in a different way. Parents provide care, nurture, love, discipline, and time to a small child with no expectation the child will be able to return the giving. The child grows and benefits from the giving, but there is no expectation that he or she has to give it back to the parents. It is a good deal for the child, but how about the parents? The reality is that because the family is *intergenerational* in nature, the resources the child receives from the parents will eventually be the same resources the adult child will use to give to his or her child when the time comes. As a child, we over-benefit from the giving of our parents. As a parent, we are then obligated to over-give to the next generation. In this way, balance is maintained through the generations.

Of course, not all parents are worthy of trust, and many of them were

raised by parents who did not give them the resources they needed. As a result, these parents are likely to carry destructive expectations that their children will love, nurture, and care for *them*. These expectations in turn rob children of a trustworthy resource; instead, they feel it is necessary to use the meager resources available to care for their parents. As these children grow into adulthood, they will not feel safe and will likely require, manipulate, and threaten their own children through destructive and untrustworthy actions. As you can see, out-of-balance families produce more injustice in the next generation, and the destructive beat goes on.

The last essential item in building a sense of trust and safety is openness or honesty. Simply put, if we do not experience openness and honesty from our relationship partner, there is no way for us to know the “real” person, and we will pull back to protect ourselves. As a therapist, I often see marriages that have experienced an affair. In many of these cases, the affair went on for months or even years before the other spouse discovered the reality. Of course, the infidelity itself damages trust, but the damage is multiplied because the victimized spouse is left thinking, “It feels like I don’t know the person I married. How could he or she carry on the secret affair and at the same time act like all was good between us? How will I ever know if he or she is telling the truth?” Secrets, lies, and lack of openness destroy trust and make relationships feel unsafe.

## **THE RESTORATION MODEL AND IDENTITY AND SAFETY**

Love and trust are at the core emotion of our identity and safety. When we feel secure in our relationships and sure of who we are, we will feel loved and safe. Essentially, this yields in us a sense of *shalom* or peace: a sense that we are perfectly fulfilled and able in every way to enjoy the goodness of God and creation. As I mentioned before, however, we were all raised by imperfect people; we have all been

rejected and made to feel small in significant relationships with friends, teachers, employers, or mentors; and we all live in an imperfect world filled with trauma, trials, and death. As a result, all of us fall short of the perfect sense of shalom in terms of our identity and safety. Because you, as a pastor or ministry leader, understand these truths, you are especially equipped to listen to peoples' stories and histories as they narrate their experiences of love and trustworthiness. Some will have stories of small hurts; others will tell of much larger hurts; but all of these stories are stories of pain.

I have my own story of significant pain. I grew up in a family where I was the fourth of four children. Although my parents did many things right, such as making sure we always had a roof over our heads and food to eat, there was something desperate in my family that I could not quite explain at the time. You see, my parents came from physically abusive backgrounds and carried that physical abuse right into our family. Despite many things being okay, the out-of-control times when I or my brothers and sister were physically abused nullified most of my sense that I was loved and that I could trust my family. Then, when I went to school, I was somewhat dyslexic and could not read well, leading me to fail second grade. I was feeling desperate for love and stability in my family and like a failure because I did poorly in school.

As a result, I was depressed and decided I would manipulate my parents into expressing their love for me by feigning a suicide attempt. What I wanted when I cut myself was a proclamation from my parents that I was indeed loved and could count on them to be there for me. What I got was something quite short. My mother was furious, and my parents' response to the incident confirmed what I most feared—that I was not loved and there was no one for me except me. In all the times that were out of control in my family, this was indeed the worst. I felt alone, unloved, and like a failure. It was, in many ways, the worst day of my life in my family.

## Primary Emotional Pain

As you listen to peoples' stories, you can recognize the pain they feel that stems from issues of identity or lack of safety. They will use a variety of words to describe feeling unloved and unsafe, but if you listen well you will start to hear this *primary emotion* of their pain in their identity and safety. In Figure 1.1, you will see a list of common words that people use to describe their pain when it comes to primary emotions.

Words Expressing Pain Rooted in Identity	Words Expressing Pain Stemming from Sense of Safety
Unloved, unworthy, insignificant, alone, worthless, devalued, defective, rejected, unaccepted, unwanted, judged, unappreciated, hopeless	Unsafe, insecure, unsure, used, unfair, guilty, helpless, powerless, out of control, controlled, vulnerable, disconnected, unknown, abandoned, inadequate, failure, invalidated, unable to measure up

Figure 1.1. Words People Use to Express Primary Emotional Pain

Are these the only emotions associated with identity and safety issues? Certainly not. They are, however, *the primary emotions* that tend to trigger people into secondary reactions like getting angry, feeling ashamed, relying on over-controlling behavior, or trying to escape or withdraw.

However, there is often a difference in the types of emotions people *feel* and the emotions they *express*. People come in to see you to complain about their relationships or situations, and you ask something like, "How did that make you feel?" Far too often, they will say something like, "It made me angry" or "It just shut me down." This is the point where you need to go one step further and ask, "Can you tell me what fueled your anger?" "When you were shutting down, what were you feeling about yourself or the relationship?" This type of follow-up is likely to lead people to express their primary pain instead of describing their reactive emotions. You will hear words like hopeless,

out of control, helpless, unable to measure up, insignificant, abandoned, or worthless. These are words describing the primary emotions that will fuel peoples' destructive tendencies.

The human brain is built to react when it is in distress. You know this as *fight or flight* reactions. God created us to have a sense of peace in our identity and safety. When that peace is challenged, the brain kicks into action because of the stress and pain of feeling violated deep in our hearts. This is called *reactivity* or *secondary emotion*. Once we become emotionally triggered or “dysregulated,” we tend to either protect ourselves or react in destructive ways. The problem rarely stems from what we *feel* when we are in a reactive state; the problem usually arises from what we *do*.

When we get triggered by those primary emotions that have to do with our identity and safety, we react automatically in an unlearned way. As time goes by, however, we continue to be vulnerable to the same faults and emotions in our identities and our sense of safety, and our reactivity or coping behaviors become recognizable and even predictable. We know that the brain prefers what it already knows. If you chronically feel like you are unloved or alone and you repeatedly react by getting angry or withdrawing, you likely have been feeling those emotions and resorting to those coping behaviors for a long time.

### **My Reactive Behaviors**

To illustrate, let us go back to my story. Remember, I felt alone, unloved, and like a failure in my identity and sense of safety. As a result, my fight/flight reactivity took over as I tried to cope with the pain and stress I felt. As a kid, I first had a *flight* reaction and withdrew because I assumed there was something so deeply flawed in me that there was little hope anyone would ever love such a failure like me. As you can imagine, this got me nowhere, and I sank further and further into despair. So I began to try and deal with my pain by performing, which

is a type of *fight* reaction. I worked hard to achieve athletically, socially, and—eventually—academically. I still felt unloved and alone, but I hoped that perhaps if I could just “do well,” maybe someone would love me and I would not be a loser.

Chances are this type of reactivity makes sense to you because it is common among us ministry types. But as you probably know, performing has no long-term future because any success is short lived: you are only as good as your last performance or success. For years, that reality struck me as terribly unfair and unjust. Here I was, striving to do God’s work and being the best I could be, but I never could just rest in who I was and be safe and secure with anyone. Then, when I was unable to measure up, my deep sense of failure would kick in and I would go into another *fight* reaction: getting angry. Not only would I damage my own sense of identity and safety with my anger, but tragically I would damage the people I loved most with my anger—just like my parents’ anger damaged me.

#### **FOUR CATEGORIES OF REACTIVITY**

I often tell people, “You are not bad all the time, you are just bad when you are bad.” When are you bad? You are bad when you get emotionally dysregulated in your identity or safety or both and start acting or coping out of reactivity. I find that peoples’ reactivity can usually be broken down into four categories: *blame*, *shame*, *control*, or *escape*. Understanding this reactivity or coping will help you to really understand the people you serve, the pain they feel, and what they do with their pain. It is important to realize that blame and control are aggressive—or fight—responses, while shame and escape are flight responses. As you can see in Figure 1.2, we experience primary emotions that result in reactivity.



Figure 1.2. Primary Emotions Result in Reactivity

## Blame

Blame is reactivity in response to the feeling that others *should have* made me feel loved or safe. In turn, the person reacts or copes with this lack of love or safety by aggressively blaming others, getting angry, raging, acting arrogant, or being sarcastic, threatening, retaliatory, and punishing.

People who react or cope with blame often do not *feel* angry as much as they *act* angry. In other words, blamers feel unsafe or unloved (primary emotion). In reaction to these feelings, they tend to make

demands or demean others because these others are not able to supply the missing identity or safety.

### **Shame**

While blamers cope or react to the feelings of being unloved or unsafe by blaming others for cheating them of the love and trustworthiness they deserve, shamers essentially blame themselves for feeling inadequate and undeserving of love and trustworthiness. Shamers believe there is nothing unique, special, or worthy about themselves and feel they do not deserve to belong or have a safe, predictable, and fair relationship.

As a result, the person who reacts with shame engages in self-loathing and self-hatred and often acts depressed, negative, hopeless, and inconsolable. The more you try to comfort a shamer into feeling loved and safe, the more you realize that he or she has a hole that cannot be filled. As a result, a shamer will often whine about not being loved and will become manipulative, sulky, or even self-harming.

### **Control**

When facing a world that is unloving or untrustworthy, a good number of us will simply say that we will not depend on relationships for anything but instead will manage life *by ourselves*. Controllers are aggressive people and react and cope with unloving and unsafe situations by simply deciding to be invulnerable to others and not deal in the normal balance of give-and-take relationships. As a result, controllers react and cope with life by being performance-driven, perfectionistic, and quite defensive when it comes to relationships.

A controller in a relationship demands things be handled his or her way and comes across as demanding, judging, and critical, often nagging or lecturing others. The main point here is that controllers look extremely competent, but they do not do well in the balance of

give-and-take of real relationships. They may get the job done, but they often are isolated and alone, which further complicates their feelings of being unloved and unsafe.

### **Escape**

Controllers usually think in terms of what actions are needed to make things safe or to better understand themselves. A person who escapes usually comes to a quite different conclusion, believing there is *nothing* that can be done to feel personally secure or safe. As a result, people who escape react to feelings of being unloved or unsafe by flight and simply leave or numb themselves. Often they will leave physically by withdrawing and retreating. Just as common, however, escapers will leave emotionally by disconnecting from important relationships, hiding out with drugs or alcohol, or even cognitively disassociating from reality.

An escaper's reactivity to feeling unloved or unsafe is often numbing out emotionally, becoming addicted to an activity or substance, and exhibiting impulsive, dramatic, avoidant, or secretive behaviors. This kind of withdrawing or escaping usually develops into terrible irresponsibility.

## **PERSONAL COPING STRATEGIES**

The reality is that all of us—pastors and parishioners alike—have imperfect senses of identity and safety. Therefore, all of us feel pain and react in a fight-or-flight manner. All of us also react or cope using one, two, three, or all four of the behaviors described above. A few of us will react in a predictable way using one coping strategy exclusively. Others of us will react using multiple coping strategies of blame, shame, control, and escape but the sequence of our strategies is usually predictable.

Remember from my story that I felt unloved, alone, and like a failure. This pattern of primary emotion is deep in my memory and the most likely feelings to be triggered. When I feel these things, I react as illustrated in Figure 1.3. I initially withdraw and shame myself because I actually believe that I am undeserving of love and trust. Trying to correct the problem, I cope by trying to overperform (control) to prove that I am adequate and worthy. But unfortunately, I am only as good as my last performance, which usually leads me into getting angry and blaming others. So damaging is my anger that I am every bit as brutal verbally as my parents were physically.

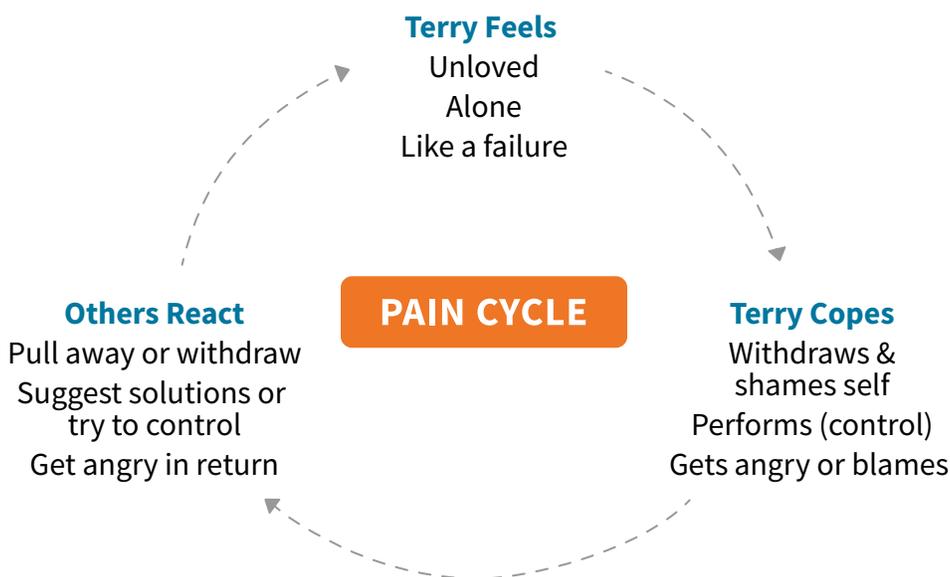


Figure 1.3. Terry's Pain Cycle

You can also see that when I react or cope in this manner, the others around me react by pulling away or withdrawing (which contributes to my feeling unloved or alone): suggest solutions or control my performance (which makes me feel like a failure); or get angry in return (which leads me into feeling unloved, alone and like a failure). In other words, the very coping I do in my reactivity causes more emotional dysregulation in my primary emotions. It is a downward spiral because all reactivity is, by nature, *unloving and untrustworthy action*.

## Naming to Change

Of course, I am not alone in my reactivity. You and the people you minister to and lead also deal with this reactivity. It is important not only to hear the narratives of pain to find out how people *feel*, but also to learn about their actions so you can understand how they cope and are reactive to those feelings. In Figure 1.4 you will find a list of common words that describe common reactive feelings and actions in the categories of blame, shame, control and escape.

<b>Blame</b>	<b>Shame</b>	<b>Control</b>	<b>Escape</b>
Blames others	Negative	Perfectionistic	Irresponsible
Angry	Hopeless	Defensive	Disconnected
Sarcastic	Shames self	Judging	Addicted
Arrogant	Inconsolable	Isolated	Avoidant
Finds fault	Self-critical	Critical	Numbed out
Harsh	Depressed/ unhappy	Controlling	Out of control
Threatening	Egocentric	Closed	Provocative
Holds grudges	Catastrophizes	Invulnerable	Unreliable
Retaliates	Manipulates	Demanding	Secretive
Makes threats	Whines	Suspicious	Impulsive
Impatient	Needy	Nagging	Selfish
Withdraws to punish	Withdraws to pout	Withdraws to defend	Withdraws to escape

Figure 1.4. Common Behaviors Relating to Blame, Shame, Control, Escape

Our pastor often says, “You cannot change what you will not name.” The first step in helping people who are acting badly to change is

to help them see clearly and accurately what they do when they are emotionally dysregulated or triggered. You know how to listen, and now that you know what to listen for, you can start separating out what a person *feels* in their primary emotions and how they *react* to these painful emotions.

When you help them organize and draw this cycle into a diagram like Figure 1.3, you are helping them identify their *Pain Cycles*. The reality is that people do not get upset and behave in unfortunate ways over thirty or forty different things, they get upset and repeat the same patterned feelings and behaviors over and over again through forty different subjects. It may be over finances, parenting, sex, work, in-laws, or home responsibilities—just to name a few of the problems that married couples bring to you as a leader. Whatever seems to be at the core of a couple's problems, most often, you will find the Pain Cycle is central to the issue.

### **A COUPLE'S PAIN CYCLE**

Figure 1.3 illustrates my individual Pain Cycle, but when you are working with couples, it can be very eye-opening if you help them draw out their *couple Pain Cycle*. Again, let me illustrate with my personal story. Sharon, my wife, has a very different but tragic narrative of pain in her early life. Within ten years, she experienced the suicide of her father, the death of her oldest brother from acute leukemia, and the murder of her next-oldest brother. These tragedies did not leave her feeling unloved, but they did leave her feeling terribly unsafe.

As a young girl and teenager, she learned to cope with her feelings of being alone, abandoned, and unsafe by controlling relationships. If people did not cooperate with her control, then she became critical and blaming in an attempt to get them back in line. With that short overview of our two lives, you can understand Terry and Sharon's couple Pain Cycle illustrated in Figure 1.5.

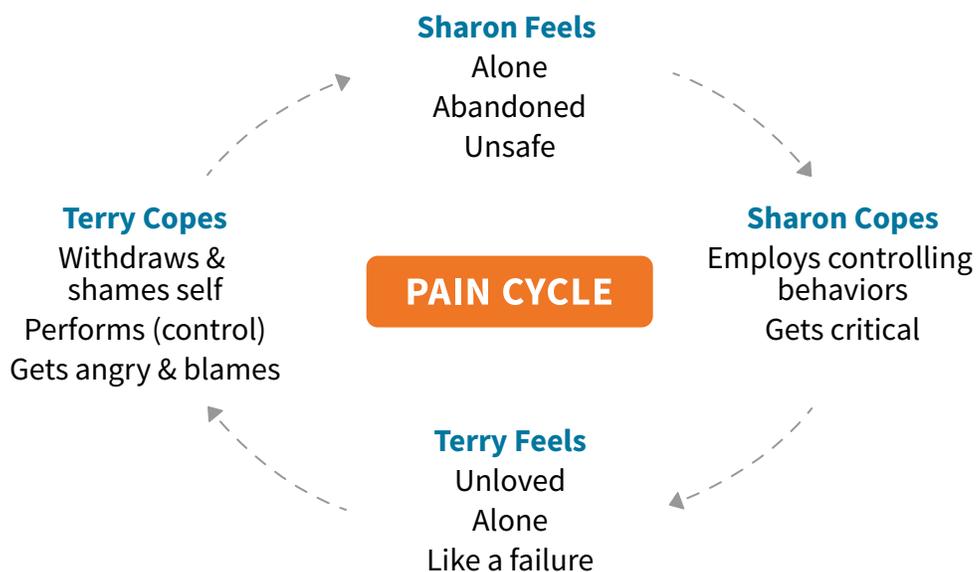


Figure 1.5. Terry and Sharon's Couple Pain Cycle

The Pain Cycle illustrated in Figure 1.5 is at the root of every fight that Sharon and I have or ever have had in our marriage. My tendency to withdraw and get angry sets the stage for her feeling alone, abandoned, and unsafe, leading her to control and become critical, which sets the stage for me to feel unloved and like a failure. It is the fight behind every fight, and every couple has a similar type of Pain Cycle.

When you help a couple find and describe this central cycle that runs their triggers, emotional dysregulations, and conflicts, you will empower them to take responsibility for their relationship in a new way. In short, by understanding, providing insight, and naming, you are empowering a couple to change!

## MYTHS ABOUT MARRIAGE

If you look closely at Terry and Sharon's couple Pain Cycle in Figure 1.5, you can probably imagine what we would complain about if we came to see you as our pastor or church leader. I would say, "She is so controlling and critical!" Sharon would say, "He just goes away and when I try to make contact with him, he just blows up!" Notice

that we would totally ignore our primary emotions that are fueling the unreasonable and unproductive behaviors. Couples ignore these important feelings because they have usually bought into some destructive myths.

**Myth 1.** *My spouse's behavior is the problem.* I hope you can see from cycle illustrated in Figure 1.5 that the *couple* is responsible for the cycle and that *both* partners have responsibility. Each partner has issues with identity and safety, and simply changing behaviors will not cure marital problems nor create couple intimacy. Both partners are part of the problem.

**Myth 2.** *Poor communication is the root of marital problems.* While it is true that distressed couples do not know how to communicate effectively with one another, just expressing a complaint or feeling does not move a couple to change. In reality, unless a couple is able to see clearly how their destructive reactivity or coping comes from their own triggered primary emotions, they will argue endlessly about making their partner understand and behave differently. Instead, when each of the partners clearly understand their own feelings and actions, they are able to take responsibility for their own part of the problem.

**Myth 3.** *Marriage and intimacy are about meeting each other's needs.* We do need one another because in the context of relationship, we are stronger, safer, and more nurtured. However, our partner is not our parent. Marriage functions best when we recognize that it is not our partner's job to take care of us emotionally, make us feel better, or to even accept us unconditionally. The job of a partner is to join with us in an equal endeavor of intimacy in our work, care for each other, and vision of how to relate to our families and friends effectively. It is not my partner's job to regulate my emotions; rather it is my responsibility to regulate my own emotions. Only when both individuals reach a state of peace can they share true freedom and intimacy as a couple,

with both able to do their parts in the relationship without being overdependent, needy, and weak. In that state of individual peace, couples are able to help and love each other out of peacefulness instead of pain.

**Myth 4.** *Marriage is about compromise.* Conflict is inevitable in marriage because both partners have dysregulated identity or safety or both. Solving the conflict, however, depends more on the growth of each partner than trying to make the other person change. On the face, compromise looks better than conflict, but it actually has the same “tit for tat” that we find in conflict. “Let’s do it my way this time and next time we will do it your way.” In a way, compromise is just a nicer way to compete with one another, which is the original root of conflict. Marriage is about *growing together*. How do we grow? I believe the relationship forces us to develop and change. In being a good companion and cooperating together, we have to modify our old behaviors and old ways of doing things in order to be intimate with our partner while becoming more emotionally mature.

### **RESTORATION THERAPY, COUPLES, AND THE TRUTH**

While you may not be a therapist, we know that you are empowered to be a good listener and to be a *disciple maker*. Although there are a variety of ways to define disciple making, we think that the Apostle Paul put his finger on a real key in the process in Ephesians 4:20-24:

*But that is not the way you learned in Christ!—assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.*

This passage is central in Pauline theology, and in Colossians 3 and Romans 12, he restates the idea of becoming more and more like God through renewing or transforming the mind. Change. Growth. Discipleship. It makes sense that God would use the foundation of relationship to serve as the training ground for us to learn about becoming more Christ-like. Further, in the most important of all human relationships—marriage—it makes the most sense for us to change our old self to the new self. Marriage is not just any relationship divorced from our spirituality; rather, it is a training ground for us to learn the basic methodology of change for becoming a disciple of Jesus.

How do we do this work? First and foremost, it is about confronting the lies we have believed about our own identities and safety. Most of us have never considered whether or not our core beliefs about ourselves are true because they were taught to us—intentionally or unintentionally—by caregivers, important others, or circumstances when we were not mature enough to challenge them. But we and the people we serve are plenty old enough and mature enough now to confront these dysregulating lies in the Pain Cycle.

When I was a boy of eight, I was not able to challenge the messages my parents were giving me about my identity and safety. Now, however, I am a grown man who has raised two children. While I did not raise my children perfectly, I certainly did a better job of building into their identities and senses of safety than was done for me. My children are living proof that I know how to shape identity and safety for the good. I did it for them; why in the world would I be unwilling to do it for myself?

### **Self-Control**

Galatians 5:22-23 refers to an essential element of a disciple's virtue in cooperation with the Holy Spirit: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love,

joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, *self-control*; against such things there is no law.” Self-control. Through self-control I can take hold of the lies and sin that entangles and allow my mind and the Spirit to guide me to the truth about myself. It is not the job of my wife, my children, my boss, or even my pastor. It is *my job*, because I am the only one powerful enough to make the choice of what I will believe. Your job, as a pastor or minister or other leader, is to help others see their core truths and walk with them as they replace their lies with God’s truth.

Paul tells us that *the self* is the most powerful decision-maker if we are going to confront the lies in our identities and safety because God will not take away the freedom of the individual to choose:

*Those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. (Rom. 8:5-6)*

Simply put, our Pain Cycle is the way of the flesh. Our primary emotions drive our destructive behaviors. Therefore, in helping couples find their way out of destructive Pain Cycles, you must first help them confront the emotionally dysregulating lies about themselves and their safety and replace it with truth. When the root of the truth takes hold, it starts yielding behaviors that are loving and trusting. For example, when I confront my own lies of being unloved, alone, and a failure, and instead believe that I am precious and loved, that I belong and that—while not perfect—I am man enough for the task in front of me, I lose the fuel for my destructive behavior. I instead feel that sense of *shalom* we discussed earlier.

### **God’s Truths**

Of course, when I make the choice to confront my own lies, God and

others are strong resources to back up the truth about my identity and safety. As a pastor, minister, or leader, you can help reinforce God’s fundamental truths to the deepest questions we all ask.

**Who are we?** “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10).

**Are we alone?** “Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of them, for it is the Lord your God who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you” (Deut. 31:6).

**Are we safe in hard times?** “For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” (Heb. 12:11).

These are just a few of the truths we can receive—and pass on to others—from God when we choose to confront the lies about our identity and safety. In addition, emphasize the family, friends, and colleagues who care for, love, and stand by the individuals and couples you are counseling. Figure 1.6 provides examples of some of the stabilizing truths that you can start integrating into your identity and reinforcing with your people as they struggle with their own identities.

<b>Truths People Feel When They Experience Peace in Their Identities</b>	<b>Truths People Feel When They Experience Peace in Their Senses of Safety</b>
Loved, worthy, significant, not alone, prized, valuable, precious, approved, accepted, wanted, appreciated, hopeful, free	Safe, secure, adequate, sure, fulfilled, capable, empowered, in control, protected, connected, intimate, competent, validated, enough

Figure 1.6. Truths People Feel When They Experience Primary Emotional Peace

### Truth in Practice

Saying or thinking these truths do not necessarily make people believe them, but it is a start in transforming the mind. As we

repeatedly think and voice these truths, they begin to take hold in our hearts and stabilize our dysregulated feelings into a more peaceful state. But the next step in creating change is to *put the truth into practice*. We have seen how what we *feel* results in destructive reactivity in what we *do*. When we regulate our identities and senses of safety with the truth, we calm ourselves with peace. We are then able to choose actions that are loving and trustworthy.

Remember, we are not bad all the time. There are times when we are good, nurturing, self-valuing, balanced in the give-and-take of relationships and reliably connected.

*Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you. (Phil. 4:8-9)*

Teach the individuals who come to you to think intentionally and then *do*. This is the pathway to allow the truth to initiate change—not only for couples struggling in a marriage, but for anyone in all stages of life.

## PEACE CYCLE

Just as couples benefit from having a cognitive map that helps them recognize and name their couple Pain Cycle, it is also helpful to show them a cognitive map of what a good, well-connected, and healthy relationship looks like based on the peace of the truth. In this model, we do not just focus on identifying the problem and then expecting couples to “stop it” because they know the problem. We also help them focus on the potential of the “new self” behavior, which exactly fits your goal of spiritual growth for the people you lead. The Pain Cycle does not show up just in marriage; it also shows up in church, work, and anywhere

people are in relationship. Therefore, when we help people make the turn toward the truth about themselves, they find the possibility of true and wholesome connection as seen in Figure 1.7.

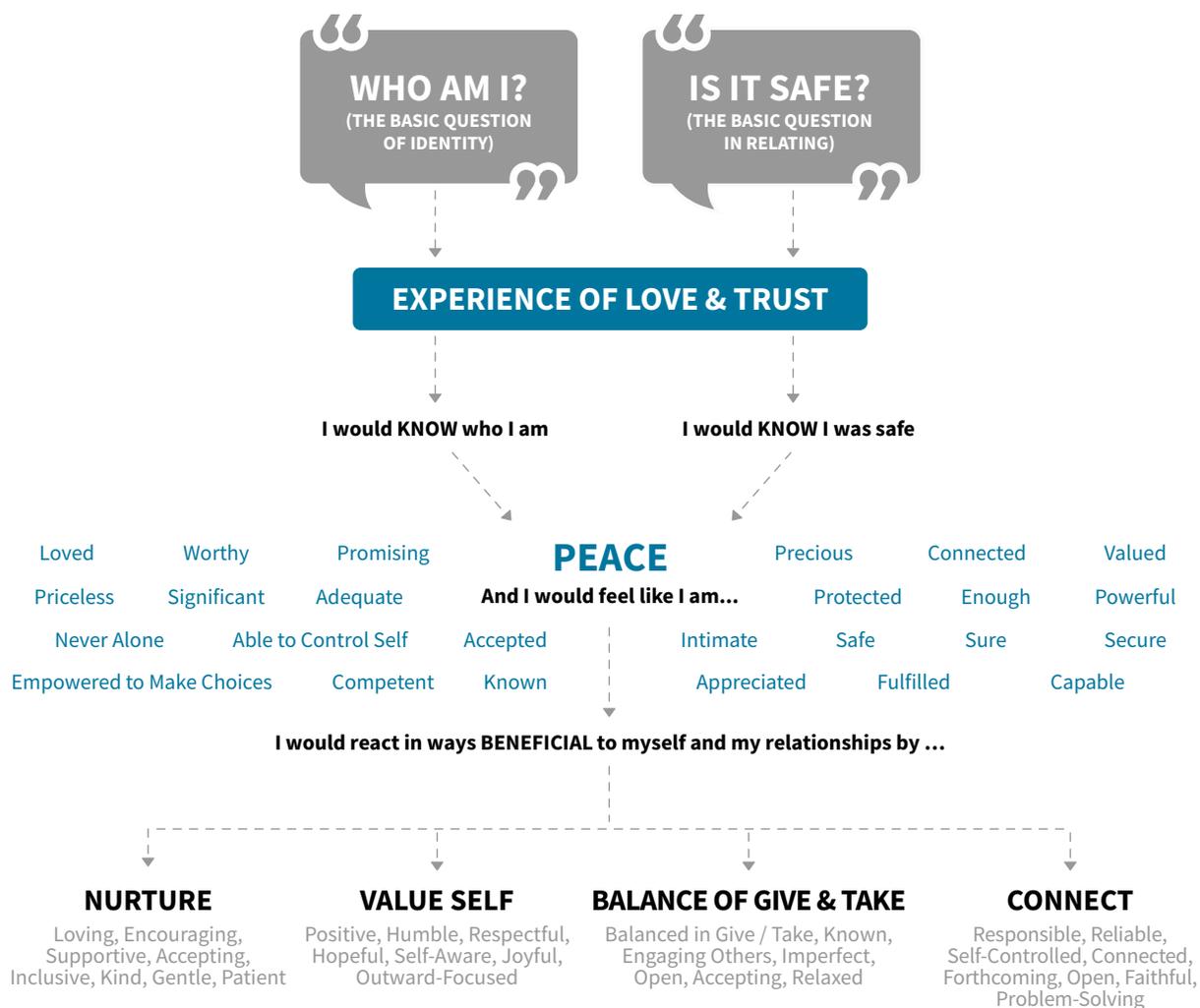


Figure 1.7. Illustration of Peace Chart and Peaceful Actions

When people feel loved in their identities and safe in their relationships, they are no longer dominated by fight or flight reactivity. Instead, they are at peace and free to choose loving and trusting actions. Instead of blaming others, they are free to *nurture* others. Rather than shaming themselves, they can learn to *value* their worthiness and uniqueness. Instead of controlling, they allow others to do their parts in a relationship and therefore can live in a *balanced give-*

*and-take*. Finally, instead of escaping, they can *reliably connect* with others in relationship.

When the people you pastor and lead are encouraged to think about their true identities and senses of safety and then led to choose loving and trustworthy actions, they have essentially taken off the “old self” and put on their “new self” or best version of themselves in Christ.

Figure 1.8 lists some of the specific actions people have found helpful in promoting nurture, self-value, balanced give-and-take, and reliable connections in relationships. (See the Appendix for more vocabulary to identify feelings and actions involved in Pain and Peace Cycles and for charts to help someone create their own cycles.)

<b>Nurture</b>	<b>Self-Value</b>	<b>Balanced Give and Take</b>	<b>Reliable Connections</b>
Loves	Values self	Balanced in giving, receiving	Responsible
Encourages	Respects self	Vulnerable	Reliable
Accepts	Remains positive	Open	Self-controlled
Supports	Stays humble	Engaging	Connected
Includes others	Offers optimism	Appreciative	Intimate
Is kind	Is hopeful	Imperfect	Faithful
Listens	Aware of self	Relaxed	Forthcoming
Practices patience	Displays confidence	Spontaneous	Problem solver
Offers compassion	Focuses on others	Lets things go	Planner
			Honest

Figure 1.8. Actions and Attitudes Related to Peace Cycle

When working with a married couple, you can now arm them with the truth that has the power to bring emotional peace to each individual. And you can provide examples of actions they can take that are sure “relational winners” in building love and trust. To help couples visualize this “new self” cycle, it is helpful to draw the cognitive map that represents their Peace Cycle, such as Figure 1.9, which illustrates our Peace Cycle. When I focus myself emotionally on the truth about my identity and safety, I know I am deeply loved by my family and God, I belong to them and always will, and despite imperfections, I am “man enough” to do the tasks in front of me. When I focus on these things, I can choose to connect with my family and others, value myself, and nurture both my relationships and myself.

When Sharon, my wife, focuses on the fundamental truths, she is able to know that she is not alone and will never be abandoned by God, even in tough times, and that she can rest “safe in God’s economy,” meaning that in the long run, even pain will produce good. When she is able to touch these things in herself, she is able to practice a balance in give-and-take, letting others do their parts and have their ideas in the relationship as well as nurturing others.

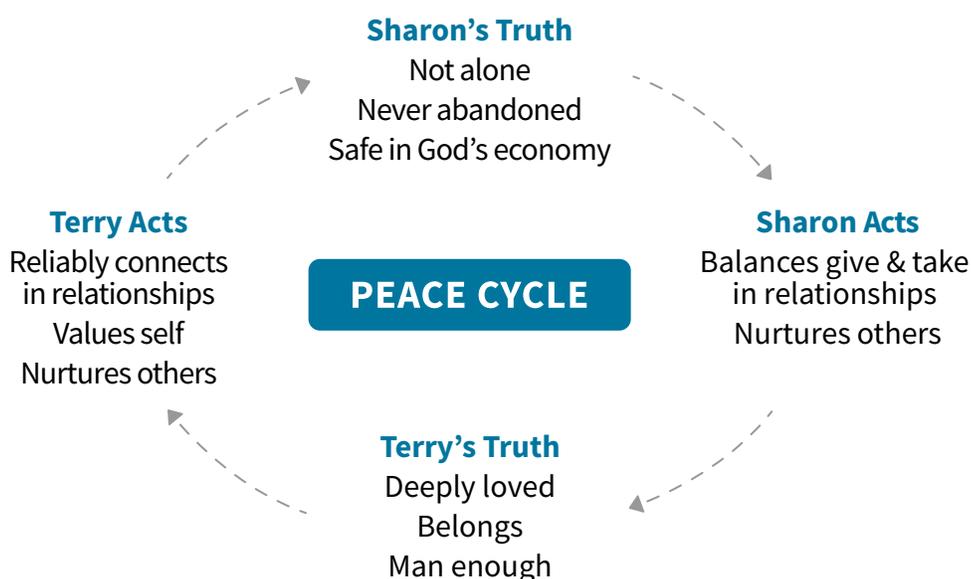


Figure 1.9. Terry and Sharon's Couple Peace Cycle

In marriage, does the Peace Cycle make all differences go away? Certainly not. All differences between partners cause them both to grow and to become stronger together. But the Peace Cycle does accomplish this: It regulates a couple to be able to connect without conflict and problem solve without escalation. Being in the Peace Cycle ensures the couple can have intimate companionship along the way of dealing with life's challenges and issues.

### **PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE**

It is no mistake that Paul laced his writings in the New Testament with exhortations such as “renewing the mind” and “practice what you have seen me do.” These are ideas that neuroscience caught up to about two thousand years later. It is not enough for a couple to have a flash of insight or understanding about their Pain Cycle and even see the possibilities of change in the Peace Cycle. Insight is a wonderful motivating tool—but only for a short time. If that insight is not moved into use with actions that are practiced over and over, it is a guarantee that no change will occur for the couple.

Triggered emotions in the brain are always there—even after something new is learned. It is the tenacious residue of the “old self,” and it sticks to the mind like duct tape. Neuroscience has demonstrated that well-ingrained thoughts and emotional patterns are hard to erase from the brain, while new thoughts—even very positive ones—are hard to make stick. It is much easier for us to hold on to what we know and have practiced than for us to put into practice something we have just learned. As you know, practice take attention, effort, and ability, and it is not easy work.

Even if you are not a therapist, as a pastor or minister or faith leader, you are well-equipped to help struggling couples enter into the type of practice that will bring about renewal. This kind of transformation not only helps a couple love one another more, it also helps them as

individuals love your community more. Jesus said that his great desire for his disciples was that they love one another. This includes husbands and wives!

The actions and attitudes listed in Figure 1.8 are remarkably like the fruits of the Holy Spirit that you are trying to build in your folks. There is no surer guide to cultivating a life of discipleship than in helping couples put these virtues into practice in their lives. You are in the position to remind people that it takes work to live a life of faith. “For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead” (James 2:26). You understand that it is not enough for a couple to simply *know* the truth alternative that will help them overcome their issues. It also requires action to deploy the faith with works. Simply stated, it takes practice, and you are well-positioned to help the couples around you practice emotional regulation, turning from the Pain Cycle to the Peace Cycle, which will strengthen the marriages in your community—and therefore strengthen your community.

### **The Four Steps**

In Restoration Therapy, we have a mindfulness practice called “the Four Steps.” These four actions are incredibly easy to follow and have proven to be an effective way to teach couples make the turn from old self to the new self.

**Step 1.** *Say what you feel.* When we are emotionally triggered, semi-automatic thoughts and action take over in our bodies. When we say what we feel out loud, we actually slow our brains so we can focus on what we are feeling and what we are getting ready to do. We realize that we are emotionally charged and that we are fueled to do unloving and untrustworthy things.

Notice that this step does not say to just *think about* what you are feeling. That’s because the process of thinking is much less likely to

sufficiently slow down the brain. When we say what we feel, it drives us back to recognize what's happening in our Pain Cycle and sets the stage for us to consider alternatives.

**Step 2.** *Say what you normally do.* After you have been able to name your current emotional state, say out loud what action you typically take when you feel this way. When we name our typical destructive tendencies—blame, shame, control or escape—we slow our brain down. And we also are predicting our behaviors. When we say out loud what we normally do when we feel emotionally triggered, we actually make it much less likely that we then will follow through with an unloving or untrustworthy action.

When you teach couples these first two steps and practice with them, you have effectively helped them “take off the old self,” calling attention to their old and sinful behaviors.

**Step 3.** *Say the truth.* When we say the truth out loud to ourselves, we are actually making a proclamation that uses a brain trick called *cognitive dissonance*. Cognitive dissonance means that when the brain has two alternatives that come in direct conflict with one another, it must make a choice between the two. Focusing on our emotionally regulating truths tends to drive out the emotions that have been triggered. The more we say the truth to ourselves, the more it soaks into our hearts.

**Step 4.** *Say what you will do differently.* Most often, when we identify the actions we *should* take in our Peace Cycle after we contact our emotionally regulating truth, we commit to a constructive action for the relationship. When we actually take those active steps, we reinforce the emotional truths that we have just described to ourselves. Spouses see the “new self” or best-self behaviors, which in turn makes it much more likely that the spouse will also emotionally regulate and move toward “new self” behaviors.

## THE FOUR STEPS IN ACTION

In this chapter, we have revealed a little about our individual and couple Pain Cycles, so let me demonstrate how Sharon and I can use the Four Steps to move into our Peace Cycles.

When Sharon and I first married, before we knew the Four Steps, financial strains often triggered our worst behaviors. We wanted Sharon to be able to stay home with our young children, but new assistant professors in academia do not earn much. Every month I would pay bills and feel like a failure because I was not earning enough to accomplish our goals and make ends meet. Inevitably, those feelings of failure would seep into my identity, and I would convince myself I was unloved and alone. I would withdraw and shame myself for not earning more and get angry when Sharon would spend money—even for things we agreed were necessary expenses.

My withdrawal or anger would trigger Sharon into feeling alone and unsafe, and she would try to deal with those feelings by attempting to control the situation and digging harder into our finances to make them work. Her actions in turn triggered me to feel more like a failure, which would prompt more anger from me.

We earn more now but still face financial strains and decisions about how to meet our goals and make ends meet. But now we know our Four Steps. When I sit down to pay bills today, I often encounter those same old feelings of feeling like a failure because I do not earn enough money. But instead of withdrawing or getting angry, I say **step one** out loud to myself: *I feel like a failure and will feel like I am unloved if this continues.*

Then I move to **step two**, saying aloud what I normally do when I feel like a failure and unloved: *I normally would withdraw and try to fix this problem by myself.* Then, if Sharon spent money, I would get angry.

But my feelings of being unloved and a failure are no more true today than they were in our early years of marriage, so I say **step three** and my truth out loud: *I am deeply loved, and I am man enough to be able to face this financial strain and work together with Sharon to make adjustments and find solutions.*

Then I move on to **step four** and say what I will do differently: *I will go to Sharon and explain to her that I did my Four Steps and feel sufficiently emotionally regulated to show her where we are short financially and discuss possible alternatives calmly.*

Hearing that we have some financial issues may trigger Sharon into feeling unsafe. If so, she would say her Four Steps as we are speaking. **Step one:** *I am feeling unsafe.* **Step two:** *When I feel unsafe, I normally try to control the situation and may become critical.* **Step three:** *I know that I am not alone and that you (Terry) are telling me this in order for us to solve the problem, and that makes the situation empowering whether we have money or not.* **Step four:** *So what I will do differently is engage the situation with you, and we will find a solution together.*

Notice that the Four Steps did not solve our problem—they simply emotionally regulated us both so we could work on the problem! Because we now routinely use our Four Steps, it has been a very long time since we have had chronic conflicts over finances.

## Moving Toward Renewal

Utilizing the Four Steps is a way to mindfully practice taking off the old self and putting on the new one. This pathway leads to all sorts of productive growth for couples and individuals—both relationally and spiritually. Find blank copies of the Pain and Peace Cycles that you can use in the Appendix to help people chart their own path toward change. How much practice does it take for these changes to take hold? Clinically, we have observed that when people practice their Four Steps about ten days out of twelve, they usually memorize both their Pain Cycle, Peace Cycle, and the Four Steps. If they practice their Four Steps about eighteen out of twenty-two days, they will also be able to see clearly in retrospect when they were emotionally dysregulated and should have deployed the Four Steps.

If people practice the Four Steps every day for about twenty-six days, they will encounter a magical day when they will be emotionally triggered but stop and take the Four Steps *before* they take the old self route. Two-year follow-up studies show that couples who continue to practice their Four Steps when they are emotionally triggered engage in fewer and less volatile conflicts, trust one another more, and experience higher rates of relational satisfaction. It is not easy work, but practice does tend to make the “new self” more and more into the image of Christ!

Hopefully, this chapter has provided you a clearer idea of how to do effective and meaningful work with your couples. We hope it has also provided you with a good idea of the restoration model and how you can use it in to help build better marriage relationships in your community.

But the restoration model is not limited to work with married couples. The RelateStrong program is designed to provide insight about a variety of issues that pastors, ministers, teachers, and leaders

encounter today in your churches or organizations. The following chapters will help you understand how to tailor the restoration model to help build strong relationships throughout your community.

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### **TERRY HARGRAVE**

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## TWO

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# RelateStrong: Singleness

*By Kelly Haer*

My mother and father met in college and got married when they were 21 and 23. My older sister married a mere three weeks after turning 21. I expected that I, too, would follow in their footsteps and find my spouse in college. Like many college students, I hoped to be engaged by the spring of my senior year in college; although I hadn't heard the term at the time, I wanted my "ring by spring."

Given that I'm writing this chapter about caring for single adults in the church, you've probably already guessed that I did not get that spring ring. In fact, I got married at age 33. Having graduated from college at 22, I experienced more than a decade of singleness—years that were challenging and satisfying, years filled with ambiguity, uncertainty, heartache, fear, and joy.

As it turns out, my story of prolonged singleness is becoming more the norm than the exception. Since 1970, the population of single adults in the United States has increased by more than 350 percent! Nearly 50 percent of all adults in the U. S. are single; 60 percent of them have never been married, 25 percent are divorced, and 15 percent are widowed. Over half of all 30-year-olds and a third of 35-year-olds have never been married, while 35 percent of 40-year-olds and 30 percent

of 45-year-olds have either never married or are single again. While these numbers might make you ask whether people even want to get married, research indicates that adults today place greater value on marriage than they have in the past five decades. Why this trend? As our communities become fragmented, people look to a spouse to help meet their emotional, physical, and social needs.

### **WHY SO MANY SINGLES?**

Given that many single adults desire marriage, what accounts for so much prolonged singleness in our society? Psychologists and sociologists attribute the increase to many factors.

#### **Divorce culture**

The fear of divorce can cause some to look for perfection in a potential partner or otherwise be very reluctant to make a commitment.

#### **A lower chance of pregnancy**

The introduction of the birth control pill separated sex from children and thereby separated sex from marriage. More people became willing to have sex outside of wedlock with the “risk” of having a child significantly reduced. Why get married if you can have the sexual benefit without costly commitment?

#### **More time spent on education and career development**

When these individuals emerge with their degrees and begin to look for a partner, they often discover that finding one is more challenging than anticipated. It can be difficult to meet new eligible partners in our monotonously structured adult lives.

#### **Cohabitation**

Some singles decide to live with their boyfriend or girlfriend in an often well-intended, yet

misguided, attempt to prevent divorce. Couples who cohabit before marriage have a higher divorce rate than couples who don't live together prior to marriage. Furthermore, cohabitation can lead some couples to forgo marriage altogether.

#### **Educational gender gap**

Women have earned more college degrees than men since the early '80s—a trend that continues to increase. Most adults look for spouses who have similar levels of educational attainment, but the pool of equally educated men is becoming increasingly smaller for women.

#### **Capstone vs. cornerstone**

Decades ago, young adults sought marriage at the launching point into adulthood, believing that they would journey through the beginnings of a career partnered with their spouse. Although most adults still desire marriage, many now look to marriage as the capstone of their adulthood, rather than its cornerstone. They don't seriously begin to look for a spouse until they have their proverbial ducks in a row—graduate degrees earned, travel experiences logged, and career foundations established. These singles often look to the church to find a partner and naturally can feel disappointed by the church when a spouse isn't found there.

Most churches have been slow to recognize the skyrocketing number of singles in U. S. society and even slower to help single adults find belonging in their faith communities. As only 4 percent of Protestant pastors have never been married, it's not surprising to find that many ministry leaders struggle to relate on a personal level with single adults whose lives are very different from their own.

This chapter and other RelateStrong | Leadership Series resources aim to help pastors, ministers, and leaders of churches and other faith-based organizations recognize the unique emotional challenges of singles so that you can cultivate a community that welcomes them, supports them, and grows with them. Restoration Therapy concepts and practices can be employed to help singles recognize that their Pain Cycles may be working against them finding a partner and/or peace—regardless of marital status.

The church has long celebrated—some might say idolized—the family. But this emphasis on marriage and family has caused many singles to feel alienated while at church. Singles can feel uncomfortably visible when they walk into a service alone and look for a seat among rows of families. Paradoxically, the absence of a spouse can seemingly render singles invisible when the church is looking to fill leadership roles.

Singles often feel that many older, married adults in the church are prone to minimize their fears and pains—telling them it's just a matter of time until the longed-for spouse is found. Some singles sense that the church even perceives their status as a threat—fearing that a single person will inappropriately act on unmet sexual desires, which could embarrass the church.

Church leaders cannot just hope that all the singles in their community will get married soon so that they will fit more comfortably into the community. Statisticians anticipate that by 2030 25 percent of

people ages 45 to 54 will have never married. As current and projected trends indicate, it's essential that the church learn to understand the growing single population and begin caring well for this group of adults.

## PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Although I got unsingle eventually, my experiences during my decade-plus of longing to get married provided personal insight into the issues of singles in the Christian community. In some ways, my story of singleness is typical; in other ways, it is extreme. I didn't go on my first date until after college. I was never invited to attend homecoming, prom, or any other function in high school or college, and didn't have my first boyfriend until I was 27. After age 27, my desert-like dating life transformed into a rainforest. Yet even the five years of lots and lots of dating prior to meeting the man who is now my husband were filled with much emotional pain and difficulty.

During the desert and rainforest years alike, I faithfully attended church, which was a place of both pain and comfort. It was painful because people typically attend church with their families, and I didn't have one—or at least not one of my own creation. I often felt the pain of my missing husband most acutely at church because I knew that if I were married, my husband and I would attend church together. This knowledge heightened my sense of loss.

Yet, church was also a place of comfort where many people supported me when I was in pain and offered help and discernment as I dated and longed for a husband. My church friends invited me to be a part of their families, and these acts of care provided immense comfort, although they didn't erase the pain.

While getting a PhD in family therapy, my studies and personal story converged in my research on single women. I studied the emotional experience of single women from the framework of *ambiguous loss*,

which I'll explain in more detail in this chapter. Less than two months after I had completed my PhD program, a mutual college friend introduced me to the man who would soon become my husband.

Adam and I had attended the same 2,500-student college during the same four years but never met. In fact we had lived in the same freshman dorm and even had the same room number on different halls—for a year, he slept on the top bunk in the basement, and I slept on the bottom bunk on the second floor, about 25 feet apart. Fourteen years later, Adam and I met through our friend, Anna, who had also lived in that same freshman dorm. At the time, Anna lived in South Carolina, I lived in St. Louis, and Adam lived in Los Angeles. Clearly, God orchestrated this arrangement—and the timing.

## **DIVERSE STORIES**

Of course, few people have a story that looks just like mine. The diversity of the single adult population is one factor that makes it so challenging for churches to care for them well. Single adults experience singleness in many ways, and no two people feel exactly the same about being single. The experience is different for men and women as our society contends with gender rules, gender roles, and gender rituals. Women may feel they have less power while waiting for men to take on the traditional role of initiator or pursuer. Men who feel the need to take on this traditional role may feel more exposed to rejection and risk.

Age matters as well. The pain of undesired singleness is different for someone who is twenty-two to twenty-seven than it is for someone who is twenty-eight to thirty-four. It changes again after age thirty-five. The second stage—past age twenty-seven—is dubbed the “limbo years”; it is past the average age for first marriage, yet still possible to have a “normal” story. Marriage after age thirty-five is a special story—perhaps a delightfully special story—but not “traditional.”

Children—or a lack of them—can complicate the pain. A single woman who desires children can feel immense pressure and pain as she approaches the end of her fertility with no mate in sight. A single parent suffers different logistical and emotional challenges.

But the factor that most determines the experience of singleness is whether a person wants to be partnered. Some singles have a clear calling from God to committed celibacy. They are single and content, having received the gift of singleness that Paul talks about in 1 Corinthians. Other singles long for marriage and are deeply discontent. Most fall somewhere in between.

## **WELCOMING SINGLES**

In order to effectively minister to singles, pastors and church leaders need to acknowledge the diversity of this population and the range of their unique emotional challenges. Don't assume that all single adults desire marriage and don't assume that all single adults who want to get married will eventually find a mate. Statistics demonstrate that increasing numbers of adults will remain single despite the desire to marry. Instead of offering false promises or vague reassurances, help singles navigate their challenging dynamics by teaching them how to cultivate hope anchored in God's attributes and promises in the midst of uncertainty.

Your congregation or organization can take a number of steps to make your community more inviting for singles. The biggest may be simply acknowledging that singles exist! Add sermon illustrations and applications that are relevant to singles and offer seminars and Bible class topics that appeal to singles. Celebrate celibacy as a legitimate calling and include singles in the call to sexual purity—but not simply for their future marriage, which is not guaranteed. Encourage singles to host events that include both singles and married couples and involve them in leadership. But don't assume that singles will always have time

to take on any role or last-minute project simply because they don't have a spouse or kids.

Also consider steps you can take to build better personal relationships with single adults in your community. As a pastor or ministry leader, it's important for you to make space in your life for single friends. Don't be afraid to ask if your single friends would like you to introduce them to potential mates. Offer (appropriately) friendly hugs; inquire about friends and family members; and be willing to listen, empathize, and pray.

## THE GRIEF OF AMBIGUOUS LOSS

Learning about the complicated emotional realities of singles will allow you to more effectively minister to them. When I was an undergrad, I met a girl named Jordan who wrote playful songs about the trials and joys of college life. The song I remember most was a lament about singleness called, "God's Gift You Can't Give Back." I appreciated how Jordan gave voice to my experience of being single, which I described as a disgruntled dissatisfaction.

Too many Christians—mostly married Christians—contend that singleness is a gift to be celebrated. Although there are undeniably benefits to being single, for many single adults who desire marriage, singleness is more of a *grief* than a *gift*. In fact, many people who are living with undesired singleness suffer from *ambiguous loss*—the complicated absence of a missing person.

Grief is an emotional response to loss, which is defined by absence, deprivation, or scarcity. Early in my PhD studies, I heard two older students discussing something called ambiguous loss. My eyes widened as I recognized the experiences they were describing. Suddenly I had a name and theoretical descriptions for my experience of undesired singleness over the past decade!

Ambiguous losses lack clarity and defy closure because it is difficult to pinpoint or name exactly what has been lost. This lack of clarity means ambiguous losses are ongoing with no clear end.

Two types of situations commonly trigger feelings of ambiguous loss. One occurs when a person is physically present but psychologically absent, such as in the case of Alzheimer's disease or alcoholism. Although people with Alzheimer's or alcoholism may be physically present, they are not fully present emotionally, causing family and friends to experience ambiguous and confusing loss. If you were to look at a photograph of my grandparents, you would not recognize my grandfather's psychological absence that my grandmother faces daily. Similarly, I recall trick-or-treating one Halloween with a friend whose mother was dramatically under the influence of alcohol. Although her mother shows up in pictures of that evening's festivities, my friend felt the absence of her mother in a way that is challenging for her to describe. Ambiguous losses are not readily apparent—thereby complicating the grief.

The other type of ambiguous loss occurs when a person is physically absent but psychologically present, such as when a child is lost or a soldier is declared missing in action. While physically absent, the missing person remains psychologically present in the minds of family and friends. It can be very difficult to live with the uncertainty of not knowing whether the psychologically present and physically absent person will return tomorrow—or never. As time continues and hope begins to dissipate, the hope of reuniting with the loved one begins to fade. But without the closure of death, the missing person continues to live in the minds of the family and friends.

Single adults can actually experience this second type of ambiguous loss. There is a missing person—the desired spouse—who is present in the single person's mind yet physically absent from daily life. Single

adults do not know whether their desired spouse is coming or not; they merely know that the desired spouse is not there now.

### **A Loss of an Unknown**

The losses surrounding this absent partner are hard to define. How can you know what life would be like if he were here? You can assume there would be huge differences: from waking up to a different morning routine, to perhaps resting your head in a different city and all the work and relationships and daily activities you have in between. But you can never know for sure what life would look like if you were partnered with your beloved. So how can you define precisely what is lost in her absence?

Ambiguous loss can also complicate basic life decisions. Should I purchase a home on my own? *Do I really need to buy a home if I'm not going to have a spouse or children? Do I want to live in rentals all my life?* Should I go to graduate school? *Can I afford the tuition on my own? But what if I don't get married—will I need that advanced degree to take care of myself in later years?* Should I take my dream vacation—alone? *Or should I wait and hope I'll soon be able to visit Spain with the love of my life?*

Additionally, these unclear losses lack closure: No one can know for certain if a partner will be found. There is no age when one gains certainty about future marital or family status because God does not tell us whether or not we will get married or have children. Someone once told me about a family member who got married for the first time at age eighty-five. This single person lived with the uncertainty of marriage for decades!

### **Grief Disrupted**

People experiencing ambiguous losses have higher levels of anxiety, depression, and other forms of emotional dysfunction than do people

experiencing more concrete losses, such as the death of a family member or the loss of a job. Coping with ambiguous loss is more challenging because the grieving process is disrupted by the lack of clarity and finality. Typically, people cycle through the five stages of grief—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance—often moving back and forth through the stages before eventually landing at acceptance.

The ongoing and unclear nature of ambiguous loss, however, often stunts the grieving process, and the person may experience continuous rapid-cycling through the stages of grief, never arriving at a place of acceptance. In the course of a week, a single adult may feel that they have accepted life with the absence of a desired partner, then experience a day or two of intense anger at the prospect of still being single, then shift into a mental negotiation with God, offering to lead Sunday School or perform some other act of service if he will bring the desired spouse. An open-ended loss can be like a continually reinjured wound, and the daily lack of a desired partner keeps the wound fresh for singles, who may feel frozen or stuck in the ongoing grief.

### **HEALING THE HEART OF AMBIGUOUS LOSS FOR SINGLES**

So, what can be done to help a single who may be grieving the present, daily loss of a desired partner who may or may not eventually be found? An important step for church leaders is to simply recognize the grief and understand the dynamics of ambiguous loss. Most singles have never heard the term “ambiguous loss,” and many of them probably don’t understand the complicating factors that are causing their emotional turmoil. Yet the pain of singleness is real and valid.

Undesired singleness is an ongoing loss that lacks clarity. It is very difficult to name precisely what is lost in the absence of a desired partner, and this lack of clarity of the loss makes grieving difficult.

Help singles to identify what they feel they have lost or are missing, acknowledge their pain, and give them permission to grieve.

Singles may not feel they have any right to mourn the absence of someone who has never been physically present. But you could argue that the perpetual absence of a spouse is worse than losing a spouse to death. As Tennyson said, it is, “better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.” As a pastor, counselor, or trusted friend, explicitly grant singles permission to experience and grieve that loss.

### **The Message of the Church**

It is especially important for religious leaders to understand how the church’s perception of singleness can amplify this complicated, disenfranchised grief. As I mentioned earlier, I frequently heard the church call singleness a gift to be celebrated. But how could I celebrate when I felt the losses so keenly? When society and the church describe singleness so positively, singles who desire marriage find little companionship or support in their grief. Many are left to grieve alone and may even feel guilty or ashamed for experiencing singleness as a loss when the church continues to call it a gift to be enjoyed.

Consider the message singles are getting in your church or organization. Do you unintentionally—or intentionally—tell singles that they should be enjoying their “freedom” and the “gift” of singleness? Do you make light of their fears that they may never find a spouse by promising them the right one will come along “soon”? Or do you provide singles a safe harbor where they are allowed to lament that life has not turned out like they planned?

### **Pre-grieving**

On the other hand, you should also try to keep singles from getting too far ahead of the present reality and “pre-grieving” a permanent loss that hasn’t actually occurred yet. The single person can inadvertently

begin to grieve as if the desired partner will *never* be found. Try to help them stay present only to the current, actual loss. It is easy to slip into anticipatory grief because people unconsciously assume it will soften the blow of the feared future loss.

Anticipatory grief can also be a way to manage the pain of hoping. If I can grieve for the future, I don't have to be aware of my continued unmet desires. Remaining hopeful about eventually finding a partner requires singles to acknowledge, attend to, and live out those desires. Encourage singles to continue to interact with possible partners in a way that invites relationship. But be aware that those actions require vulnerability, which opens them up to more ongoing disappointment and hurt.

### **BOUNDARY AMBIGUITY**

When you reach out to singles, you should keep in mind that the extent to which singles perceive, are preoccupied with, or impacted by ambiguous loss may vary. In fact, the *perception* of an ambiguous loss has a name: *boundary ambiguity*. A person who is very aware of and impacted by the ambiguous loss has a high level of boundary ambiguity. People with high levels of boundary ambiguity may find that the lack of clarity about the future with a desired partner can impact their thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Recall that Alzheimer's disease is a type of ambiguous loss, and people whose partners have Alzheimer's disease have historically been reported to have the highest levels of boundary ambiguity. However, when I conducted a research study to measure boundary ambiguity among singles, the more than 7,000 men and women in the study experienced *even higher levels* of boundary ambiguity than people whose spouse has Alzheimer's disease.

Practically, a single adult who is experiencing a high level of boundary ambiguity would agree with many of these statements, which are taken from the Boundary Ambiguity Scale for Singles.<sup>1</sup>

- *I continue to keep alive my deepest hope that I will find a spouse.*
- *I feel I am unable to plan my future without knowing if I will find a spouse.*
- *I feel like it will be difficult, if not impossible, to carve out a good life for myself without a spouse.*
- *When I meet a single person, I immediately wonder if she or he would be someone I would want to marry.*
- *My friends and I talk about my future spouse seemingly quite often.*

Many (but not all) single adults who desire marriage will agree with the majority of these statements. Living amid this uncertainty, not knowing if the desired spouse will be found, is very difficult. It is hard to live in the present when a significant part of the future remains unknown.

In P. D. Eastman's popular children's story, "Are You My Mother?" a baby bird falls out of the nest and begins looking for its mother, asking each animal it meets, "Are you my mother?" Single adults who desire marriage may relate to the baby bird, and may internally ask, "Are you my partner?" every time they meet someone new. This sentiment is captured in the statement above, "*When I meet a single person, I immediately wonder if she or he would be someone I would want to marry.*"

Many singles at church find this dynamic particularly irksome, often feeling that other singles approach them as potential suitors instead of as possible friends. This culture of perceiving other singles as possible

mates can be uncomfortable and pressure-filled, even stymying healthy relationships that might otherwise become romantic.

## **THE STRUGGLE WITH AMBIGUITY AND UNCERTAINTY**

Why is this all so difficult? Plainly said, humans do not do well with ambiguity. People are wired to understand, predict, and exert control over their environments because they want and need to have a sense of safety and well-being. Ambiguity frustrates these natural human drives.

Humans find ambiguity problematic across many dimensions of life. Clowns are ambiguous, being somewhat human but not entirely, which is why many people find them creepy. In education, ambiguous class assignments are connected to poor performance and learning outcomes. City planners avoid ambiguity when designing streets, sidewalks, and public spaces—it can be inefficient and even dangerous if people can't tell where and when they should walk or drive. Architects will even install obstacles in otherwise open places to give people a sense of defined limitations, removing ambiguity about how to navigate the space.

When it comes to undesired singleness, it may be clear that there are losses, but they are ambiguous. A single person might wonder, “How would my birthday or the holidays or dinner time be different if my desired partner were present?” The answers to these questions aren't clear, even if it's certain there would be significant differences.

This ambiguity, uncertainty, and unpredictability of singleness can cause singles to feel unsafe, which can trigger the Pain Cycle. Be ready to walk with singles through this difficult time and demonstrate that they can experience transformation even in the midst of painful uncertainty and ambiguity.

## PAIN AND PEACE CYCLES

According to Restoration Therapy concepts, your early experiences influence your sense of identity and safety. When you don't feel loved or safe, you may feel powerless, out of control, controlled, insecure, vulnerable, or disconnected. To be clear, no one is raised in an environment that provides perfect love or trustworthiness; hence, everyone struggles to some degree with a sense of being unworthy and unsafe. And to some extent, everyone responds with one or more of four primary coping mechanisms: blame, shame, control, or escape behaviors. All of these negative ways of coping impact relationships, creating a cycle where others respond to your coping mechanisms in painful ways that in turn provoke more coping—and around and around it goes. We call this the Pain Cycle.

Singleness is riddled with ambiguity and uncertainty that can trigger feelings of being unloved and unsafe. Not only is it hard to define what is lost in the daily absence of a desired partner, but singles also struggle with other challenging questions whose answers are laden with ambiguity.

- **How do others (particularly at church) perceive me?**  
This question is closely connected to identity.
- **Why am I single?**  
This question is also closely connected to identity.
- **How long will I be single?**  
This is a question closely connected to safety.
- **What can I do to get unsingle?**  
This is also closely connected to safety.

Questions, such as “How long will I be single” can trigger our fears of being unloved or unsafe and catapult us into a vicious-circle Pain Cycle, such as the one experienced by one of my clients.

### **Cindy's Pain Cycle**

Cindy, age thirty-one, came to therapy at the encouragement of her friends. She was showing symptoms of anxiety and depression. As a child, she had struggled with severe allergies, including two intense episodes that threatened her life. For several years, she had to forgo playing outside with friends to help keep her allergies at bay. As a child, it seemed there was nothing she could do to resolve this issue, and it made her feel out of control as her body overreacted to benign substances against her will. Thankfully, by the time Cindy completed high school, her allergy specialists had been able to discover an underlying cause and prescribe medication that greatly reduced her symptoms.

But years later, Cindy was struggling with both undesired singleness and an unsatisfying work life. As she watched many of her closest friends date and marry, the question “how long will I be single?” grew louder and louder. At work, Cindy felt unappreciated and was twice passed over for promotion. Once again, she felt out of control and powerless.

Amid romantic and work-life disappointment, Cindy began to experience anxiety and depression, and she was exhibiting a defeatist mindset. She refused to try online dating, believing that nothing she could do would make her appealing to men. When Cindy did meet single men in her daily life, her depressed demeanor made her seem low energy and uninterested while her anxiety made her seem aloof and preoccupied. She would only offer short answers to questions, fidgeting uncomfortably all the while.

In therapy, Cindy recognized that desiring marriage without knowing if she would ever find a spouse was so difficult that she couldn't bear being hopeful. But neither could she eradicate her hope entirely. As you can imagine, Cindy's anxious and depressed reactions did not lead

to positive interactions with men, which in turn made her Pain Cycle worse. Not knowing if she would ever marry triggered feelings of being out of control that harkened back to the trauma of her childhood, and these painful feelings prompted responses that may have contributed to Cindy's prolonged singleness.

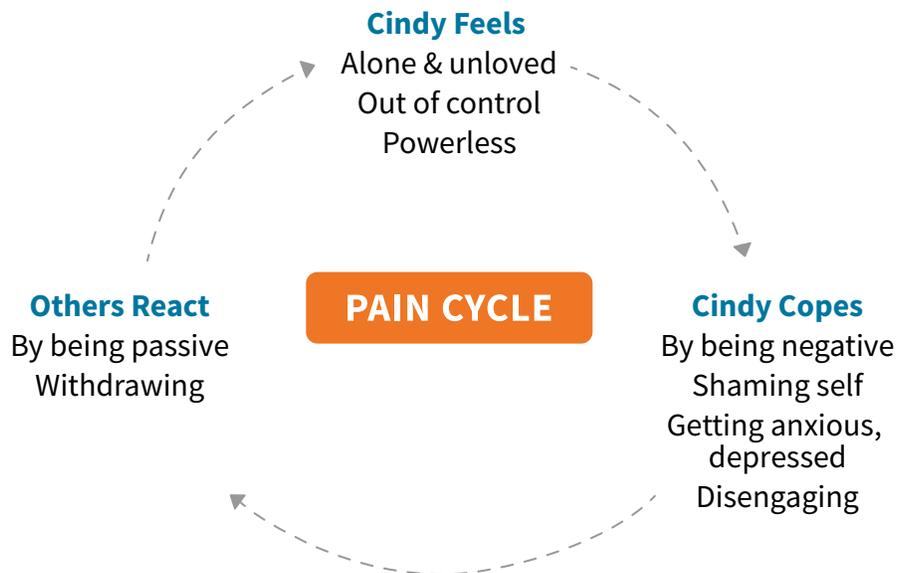


Figure 2.1. Cindy's Pain Cycle

### Facing the Truth

How did Cindy escape her Pain Cycle? Cindy needed to ground herself in truth that would counter her feelings of powerlessness and being out of control, thereby disrupting the anxiety and depression. Yet the truth in this case was tricky. "How long will I remain single?" was not within Cindy's, nor anyone's, power to answer. There was a legitimate reason that she felt out of control and powerless. Yet this truth was not the WHOLE truth. God knows whether or not Cindy will get married, and he has the power to help her find a spouse though it is not certain that he will. Hence, Cindy found comfort in the truth that God does know the answer to that difficult question, that he is in control, and that he is good.

Reflecting on God’s omniscience, power, and goodness is powerful in the face of uncertainty. Cindy stayed connected to the truth that caused her pain—she didn’t know when or if she would ever marry—but she added to it these truths about God’s character and how much he loved her. In view of God’s power and goodness, Cindy began to respond with greater openness and interest to single men and eventually signed-up for an online dating service. Although Cindy has not found a husband, she is dating and experiences less anxiety and depression.

This experience also gave Cindy strength to better grapple with other uncertainties in her life. She was better able to accept the uncertainty of her relational future by transforming the uncertainty into a certainty. By recognizing that the uncertainty of a future spouse is certain—no one will ever know for sure whether God will provide a spouse—Cindy was able to accept that reality and become less preoccupied with not knowing. As odd as it may sound, focusing on the certainty of the uncertainty can be helpful because we are better at processing what is clear. When Cindy was able to reckon with the fact that she will never be given an answer to that difficult question, it lost its power over her. In turn, she found that others reacted to her by staying more connected and engaging with her, which greatly confirmed that she was lovable, not alone, and empowered to do some things as a single.

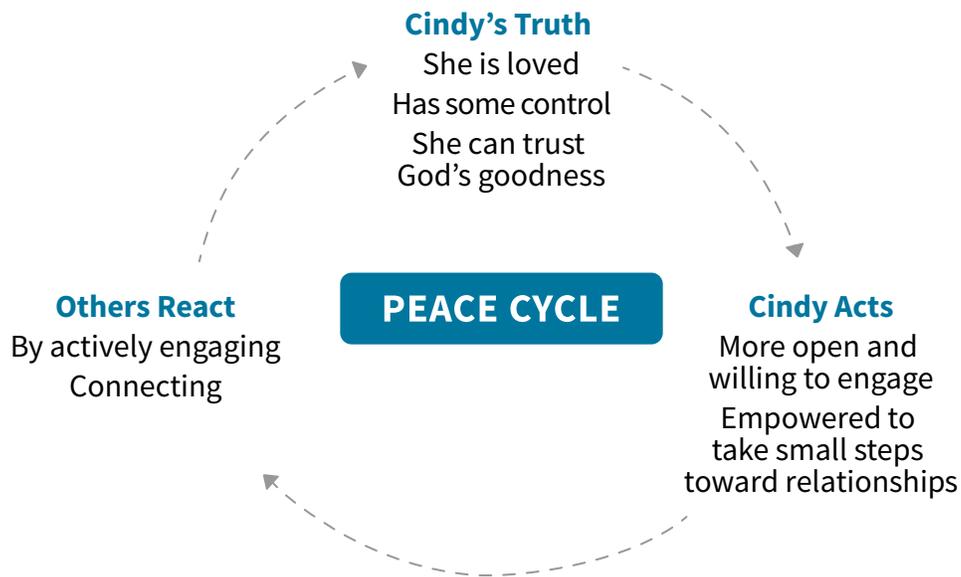


Figure 2.2. Cindy's Peace Cycle

## STRENGTHENING SINGLES

To sum up this chapter, consider again how you and your church or organization are interacting with singles. Consider the messages you are sending by what you say and what you don't say about singleness, marriage, and families.

It's tempting to offer easy solutions or half-hearted reassurances when you minister to people who do not know if singleness is going to be a temporary or permanent part of their story. Platitudes, such as "I know God has someone for you" or "It's just a matter of time until God brings Mr. Right into your life," can be unhelpful and even downright hurtful. For one thing, these statements are untrue—you don't know whether God has someone and there is no guarantee that it is "just a matter of time." Singles may hear these attempted encouragements as empty promises and start to believe you either do not understand their uncertainty or are not willing to acknowledge the reality and depth of their pain.

Beyond that, these platitudes can keep the single person from grappling with the difficult reality that God has allowed. They can steal or short circuit suffering that God has allowed for a specific, good purpose. Personally, wrestling with God over the uncertainty of my undesired singleness strengthened and increased my faith. Relating with God throughout this agonizing unknown helped me get to know him and depend on him.

As a pastor or church leader, you are in a unique position to help singles understand that their struggles can actually bring them closer to God. Validate the pain and difficulty of uncertainty instead of minimizing it or offering hollow promises and platitudes. Singles will appreciate your honesty, sincerity, and support.

While impatiently waiting to find out if she would be offered her dream job, a friend told me that her time of uncertainty paled in comparison to my not knowing whether God was going to bring me a spouse. She recognized that she would learn about the job in a discrete amount of time and yet I had no anticipated timetable to know if I might end up with a spouse. I so much appreciated her words and her support.

Another helpful response I've heard is, "I don't know when or if God has a spouse for you, but I'm committed to praying for God to grant you the desires of your heart."

And one of my favorites: "I'll hold hope for you."

Hoping, praying, listening, comforting, encouraging, understanding. These are the keys to welcoming singles into your church or organization and to helping them realize God's potential in their lives. As you walk with singles, remember the ambiguous losses they walk with every day. Help them recognize their Pain Cycle triggers and teach them to hold close God's truths of love, care, and trustworthiness.

**KELLY HAER**

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1. K. A. Maxwell, *An Exploration of Boundary Ambiguity among Single Never-Married Women* (PhD diss., Saint Louis University, 2015).

# THREE

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## RelateStrong: Parenting

*By Connie Horton*

Having worked in university counseling centers for much of the past two decades, I've observed a trend: More and more students are more and more anxious! Oh, they will express it different ways. Some students will name it directly: "I have an anxiety disorder" or "I deal with a lot of anxiety!" Others will say, "I'm so stressed out all the time! I can't stand it anymore!" Some will even admit that they abuse alcohol, use drugs, or engage in other self-destructive or high-risk behavior just to get some temporary relief from their almost-constant feelings of anxiety.

Chronic levels of high anxiety wreak havoc in the lives of teens and young adults. When young people feel super anxious, they may lose their appetites and their ability to fall asleep. And, as you might imagine, someone who is sleep-deprived and not eating well is likely to become even more anxious. Anxiety also greatly impairs concentration—it becomes difficult to read, to focus. Memory is impaired; it becomes harder to function in school or at a job. Relationships are impaired; it becomes harder to tolerate the slightest irritation from a roommate or to find time to relax with a friend.

At its core, anxiety is basically hyperarousal. When I counsel with anxiety-ridden college students, I tell them, “Your brain is acting like there is lion lurking in your room. If there were a lion in your room, would you feel like eating? Be able to sleep or concentrate? Have a conversation? Of course not!”

Anxiety is the top mental health concern among college and university students nationally, and surveys of college students and data from university and college counseling centers confirm that rates of anxiety have been rapidly increasing. This trend should be concerning to pastors, ministers, church leaders, and anyone who works with families or young adults. And what should be even more concerning is that college students who identify as Christians do not show significantly lower levels of anxiety than college students who have no faith background.

Although many factors contribute to the rising tide of anxiety, here’s an important one for ministers and church leaders to recognize: Teens and young adults are anxious in part because they have been raised by anxious parents! Anxious parenting leads to anxious children, teens, and emerging adults. And, contrary to what some might wish to believe, this phenomenon is alive and well in Christian communities.

Scripture reminds us to “be anxious for nothing” (Phil. 4:6), but if we are honest, we will admit that is easier said than done, even for faithful Christians. Many find that their role as a parent elicits the most anxiety. They worry about their children’s safety, their well-being, their futures.

If you are having trouble empathizing with the worries of the parents in your community, just watch a few minutes of a morning news show. Alarming stories of terrorism, natural disaster, and political and economic turmoil can unsettle anyone. And you are also likely to see news segments that are especially anxiety-producing for parents,

including reports on antibiotic-resistant diseases, fatal allergic reactions, freak accidents, school shootings. Turn to social media and you're likely to find posts about cyber-bullying, peer pressure, substance abuse, dating violence, and sexual assault. Parents can't help but be alarmed by stories of teen depression and suicide, and headlines about the competitiveness and costs of college create yet another kind of anxiety.

A parent's mind can easily be flooded with "what ifs?" "What if my child gets a terrible, incurable disease?" "What if my child is bullied because of the color of her skin?" "What if my teen gets in with the wrong group of friends, loses her faith and her way? What if my child doesn't get into college?" What if? What if? What if?

And you can't put all the blame for parental anxiety on the news. Just hang around a group of parents at a church event, and you will likely hear some unintentional fear mongering. "What?! Johnny isn't walking yet?" "I have Shelby in swimming lessons, children's orchestra, and math tutoring. What is Alyssa doing this summer?" "Did you hear what happened on the playground after church last week?" "Did you read about the big drug bust at the high school?" "I just found out that another one of Katie's friends is pregnant!" "How's David's ACT tutoring going?"

Anxiety is contagious! Parents—even Christian parents—can get it from each other!

## **THE PROBLEM WITH ANXIOUS PARENTING**

You might hope that parents who are overly worried about the dangers that lurk out there would somehow become super parents. But ministers and church leaders need to understand that too much anxiety actually interferes with healthy parenting—and thus with healthy child development.

Parents who are too anxious, too focused on the dangers, too attentive to the risks, too worried about the “what-ifs” may not provide what children need most from their parents: a calm, solid, available presence. In Chapter 1, Terry Hargrave detailed the lifelong implications that can arise when children don’t feel safe or don’t trust their caregivers to keep them safe. Children can pick up on their parents’ anxiety, and it’s hard for them to feel safe if they know their parents are worried or afraid.

Even though they have the best of intentions, anxious parents are far too likely to overpressure and overprotect their children. Because they are too worried about the future, parents can turn to a “resume-building attitude” in structuring their young children’s lives. Because they are too worried about their children getting hurt, parents can try to shield them from any disappointment, rejection, or hardship. Unfortunately, these well-intentioned parenting strategies do not produce young adults who are strong in their faith and prepared to navigate the challenges of life. Instead, they lead to anxious kids, insecure teens, and stressed-out young adults who have no idea how to tap into their faith to face life’s storms.

This chapter aims to provide ideas to help pastors and ministry leaders address this epidemic of anxiety that is infecting our families and hampering the healthy development of our young adults. Start with the ideas discussed here to help develop sermons, workshops, and small-group curriculum on parenting, the pitfalls of anxiety, and the need for spiritual fortitude. Use *RelateStrong* and *Restoration Therapy* concepts and resources to help parents act from their Peace Cycles instead of from their cycles of pain and worry.

Of course, there are many dangers in the world, and parents certainly need to teach their children how to minimize their risks and live wisely in a world where things are not totally safe. But parents must accept

the fact that they don't have the power to make things completely safe for their children while also remembering there are still truths to live by. Frequently remind parents of God's truths: that he loves their children perfectly and will provide for their ultimate protection—and he will also help them to be the godly parents their children need.

### **BEGIN WITH THE END IN MIND**

As a pastor or church leader, you may well have been asked a version of this question that I hear frequently: “How should I parent?” That's a very good question, of course. I typically try to answer with some version of, “That depends on your goals.”

In parenting classes or workshops, I often ask, “What do you want for your children and teens as they grow up? What do you want for them as college students, as young adults? What are your hopes? What would you consider good outcomes?”

Most parents tell me they want their children to be happy, successful, responsible, kind. Christian parents want their kids to develop their own strong faith, stay committed to a church family, be a servant.

Then, I ask some follow-up questions: “What about their levels of independence? Do you want them to become autonomously functioning adults? Or are you hoping they will be dependent on you throughout their lives? What do you want your kids to expect out of life? Should they expect their lives to be easy, to anticipate that they will always get what they want?”

No one ever acknowledges that their goal is to raise a child who can never be independent, but many parent their young kids and teenagers as if their ultimate goal is to be making decisions and fully supporting their 35-year-olds. Similarly, no parents say they want to raise a child who quits an activity as soon as it becomes hard. Yet they too often step in and take over as soon as they see their child

struggling, not realizing they are actually teaching their child to quit when things become difficult. Parents may not *tell* their kids that life will always be easy, but their actions often lead their kids to develop those very expectations.

In parenting, as in life, it is so important to begin with the end in mind! As a church leader or pastor, you may well be familiar with Stephen Covey's bestseller, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. It's one of those books that suggest some straightforward strategies that sound so simple but can have some pretty profound impacts.

One of Covey's recommended habits is, "Begin with the end in mind." The idea is to have a sense of where you want to go, to have a sense of your mission. Once you know the "destination," you can make choices that will get you there. This notion is really important in parenting! Parents who are too anxious, too overprotective, or too demanding may "wake up one day" and realize their young adult child is totally incapable of functioning independently. Or that their teenager expects life to be easy and has no idea how to cope when something goes wrong!

If you want to see faithful, secure young adults emerging from your church or organization, it's important to begin with the end in mind! Sleep-deprived young parents may not be able to envision their cranky toddlers or stubborn preschoolers as independent adults, but it's never too early to help them think about their ultimate goals for their children. Help them picture their children becoming young adults who can function independently, are able to navigate hardship, and know clearly that God is always with them. Pastors have a special responsibility to ensure that parents in your community don't "accidentally" raise a college student who believes that faith does not have much to do with real life!

## **Advancing Toward the Goal**

What are some steps that parents and families can take to raise independent, faithful young adults?

**Provide age-appropriate opportunities.** Let children choose their own clothes, even at fairly young ages, even if it's not a perfectly coordinated outfit. As they get older, let them experience the consequences of not studying instead of nagging them until you are certain they know all of their spelling words. When appropriate, allow them to work out conflict with a sibling or friend.

**Set realistic expectations for life.** Say “no” or “not yet” at times when children want a treat, a toy, or the latest piece of technology. Do not protect kids from every disappointment or hurt. Do not consistently challenge coaches or youth ministers or teachers about decisions that are unpopular with your kids. Learning to live with outcomes that don't always seem logical or fair can help kids prepare for life's ups and downs.

**Help them rely on God.** When a kid faces conflict with a friend or teacher, a parent's first move should not be to intervene. Instead, take time to empathize, to pray, and to teach the child to pray for God's wisdom in the situation. Children and teens should learn that their value as a person does not lie in their grades or their athletic prowess or their friend group; they need to know that they are children of God and that alone means they are of infinite worth. Parents should let kids see how they turn to God during their own struggles. Even in very hard times, like the death of a grandparent, kids should be allowed to witness the sorrow and also the comfort that God provides. Make sure that children see how parents and others in their faith community rely on God as shepherd, rock, hiding place, ever-present anchor in a storm.

## YOU CAN DO HARD THINGS

Like pastors, parents, say a lot of things. We teach, give advice, and explain how life works. And, like pastors, we're often not quite sure exactly what sticks. But I recently got a glimpse that my young adult daughter has taken at least one of my admonitions to heart. In a phone call, Hannah described how she and her apartment-mates had posted a number of fun, encouraging, or inspirational quotes on their apartment walls, noting that some of the quotes that she posted are "Momisms"—things I have said to her over the years. She mentioned one in particular: "You can do hard things." I smiled when she told me that. I guess I said that a lot while she was growing up, and I'm so glad she heard me and took it to heart.

It is important to remind kids—and adults—that they can do "hard things," to encourage them to develop the skills, muscles, and "grit" to persevere when the going gets tough. In my work, I see so many college students who are so easily surprised and overwhelmed when the going gets tough. It's like they expected life to be easy and are unprepared for when it is not.

I often show these students an illustration of a stick figure on a bike in two scenarios. Scenario #1, How you thought life would be: A straight, flat road, with an easily attainable finish line marked by a flag. Scenario #2, How life really is: A bicyclist facing many mountains and valleys, obstacles, and storms before reaching that finish line flag. Older people recognize the truth of the second image all too well, but many college students really are shocked and unprepared for the challenges of life.

To paraphrase M. Scott Peck, from his classic book, *The Road Less Traveled*, "Life is hard. Once you accept that, it's not so hard."<sup>1</sup> Most of us with multiple decades under our belt know that to be true.

By this stage of our lives, we have experienced a number of losses, disappointments, and other heartaches—along with great joys.

### **Hovering and Plowing**

Many teenagers and young adults have not yet accepted that reality. Part of that is simply their youth, but some of them were never prepared for life's storms because their very well-intended parents always sheltered them from bad weather. These types of parents have been labeled “helicopter” parents because they “hover” above their kids, ready to quickly intervene. They have also been called “snowplow” parents because they “clear the path” to make things easier for their young ones.

It is hard to allow a child to be hurt in a peer conflict, distressed by a team outcome, or shocked by a disappointing grade. But it's vitally important that children and teens are allowed to have those experiences. If parents are so involved in orchestrating their children's lives and intervening immediately upon any sign of trouble, kids experience unrealistically easy lives. We should not be surprised when these young adults honestly never realized that that life is hard and have no idea that they, too, can surely do hard things.

Pastors and church leaders need to help prepare the children growing up in their community for life's difficulties. Encourage parents and youth ministers and children's pastors to explicitly teach kids that they “can do hard things.” As much as we would like to protect our children from the difficulties of life, raising them to believe that life won't be hard for them will just lead to more heartache down the road.

### **Cultivating a Growth Mindset**

Parents and people who work with kids should also be aware of the hidden messages they may be delivering even they compliment “traits” rather than “processes or growth.” In an effort to encourage

their children, parents often compliment their kids by saying things like, “Wow, look how smart you are!” “You are so good at math!” “You are such a fast runner.” “What an amazing artist!” These seem like such positive statements. What could be wrong with them?

Encouraging words are generally encouraged, but a Stanford University psychologist who has spent decades reaching this phenomenon notes that such trait-based compliments can encourage people to develop a “fixed mindset,” to believe, for example, that “I’m a writer. I’m not good at math.”<sup>2</sup> Far better for people to develop a “growth mindset,” to believe that “Math is a challenge for me, but if I work at it, I can get better.” Cultivating a growth mindset in children can help them grow up to believe that they have what it takes to face various challenges in life.

If they know that “I can do hard things,” they will not be intimidated when they realize, “I need to learn to budget better.” Or when they decide, “I need to work on my resume and practice my interviewing skills if I want to get a better job.” Or when they discover, “I need to learn new behaviors when I feel emotionally triggered.”

Trait-based compliments, such as “you are so smart,” actually do not help children develop a growth mindset. Instead, if a parent regularly tells their child how smart they are, they will believe it only until they face an academic challenge that doesn’t come easily. Those children quickly give up, and they may become adults who give up quickly, too. They think they aren’t smart after all, or they can’t understand this particular subject. Instead, Dweck finds, parents should focus on complimenting effort and process: “Wow, you really worked hard on that assignment.” “I see your handwriting is getting better as you write more.”<sup>3</sup>

These types of compliments help children to develop a growth mindset in life. They expect some things to be challenging, but they

don't give up. Because they know they can “do hard things,” they rally, put effort into the task, and eventually master it.

### **LIFE IS HARD—FAITH CAN HELP**

It's important to teach our children that they can do hard things because life is hard. If you have heard me speak or read my articles, you know this is one of my most-used refrains: “Life is hard.” In most every parenting class I teach, I implore parents to recognize that life will inevitably have its challenges, so it is so important to raise kids in a way that prepares them to be resilient in the face of adversities—small and large. Instead of shielding their kids from all of life's difficulties, wise parents allow their children to experience some developmentally appropriate disappointments, conflicts, and trials. Those difficult days can then become opportunities to teach children coping skills that help when the going gets tough.

Research clearly demonstrates that faith can help people “bounce back” and “stay afloat” in life's hard times. Of course, believers know that their faith in God is so much more than simply a “coping strategy.” The essence of Christian faith assures us that our current situation is not the end of the story—thus, we have hope even in the darkest times. Practicing our faith in a Christian community gives us support and prevents us from having to “go it alone.” And our faith allows us to recognize that hard times produce in us the worthy virtues of life:

*knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character; and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. (Rom. 5:3–5)*

Pastors, ministers, and church leaders, help the families in your community develop a resilient faith. Teach them to be assured of God's truths and show them how to recognize the gifts he provides to help us through life's hard times.

When asked about their ultimate goals for their children, no one says they hope their children will develop strong, intellectual Christian beliefs but be unable to relate their faith to their real life. Parents who want their children to develop a faith that will anchor them in times of trouble need to be intentional in teaching their kids how to tap into that faith. And pastors and church leaders need to be intentional in helping parents teach these all-important lessons.

### **A Faith that Hinders**

In my work in a Christian university counseling center, I have been inspired and humbled as I've watched Christian students rely on God during moments of great challenge and loss. Unfortunately, I have also seen plenty of Christian students who are devastated by minor bumps in the road; they never seem to consider using their faith as a resource in such times. In fact, sometimes I see young Christians almost using their faith against themselves, buying into one or more distorted views of God or Christian doctrine.

**Faith as competition.** Some of these young adults seem to view their Christian faith as one more arena in which to try to excel. There are anxious, perfectionistic college students who put a tremendous amount of pressure on themselves to earn straight A's, graduate with two or three majors, and build an impressive extracurricular resume that includes leadership positions in multiple organizations. Unfortunately, some of them apply that approach in their spiritual lives as well. They may be involved in multiple faith communities and undertake numerous service opportunities and still feel pressured to do even more.

Instead of learning the peace to “be still and know that I am God,” (Ps. 46:10), they carry the stress, of a go, go, go, competitive, resume-building attitude into their “spiritual” lives. I felt sad for the college sophomore who once confessed, almost embarrassed, “I haven't created

a nonprofit yet.” This pressured sense of faith cannot be expected to provide calm and comfort in the storm.

**Faith as self-denial.** Other well-intentioned students have distorted Scripture in a way that limits self-care. I’m always impressed with students who, at such a young age, are committed to honoring God through a life of service. Unfortunately, sometimes they don’t understand the need for self-care or realize that setting boundaries is not anti-Christian or anti-ministry.

Student leaders, such as resident assistants, come to the counseling center feeling fragile and overwhelmed. When asked about their sleeping habits, they describe how they must sacrifice sleep to tend to the many needs of their residents or friends. They believe this is part of their ministry role—part of putting others before themselves. Valuing others and even considering “others more significant than yourselves” (Phil. 2:3), are Christian principles, of course, but I find these students forget that Jesus taught us to love our neighbor, *as ourselves* or that Jesus at times removed himself from the crowds to pray. Students like this need to learn to say, “no,” at times to ensure they are nurturing their own physical and spiritual lives.

**Faith as wish fulfillment.** I’ll never forget my shock when a student, who was having trouble keeping up with the expensive tastes and lifestyles of some of her friends, proclaimed, “God hasn’t blessed my family like he should have!” Even though this student used some religious vocabulary, it was not surprising this entitled worldview would not be good for mental health or resilience in times of struggle.

Pastors, church leaders, and parents need to be careful that they do not—intentionally or unintentionally—teach a distorted Christian worldview that promises an easy path and a comfortable life. Christian parents understandably want their children to grow up following God,

and it is tempting to give false promises, to tell them that as long as they avoid sin, God will make their life easy.

When peers are engaging in dishonest, disrespectful, and disobedient behavior that is leading to pain and discomfort, it is certainly fine to emphasize that God has plans and rules for us for a reason and part of that reason is to avoid pain. BUT, it is simply not true to promise, “If you follow God’s plans, you will ALWAYS have an easy life.” This way of thinking is obviously inconsistent with passages that acknowledge difficulty or that describe the difficult lives of many biblical characters, including Paul and Jesus!

If life were always going to be easy for God’s people, we would not need the many biblical admonitions about handling difficulty. There would be no reason to “be strong and courageous” (Deut. 31:6) We would not need Paul’s example of learning to “delight in weaknesses, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” As the old hymn says, “this world is not our home.” Life on earth will at times be hard. Christian families should raise their children to expect that and help them learn to lean on God to preserve them through hard times.

### **A Faith that Sustains**

I have seen far too many students who proclaim a deep Christian faith but make few connections between their faith and their real-life struggles. Many students who identify themselves as Christians and indicate their faith is very important to them on intake paperwork never mention faith when talking about their struggles in counseling sessions. To be clear, I don’t think Christians are exempt from life struggles or mental health concerns, but I do hope that even in dark times, a Christian can trust that God is there and has plans for “a future and a hope” (Jer. 29:11). Even when struggling with the world’s view of

perfection, Christians should remember that they are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139:14).

Based on my observations, I believe that pastors and church leaders must help parents be intentional in helping their children develop a deep faith that promotes their resilience. Consider how your church community can work with families to foster the following principles.

**A deep sense of “God with me.”** Having a deep sense of God provides the peace of knowing we are never alone. Knowing we can always count on God is hugely important when feeling alone or facing adversity. It is a great comfort to know that wherever we are, whatever is happening, God is with us. Teach your families about the nature of God as shelter, deliverer, shepherd in hard times. Parents can teach children how to visualize God in these roles, which can bring them a great sense of protection, guidance, support.

Frequently talk about God’s commandments and God’s promises.

*“Talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down and when you rise” (Deut. 6:7). Teach children that they can count on God’s presence throughout their lives in a variety of situations, positive and negative. Help them image God as shelter (Ps. 27:5), shepherd (Ps. 23:1), fortress (Ps. 31:2).*

**Profound appreciation for spiritual disciplines.** Don’t reduce spiritual disciplines to one more task. Part of Christian parenting is teaching Christian disciplines, but children must be taught to view these activities as profoundly more important than other tasks such as making beds or brushing teeth. Parents and church communities can, in developmentally appropriate ways, help children understand that spending time in prayer or reading the Bible is not about marking another task off the daily to-do list. Instead, these activities help us develop a relationship with God, become more like Christ, and provide

a lamp to their feet, a light to their path (Ps. 119:105).

Children and teens should be socialized to understand that going to church isn't about checking an attendance box but about participating in God's family. Parents and church leaders should model these activities and attitudes for children and teens and nurture them to understand these habits are central to life of a believer.

**An eternal perspective.** Christian faith should help keep life's challenges in perspective. College students can sometimes feel overwhelming anxiety about a major paper or an upcoming exam. Reminding them that this is one grade in one class in one semester of their undergraduate experience in the whole of their life on earth in all of eternity can help them settle down and just do their best.

Faith helps even in much more significant challenges, such as the death of a loved one. Christians know there will be days of grief, but they also know that they do not grieve as those "who have no hope (1 Thess. 4:13).

**Community.** Christians find that a church community provides a support network in difficult times. Scripture calls us to "rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep" (Rom. 12:15). Social isolation adds to the burden of life's difficulties, but Christians involved in communities of faith, who "do life together" are blessed to have fellow believers who will assist them in any number of ways.

Parents should make sure that their children see and participate in this community life—including visiting, praying, providing transportation, offering childcare, sharing meals. This support can provide a huge reservoir of resilience. Knowing they have a caring community beyond their family can help children grow up feeling loved and safe. Seeing a community take care of others in need can teach children that troubles can be overcome.

**Service.** Faith communities also provide opportunities for service. When we are hurting or faced with challenges, it is good to receive support, but it is also helpful to have opportunities to serve others. Sometimes when we struggle with depression or anxiety, we can get too focused on our own problems or feelings. Serving soup at a homeless shelter, providing a meal to an elderly member of the congregation, or teaching Sunday school can help a person avoid the “downward spiral” of negative self-focus. Churches and faith-based organizations should ensure that kids and teens are given many opportunities to serve; it helps them feel useful and helps them look beyond their own needs and desires.

**Gratitude.** Christian faith encourages gratitude. Scripture is full of this truth! Many Psalms, such as Psalms 100, are celebrations of gratitude: “Give thanks to him; bless his name! For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever.” Numerous passages in the Old and New Testaments directly teach the importance of thanksgiving: “And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful (Col. 3:15).

**Real-life connections.** Parents and church communities should help their children and teens repeatedly connect their faith to real life. This may include helping children pray for sick grandparents or about a conflict with a friend. It could include talking with a teen about finding God’s calling as they struggle to consider a college or a major. Offer honest discussions of “God with us” when they experience the heartache of a break-up, struggle to forgive a friend’s betrayal, or suffer with a difficult illness or disability. The key is to intentionally raise children to understand that faith is not a Sunday-only event, but a fabric that is inextricably woven into their whole life experience.

## ADDRESSING PARENTAL ANXIETY

The principles and practices described so far in this chapter can help families and faith communities raise kids into resilient young adults who tap into their faith in times of trouble. Pastors and church leaders can also address the rising anxiety levels in kids and young adults by addressing the growing anxiety levels among parents in their communities. Instead of simply pointing parents to Scriptures forbidding anxiety, which can actually be counterproductive to someone who is struggling with anxiety, give them some resources to quiet their own agitation so that they can then better help their children. And help parents understand that frantic attempts to keep their children perfectly safe or ensure that they perform at the highest levels at all times may lead to children who grow up feeling unsafe or inadequate, which can trigger painful emotional and behavioral cycles for years to come.

Brené Brown, in her work *The Gift of Imperfection*, noted that healthy people she had studied are not “anxiety free” or “anxiety-averse” but are “anxiety-aware.”<sup>4</sup> Similarly, RelateStrong programs teach that anxiety can be a gauge that helps people realize they may be believing things about themselves that are just not true. Especially in the age of social media, people can find themselves feeling anxious and insecure, worried that they are missing out on fun experiences or less happy than friends who don’t seem to be experiencing any problems. Therefore, anxiety exists on an untrue belief.

Everyone feels anxious from time to time. Parents who do not acknowledge their own anxiety—either because they are simply oblivious or because they feel guilty about feeling anxious—are more at risk for parenting in a reactive way. Without realizing it, they are essentially “taking their anxiety out on their child” by overpressuring or overprotecting.

## **THE FOUR STEPS: MOVING FROM PAIN CYCLE TO PEACE CYCLE**

Teach parents to check in with themselves. (See the Appendix section for more vocabulary to identify feelings and actions involved in Pain and Peace Cycles and for fill-in charts that can be used to create personal cycles.) When they watch a disturbing news story or spend time with a group of hypercompetitive parents, they need to ask themselves, “What is going on for me right now? How am I feeling?” Remind them to rely on Restoration Therapy’s Four Steps when they realize that their anxiety is about to trigger unproductive behaviors:

1. *Say what you feel.*
2. *Say what you normally do.*
3. *Say the truth.*
4. *Say what you will do differently.*

### **Pain to Peace: An Example**

Shirley sees a Facebook post about a friend’s son who has just been awarded a scholarship to college. She starts to feel anxious, worried that her 16-year-old son, Trevor, will never get a scholarship into one of the top schools. She feels like an inadequate parent because she has not helped her son enough academically or saved enough money to afford the “best” college education. She imagines her son will be angry with her if he can’t go to the school of his dreams, triggering her to feel unloved and like a failure.

Before she knows it, Shirley has spent two hours online investigating an ACT tutoring service. She enrolls her son in the program before discussing it with him. When she tells him about the course, Trevor rolls his eyes and complains, which further heightens Shirley’s sense that she is unlovable and a failure. She quickly becomes angry, lashing out at her son for “not working hard enough in school and making us sacrifice more for your college preparation!”

Shirley has just experienced a full-blown activation of her Pain Cycle, which she has been struggling with since Trevor was young. She is trying to be a good mother, but as long as her emotions are dysregulated and she believes herself to be unlovable and a failure, she will continue to cope in destructive ways seen in Figure 3.1. Her son demonstrates contempt for her pressing anger, nagging and pressure—which confirms that she is unlovable and a failure as a parent.

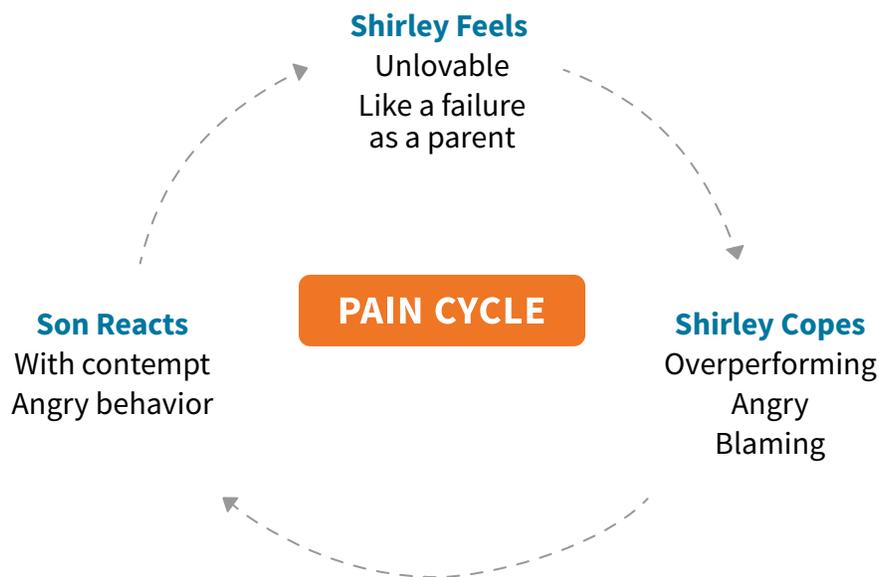


Figure 3.1. Shirley's Pain Cycle

Soon enough, Shirley feels awful about her overreaction and how she treated her son, so she moves to correct the situation by going through her Four Steps. Starting with Step One, she says out loud to herself, “When I read the post, it triggered the feeling in me that I was inadequate and a failure as a parent and therefore I would be unlovable.” Moving to Step Two, Shirley states, “What I normally do when I feel that way is what I did: I start overcontrolling by trying to overperform and fix the situation that makes me feel inadequate. I also get angry and blame others who I feel are not cooperating with my efforts.”

Shirley actually knows her Peace Cycle also (see Figure 3.2). She does not feel unlovable and like a failure all the time—just when she is

emotionally dysregulated. When she is in touch with her truth about who she is, she knows that is perfectly lovable as a person and is a good parent. She knows that she and Trevor will find a way to address challenges and problems that life presents—whether they be emotional or financial.

So in Step Three, Shirley assures herself by saying the truth out loud to herself: “I know that I am loveable and a good parent. Together we will find good college options because I am resourceful and my son is a fine student. And I have faith that God cares about my kids and their future and will help us find the best possible options for their education.”

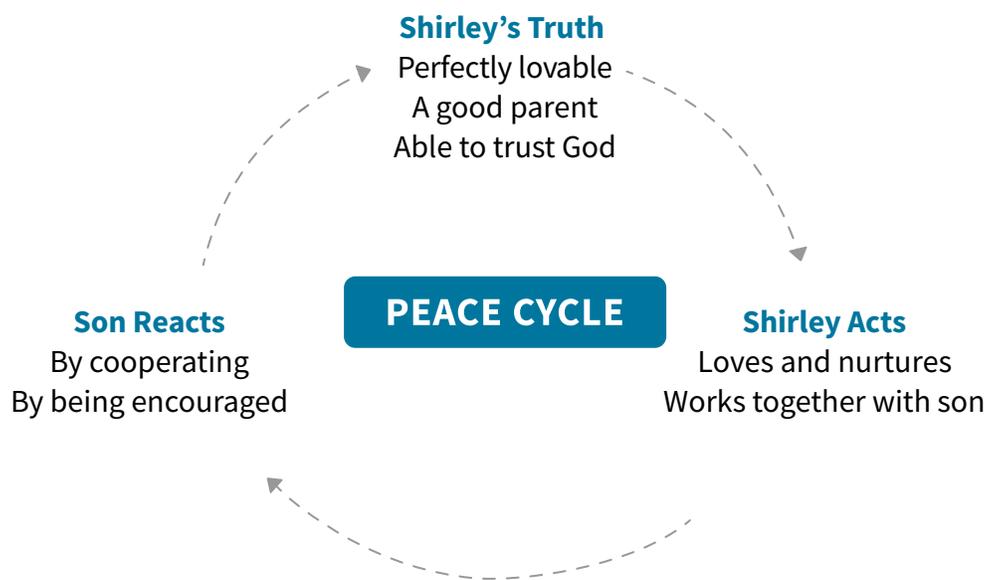


Figure 3.2. Shirley's Peace Cycle

With this truth, Shirley has regulated her triggered emotions and feels a sense of peace, making her ready for Step Four, saying what she will do differently. “I am going to put away my computer and stop the research for now and see if Trevor wants to watch a movie this evening. When we are both calm, I will suggest we work together to look into possible scholarships that are available.”

## CULTIVATE CALM

When parents are willing to acknowledge their own anxiety, then they can do something about it, such as practicing the Four Steps or choosing other ways to regulate their emotions. Brene Brown describes how the people she admired in her study “were committed to a way of living where anxiety was reality but not a lifestyle. They did this by cultivating calm and stillness in their lives and making these practices the norm.”

That’s a more realistic goal! Christian parents may get intimidated by the charge to “be anxious for nothing,” but Max Lucado offers a translation of this familiar concept that may be more helpful: “Don’t let anything in this life leave you perpetually breathless and in angst.”<sup>5</sup>

So, how do you help parents—and all other members in your community—avoid being “perpetually breathless and in angst?” In addition to teaching your community to about understand their Pain and Peace Cycles, what else can you do to help your community cultivate calm and stillness? Teach them about these simple steps.

- *Breathe!* When we are anxious, we tend to take shallow breaths, even hyperventilate. Slow down; breathe deeply; notice your God-given breath!
- *Rely on your faith.* Go to God in prayer, remembering to “Cast all your anxieties on him, for he cares for you. ”
- *Meditate on Scripture that you find comforting.* Remember God loves your child more than you do!
- *Check your thinking.* Anxiety is fueled by unbiblical, irrational thoughts of perfectionism, future forecasting, and catastrophizing. Instead, keep perspective and wait to worry!
- *Be a good steward of your body.* Healthy eating, sufficient sleep, and rigorous exercise can make a huge difference in mood regulation.

- *Enjoy your relationships.* Friends and family provide opportunities for support and conversation about important concerns as well as levity, joy, and fun.
- *Be mindful and grateful.* Instead of focusing on what is wrong or worrying about what could go badly, choose intentionally to be present and focus on blessings.
- *When you feel yourself being triggered or find yourself in the middle of conflict with your spouse or kids, practice the Four Steps of Restoration Therapy.*

Help your community understand that parents who are good at cultivating calm in their lives will be in the best position to parent wisely. And wise parents are more likely to raise kids who will become faith-filled, resilient young adults.

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## CONNIE HORTON

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### Endnotes

1. M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values, and Spiritual Growth* (New York: Touchstone, 1978).
2. C. S. Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (New York: Random House, 2006).
3. Dweck, *Mindset*.
4. B. Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed To Be and Embrace Who You Are* (Center City, Minn: Hazeldon, 2010).
5. M. Lucado, *Anxious for Nothing: Finding Calm in a Chaotic World* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2017).

## FOUR

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# RelateStrong: Sexual Intimacy

By Melissa and Scott Symington

What's the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the word intimacy? One of the most common associations is sex.

Intimacy = Sex.

Sex = Intimacy.

Our culture seems to reinforce this definition of intimacy so much that we seldom differentiate the words. Retailers describe lingerie and sexy apparel as “intimate wear.” Talking about “intimacy” can be a discreet way of describing sex or a sexual relationship. Suggesting that a couple is “intimate” communicates that their relationship is sexual, but it doesn't describe anything else about the couple's closeness or the quality of their relationship.

Although intercourse and sexual contact can indeed be very intimate in terms of body closeness, it can also be lacking in emotional connection, love and trust—robbing it of the bigger and more meaningful connotation of the word *intimacy*.

Pastors and other leaders who want to help their community members address sexual relationship problems should first explore

a fuller definition of intimacy. You need to have a better understanding of marital intimacy, physical intimacy, intimacy as a whole, and you need to recognize how this broader view of intimacy relates to the sexual relationship. This chapter and other *RelateStrong | Leadership Series* resources aim to help pastors, ministers, and leaders of churches and other faith-based organizations recognize how problems with intimacy can challenge a couple's relationship and threaten marriages in your community. The information offered here can help you understand some basic Christian concepts about intimacy as a whole and sexual intimacy in particular and provide some resources to support and encourage couples who struggle with such issues. Restoration Therapy concepts and practices can be employed to help couples recognize how their Pain Cycles may be preventing them from finding true intimacy and demonstrate how they can move into a Peace Cycle that will enhance their physical and sexual relationships.



Figure 4.1. The three elements of intimacy

### **LOVING WITH ALL WE'VE GOT**

Figure 4.1 illustrates the concept of marital intimacy, which is a balance of emotional, spiritual, and physical closeness. One element

is not more important than another. Real intimacy requires a variety of ways of relating that are so interdependent they cannot truly be separated in intimate relationships. Marital intimacy includes sexual and physical elements, but sexual contact alone does not determine intimacy. Physical intimacy is created and supported by spiritual and emotional connection—and physical intimacy creates and supports spiritual and emotional connections. Intimacy is a multidimensional way of relating to one another.

From a biblical standpoint, we know that God desires this multidimensional intimacy with us and that he desires us to be in right relation with others. We see this explicitly by how Jesus responded when he was asked to identify the greatest commandment.

*Jesus answered, “The most important is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:29–31)*

In this first part of the commandment, Jesus is quoting from the Torah. We like the way this passage from Deuteronomy is phrased in *The Message*: “Love God, your God, with your whole heart; Love him with all that’s in you, love Him with all you’ve got!” (Deut. 6:5). We are to love God with all that is in us, all of who we are, and all we can give. *The Message* version of Mark 12:30 also offers a slightly different description of how we should love the Lord God: “with all your passion and prayer and intelligence and energy.”

This is the heart of intimacy with God, and it is the model for marital intimacy as well. We are to love God with all of who we are—not just the physical or the spiritual or the intellectual parts of who we are—but all of who we are. And we are to love our spouses in the same way.

So the goal of intimacy is a fullness of knowing and loving our spouses: physically, emotionally, spiritually, with all our intelligence, strength, and passion. We are to love our spouses with everything we've got—with every ounce of our whole person.

### **Agape Love**

The second part of the Great Commandment is to love others as we love ourselves. Jesus is making a reference to a passage in Leviticus 19:18 where God calls his people to love others like they would love themselves instead of retaliating or holding a grudge. The kind of love that doesn't retaliate is what we call *agape* love. Often crowned as the highest form of Christian love, agape shows empathy, desires good for the beloved, wants the best, extends help or demonstrates good intentions, and is offered to everyone. Most importantly, agape love is sacrificial in seeking and meeting the need of the other instead of demanding that the other first meets our need. Agape is sacrificial in that we give it freely for the benefit of the beloved at our own cost with no expectation of return. However, sometimes we need to be reminded to engage in this intentional way in our relationship with our spouse.

Loving spouses with agape love means not always getting our way. Strengthening intimacy in our marriage sometimes requires us to demonstrate by our words and actions that we want what is best for our spouses. Sometimes it requires us to show our spouses empathy and understanding and to extend grace to them.

We see both of these aspects of intimacy when we look at the creation narrative. God creates Eve because Adam is alone. He needs a companion and helpmate. At Eve's creation, Adam exclaims, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Gen. 2:23). Adam feels the joy and excitement of being able to have a relationship with someone like him. Scripture goes on to say that because of this partnership,

“Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed” (Gen. 2:24). We know that God designed Adam and Eve for oneness, partnership, friendship, pleasure, and vulnerability with one another. Unfortunately, however, we also know what happens next in the story.

### **The Temptation To Hide**

After Adam and Eve consumed the fruit from the forbidden tree, they covered themselves, hid from each other, and hid from God. To understand intimacy, you must understand this fact: although intimacy is God’s intention for us—with each other and with him—it is hard to be vulnerable and naked. In all senses of that word. It is especially hard when we are broken, sinful people who can’t uphold our best intentions even with those who know us best! So, we decide that it’s easier to hide and cover up the parts that are not our best.

Intimacy isn’t always shiny and glamorous. Sometimes it is gritty and raw and challenging and even painful. Thus, while the intention for marital intimacy is a fullness of knowing and loving your spouse—physically, emotionally, spiritually, with all intelligence, strength, and passion—true intimacy also acknowledges the presence of sin, mistakes, and pain and commits us as helpmates to work toward repair and growth.

### **LOVE AND TRUST**

One working definition of marital intimacy is a close and loving relationship where partners work to know and be known and attentively relate to each other emotionally, physically, and spiritually for the purpose of pleasure, friendship, spiritual formation, and mutual growth. Intimacy is not just one kind of physical or sexual act or even the feeling of love; rather, it is a constant process of intentionally

deepening the marital relationship. A bigger-picture definition of marital intimacy is a relationship where partners relate to each other as one whole person to another whole person with the intention to bring good for one another and for others, such as family, children, community, or church. This bigger definition manifests intention, commitment, and actions to communicate closeness, oneness, wholeness, and growth.

As discussed in Chapter 1, love and trust are the essential elements for a strong marriage relationship. Love entails uniqueness, affection, belonging, and sacrifice. Trust necessitates safety, predictability, and a balance of give and take in the relationship. Simply stated, if love and trust are the foundational pillars for relationships, intimacy is the language of closeness and the currency exchanged between those pillars.

Real intimacy requires both a sense of being loved and being safe. We can't be intimate—physically, emotionally, or spiritually—with our spouses if we do not feel safe or if we don't feel cared for or seen. Intimacy is earned through intentional actions that build up both love and trust. If we compare actions of intimacy to currency or money, then intimacy represents the financial balance in the bank accounts of love and trust in the marital relationship.

## **PHYSICAL AND SEXUAL INTIMACY**

It is vital for pastors and church leaders to understand the multifaceted nature of intimacy and its role in cultivating love and trust in marriages—and how the concepts of Restoration Therapy can be employed to strengthen the bonds of intimacy. Before addressing matters of sexual intimacy in a marriage, you also need to understand how physical intimacy is different than sexual intimacy and why it is important to understand the connection.

*There's more to sex than mere skin on skin. Sex is as much spiritual mystery as physical fact. As written in Scripture, "The two become one." Since we want to become spiritually one with the Master, we must not pursue the kind of sex that avoids commitment and intimacy, leaving us more lonely than ever—the kind of sex that can never "become one." There is a sense in which sexual sins are different from all others. In sexual sin, we violate the sacredness of our own bodies, these bodies that were made for God-given and God-modeled love, for "becoming one" with another. Or didn't you realize that your body is a sacred place, the place of the Holy Spirit? Don't you see that you can't live however you please, squandering what God paid such a high price for? The physical part of you is not some piece of property belonging to the spiritual part of you. God owns the whole works. So, let people see God in and through your body. (1 Cor. 6:16–20, The Message)*

This passage underscores God's design for sex to be experienced in the context of marriage and intimacy. However, even in committed marital relationships, sex can become less about an intimate expression of care, love, and enjoyment and more of a battleground about individual needs, expectations, and demands. In this way, it is easy to see how the sexual relationship taken out of the context of intimacy becomes a source of emotional and relational pain.

There are many issues to tackle, but let's start with some basic concepts regarding physical and sexual intimacy. Just as physical intimacy is only one facet of true marital intimacy, sexual intimacy is only one aspect of physical intimacy. Real sexual intimacy is supported and enhanced by the quality of emotional and spiritual connections, and it is also built upon layers of physical intimacy expressed in a variety of ways. Physical intimacy includes many kinds of physical connection—not just sex.

Touch is an important communication tool between two people to express care, love, and trust, and it provides one of our first ways of

feeling love, comfort or safety. Being held, snuggled, and rocked in close proximity to caretakers helps infants not only thrive but even survive! Many times, we take for granted the power of nonsexual touch, but it forms the basis of physical intimacy.

A friend and colleague, Dr. Doug Rosenau, has created a helpful color-coding system (see Figure 4.2) that helps demonstrate the various layers of physical intimacy.<sup>1</sup>

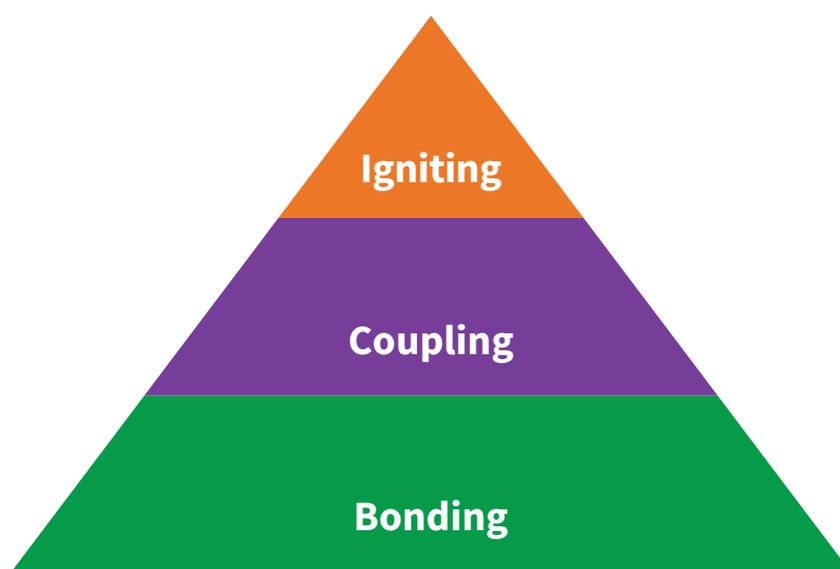


Figure 4.2. Types of Physical Intimacy

As seen in Figure 4.2, green represents bonding intimacy. Bonding involves expressing our feelings and connecting through actions such as touching a shoulder, giving a hug, looking into another person’s eyes, and listening intently. These actions are all various ways to express that we enjoy another’s company. Bonding intimacy is not reserved for spouses—it also happens between friends and family. We even refer to this type of intimacy as “fellowship” when we use such actions to express warmth and love to brothers and sisters of the faith.

The next level of intimacy is coded purple—the color of passion. Coupling intimacy is especially passionate and filled with the

excitement and desire for touch. Purple intimacy includes kissing, cuddling, making out, holding hands, sensual touching, and flirting. These types of behaviors are not practiced with just anyone but are actions that demonstrate an intentional movement toward an exclusive relationship of dating or engagement.

Rosenau's third category for intimacy—igniting—is colored orange to represent sexual intimacy and passion. This layer of intimacy includes all other forms of green and purple intimacy with the added actions of genital touching, intercourse, and the full sexual experience. In Christian circles, orange intimacy is reserved for the marital relationship. Intercourse becomes the ultimate symbol for intimate relationship; however, this does not mean it replaces other forms of intimacy or physical connecting.

As depicted in Figure 4.2, the orange level of sexual intimacy is built on the foundation of bonding and coupling types of physical connections. Thus, true physical intimacy in marriage includes all forms of physical connection, including holding hands, looking into your spouse's eyes, hugging, listening intently, expressing warmth, kissing, flirting, being romantic, etc. Without the green and the purple types of physical connection, sexual connection can be lacking in intimacy.

### **PHYSICAL INTIMACY AND MARRIAGE: FANTASY VS. REALITY**

Understanding these categories of physical intimacy can help you recognize the importance of physical touch and its role in relationships in general and marriage in particular. The bonding, coupling, and igniting aspects of physical intimacy are all important, but somehow one, two, or even all three of these categories may start to seem less important to a couple as life moves beyond the honeymoon phase.

Why do couples forget about physical intimacy? In a nutshell, the earliest forms of physical intimacy are bathed in newness, excitement,

and fantasy that usually lasts just long enough to get two people together and in a committed marriage. Real intimacy doesn't start until the honeymoon phase is over.

The creation narrative helps us understand this interesting and real phenomenon. The newness of a relationship is like a Garden of Eden experience—thrilling and exhilarating. But as time goes on the scales fall from our eyes and we gain a new awareness of our imperfect self and imperfect spouse. This jolt into reality can be alarming, and suddenly life together doesn't seem as sexy as it was before. Physical affection, a defining characteristic of the early relationship, decreases. When people learn of this reality, they are sometimes dismayed. Don't be distressed! Instead, return to the notion that physical intimacy, like intimacy as a whole, must be an intentional process if we want to continue to grow.

Look again at Rosenau's diagram. Which colors of intimacy do you think get neglected as time passes? Some of them? All of them? Even if we stop investing in only the bonding (green) or coupling (purple) levels of intimacy, it will affect the igniting (orange) form of intimacy. When physical intimacy decreases, couples often feel less connected overall and one or both spouses become less interested and motivated in this domain of physical intimacy.

Touch can often become associated with an invitation for sex instead of a general communication of warmth, love, care, and comfort, and that association can also result in a decrease in the domain of physical intimacy. In the bedroom there is often a shift from physically communicating love and care or savoring a chance to enjoy each other's bodies to a hurried mission toward intercourse.

And that shift can be the start of problems that move beyond the bedroom to affect the overall quality of a couple's multifaceted, multidimensional, whole-person, intimate relationship.

As a spiritual leader who is invested in the quality of your community's marriages, you should not ignore the importance of physical intimacy in a couple's relationship. However, you must also recognize that physical intimacy cannot be reduced to sexual experiences. Don't be afraid to extol the importance of touch, which is an important aspect of demonstrating love and building trust. Teach couples that true physical and sexual intimacy involves various levels of loving, caring, and safe physical touch. And remind them that marital sexual intimacy is embedded in the larger concept of intimacy, which includes emotional and spiritual connection.

Here are some practical tips based on Dr. Rosenau's diagram (Figure 4.2) to help couples connect or reconnect at all levels of physical intimacy.

#### **Bonding: Green**

**Implement a coming-home ritual.** When you arrive home at the end of the day, drop everything and move toward each other. Embrace until you relax in each other's arms.

**Hold hands.** Make it a habit to hold hands when you're in the car or sitting next to your spouse at church, or in a movie, or at the DMV—anywhere.

#### **Coupling: Purple**

**Kiss daily.** Instead of a quick peck, linger a little longer. Try kissing for a few seconds a couple times per day.

**Keep dating.** Initiate a romantic date night once a week or at least a couple of times per month.

**Take time to touch.** Set aside time for sensuous touching, whether it be a massage or a light caress of each other's bodies.

**Write it down.** Leave a romantic note or send a flirtatious text.

#### **Igniting: Orange**

**Slow down.** When you're in the bedroom, slow down, be fully present and enjoy your partner's body.

**Touch more.** Instead of going directly toward intercourse, engage in more genital touching and passionate touching.

## **SEX AND THE GREAT COMMUNICATION BREAKDOWN**

A healthy sexual relationship in marriage requires communication—both in general and about sex specifically. When we say communication about sex, we are not referring to “sex talk” or “talking dirty” to spice things up. Instead, we are talking about discussions about sex and what sex means to the individuals in a marriage and to the marriage itself. When couples come to therapy about sexual issues, their problems often stem from their lack of direct communication about desires, expectations, and beliefs about sex. And they certainly have never figured out how to share these things in a healthy, loving manner.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, marital sex must be rooted in the larger framework of intimacy, which includes emotional, spiritual, and physical closeness. Emotional and spiritual closeness requires being aware of and communicating about ideas and feelings, tenderly and vulnerably sharing dreams and struggles, working through difficulties with grace, and extending forgiveness. Applying these ideals of communication to sex is a very complicated task.

It can be helpful for you as a minister or church leader to recognize the barriers that prevent many people from engaging in productive discussions about sex, so let’s take a look at a few of the most common problems.

### **Talking about Sex Is Difficult!**

And no one knows that better than we do! In 2009, we were asked to join a therapy practice of internationally recognized sex therapists, a dynamic couple we had admired and respected from a professional distance. Both of us had PhDs in clinical psychology, but we focused on general issues like anxiety, depression, and other relational problems. We prided ourselves on being able to talk with clients about difficult and painful things, which occasionally included sexual issues.

We were certainly flattered by the offer to join these well-respected sex therapists, but our first response was—well—we LAUGHED! If we worked in that practice, would people think we were perverts? What kinds of people talk about sex all the time? How embarrassing! How could we talk about the sex lives of other individuals and couples? Would this added expertise interfere with our other clinical interests or change the kinds of people we see in therapy? What would our parents and friends say? What about our reputation?!!

However, after a couple of months of thinking about this extraordinary offer, we finally accepted the opportunity and began getting more education and training to allow us to effectively work with individuals and couples about sexual issues. Needless to say, this journey has not only enriched and broadened our professional lives, but it has helped us understand and deepen intimacy in our own marriage. We saw more clearly our own hang-ups about sex and realized that even we—two people with PhDs in psychology and training in sex therapy—had problems talking to each other about sex!

Our story helps illustrate the natural struggle to communicate about sex. Sex is linked to our most vulnerable parts of self. The image of Adam and Eve immediately covering themselves with fig leaves after eating the forbidden fruit captures this point. Conversation brings into the light what we want to conceal; therefore, talking about sex is—well—exposing!! Sex definitely has a giggle factor; it can be embarrassing or shameful to talk about; and it can make us feel deeply vulnerable and scared. Difficulty communicating about sex is a common experience. Let's briefly discuss the attitudes that accentuate this communication problem.

### **Sex Is Natural!**

And because it's natural, we believe we don't really need to talk about sex. "Just let the body do what comes naturally!" Or—and this

idea is especially common in Christian circles—we think that sex is so wonderful and mysterious that we “can’t talk about it because we might destroy the mystery!” This idea that sexual feelings and/or touch do not need thoughts or words because the body will “know what to do” reflects a long-standing philosophy that divides our bodies from our minds and heart. While this idea could merit a chapter in and of itself, let’s just give it a superficial nod and note that both secular and Christian ideals can promote this division of body and heart/mind/soul and that this compartmentalist attitude hinders healthy sexuality and works against intimacy as a whole.

A lack of communication about sex in marriage reinforces hurts and misunderstandings and leaves few opportunities to deepen physical or emotional satisfaction or repair any problems that might arise. The first step on the road to repair is to believe that sex and communication are a necessary part of healthy intimacy and growth in marriage. The next step is to learn *how* to talk about sex, which is a challenge because healthy, direct communication about sex is rarely modeled.

### **“The Talk”**

Many people say they received “the talk” about sex as a young person from one or both parents. Although some families/parents/young people are more than capable of having open, healthy discussions about sex, they are not the norm. Even if parents intend to give good, helpful information, their own discomfort often speaks louder than their words. For this reason, often times “the talk” is boiled down to a brief, one-time occurrence rather than an ongoing, open discussion. A one-time discussion with an uncomfortable parent can definitely discourage kids from asking future questions or bringing up the subject of sex again.

Sometimes “the talk” conveys the idea that sex is dirty, bad, wrong, and this certainly closes down further discussions. Who would want

to be viewed by their parents as dirty or bad for asking a question or seeking guidance about a topic that seems to be inherently wrong? Some parents fear conversations regarding sex will stoke the fires of passion and lead to sexual behavior outside of marriage—and so they never raise the subject at all. We have had many conversations with clients who never heard anything about sex at home.

Many well-intentioned parents who want to protect their kids wind up leaving sex a complete mystery to their children. Their attitudes, their words, or their lack of words convey a persistent and louder message: “sex is not something we talk about.”

### **The Giggle Factor and the Unknown**

Years before parents attempt to deliver “the talk,” many of them communicate their discomfort with sex by their vocabulary for genitals and body parts. Parents often pick substitute names for the vagina and penis like wuwu, weewee, who-ha, peepee. These funny or silly labels hinder our ability to discuss sex or sexual issues because they inherently carry a giggle factor, which makes conversation difficult, disjointed, or even more awkward.

Other parents never provide any vocabulary at all for certain body parts, which makes them seem shameful or secretive. A previous client kept using the term “down there” when referring to her vagina. I asked what names had been used for genitalia in her family of origin; she looked at me blankly and said, “There was no name.” For this woman, her vagina was “unnamable,” “unmentionable,” and therefore confusing and unknowable. It’s easy to see how communication about sex devolves into guessing games or silence when genitals are associated with juvenile terms or regarded as “the thing that can’t be named!” Sometimes we don’t even have the right words to begin a conversation!

## **Communication about Sex and Trauma**

Sex can also be a topic that triggers painful emotions, memories, and effects of sexual abuse, rape, assault, or exploitation. Sadly, we know that sexual abuse and assault statistics are high. Sexual abuse promotes a culture of secrecy, threats, and power differentials.

Victims feel they did not have a voice about sex because sex was something that happened to them, not something they chose. Thus, talking about sex can become a reminder of deeply shameful and unsafe experiences, and some victims may wonder whether they have the right to their own voice about sex at all. Even in a loving marriage, the effects of past abuse can make communication extra vulnerable and scary. Allowing and nurturing a person's voice in the sexual relationship can help reinforce that individual's sense of safety, right to make a choice, and path to healing. This is a delicate process that may take time and patience and may also require the help of a professional.

## **FOSTER HEALTHY COMMUNICATION**

It's not hard to see why so many people in your church community may have problems communicating about sex and healthy sexuality in marriage. Talking about sex can be awkward, uncomfortable, foreign, threatening, or painful. However, helping the couples in your church or organization to better communicate about sex can enhance their relationships and deepen their intimacy as a whole.

Know that both partners must be committed to finding safe and loving ways to open up the discussion and recognize that any such conversation will be a delicate balance. It is also important to ensure that both partners understand that conversations about sex are ultimately about intimacy—not about one person's demands. These conversations should be about understanding, supporting, and loving each other. But how can you help couples start such a discussion with care, love, and intention?

First, acknowledge that we all struggle with talking about sex; this is sometimes one of the best ice breakers. Then, help couples recognize the barriers discussed above that often keep us from speaking more directly about sex (it's natural, it's bad or dirty, it's embarrassing or uncomfortable, it's too scary or painful). Last but not least, emphasize that direct communication about sex not only improves our sex lives but also helps us more fully live out God's intention for intimacy: the emotional, spiritual, and physical closeness for the purposes of pleasure, friendship, spiritual formation, and mutual growth.

### **MOVING FROM PAIN TO PEACE**

A difficult or unfulfilling sexual relationship can keep a marriage from reaching its potential for true intimacy and prevent one or both partners from feeling truly loved or fully safe. Teaching couples in your community about Restoration Therapy's pain and Peace Cycles can help them understand their own pain and recognize how their coping behaviors can trigger pain in their partner, who then turns to coping behaviors that trigger more pain for the first partner, etc., etc. etc. Couples also need to learn how they can utilize Restoration Therapy's Four Steps to break these looping Pain Cycles and move into a pattern of peace with themselves and each other:

1. *Say what you feel.*
2. *Say what you normally do.*
3. *Say the truth.*
4. *Say what you will do differently.*

### **Pain to Peace: An Example**

Deja and Blake had both waited to have sex for the first time on their honeymoon, and they believed all would go well because they had committed to sex only in the context of marriage. They were both

surprised when their bodies didn't immediately “know what to do,” and they found it almost impossible to communicate about their unmet expectations because neither of them were comfortable talking about sex.

After a few months, Blake found it hard to sustain an erection, and Deja found sex to be painful. Their experiences left Blake feeling inadequate, defective, and like a failure, and he coped with those emotions by withdrawing and shaming himself. Deja felt unsafe, devalued, and worthless—and those feelings were intensified whenever she felt Blake withdrawing from her. She responded by getting depressed and inconsolable. Soon, she had moved from indulging in one glass of wine in the evening to drinking several glasses a day—sometimes more.

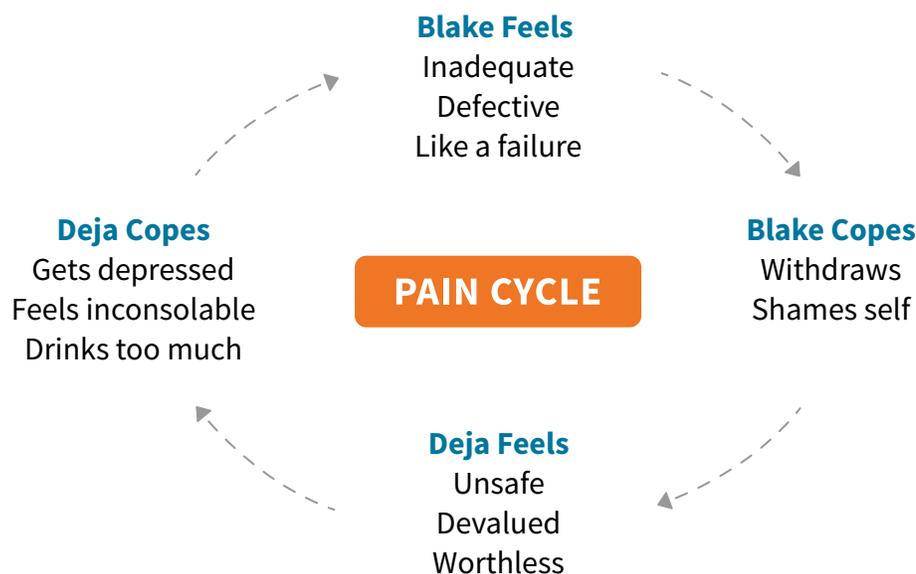


Figure 4.3. Pain Cycle for Deja and Blake

Eventually, Deja and Blake both agreed that their relationship meant too much to them to let these problems tear them apart. They finally got the courage to learn more about sexual relationships and discovered problems in a new marriage were quite common. They

were relieved to realize that the issues they faced could be addressed. Blake began to understand that he was adequate, normal, and not a failure. When he believed those things to be true, he was able to stay connected with Deja, value himself, and change the dynamic of their sexual relationship. When Deja saw that Blake was working with her to improve their physical relationship, she began to feel safe and to realize that she was valuable and full of worth. Holding on to those truths, Deja was able to stay peaceful, comfort herself, and not attempt to escape through alcohol. (See Figure 4.4.)

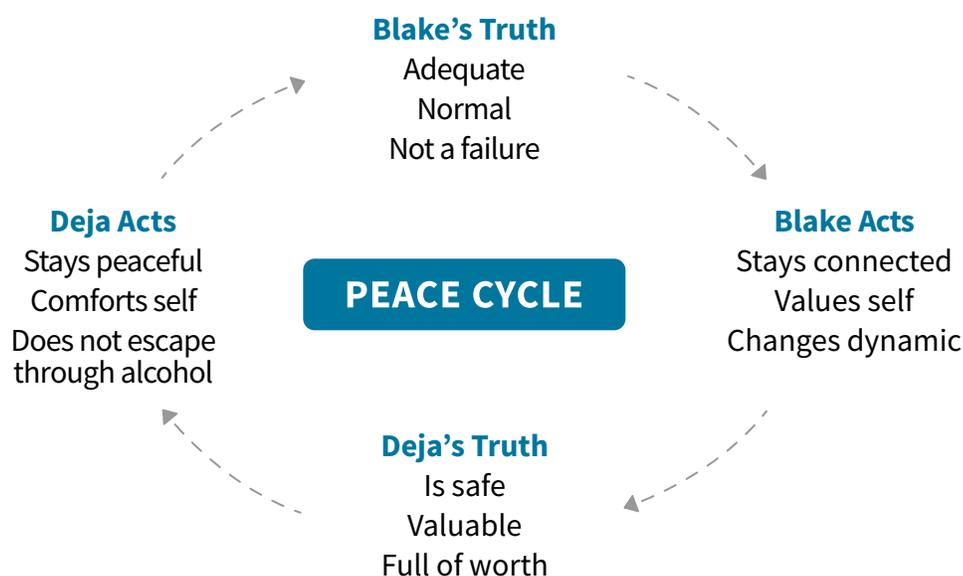


Figure 4.4. Peace Cycle for Deja and Blake

## OTHER STEPS TO FOSTERING INTIMACY

In addition to introducing Restoration Therapy concepts, there are other steps you can take to support couples in your church or community as they seek to develop healthy sexual intimacy. First, consider your own example. It is vital that pastors and church leaders live out healthy sexuality in their own relationships, and that they support the concepts of true intimacy in your public and private words and actions.

If you are willing to provide pastoral counseling and education regarding these issues, never give trite advice like “just relax” or “try some racy underwear” as a solution to sexual problems. If couples express sexual concerns that you are not qualified to address, be ready to refer them to a physician or therapist trained in sexual issues.

Discuss healthy sexuality from the pulpit or in small groups, dispelling myths through education and biblical truths. Avoid jokes or remarks that perpetuate sexual stereotypes, and don't make light of sexual problems that may be all too real for some members in your audience.

Teach about healthy sexual relationships, connecting sexuality and spirituality and giving spiritual people permission to be sexual human beings. Design separate programs for youth, singles, and married couples that promote integrated and healthy views of sexuality targeted to their different life stages and circumstances.

Develop programs to help parents talk to their children about sex. Family involvement is foundational to develop a healthy sexual culture in the church community. Teach parents to avoid fear or shame tactics—such as disease or unwanted pregnancy—to discourage sex outside of marriage.

Above all, consistently remind your community that sex does not equal intimacy. And help them see how a healthy sexual relationship can help couples achieve God's design for marital intimacy: knowing and loving each other physically, emotionally, spiritually, with all intelligence, strength, and passion.

## MELISSA AND SCOTT SYMINGTON

Melissa Symington, PhD, and Scott Symington, PhD, are clinical psychologists in full-time private practice. Both earned doctoral degrees in clinical psychology from the Graduate School of Psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary and have additional training in sex therapy. Their clinical work is driven by a passion to help individuals and couples experience greater levels of aliveness, intimacy, and healing in sexual relationships. Melissa and Scott and enjoy speaking at professional conferences, couples retreats, and church settings about healthy sexuality.

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1. *This figure is used by permission from Dr. Douglas E. Rosenau. It is adapted from Rosenau's Colors of Intimacy concepts as found in the book, Total Intimacy by Douglas Rosenau and Deborah Neel (Atlanta: Sexual Wholeness Resources), 2013.*

## FIVE

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# RelateStrong: Pornography

By Jeff and Robin Reinke

What is pornography? It is the portrayal of erotic behavior in magazines, books, photos, videos, or websites with the intention of causing sexual excitement.

Is it possible to be addicted to pornography? Although experts would disagree on the term *addiction*, it is clear that some people who view pornography lose self-control over the behavior and are unable to stop despite repeated attempts. It is also clear that many people find themselves so preoccupied with pornography that they regularly anticipate and desire the behavior, spending hours planning for and then viewing it. For these reasons, a person's use of pornography can become a problem that looks very much like an addiction.

Why should pastors and church leaders be concerned about pornography? Because in a recent survey done by the Barna researchers, 51 percent of all Americans say they seek out porn at least occasionally and 21 percent say they seek it weekly.<sup>1</sup> And four in ten of self-identified Christian men ages thirteen to twenty-four are actively seeking out porn at least once or twice a month, according to the same study.<sup>2</sup>

Even more sobering, the Barna researchers report that one in five youth pastors (21 percent) and one in seven senior pastors (14 percent) admitted they currently use porn. More than half of youth pastors who use porn (56%) and one-third of senior pastors who use porn (33%) believe they are addicted.<sup>3</sup>

We can personally speak to the struggle with porn because Jeff has publicly testified about his struggle and his fight to overcome it, and Robin speaks to how a wounded spouse can work toward restoring trust in a relationship. Jeff's exposure to pornography began when he was twelve and discovered *Playboy* magazines tucked secretly underneath the sweaters in his dad's dresser drawer. "This event changed my life forever. I soon learned how to justify my periodic visitations into my parents' room when no one was home, and I didn't think too much about what effect this secrecy could have on me or on others."

Today's easy access to porn through the internet and smartphones too often allows people to rationalize a behavior that damages our identities and our relationships. Pastors and church leaders need to understand how pornography can damage individuals and relationships through unhealthy thinking, secrecy, and relational betrayal in order to help people break free from this unhealthy behavior.

## FIVE MYTHS

Our culture commonly promotes five myths about pornography viewing in order to downplay its damage.

- *It isn't hurting anyone.*
- *God wired me this way—so it must be okay.*
- *Pornography is a helpful tool for intimacy in the bedroom.*
- *When I get married, I will stop viewing porn.*

- *Pornography isn't a problem for practicing Christians.*

We want you to recognize these myths so that you can also recognize and share the truths that undermine them. Your understanding of the truth can help you prevent community members from becoming ensnared in the dangers of pornography—and help free others who are already struggling.

### **Nobody Gets Hurt**

People who spend a lot of time viewing pornography are likely to tell you that they are engaged in something private and not acting out in any physical way, so it can't be hurting anyone. Their inner dialogue sounds something like this:

It does not affect me because I am in control of the situation. It does not affect my standing with others because I am only engaging my mind and not my physical body. I am certainly not harming my relationships because no one else who is important to me has to know anything about my thought life. *I'm not hurting anyone.*

But the reality is very different indeed: *Pornography hurts everyone connected to the user.* The Apostle Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 6:15–20 that our bodies are members of Christ and that when we do sexually immoral things, we join Christ and the Holy Spirit with those same immoral things:

*Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, "The two will become one flesh." But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you*

*have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.*

When we engage pornography, we are typically viewing exploitative images of women and men for the sole purpose of satisfying our own lustful desires apart from reality. Pornography does nothing to build up the best parts of who we are; instead, it builds up and strengthens the most selfish and immoral parts of our personhood. It also victimizes the people we are viewing, making them into sex objects instead of human beings, and contributes to our own most base and corrupt thoughts.

Recent research suggests that men who compulsively view pornography desire and require more and more novel images to achieve sexual excitement.<sup>4</sup> In addition, brain circuitry of those who compulsively view porn is similar to those who have drug addictions.<sup>5</sup> Continuing to seek out and view exploitative images of sex and people strengthens the most selfish and immoral parts of ourselves as we directly step away from engaging in the holy, pure, and wholesome thoughts and actions that serve Christ and his servants.

It is little wonder that frequent pornography users report altered sexual focus, lowered relational satisfaction, and less real-life intimacy.<sup>6</sup> The concentration and ruminating happening in our brains when we view pornography not only makes us untrustworthy and unloving to Christ, it damages the relationships that are most important to us. Pornography has the power to consume more and more of our thoughts, making us less and less interested in real relationships and more likely to turn to the fantasy of exploitative sex through images and sounds. We actively devalue real relationship with our spouses, children, and others in our lives when we choose unrealistic images over them. The hurt and relational betrayal of significant others is palpable when they reckon with the reality that sexual imagery is preferred over a real and intimate relationship with them.

Another truth to consider: the young women or men in those pornographic pictures and videos are in reality not objects but people who have families and real-life experiences. The pornography industry often exploits troubled young people to create those images, and when we engage in pornography, we participate in that exploitation.

### **God Made Me This Way**

While it is true that both men and women are created with sexual desires, God's plan is for humans to experience the fulfillment of their sexual desires primarily within the sacred covenant of marriage and in the context of healthy relationships. The sexual act is part of the marriage covenant that reflects the reality of this most personal and relational-oneness that can exist between two people, as is described in Genesis 2:24: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." The act of sexual union both represents and strengthens the bonds that a man and woman are designed to share emotionally, cognitively, and spiritually in addition to physically.

Within this sacred covenant, marital intimacy takes on a meaning of genuine oneness. It goes deeper than just two people sharing experiences and instead creates an identity of one from the two in how they learn to think, act, and believe together. In other words, a third identity develops along with the "you" and "me" in relationship and expresses a clear "us" or oneness.

Sex is one of the expressions of the drive to be intimate with another human being. We cannot get this kind of intimacy or unity through movies, magazines, or the internet. Pornography takes over a wholesome sex drive for a painful counterfeit.

### **It Will Help My Marriage**

Some pornography users contend it is a helpful tool for intimacy

in marriage. However, people who allow pornographic images to dominate their brain are driven away from intimacy and appropriate sexual relationships.

Recent studies have shown that one-quarter to one-third of *young* men—men under age forty—may experience erectile dysfunction, and at least some researchers are pointing to the abundance of porn as a culprit in this condition. A 2016 article in *Time Magazine*, “Porn and the Threat to Virility,” contends that porn increases erectile dysfunction (ED). The article notes that in 1992 about 5 percent of men experienced ED by age forty, but a 2013 *Journal of Sexual Medicine* study found that 26 percent of adult men seeking help for the condition were under age forty and a 2012 Swiss study reported that one-third of men ages eighteen to twenty-five struggled with ED.<sup>7</sup>

The pornography use reported by those who experience erectile dysfunction is not a single variable; it also involves repeated and frequent masturbation along with significant time spent on the internet. This focus on pornography and subsequent masturbation affects daily schedules and physical health, all of which can contribute to a lack of intimacy within a marriage relationship.

Pornography creates unrealistic and enhanced images of idealized bodies in the minds of users—images that a real-life spouse cannot live up to or compete with. In addition, viewing multiple images overstimulates the brain, making it far more difficult for a frequent porn user to experience sexual satisfaction with a real person. Far from enhancing intimacy and sexual experience, pornography use tends to destroy a person’s ability to engage in healthy intercourse and sexual expression.

### **It’s Only Temporary**

Many people like to believe their pornography use will stop when they get married. However, no matter how we look at pornography

usage, it is high with both married and single people. Recent survey research indicates that among 18- to 35-year-olds, 73 percent of females and 96 percent of males had viewed some type of pornography over the past six months.<sup>8</sup> As mentioned above, research has shown that pornography use influences the circuitry in the brain, and it is highly likely that this change fuels the need for more erotic images to be sexually stimulated. Even though a person may be single now, the habits and possible addiction to pornography may mean a person will prefer the same images and stimulation even after marriage.

I (Jeff) know that porn became a means of self-medicating and soothing life's disappointments, insecurities, and fears. My use of pornography was infrequent and sporadic. I would go for months without acting out. However, my inability to be open and honest about my behavior kept me in bondage to the underlying shame and the fear of being exposed. The worst day of my life was when my fourteen-year-old daughter discovered pornography on my phone. Ironically, this became the best day of my life because I could no longer minimize my actions or deny that there was an addictive component to my behavior. I was tired of lying and hiding. It is important to note that marriage will not break this type of cycle if we do not deal with the habitual lying and hiding.

In the early years of my marriage to Robin, the suppression of sexual desire as a result of shame attached to sex would be more accurately described as sexual anorexia. Many would describe sexual anorexia as a form of addiction—instead of an obsession toward sex, sexual anorexia is described as an aversion from sex. In my life, premature exposure to pornography, being sexually seduced in my early teens, and my family's shame-based approach to sex contributed to my attitude of fear and guilt regarding sex. Of course, my attitude and actions caused Robin great pain, making her feel rejected and unloved.

## **Christians Are Immune**

My personal testimony is not unique. Many Christian men can share similar stories; attending church or reading the Bible does not make anyone immune to habitual viewing of pornography. Barna's study does note lower levels of porn usage in those who identify as practicing Christians. But it also notes that about 40 percent of teens and young adult males in the church are actively seeking out porn at least once or twice a month and that two out of three youth pastors and more than half of senior pastors say porn is a current or past struggle.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, the study's authors say, "It is likely practicing Christians use porn less frequently, as reported, but there may also be under-reporting since porn use within the Christian community is much less socially acceptable than in the wider culture."<sup>10</sup>

Many church-goers who have brought pornography into their lives find themselves struggling with the stigma of shame and silence; they know the behavior is harmful and sinful to themselves and their relationships, but they find it difficult to seek help from the church. This isolation magnifies their shame and guilt, which contributes further to the desire to escape, which can often lead to more pornography use.

Pastors and church leaders should not allow this cycle of silence and shame to continue. Don't be afraid to address the issue from the pulpit or in small-group settings or to plan special seminars or lectures. Employ the resources provided in this chapter, including our first-hand and hard-learned knowledge, and in other RelateStrong materials to educate yourselves and your community. Bring this topic out of the shadows of secrecy and shame where it thrives.

Don't be surprised to find that people in your community are struggling and don't be afraid to tell them if they need more focused

treatment than you can provide to help them overcome the toxicity of pornography. But also remember to assure them that God is working on our behalf to sanctify us and help us lift up others:

*For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God. (1 Thess. 4:3–5)*

### **FRUIT OF THE FALL**

The story of Adam and Eve and the Fall as recorded in Genesis 3:6–9 provides a good illustration of how people behave when they do things they know are wrong and damaging to relationships.

*So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.*

*And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?”*

When Adam and Eve took this step away from God, they experienced the crisis of separation and realized they were “naked.” For the first time, they experienced fear of inadequacy and shame which led to the feelings of isolation. But instead of running to God for restoration and repair, they chose to be secretive and hide. In their fear, guilt, and shame, they tried desperately to hide themselves. This hiding of what we are most ashamed of leads to isolation from the one who loves us the most. It leaves us to live in our inadequacies and develop a

pattern of running and hiding from God, others, and ourselves. For the Christian using pornography, this is the same situation we find for both men and women who are living tied down in shame—alone and isolated from pursuing help.

Those of us who develop a habit of use attempt to keep that use a secret and hide it from God, even though we know that nothing is hidden from God. We hide from others for fear of being discovered and uncovered in the same way. Although we may be a little more successful at keeping the secret from others, the trail of our behavior is often eventually discovered.

### **THE GREAT ESCAPE**

I (Jeff) never thought I was addicted to porn. Yes, I would periodically look at a porn website out of curiosity or boredom, but I never thought it would lead me to uncontrollable and destructive behavior.

According to Restoration Therapy concepts, the need to escape is part of my Pain Cycle—and the Pain Cycle of many people who struggle with pornography. An absence of love will affect a person's identity, and a lack of trust will affect an ability to feel safe, leading us to hide or escape from our relational pain. Pornography is one of the easiest forms of escape because it is affordable—in fact, it's often free—it is typically accessible immediately, and it feels anonymous, since most of us think we will never get caught.

Paradoxically, we never escape from the desire to love and to be loved. Speaking from my perspective, heavy porn users feel a tension stemming from the fear of discovery and a longing for love and intimacy that lead them to believe lies about themselves—that they are worthless, inadequate, unloved. The lies lead them to act out in anger or shame, to withdraw or retreat from loved ones. This Pain Cycle drives them back to the cheap relational counterfeit of pornography.

Like Adam and Eve, we create our own “fig leaves”—addictions and coping behaviors that help us to hide and control our chaos. Pornography can become a person’s primary method of escape, a fantasy or alternative world. The Pain Cycle is born out of the need for self-preservation and is influenced by everything that we experience in our lives, particularly the lies we continue to tell ourselves about our inadequacies and unlovable qualities. Our view of ourselves fundamentally influences our relationships with God, others, and ourselves. When we don’t address the broken parts of our wounded souls, we will resurrect our past and repeat it in our current and future relationships. This keeps us reliving the past through compulsive repetition or fearful avoidance.

Our suffering is then a result of our inability, or unwillingness, to honestly face the pain and our destructive coping in our lives, which eventually leads to our brokenness being exposed, and more suffering. We must not despair, however. God is involved in the process of making us people of honesty and of courage. We must face our fears, our false selves, and recognize the lies that we are telling ourselves. Then we can accept God’s truths about us, abandon the life of lost-ness, and establish a Peace Cycle for ourselves, allowing us to live in the new life of wholeness as God intends.

### **Where Do We Find Our Truths?**

How can pastors and church leaders help heavy porn users to break out of their Pain Cycle so that they can accept God’s truths about their lives and break free of their compulsive desire to hide or escape through pornography?

For me, it was important to uncover the primary emotions that drove me to escape through pornography. My primary feelings of “I am a failure” and “I am defective” stemmed from a lack of love and

affirmation from my father early in my life. I had hoped that my athletic success in college and as a pitcher with the Detroit Tigers would give me a sense of significance and self-worth. In hindsight, I now realize my brain was already hardwired to a performance-driven identity. I thought giving my life to Christ and receiving his forgiveness would deliver me from these destructive feelings and behaviors, but my addiction to performance was transferred to my service to God and the Christian community as a local pastor.

As a pastor, I believed I could control my occasional visits to porn sites. In hindsight, I can clearly see that pornography became my way of escaping from failures of the past and disappointments of today. In order for me to be set free, I had to accept that there was a fine line separating a casual user of pornography and a sexual addict—and it's far too easy to cross that line. I also had to accept that I was not a failure and that my relationship to God and my family did not depend on my performance record.

### **How To Help**

As a pastor or church leader, you can help someone who is struggling with porn to come out of hiding and choose to be honest and authentic. First, examine the culture of your church? Is your church a safe place for someone to share their deepest fears and addictive behaviors? Do you offer grace from the pulpit or do you publicly shame “sinners”? Are there small, confidential accountability groups where anyone struggling with pornography addiction can feel safe to be soberly honest with themselves, others, and God.

Second, teach your community about the Pain and Peace Cycles; help them learn their deepest truths: “I am valuable; I am the righteousness of God in Christ Jesus; I am forgiven.” These deep biblical truths can over time minimize and disempower the self-defeating emotions and

lies that people tell themselves. The mind can be renewed through the rewiring of the brain, creating new neuropathways in the brain.

Finally, you can partner with a sexual addiction specialist in your area. Encourage anyone from your church community who is struggling with porn usage to seek out a sexual addiction specialist or counselor who can help develop a game plan of deliverance and restoration.

### **REBUILDING A MARRIAGE IN WAKE OF PORN ADDICTION**

When a married man or woman struggles with a porn addiction, that addiction also affects the spouse in profound and immensely painful ways. If you, as a pastor or church leader, are walking with a married man or woman who struggles with a porn addiction, you also need to take steps to help the spouse.

Trust and love are the two most important pillars in the foundation of healthy relationships. Love says “I know you.” Trust says “you are safe with me and I am safe with you.” When trust has been broken, no matter how big or small the violation, our hearts will begin to close and our souls shrink. This is part of our natural survival instinct. It is possible to love somebody but not trust them.

Discovering that a partner is struggling with pornography is a huge violation of trust. What can you do to help two people who have been wounded by a porn addiction repair the fabric of trust that must exist in a healthy marriage?

Help a wounded spouse first turn to God. Let them know they can trust God—even when they have no trust in their partners. Teach them of God’s faithfulness at all times and how he draws near to those who are hurting. “The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit” (Ps. 34:18).

I (Robin) know first-hand that discovering your spouse is addicted to pornography is like experiencing a hurricane. It violates our sense of

trust, of safety, of privacy, of union. Rebuilding from a hurricane is not easy or quick, but it can be done. It will be a journey to rebuild trust, a journey that leads from crisis to wholeness.

We believe couples travel through five stages in order to restore TRUST after sexual betrayal: Trauma, Rage, Understanding, Sorrow, Turning toward God's grace. As a pastor or church leader or Christian counselor, help betrayed spouses and wounded couples in your community recognize and travel through these stages on the road to a restored relationship.

### **Trauma**

Trauma must be recognized and acknowledged before healing can take place. Facing the sober reality of shattered dreams and the loss of a relationship is the first stage of moving forward to rebuilding trust. When a spouse is confronted with a threat to physical integrity or emotional well-being, the threat overwhelms coping mechanisms and often evokes intense reactions of danger, helplessness, or horror. We no longer are able to trust. In this relationship crisis, we resist what we need the most: love.

Trauma, by nature, overwhelms our capacity to endure and leaves us feeling helpless and powerless. A trauma survivor does not have the inner or external resources to metabolize or integrate the experience. Therefore, trauma begets trauma, producing exhaustion on every level. Trauma survivors are physiologically, emotionally, cognitively, and spiritually depleted. The sympathetic nervous system is vigilantly scanning the environment for dangerous stimuli, creating a readiness to fight, flee, or freeze at the slightest provocation.

The healing of relational trauma is a long journey that requires proper assessment, proper resources, and the willingness of the violator to do whatever it takes to restore the soul of the one they have wounded.

Because trauma keeps the wounded soul in a state of survival, marriage experts agree that couples heal better if the offending spouse supplies all information requested by the betrayed partner.

The wounded spouse needs to reach the point where she or he can talk about the betrayal without pain. If they never, ever discuss it, they cannot recover. Many spouses—and some pastors and even therapists—assume that going over the details of an offense will only further upset the aggrieved partner. But the truth is that a willingness to talk rebuilds trust. The offender must be willing to not hold back, to keep no more secrets. If more details emerge later, the spouse may feel newly betrayed.

### **Rage**

Protest is necessary before healing can begin. A spouse who is unable to experience anger or is counseled not to express anger will only prolong the healing process. RAGE is the indicator that a violation has occurred and that protest is needed. Of course, the outrage or protest must be channeled in a healthy manner, and a betrayed spouse may need help from a professional counselor or therapist to help them understand their anger and how to wisely express it. Stifling all anger is not healthy, but neither is nursing the rage. Chronic anger will lead to resentment and bitterness, which will backfire on the wounded soul and lead to emotional and psychological sickness.

### **Understanding**

Betrayal is a shattering blow to the human soul, and a wounded spouse needs sympathy and understanding. Pastors or Christian leaders must recognize that discovering a spouse is struggling with pornography is a betrayal and that it cannot be brushed off lightly. Proverbs 18:14 says, “A man’s spirit will endure sickness, but a crushed spirit—who can bear?”

Deep grief and sorrow can damage a betrayed spouse for the rest of his or her life unless they receive proper care and experience healing. Injured spouses need to understand why they feel such sorrow, grief, and rage. Help them understand that their feelings are legitimate reactions to a betrayal of trust, which is the building block and the protector of intimate relationships. A pornography struggle or addiction makes a spouse feel both betrayed and rejected, and both are relational injuries that obliterate trust. Betrayal and rejection in a relationship are like “shock and awe” in war, especially when your spouse is revealed as the enemy.

“Can I ever trust this man again?” “Has our whole marriage been a lie and I have been a made a fool?” “How can I have been so stupid to not see this?” Spouses will be haunted by confusing questions like these. We compare this level of injury to being in the intensive care unit of the hospital. This problem isn’t going to be solved with a Band-aid or a little physical therapy. This is a life-or-death situation for the marriage. To downplay this betrayal or minimize the seriousness of the injury will either lead to the death of the marriage or to a state of chronic pain for one or both partners.

### **Sorrow**

Grief is the fourth stage that must be passed through if a relationship is going to heal from a sexual addiction betrayal. Grief and sorrow, which can look like depression, anxiety, or confusion, are part of the healing process. Grief is a profoundly emotional experience that is universal to all human beings, and all recognize the need to grieve after the death of a loved one. But survivors of betrayal or abandonment often feel little support in their grief.

Rejection or betrayal by the most important person in our lives tears at the very fabric of our soul. We begin to question our self-worth, our

belief system, and life itself. Yet rejected or betrayed spouses can be made to feel that they have no right to grieve because their loved one is still alive. Pastors or church leaders can be too quick to tell the injured spouse to “forgive and move on.” Instead, you should encourage the spouse to truly grieve the loss of trust and love in the partner and the relationship.

Grief helps overcome the toxic emotions of resentment and revenge and helps a person stop reliving the painful event, allowing the wounded spouse to move from victimization to empowerment. A support system is critical to help survivors face the pain of loss and give them permission to process the deep and confusing emotions that come with it. As a pastor or church leader, allow space for an injured spouse to grieve and encourage them to find support in that grief.

The offending spouse also must display sorrow for the betrayal. Abstinence from pornography use will not be enough to restore a partner’s trust. Emotional sobriety must also exist. Emotional sobriety takes place when the offender takes responsibility for his or her actions without defensiveness, irritability, blame, or emotional disconnect. Understand that the wounded partner may be in deep pain or shock. Expect tears, rage, and anger. Violators need to consistently assure the spouse that they are sorry for their actions. Expressed brokenness and humility will help the wounded spouse begin to open a closed heart.

### **Turning Toward God’s Grace**

The fifth stage of healing from broken trust is turning toward a kind and gracious heavenly Father who feels the pain of a betrayed spouse and understands the factors that contributed to the violation. In your role as a pastor or Christian counselor, it is important that you help a betrayed spouse see that our God is a comforting and empathetic God who joins us in our pain:

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. (2 Cor. 1:3-5)*

The single best indicator of whether a relationship can survive infidelity is how much empathy a pastor, counselor, friend, or even the unfaithful partner shows when the betrayed spouse displays their pain. For trust to be restored, an understanding of the contributing factors of why and how the porn addiction occurred will help both parties integrate the pain for redemptive purposes.

Forgiveness will be the final step in healing a relationship broken by pornography struggle or addiction. Forgiveness is the crown jewel of love, and we know that we have received God's unmerited and undeserving acceptance of a lost sinner. But forgiveness is a journey that takes time, and the severity of the trauma will determine the length of the forgiveness process. Do not encourage a wounded spouse to forgive too quickly. But do encourage both partners to accept God's forgiveness and to use his mercy and his strength to help them forgive each other.

Teach both spouses about the Pain and Peace Cycles (see example below and the Appendix for fill-in forms). Help them to see how both partners' pain and coping behaviors affect the other. Teach both how to recognize their own truths and to know that they are beloved of God and not "damaged goods." Show them how to use the four steps to remind themselves of those truths and to bring themselves back into a Cycle of Peace instead of Pain.

And teach both spouses not to despair. God is involved in the

process of making us people of honesty and of courage. We must face our fears and our false selves and, with his help, heal them so that we can abandon a life of shame and live in the new life of wholeness as God intends.

### MOVING FROM PAIN TO PEACE: AN EXAMPLE

Andrew had been hiding his pornography addiction for many years. Every time he turned the computer on he felt worthless, unknown, and disconnected. With the help of a counselor trained in Restoration Therapy techniques, he began to learn about his Pain Cycle and recognize how his feelings led to his coping behaviors. He discovered that he was coping with his feelings by getting angry, shaming himself, and numbing himself through more pornography.

His wife, Maria, had recently learned about Andrew's porn usage and was still trying to move past her own feelings of grief and betrayal. When she began examining her emotions and coping behaviors, she realized that she was feeling inadequate, unsafe, and alone. To cope with those behaviors, she would withdraw, get controlling, or become very critical.

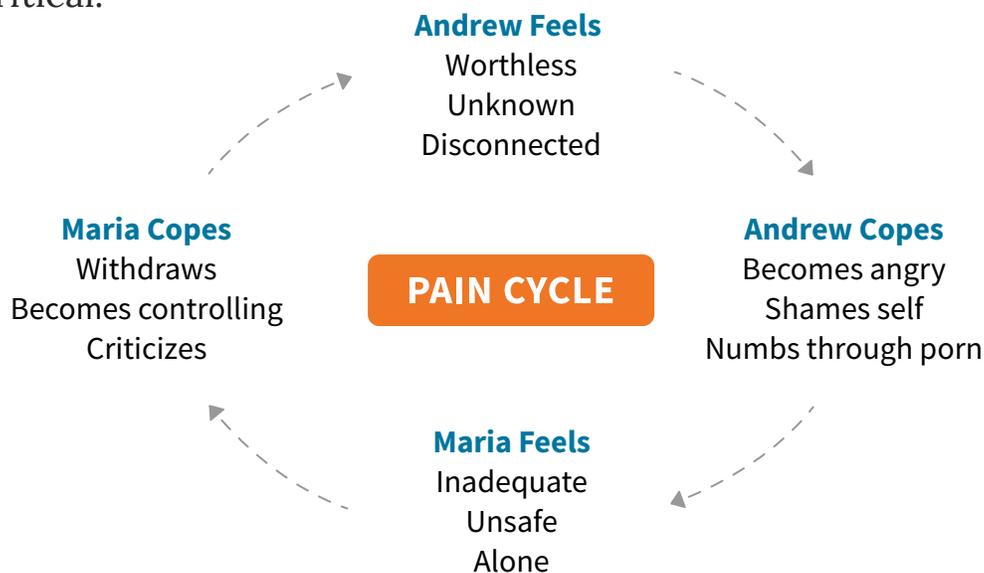


Figure 5.1. Pain Cycle for Andrew and Maria

After helping Maria and Andrew illustrate their Pain Cycles, their counselor taught them how utilizing Restoration Therapy's Four Steps could help them break their looping pain cycles and move toward a pattern of peace with themselves and each other:

1. *Say what you feel.*
2. *Say what you normally do.*
3. *Say the truth.*
4. *Say what you will do differently.*

With the counselor's help, Maria and Andrew learned how to examine their own emotions so that they could begin to talk about the issue of Andrew's pornography use and how it affected their marriage. In order to stay calm in talking to each other, they had to learn how to self-regulate by learning the truths about themselves and respond from a position of peace rather than pain.

Andrew worked to understand that as a Christian man, he was valued, known, and actually connected to many people in his life. He began to understand that his worth grew from being a child of God and that with God's help he could stay connected and be the husband he wanted to be. When he believed those things to be true, he was able to stay calm, value himself, and not numb himself with porn.

Maria had to learn that she was adequate, had some power to make herself safe, and was not alone. She learned to accept comfort from God's grace and from a small community of supporters to begin healing from her trauma and reconnect with Andrew. When she knew those things to be true, she could work to stay connected, give up control, and nurture. Although the Pain and Peace Cycle alone will not solve a couple's problems with one partner's pornography use, it can help the couple arrive at a peaceful place where they can begin to work on the painful topics of hiding and trust.

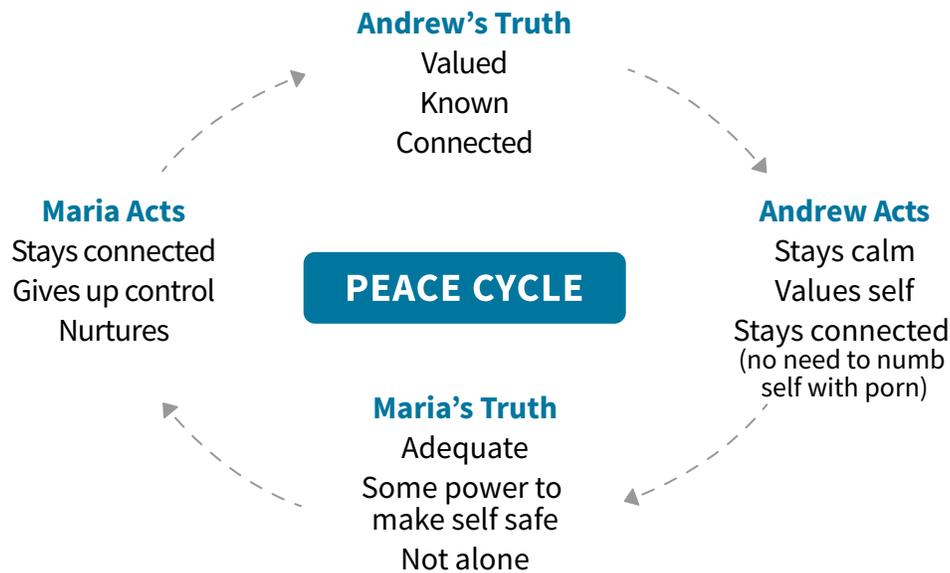


Figure 5.2. Peace Cycle for Maria and Andrew

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## JEFF AND ROBIN REINKE

Jeff Reinke has a master's degree in marriage and family therapy and has served as a pastor for more than twenty years. Robin Reinke is a licensed marriage and family counselor with more than twenty years of experience. They have researched and presented on numerous aspects of pornography. Jeff has counseled men and couples struggling with pornography and its impacts. Robin has counseled women and led women's groups in this area.

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## SIX

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# RelateStrong: Anxiety

*By Rhett Smith*

Anxiety is a hot topic these days. Complaints about and treatments for anxiety have been increasing at a record pace in our culture in recent years, and you can hardly look at the news without seeing another article proclaiming the findings of some new study about anxiety.

One article that has attracted a lot of attention was “Why Are More American Teenagers Than Ever Suffering from Severe Anxiety?” This October 2017 *New York Times Magazine* piece examined the rising rates of anxiety among adolescents and detailed how many high school kids struggle to navigate the transition into college.<sup>1</sup> A June 2017 *New York Times* article, “Prozac Nation Is Now the United States of Xanax,” cited statistics showing that anxiety is now more prevalent than depression in our culture.<sup>2</sup>

I could refer you to article after article, but you get my point. Statistics can vary from source to source, but the American Association of Depression and Anxiety reports that anxiety afflicts around 18 percent of the adult population and 25 percent of the population of thirteen- to eighteen-year-olds. According to Benoit Denizet-Lewis in the *New York Times Magazine* article mentioned above:



Anxiety is the most common mental-health disorder in the United States, affecting nearly one-third of both adolescents and adults, according to the National Institute of Mental Health. But unlike depression, with which it routinely occurs, anxiety is often seen as a less serious problem.<sup>1</sup>

Pastors, ministers, and church leaders should recognize the prevalence and the seriousness of anxiety in our society in order to help their community members who are struggling with it. Simply telling people to “be anxious for nothing” is not sufficient—and usually not even very helpful.

In this chapter and other RelateStrong resources, you will find material to help you understand and address the torrent of anxiety that is swamping our society. Use these ideas in sermons, small-group curriculum, and one-on-one sessions. Teach your community how to use RelateStrong and Restoration Therapy concepts so that they can move away from their Pain Cycles and into their Peace Cycles, and tell them about other tools and exercises they can implement to help alleviate anxiety.

### DEFINING ANXIETY

It seems the definitions of anxiety are as varied as experiences of anxiety. I usually hear people define anxiety as stress, worry, panic, fear, restlessness, nervousness; feeling apprehensive, jittery, or uneasy; or experiencing the fear of missing out (otherwise known as FOMO).

The Merriam Webster dictionary defines anxiety this way:

*1- a) Painful or apprehensive uneasiness of mind usually over an impending or anticipated ill; b) Fearful concern or interest c) A cause of anxiety. 2- An abnormal or overwhelming sense of apprehension and fear often marked by physiological signs (sweating, tension, and increased pulse), by doubt concerning reality and the nature of the threat, and by self-doubt about one's capacity to cope with it.*<sup>3</sup>

It's a pretty good definition of anxiety, and it covers both the physiological and psychological experiences of people suffering from anxiety, but it still doesn't quite get to the heart of the matter. In a wonderful book about anxiety, *Be Not Anxious: Pastoral Care for Disquieted Souls*, Allan Hugh Cole Jr. notes that anxiety shares the Latin root *angere* with anger and anguish. According to Cole, congregational consultant Peter Steinke took that a step further, noting that *angere* "is translated 'to choke or to give pain by pushing together,' with its noun from *angustus*, meaning narrow."<sup>4</sup>

I love Steinke's insight because anxiety sufferers often describe a physical feeling of choking or not being able to breathe very well, like the airways in their throat are being pushed together. In addition to the physical feelings, they often feel like their lives—or at least the options in their lives—are narrowing. People suffering from anxiety feel like their lives are physically and emotionally closing in on them.

### **MY OWN JOURNEY WITH ANXIETY**

This feeling of physical and emotional choking resonates with me personally. I share this story at length in my book, *The Anxious Christian: Can God Use Your Anxiety for Good?*, but let me share a little of that story here.<sup>5</sup> In April 1986, when I was eleven, my mom died after a five-year battle with breast cancer. Two weeks after my mom passed away, I returned to my fifth-grade class and discovered I was no longer able to read out loud. I could read and understand the words, but I literally could not produce a sound. I describe this in my book as the day I began to stutter.

For most of the next ten years, I did everything possible to avoid anxiety-provoking situations, especially having to read out loud or talk on the phone or communicate in any situation where I might feel uncomfortable. Looking back, I can clearly see that the stuttering was caused by the trauma of my mom's death.

But I can also recognize that anxiety had begun its work in me the five previous years as I constantly worried about her dying and what life would be like without her. After her death, I experienced both a physical sensation of choking and an existential feeling that my life had narrowed greatly, that possibilities had closed up around me.

In 1996 I was asked to give the sermon at the Easter morning sunrise service at my small Christian college. The invitation came just a few weeks after I had prayed for an opportunity to speak, having decided

that the only way to work through my anxiety was to literally go through it. My first reaction to the invitation was to say no and thank you, but as I hung up the phone, I remembered my prayer for an opportunity to speak. So, I called my friend back and agreed to speak.

I would like to tell you that the next couple of months of sermon preparation were anxiety-free and that I got up on Easter morning 1996 and delivered an amazing sermon. But they weren't and I didn't. However, I did get up. And I did deliver a sermon. I think I stuttered a lot of my way through it, but I survived. And that experience launched me on a journey to really work through my anxiety. Over the next fourteen years, I started working with therapists and increasing my public speaking; in fact seven of those years were spent preaching each week as the college pastor at Bel Air Presbyterian Church in Los Angeles.

### **ANXIETY IS A RESPONSE, NOT A FEELING**

My anxiety did not disappear, but I seemed to have a pretty good handle on it, and it was no longer impeding my life. But I began to understand my anxiety at a deeper level and deal with it in a transformative way when I began working with the Restoration Therapy concepts developed by Terry and Sharon Hargrave. Through Restoration Therapy, I discovered that anxiety is not a feeling or an emotion but my response to some deeper, underlying feeling. For most of my life I assumed I was feeling anxious and spent untold hours trying to alleviate the symptoms, rather than work on the deeper issue. I did a really good job of working through and reducing the symptoms, allowing me to get up and speak in front of others each week. But that didn't get me any closer to what was actually causing my anxiety.

Through Restoration Therapy, I discovered that underneath my anxiety was a feeling of inadequacy, of not being good enough, not

measuring up. There was also a deep sense of feeling abandoned after the death of my mom, and it was those feelings that had driven my anxiety for most of my life. When I began to understand the underlying causes, I was then able to work on those feelings, rather than just treat the symptom of anxiety.

As a pastor or spiritual leader, you can use the same concepts to help members of your church or organization who struggle with anxiety, and there is a more detailed discussion of these techniques later in this chapter. But first let's examine anxiety from a biblical perspective.

### **ANXIETY AND THE BIBLE**

I frequently counsel Christians who feel they cannot discuss their anxiety with anyone in their church community. All too often, anxious Christians are simply told, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."

Of course, those are the Apostle Paul's infamous words from Philippians 4:6. I intentionally describe them as *infamous* because anyone who both suffers from anxiety and belongs to a church community has heard those words ad nauseam. In fact, a lot of Christians believe their anxiety indicates something is wrong with them, and they frequently hear this verse invoked when they try to talk to someone in the church community.

This verse and the experience of many Christian anxiety sufferers led me to write *The Anxious Christian: Can God Use Your Anxiety for Good?*<sup>5</sup> I consider myself a devout and faithful Christian, pastor, and amateur theologian, and I also am certain from my own personal experience that citing Philippians 4:6 to someone struggling with anxiety too often leads to more shame and feelings of inadequacy. So I researched this verse and what Scripture has to say about anxiety in more depth.

## Merimnao

The Greek word used by Paul in the New Testament, and specifically in Philippians 4:6, is *merimnao*. Bill Mounce, a biblical Greek scholar, defines *merimnao* as “to worry, have anxiety, be concerned” and provides examples of various ways the word is used in the New Testament, including:

“to be anxious or solicitous” (Phil. 4:6), “to expend careful thought” (Matt. 6:27, 28, 31, 34 and 10:19; Luke 10:41, 12:11, 22, 25, 26), “to concern one’s self” (Matt. 6:25; 1 Cor. 12:25), “to have the thoughts occupied with,” (1 Cor. 7:32, 33, 34), and “to feel an interest in” (Phil. 2:20).<sup>6</sup>

As you can see, *merimnao*—like the English word *anxiety*—encompasses a breadth of meaning, with context determining the meaning. So when people who are struggling with anxiety come to you, it is critical that you never give them the message that something is wrong with their faith. Instead, take time to listen and to explore their anxiety and consider possible next steps.

Use your position as a pastor or church leader to discuss the biblical breadth of *merimnao*, explaining how Paul does not communicate anywhere in Philippians 4:6 that anxiety is *wrong*—he simply is telling someone not to worry, and instead lean into God (my interpretation).

## Anxiety’s Concern

Indeed, Paul also uses the word *merimnao* in Philippians 2:20 to describe Timothy, writing, “For I have no one like him, who will be *merimnao* for your welfare.”

Most English translations of this verse use “genuinely concerned” or a similar term rather than “anxiety,” which carries a far more negative connotation. Timothy’s *merimnao* (anxiety) is a beautiful reflection of the relationship that he has with the people in Philippi—it’s a genuine

concern for others. When comparing these two verses, it's clear to me that there are times to be anxious and times to not be anxious.

I experienced this anxiety of genuine concern in September 2017 when I was driving my wife to the airport for a ten-day trip to Rwanda. We were both very quiet, and I noticed myself becoming more and more anxious. My chest started to get tight, and my breathing became more difficult, and I started to worry I would have a panic attack. I started praying and taking some deep breaths. Since I have struggled with anxiety most of my life, this was a common feeling, but one that I had not had in many years, so it was unsettling.

As we pulled into the airport, the anxiety really started to hit me, but as I helped my wife with her luggage, I began to notice a lot of other emotions too, including sadness and fear of loss. As we embraced, I fought back tears and said something like, "I need to let you go before I totally lose it here at the airport."

On my drive home, I reflected on my anxiety and realized that I was experiencing the anxiety that Paul described in Philippians 2:20—an anxiety that reflects concern for others and registers the close relationship between people. My anxiety for my wife was not a negative anxiety that I should not register; it was an anxiety that let me know just how much I cared for her. In that moment, my anxiety was actually a gift as it was a reminder of our loving relationship.

When talking about anxiety, context is everything, and the only way to determine context is to sit with someone long enough to hear about their anxiety. When we negatively judge someone's anxiety at the outset or offer a verse like Philippians 4:6 as a simple remedy, then we lose the opportunity to understand or help them grow and be transformed.

### **How to Address Anxiety in a Christian Community**

Ministers and church leaders do a huge disservice to others and—in

my opinion—to God when they simply quote Philippians 4:6 to people who are struggling with anxiety. There are multiple helpful approaches to anxiety that pastors and leaders should consider.

Begin by communicating—in public and on an individual level—that it’s okay to have anxiety. If you know someone in your community is suffering from anxiety, I encourage you to say, “I am creating a safe space for you and giving you permission to talk about your anxiety.” This kind of permission can be a key to unlocking a lot of the negative assumptions and fears Christians hold around anxiety.

All people, and Christians in particular, need to feel it is safe emotionally and spiritually to talk about anxiety. Too many Christians come to me in my therapy practice after their pastor, or Bible study leader, or small group members made them feel it was unsafe to discuss their anxiety. Pastors and Christian leaders should recognize that people dealing with anxiety often need to be invited to share something so personal. Be prepared to be surprised by the stories of anxiety that emerge when you publicly declare you are creating a safe space and giving permission for your community to discuss the topic.

Ministers should also purposefully share from the pulpit Bible stories where anxiety is present, either implicitly or explicitly. There are lots of biblical accounts of people who experienced anxious times, such as the Israelites fleeing the Egyptian army and then wandering in the desert for forty years, or of Jacob preparing to meet the brother he had wronged, or of fishermen who walked away from their livelihood to follow a little-known prophet. Such biblical narratives may not mention anxiety, but we can certainly imagine it.

Consider preaching on the topic of anxiety itself, helping your community to understand the many scriptural ways to view the topic, such as the ones discussed above. Encourage people to ultimately listen for God in the midst of their anxiety, to ask, “God, where are

you in my anxiety? Or, “God, what are you up to? What are you wanting me to learn?”

## **SIX STEPS TO HELP PEOPLE WORKING THROUGH ANXIETY**

In addition to the public support that you can offer as a pastor, there are many steps you can take to work more effectively with anxious people one on one. Over the years, I have developed a process that might help you provide support to a community member who comes to you for help with anxiety issues.

### **Normalize Anxiety As Part of the Human Experience**

I can't say enough about this first step. By the time someone steps into your office to talk about their anxiety, they have almost certainly been wrestling for a long time with internal and external negative messages concerning their anxiety. The very act of sitting down across from you is an act of courage, in my opinion, and I believe it's important to acknowledge that courage and to let them know that having anxiety is part of the human experience. To be human is to experience anxiety. Welcome to humanity.

Many people struggle to reach out for help, so you offer them a huge gift when you can normalize anxiety. In the process, you let them know that working with you is going to be a safe experience where they can truly be themselves, free of judgment, regardless of how much anxiety they may bring with them.

### **Reframe Anxiety As an Opportunity for Growth**

Anxiety gives us clues about what is going on inside and outside. It shows us the state of our internal lives, including struggles with identity and personhood, and provides information about the state of our external struggles as we wrestle with safety and relationships. But none of this helpful information is accessible unless people believe

their anxiety can actually be used in a redeeming matter. Anxiety either moves us toward health and growth or toward illness and destruction. How a person cues into anxiety will often determine the direction.

### **Identify Root Feelings and Coping Behaviors (Pain Cycle)**

After you have normalized anxiety and reframed it as a tool for transformational growth, then it's time to work to identify its underlying roots. Using Restoration Therapy concepts and RelateStrong resources, help clients identify the roots of their anxiety and then show them how anxiety is a *response* to their underlying feelings. I often supply handouts illustrating the Pain Cycle and descriptions of “feelings” and “coping behaviors” (see the Appendix section) that help people draw their own Pain Cycle.<sup>7</sup>

### **Identify the Truth and Transforming Actions (Peace Cycle)**

Once you have helped clients identify their Pain Cycle, it's important to begin work on the Peace Cycle, which helps them identify an emotionally regulating truth that will direct them toward healthy actions. This can often be a hard step, and it's where I usually spend the majority of my time with clients. Because anxiety is a response to an underlying feeling, it's critical to find a truth that speaks into that underlying feeling and allows the client to move toward nonanxious behavior. As when we discuss the Pain Cycle, I often will use handouts to help clients locate their truth from God, self, or others.

This can be a surprisingly difficult step for Christians. As a Christian myself, I know it's quite tempting to give the Sunday school answer to the questions: “What is the truth about you from God's eyes?” Or “What does God want you to know and believe about yourself?” People often respond to that second question without hesitation, saying, “God wants me to know that I am loved,” or “have value,” or am “his son or daughter.” Although these truths are certainly true, too often

they are simply intellectual beliefs that haven't made the journey to the heart, where transformation takes place. It's important to push back in some gracious and healthy ways to help Christians move from the automatic Sunday school answer to a truth that is life-changing, one they can know deep down and act on.

I often cite Romans 12:2 to my clients: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." I use this verse to demonstrate that the renewing of our minds is the first place to start if you want a truth to work its way through us, moving from an easy, clichéd Sunday school answer to one of real depth that creates change. When we start to think right thoughts, we can place a truth on the path to our hearts where it becomes belief.

### **Provide Tools and Resources To Help Manage Anxiety**

To reduce, manage, and ultimately work through their anxiety, clients need some tools and resources. Fortunately, there are more tools than ever to help with anxiety, and more ways to easily access those tools. I use Restoration Therapy's Four Steps of the Pain and Peace Cycles as my foundation tool, but I also recommend a variety of peripheral tools to help anxious clients; those tools are discussed later in this chapter.

### **Preach the Power of Practice**

My underlying formula when working with people can typically be described as: Insight + Deliberate Practice = Transformational Change. For many people struggling with anxiety, practice is the missing component. Deliberate practice is the intentional and thoughtful repetition of a certain skill. In my practice, I describe deliberate practice as intentionally experimenting with an insight. Angela Duckworth in her wonderful book, *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*, writes:

*Make it a habit. Figure out when and where you're most comfortable doing deliberate practice. Once you've made your selection, do deliberate practice then and there every day. Why? Because routines are a godsend when it comes to doing something hard. A mountain of research studies show that when you have a habit of practicing at the same time and in the same place every day, you hardly have to think about getting started. You just do.<sup>8</sup>*

## **FOUR STEPS: COMBINING INSIGHT AND PRACTICE**

Restoration Therapy's Pain and Peace Cycles and the Four Steps required to move from pain to peace require a combination of both insight and practice. People need insight to recognize their Pain Cycles and create their personal Four Steps. To bring about true life change, that insight must be put into practice through actively performing the Four Steps until they become second nature.

### **Step 1: Say What You Feel**

This first step, a part of the Pain Cycle, helps a person discover how she or he feels in certain situations such as conflict or distress. When I become anxious, I often feel that I am not good enough, or that I don't measure up or that I am alone (see Figure 6.1). When you're working with someone who is struggling with anxiety, help them identify their core underlying feelings.

### **Step 2: Say What You Normally Do**

This step is also a part of the Pain Cycle, and it helps a person recognize his or her coping behavior in stressful situations. Personally, I know that when I feel alone or that I'm not good enough or can't measure up, I tend to cope by becoming anxious and often withdrawing from others (see Figure 6.1). In my experience it is often easier for people to identify these behaviors than their feelings. We are often

much more aware of our actions than of the underlying feelings that trigger those behaviors.

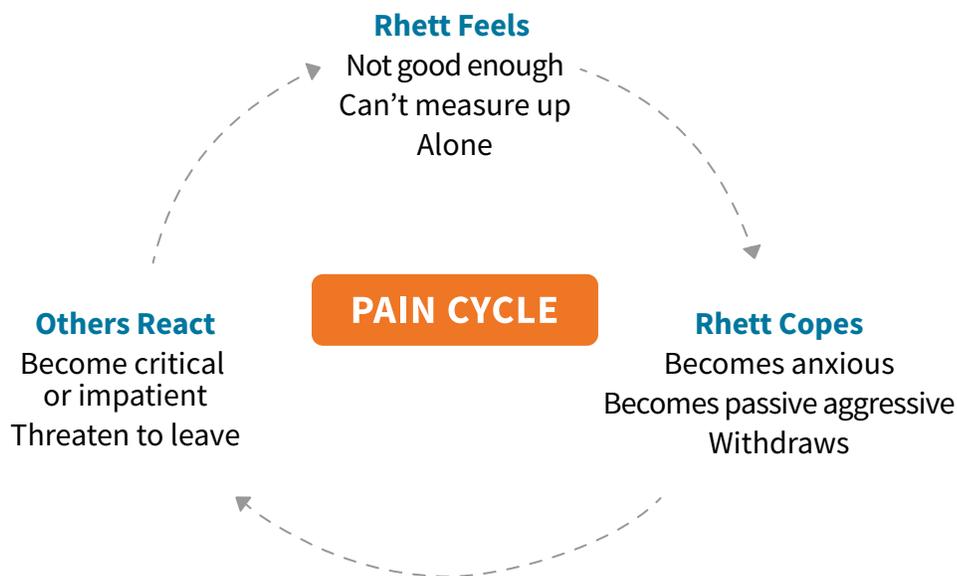


Figure 6.1. Rhett's Pain Cycle

### Step 3: Say Your Truth

This step is the beginning of the Peace Cycle. It often takes a lot of work to help someone identify a truth that resonates with them and their experience when they are emotionally regulated, especially when working with Christians, as described above. When people identify their truth and practice incorporating that truth into their lives, they are learning to emotionally regulate themselves and respond in healthy ways. In the Restoration Therapy model, truth can be identified from three different sources: self, others, God. For me, when I feel myself being triggered into anxiety, I repeat my truth: I am good enough; I do measure up; and I know that I can handle even difficult situations—in other words, “I got this!” (See Figure 6.2.)

### Step 4: Say What You Will Do Differently (And Do It)

This final step is also part of the Peace Cycle, and is the healthy response chosen by a person who is emotionally regulated and

operating out of personal truth. For example, when I'm able to say to myself, "I am good enough, I'm not alone" and "I got this," then I respond by "being engaged, not anxious, and caring.

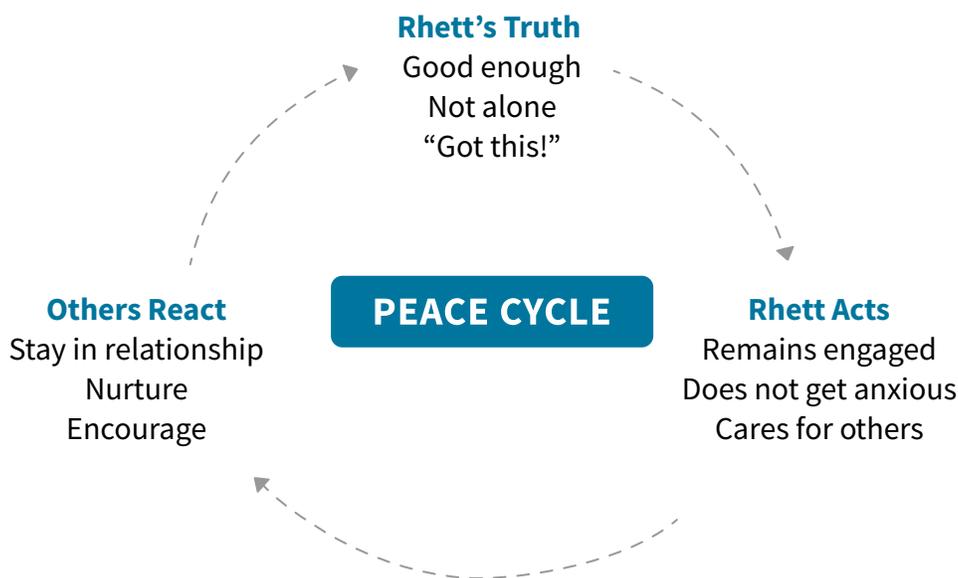


Figure 6.2. Rhett's Peace Cycle

I practice these Four Steps multiple times a day, even when I'm emotionally regulated. And I encourage my clients to also intentionally and deliberately walk through the steps multiple times a day, until it becomes a habit. It's like a fire drill—the more you practice in nonemergency situations, the more readily you can put it into action when the heat is really on.

If you are working with a person who is experiencing anxiety, share the Pain and Peace Cycles with them and encourage them to practice the Four Steps that can help them become emotionally regulated.

## OTHER TOOLS

Though I lean most heavily on Restoration Therapy concepts to help clients who struggle with anxiety, I can also recommend a few other tools and practices that I have found helpful in my own life or in my

clients' lives. You may find one or more of them can be instrumental in helping calm someone's anxiety.

### **Simply Notice. Accentuate. Calm.**

One way to help work through anxiety is to pay attention to it and what it does to your body and mind. If you're working with someone who is struggling with anxiety, encourage the individual to pay attention to it and to experiment with various methods that can increase or lower anxiety. Ultimately, the key is to help them not run from anxiety, but to put themselves into contact with it, and then learn how to be the one controlling the anxiety. For example, before I speak in public, I allow myself to notice an increase in my anxiety. I accentuate it by walking through my Pain Cycle and then calm it by walking through my Peace Cycle. The exercise demonstrates to me that I am in control of my own emotional regulation. It takes practice but is well worth it.

### **Breathing Exercises**

I believe breathing is completely undervalued in anxiety work. I know that sounds silly, but it's true. Breathing is one of the last things most people think of when they become anxious. But as I explained in the early pages of this chapter, anxiety often gives people the literal feeling of not being able to breathe well. So, one of the fastest ways to restore a sense of calm is to open up the airways and take deep breaths from the diaphragm rather than shallow ones from the chest. You can find lots of tools to help with this practice, but I recommend this article about "box breathing" on the *healthline* website as a good place to start:

<https://www.healthline.com/health/box-breathing>.

### **Meditation Apps**

I am a huge fan of meditation because I think it's one of the best ways to teach people to be more in control of their bodies and their

breathing—which helps them learn how to better emotionally regulate themselves. But I’ve learned that meditation can be very intimidating to a lot of people. Some don’t know what to do or are afraid they can’t do it well. And some Christians shy away from meditation because they fear it will engage them in nonbiblical spiritual practices. Recognizing those obstacles, I can highly recommend two apps that have transformed my life: [Headspace](#) and [Don’t Panic with Andrew Johnson](#).

Headspace is super simple to use, and I know it gets results for people. Johnson is a hypnotist by profession, and in the Don’t Panic app I find he can very quickly put a person into a state of deep calmness, all the while explaining how to navigate your anxiety.

### **Walk Through Your Anxiety**

I developed a flash-card exercise that gets people out of their chairs—as well as out of their heads. I ask a client to write all the things they are anxious about on flash cards—one issue per card. Some clients will create five cards while others create twenty-five. When the cards are complete, I tell the client to get up and place them on the floor throughout my office. Then I ask him or her to walk through and around the flash cards, picking up one at a time. My goal is for the client to get the anxieties out of her or his head and externalized onto cards.

When they pick up a card, I tell them to take a few minutes to get familiar with the anxiety on the card—ask questions of it, see what it feels like, and pay attention to what they notice when they walk by and through the cards. When the client is left with one card, we agree to explore that anxiety issue in our session. I find this to be a good kinesthetic exercise that helps clients regulate some emotions and get acquainted with their anxiety. And when anxieties are externalized onto flashcards, it often feels less threatening.

## **Bilateral Stimulation**

According to a definition on a website by Mark Grant,

*Bilateral stimulation is stimuli (visual, auditory or tactile) which occur in a rhythmic left-right pattern. For example, visual bilateral stimulation could involve watching a hand or moving light alternating from left to right and back again. Auditory bilateral stimulation could involve listening to tones that alternate between the left and right sides of the head.*<sup>9</sup>

Bilateral stimulation has been found to be very effective in the treatment of anxiety, so that's why I often recommend people do eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR)<sup>10</sup> or emotional transformation therapy (ETT).<sup>11</sup> Other activities, such as running and drumming, have been found to be helpful in the treatment of anxiety through bilateral stimulation as well.<sup>12</sup> I have added a ping-pong table into my office because I have noticed the rhythmic movement of the game helps calm some clients' anxiety.

## **Self-Care**

One of the most important things you can do when you meet with people who are struggling with anxiety is to ask how they are taking care of themselves physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. A person's ability to care for self is often connected to anxiety and to the ability to emotionally self-regulate. Ask people who struggle with anxiety if they are paying attention to exercise, diet, and sleep (physical). Encourage them to connect with friends or spouse and also tune into interior life (emotional). Make sure they are doing things that stimulate their intellect (mental). And finally, ensure they are doing things that help them connect to God and other Christians (spiritual). These acts of self-care are important to help reduce and manage anxiety.

## Practice Experiments

Finally, I think it's so important that people dealing with anxiety be given little experiments to carry out. For example, if a teen is struggling with social anxiety, I might tell them to just walk through the cafeteria. They don't have to find a seat or engage in conversation, but if they can walk through it every day for a week, we can build on that experiment. If someone fears public speaking, you can assign little speaking experiments, perhaps beginning with ordering food in a drive-through and working up to addressing a small group at church. One way to work through anxiety is to practice overcoming barriers and gaining confidence in the process.

## CONCLUSION

As you can see, there are many tools to help someone reduce, manage, and ultimately work through anxiety. As a pastor or church leader, you will most likely have many opportunities to help members of your community who struggle with anxiety. Be wise in your use of biblical principles and examples, introduce the Restoration Therapy model, make use of RelateStrong resources, and experiment with some secondary tools in order to help them experience peace and freedom from anxiety.

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### RHETT SMITH

Rhett Smith is a licensed marriage and family therapist (MSMFT, LMFT) in private practice, an author, and a speaker. He transitioned into this work from full-time ministry (MDiv). He is the author of *The Anxious Christian* and *What It Means to be a Man*. Rhett's passion about helping others deal with anxiety has grown out of his own journey with anxiety.

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## Rhett Smith

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## SEVEN

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# RelateStrong: Depression

*By Rhett Smith*

“Are you depressed?” I asked the man in my counseling office.

“Depressed? What—depression? No, I’m not depressed,” he said, acting as if I had asked a crazy question.

I remained silent for what seemed like a few minutes, and then he said, “Well, I mean, I may have a bad day now and then, or feel down. But I’ve never been depressed.”

I share this incident to illustrate that depression is not always easy to identify or acknowledge, even in the office of a mental health professional.

Yet despite this degree of difficulty, pastors, ministers, and church leaders should be ready to deal with depressed people—because your church or organization almost certainly includes people struggling with depression. According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America and the National Institute of Mental Health, almost 7 percent of the U.S. adult population experienced at least one major depressive episode in 2016.<sup>1</sup>

In Chapter 6 I provided information and strategies for working with people who struggle with anxiety. Much of the advice offered in that chapter can also be used to help people who struggle with depression. But you should also recognize that there are differences in anxiety and depression and in working with people who are depressed.

## DEFINING DEPRESSION

Merriam-Webster defines depression as:

*a (1): a state of feeling sad: DEJECTION*

*<anger, anxiety and depression>*

*(2): a mood disorder marked especially by sadness, inactivity, difficulty in thinking and concentration, a significant increase or decrease in appetite and time spent sleeping, feelings of dejection and hopelessness, and sometimes suicidal tendencies*

*<bouts of depression>*

*<suffering from clinical depression><sup>2</sup>*

If the above definition sounds too clinical, you are probably right. The reality is that most people who struggle with depression don't use language like that. You're more likely to hear them say things like:

"I am feeling blue today."

"I don't know what the problem is, but I just can't stop crying. It's like I'm sad all the time."

"I just feel like I haven't been happy in a long time."

"Nothing really seems to excite me. I just feel sort of flat."

"I feel nothing. I'm just sort of numb."

Maybe you have heard some of these statements from people in your community. In many ways, words like these are the sound of depression. It's important for you as a pastor or church leader to be

aware of these key words because people with depression often can't describe in any deep way what they are feeling. And if they feel there is a potential stigma on depression, they may never reach out for help out all.

When people don't recognize or are afraid to acknowledge their own depression, they can feel sad and numb, cut off not only from their own emotions but also from the world around them and even their most important relationships. And this can affect relationships with their families, their performance at work, and their ability to fully participate in your church community or other activities. RelateStrong provides resources, in this chapter and elsewhere, that can help you as a pastor or spiritual leader to understand depression and reach out to those who are living under its grip.

### **RECOGNIZING DEPRESSION**

Some of the most common symptoms of depression are:

- *Persistent sad, anxious or “empty” mood*
- *Feelings of hopelessness, pessimism*
- *Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, helplessness*
- *Loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies and activities, including sex*
- *Decreased energy, fatigue, feeling “slowed down”*
- *Difficulty concentrating, remembering, making decisions*
- *Insomnia, early-morning awakening, or oversleeping*
- *Low appetite and weight loss or overeating and weight gain*
- *Thoughts of death or suicide, suicide attempts*
- *Restlessness, irritability*

- *Persistent physical symptoms that do not respond to treatment, such as headaches, digestive disorders and pain for which no other cause can be diagnosed*

Although depression is no laughing matter, I sometimes joke that the list above can sound very similar to symptoms of parenthood. I mention this because depression can often be overlooked by so many people, even those experiencing it. They will blame their symptoms on life circumstances or the weather or some other condition. In reality, many people are living in a depressed state and don't even realize it. And those people will never really get the help they need.

When I was a first-time parent I remember thinking that all the sleepless nights and the colic and the feelings of helplessness and being on edge were just a temporary part of this season of life. That was true, but it's also true that the season triggered a certain level of depression in me. And because I was unable to recognize it, I think my depression ended up lasting longer than it would have if I had gotten help sooner.

People excuse symptoms of depression as if they are just part of living life. And it's true—to a degree—that because we are all human, we all experience varying levels of depression. But being able to recognize depression, acknowledge it, and then get help, is a transformative experience. No one should have to go through that season alone.

## **TYPES OF DEPRESSION**

In my counseling experience, I often see two different types of depression. One seems to stem from a specific life situation, which could be a recent event or something that took place years in the past. For example, someone might be depressed because of a divorce that happened a year ago or suffering from the death of a close friend in childhood. Or they might be depressed because of recent problems in their marriage or workplace. Both situations are specific and concrete in many ways.

In the second type of depression, people often can't identify the source. They may describe depression as something they have experienced their whole lives. They may say, "I can remember as a child always being sad, and that feeling just hasn't really ever gone away." Or, "Compared to all my friends I seem to be really sensitive to my emotions and I feel and take on things in a very deep way. I like that about myself, but it often leaves me feeling down for days."

Differentiating between these two types of depression (there are probably more types, but we're just going to examine these two) can be critical to understand how to help. The first type of depression might require some specific changes to a person's current circumstance while the second might require a deeper look at the person's history. One might require short-term medication or therapy to navigate the depression and come out on the other side of the circumstance feeling better. The other might require long-term or permanent use of medication to help alleviate chemical imbalances.

Of course, everyone is created uniquely; therefore, how a person experiences depression will be unique as well. Recognizing that depression affects people in different ways prepares you to exercise some discernment in determining to know how to best intervene.

### **THREE-LEGGED STOOL**

I know many pastors and church leaders can be nervous about working with someone who is going through depression, especially if they have no professional mental health training. But depression doesn't have to be scary or overwhelming.

Although there may be times when you should refer someone to a mental-health professional, there are many other actions you can take to help someone navigate through their depression. I like to group them in three broad categories: offering safety, exploring emotions,

and providing resources. Visualize a three-legged stool that needs all three legs to stand up—these three approaches all support each other when you are working with depression.

### **Communicate Safety**

First, I think it's critical to create space and give people permission to talk about depression. Like anxiety, depression often carries a social stigma and can come with a great deal of shame, particularly when communities perpetuate myths that depression stems from a personal weakness or failure.

In your role as a pastor or church leader, communicate publicly through sermons or prayers or small-group studies that it is okay for people to speak up about depression. Verbally tell your community, "If you are struggling with depression, I am giving you permission to talk about it." In that way, you begin to cultivate a safe environment that allows people to share.

Sometimes ministers or church leaders assume that their community members all feel safe to come to them for help if they are struggling with depression. But it can be incredibly difficult to open up to a leader who never seems to acknowledge that Christians can struggle with depression or anxiety or addiction. Discussing these topics publicly can provide a powerful affirmation for your community.

When someone does approach you privately to talk about their depression, repeat your message of permission. Tell them, "I am giving you permission to talk about your depression, and we are going to create a safe environment for these discussions."

### **Explore Roots**

When someone approaches you for help, begin to explore and identify the roots of that individual's depression. Restoration Therapy

recognizes that depression is a type of behavior used to cope with an underlying emotion. To truly address someone's depression, you must first identify the core issue. A good place to start may be to simply ask, "When you notice yourself becoming depressed, what do you think is the deeper feeling that triggers the onset of your depression?"

Introduce the Pain and Peace Cycles and provide a list of "feeling" words (see Appendix section) to help people identify what they feel when depression hits. This list of words can be a powerful tool to help people begin to identify their underlying core emotions. I'll explore Restoration Therapy practices and depression in more detail later in this chapter.

### **Employ Tools, Resources**

Consider some tools and resources that can help an individual navigate depression. Not every tool will be appropriate for every person, so you need to listen and try to understand each person and his or her specific situation. Here are some tools I find most helpful.

**Reframing.** Reframing is simply the ability to look at a situation and locate helpful new possibilities. You can ask someone to look at her or his depression and consider how it can be used as an opportunity for growth. See below for discussion about practicing this concept in a Christian context.

**Externalizing and interviewing.** In terms of reframing depression, one of my favorite tools is to "externalize" and "interview" depression. If you want to help someone externalize their depression, encourage him or her to have a "conversation" with depression as if it is an animate object. Or ask people to keep a journal about what they experience when depressed. Have them bring the journal into your next meeting and allow you to read their entries and interview them about their depression. People can often gain insight when they hear

their experiences of depression read back to them or put into an interview format. I find there is no right way to do this, so don't get stuck on specifics; simply utilize what is best for you.

**Self-care.** One of the most important things I do when I first meet with clients is to ask how they are taking care of themselves physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. I have learned that one's ability to care for themselves is often connected to their depression, so I always encourage clients to pay close attention to their exercise, diet, and sleep (physical); to connect with friends and spouses (emotional); to do things that stimulate their intellect (mental); and to take actions that help them connect spiritually to God). These are important categories to help reduce and manage depression.

**Little experiments.** I find it very helpful to set up little experiments that give people real-time experience in learning to navigate through depression. For example, I might assign someone an experiment to just walk around the block in the morning to get some exercise. They can then follow up their walk by meeting a friend for coffee. One way to work through depression is to practice overcoming barriers, which builds confidence in the process.

**Stay in relationship.** It's vitally important that you maintain your relationship with a person struggling with depression, even if results seem discouraging. Stay in touch even if you recognize at some point that the person needs professional help, whether in the form of pastoral counseling, a licensed professional counselor, psychiatrist, or some type of inpatient or outpatient program. Pay attention to your limits and acknowledge what you can and can't do. But know that the human connection is always a crucial piece in helping someone navigate the often lonely journey through depression.

## DEPRESSION AND THE BIBLE

Your role as pastor, Bible teacher, or church leader allows you to explore a biblical understanding of depression with your community. Although depression is one of the most common mental health issues you will face in the church today, it does not seem to be discussed in faith communities as often as anxiety is. Christians struggling with depression can find great solace when they recognize that their struggle is not ignored in Scripture.

### Ademoneo and Muk

Within the New Testament, the Greek word *ademoneo* is translated as “to be troubled, distressed,” as well as “to be depressed, or dejected, full of anguish or sorrow.”<sup>3</sup> For example, in the New Testament we read the following:

*And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled. (Matt. 26:37)*

*And he took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be greatly distressed and troubled. (Mark 14:33)*

*For he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. (Phil. 2:26)*

Within the Old Testament, this idea of depression is best expressed in the Hebrew word *muk* (transliteration), which means to be “low or depressed, or grow poor.” It can also be thought of as “sinking or bending down, or being brought low or humble.”<sup>4</sup>

My theological and pastoral work has led me to conclude that the concept of depression is less nuanced in biblical texts than is the concept of anxiety. As I discussed in Chapter 6, New Testament passages not only warn us against anxiety, they also explore the idea of anxiety as an expression of what we care about. Whereas biblical

references to depression seem to express only the idea of being down, or low, or humbled.

However, I believe depression, like anxiety, can point us toward spiritual growth in our own lives. Depression can bring us down. Depression can sink us low. Depression can make us humble. And that posture can sometimes help us better understand the work of God in our lives.

Parker Palmer writes about his experience with depression in his wonderful book, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*:

*After hours of careful listening, my therapist offered an image that helped me eventually reclaim my life. “You seem to look upon depression as the hand of an enemy trying to crush you,” he said. “Do you think you could see it instead as the hand of a friend, pressing you down to the ground on which it is safe to stand?”*

*Amid the assaults I was suffering, the suggestion that depression was my friend seemed impossibly romantic, even insulting. But something in me knew that down, down to the ground, was the direction of wholeness, thus allowing that image to begin its slow work of healing me.*

*I started to understand that I had been living an ungrounded life, living at an altitude that was inherently unsafe. The problem with living at high altitude is simple: when we slip, as we always do, we have a long, long way to fall, and the landing may well kill us. The grace of being pressed down to the ground is also simple: when we slip and fall, it is usually not fatal, and we can get back up. (p. 66)<sup>5</sup>*

Depression may not be good in and of itself, but the experience of depression may give us an opportunity to grow in life. As a Christian leader, you can introduce this idea to individuals in your community who are feeling the burden of being brought low. Help them trace this idea through Scripture.

## Being Pressed Down

I am intrigued by the use of *ademoneo* in the book of Philippians. In 2:26 we read that Epaphroditus was “*distressed* because you heard that he was ill.” In this verse, the Apostle Paul is describing how Epaphroditus felt when he knew the church at Philippi had learned of his illness. Their concern has literally made him depressed. Translated, it has “brought him low” and “humbled him.”

Although Paul doesn't use *ademoneo* in Phil. 2:5–11, he explores the concept of being brought low in the context of the famous Christ hymn:

*Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

To have the very mind of Christ involves the process of humbling ourselves and being brought low. Following after Christ bring us to our knees in a sense of “fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12).

Although depression is not something we ever hope to experience, if it does come upon us, we have the opportunity to grow from it. It can be an experience that presses us to the ground, humbles us, and points us toward a life in Christ. As a pastor or church leader, you are in a unique position to point out this potentially transforming vision to people struggling with depression.

## **Practicing the Dance**

Henri Nouwen in his book *Inner Voice of Love*, a journal he wrote to describe and work through his own depression, says, “There are two extremes to avoid: being completely absorbed in your pain and being distracted by so many things that you stay far away from the wound you want to heal.”<sup>6</sup>

When you are walking with someone through depression, help them avoid these two extremes. Show them how they can learn from their depression, from being pressed down and humbled, but don't allow them to jump completely into it. Try to help them envision this process like a subtle dance, learning to move into and out of contact with the depression while constantly moving, rather than getting stuck in one position.

## **The Struggle of Faith**

The book of Philippians may be unique in the way it addresses both anxiety and depression in the span of a few verses. We read of anxiety as expressed as concern in 2:20, of depression in 2:26, and Paul's encouragement against anxiety in 4:6. These verses about depression and anxiety, set within the context of Philippians, highlight the struggles we all face as we wrestle with what it means to follow Christ.

The Christian journey is full of ups and downs, and so it should come as no surprise when we experience bouts of depression and anxiety, often both at the same time. This is what makes us human, and it is part of our journey of Christian faith. As a pastor or church leader, you can help your community better understand this concept.

## **RESTORATION THERAPY'S PAIN AND PEACE**

As noted in Chapter 6, I am a firm believer in the equation that insight + practice = transformation, and I am convinced that

Restoration Therapy concepts and RelateStrong resources provide the real-life steps to achieve this equation. I always draw up someone's Pain Cycle in session, identifying depression as a coping behavior. When people see this visual representation, they often realize that depression is actually something they do. And that realization can be life-changing.

If you are working with someone who is struggling with depression, help the person identify both their Pain and Peace Cycles. There are different ways to do this, but the most simple is by sharing lists of feelings, coping behaviors, truths, and actions, to help a client identify personal cycles. Pay particular attention to what words the individual uses to describe her or his depression, which can help you identify the negative pattern of interaction that creates the Pain Cycle (see Figure 7.1). You should also listen for words that identify a person's beliefs about particular strengths and use those ideas to help construct a Peace Cycle (see Figure 7.2). Below is an example of a person working through his Pain and Peace Cycles.

### **Pain to Peace: An Example**

When Lorenzo was five years old, his father was killed in an automobile accident. Lorenzo struggled with depression and anxiety throughout his adolescence and college years. Although he had several long-term relationships, they all ended badly. After each break-up, Lorenzo would sink into depression, isolating himself further and often drinking too much. Although Lorenzo certainly wanted to be married, he remained single into his thirties.

Eventually, Lorenzo sought help for his depression, talking to a counselor who taught him about his Pain and Peace Cycles. Lorenzo began to realize that whenever he was in a serious relationship that might lead to marriage, he would start to feel lonely, insecure, and disconnected. In response, Lorenzo would shut down emotionally,

avoid others, and start drinking too much instead of talking about his feelings. At that point, the women he dated (and also family and other friends) would demand explanations, try to control his actions, or withdraw, which would, of course, make Lorenzo feel lonely, insecure, and disconnected.

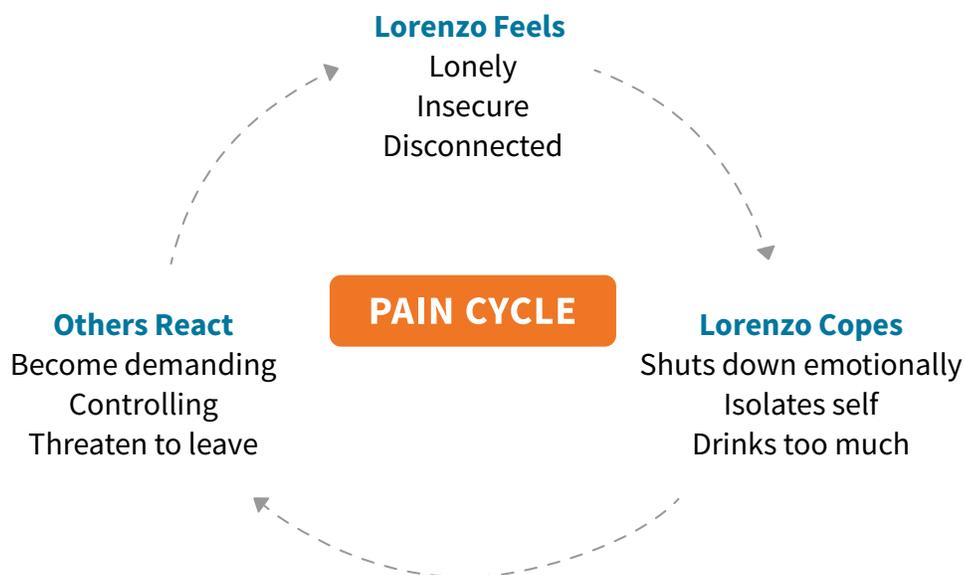


Figure 7.1. Lorenzo's Pain Cycle

When Lorenzo decided he wanted to change his patterns, he began to realize his father's death was the root cause of him feeling lonely and insecure—he had been avoiding deep connections because he was trying to protect himself from being hurt again. To help Lorenzo change his behavior, his counselor taught him about Restoration Therapy's Four Steps and helped him practice the steps whenever he started to feel emotionally dysregulated.

**Step 1: Say what you feel.** With practice, Lorenzo learned how to identify his underlying emotions when he felt himself being pulled into depression. He would name those feelings out loud: *I feel lonely; I feel insecure; I feel disconnected.*

**Step 2: Say what you normally do.** When Lorenzo began feeling lonely or insecure, he typically withdrew even further and often began drinking too much in order to escape from any emotions. Lorenzo’s counselor taught him to recognize these steps as actions he could control.

**Step 3: Say your truth.** It was not easy for Lorenzo to identify his truths, but with perseverance and help from his counselor, he began to see that he was not alone, he was not unlovable, and that he had the power to maintain serious relationships and stay connected to people he cared about.

**Step 4: Say what you will do differently (and do it).** Lorenzo eventually was able to choose new behaviors. He started working to stay connected with others and to avoid numbing himself by drinking or withdrawing. Making these new choices eventually helped him stay in a romantic relationship and to overcome his depression.

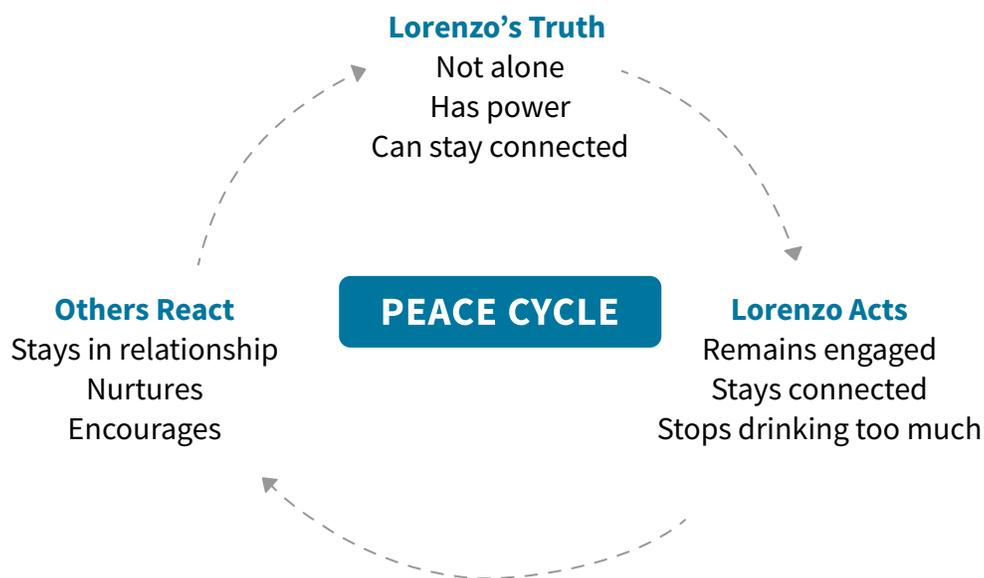


Figure 7.2. Lorenzo's Peace Cycle

## **Practicing for Peace**

Deliberate practice is intentional and thoughtful repetition of a certain skill. In my practice I like to talk about deliberate practice as being those moments when someone intentionally experiments with the insight they have gained in therapy. Restoration Therapy's Four Steps give people a way to practice the insights gained from Pain and Peace Cycles.

After you have helped people identify their Pain and Peace Cycles, encourage them to practice the Four Steps intentionally and deliberately multiple times a day. Tell them to walk through the steps when they are emotionally dysregulated—and when they are emotionally regulated. I compare it to a fire drill—the more I practice when I'm not in conflict, the easier it will be to put those steps into action when I really need them.

As a pastor or church leader, you are probably only too aware that many members of your community will struggle with depression at some point in their lives. Don't be afraid to reach out to these people, to help them understand what they are feeling, and to identify the underlying emotions that lead to depression. Offer them safety, help explore their emotions, and provide resources, such as Restoration Therapy and RelateStrong ideas that can help them work through their depression. Depression can be debilitating and discouraging, but it can also provide opportunities for spiritual growth. Maintain relationships so that you can journey alongside people through the fires of depression into God's freedom and truth.

## RHETT SMITH

Rhett Smith is a licensed marriage and family therapist (MSMFT, LMFT) in private practice, an author, and a speaker. He transitioned into this work from full-time ministry (MDiv). He is the author of *The Anxious Christian* and *What It Means to be a Man*. Rhett's passion about helping others deal with anxiety has grown out of his own journey with anxiety.

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# EIGHT

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## RelateStrong: Addiction

*By Robert Scholz*

Substance abuse and addiction occur in every segment of our society—including your church community. Some pastors and church leaders fail to see the abuse problems in their midst because they don't recognize all of the many signs of addiction—the abusers in their pews don't look like the ones they see in the park down the street. Others hesitate to address the topic of addiction because they don't know what to say or how to help. Some may even believe that addicts can't truly be helped. But failing to address the topic of addiction in your community only reinforces myths and stigmas while forcing addicts and their families to struggle in silence.

This chapter aims to help pastors and church leaders recognize the signs of addiction, better understand how addiction works, and dispel some common myths about addicts and recovery. It also aims to give you hope by demonstrating how you can use Restoration Therapy concepts, RelateStrong resources, and loving Christian responses to help people break the pathways of addiction and restore damaged relationships.

## IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM

The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) defines addiction as “a chronic, relapsing disorder characterized by compulsive drug seeking, continued use despite harmful consequences, and long-lasting changes in the brain. It is considered both a complex brain disorder and a mental illness.”<sup>1</sup>

According to the NIDA, drug and alcohol abuse every year costs the U.S. more than \$700 billion in crime, lost work productivity, and health care. During 2016, there were more than 63,000 overdose deaths in the United States, including 42,249 that involved an opioid—an average of 115 opioid overdose deaths each day. In the same year, 88,000 people died from excessive alcohol use.<sup>2</sup> And those numbers don’t begin to describe the damage done to individuals, families, and relationships.

Pastors and church leaders who recognize the signs of substance abuse and addiction have a better chance of offering help and support before problems become overwhelming and intractable. You should know that a person who is struggling with a substance addiction typically loses control of many aspects of life and fails to fulfill major responsibilities. They also begin to experience relationship problems, particularly with those closest to them. Lying and stealing are also common signs of substance abuse or addiction.

Of course, addiction doesn’t affect just the user—it also burdens families and loved ones and friends. As a pastor or minister, you may first spot the signals of addiction displayed by family members and loved ones. These signs include feelings of helplessness, depression, anxiety, and anger. Relationship failure is often a sign of addiction in one or more of the people involved, and people who see a loved one struggle with addiction may also develop addictive behaviors of their own.

## SEEKING TRUTH AMONG THE MYTHS

Myths abound regarding substance abuse and addiction. Instead of mindlessly accepting those myths, seek out the facts and teach them to your community so that you are all prepared to support people who are struggling with addiction.

### **Willpower**

One of the most common myths is that anyone can overcome any kind of addiction with willpower. If you buy into this idea, you are likely to see addiction simply as a personal weakness, which will make it hard to offer much empathy or support to anyone who is fighting addiction. In reality, prolonged substance use alters the way the brain works, causing it to send signals of powerful and intense cravings, which are accompanied by a compulsion to use. These brain changes make it extremely difficult for anyone to quit.

Teaching very specific steps about how to alter brain responses is critical to help someone break free of addiction. Showing someone how to use Restoration Therapy's Four Steps—which will be described in more detail later in the chapter—can be far more powerful than just imploring someone to show some willpower and quit using.

### **Rock Bottom**

You have probably heard that addicts have to hit “rock bottom” before they will make any attempt at recovery. This myth can lead family and friends to delay getting help for someone who is abusing drugs or alcohol. The truth is that recovery can begin at any point in the addiction process.

In fact, given the way substance abuse impacts the brain, the earlier a person can get treatment, the better. The longer drug abuse continues, the stronger the addiction becomes and the harder it is to treat. In addition, the longer a person misuses alcohol or drugs, the more likely

they are to face negative consequences, such as legal and financial troubles, health problems, lost jobs, and ruptured relationships.

Sometimes family members or close friends have trouble responding to a loved one's problems because they are experiencing their own pain related to the addiction. In your role as a pastor or church leader, you may have the chance to make a big difference in these situations, helping both the addict and the family find the help and support they need as soon as possible.

### **Incurable Disease**

It is true that substance abuse and addiction changes a person's brain, but it is a myth that addiction is an untreatable disease. Although most experts agree that addiction is a brain-based disorder, they do not believe that a person is a helpless victim with no ways to combat the malady. The brain changes related to addiction can be treated and reversed through therapy, medication, exercise, and other treatments.

Unlike some physical diseases, addiction does not strike randomly. A high percentage of substance abusers have significant histories of trauma, mental health concerns, and relationship problems. Many people who struggle with substance abuse experience deep feelings of distrust and feeling unloved, emotions that are at the heart of Restoration Therapy's Pain Cycle. Anyone who is struggling with addiction can retrain their brains by learning about their cycles of unhealthy self-regulation and begin practicing new ways of reacting to emotionally painful situations.

### **Addicted Forever**

Once an addict, always an addict—that's another commonly held belief about addiction. It is also a myth. Truth is that addiction is different in every person. Some struggle with addictive behaviors for years, and others manage to respond to treatment quickly. The ultimate

goal is a long-term recovery that will allow people to lead normal and productive lives.

Critical to a person's recovery is the ability to learn how to manage pain without turning to alcohol or drugs for relief. Loved ones play a critical role in a person's recovery as they must learn to relate to the addict differently—not responding out of their own Pain Cycle in ways that trigger the person's addictive tendencies.

As a pastor or church leader, you can work with the entire family to teach them about Pain and Peace Cycles and how their actions and reactions affect each other's behaviors. Helping them create new individual behaviors and relationship systems that lead to feelings of safety—where openness and predictability exist—is key to creating long-term healing.

### **Forceful Failures**

Another myth about addiction says that if you force someone into treatment, then the treatment will fail. But a person doesn't have to be voluntarily seeking out treatment in order to have a successful outcome. People who are pressured into treatment by their family, employer, legal system, or church community are just as likely to benefit as those who choose to enter treatment on their own.

However, in order to have the best chance to succeed, the “pressure” has to come through a well-conceived and caring plan of intervention. Chances for success rise along with the number of caring people who are involved and with the amount of empathy and kindness shown to the person's pain and specific situation.

### **PATTERN OF ABUSE**

Addicts don't all look alike—they come from all races, income brackets, levels of education, family settings. But the pattern of

addiction does look the same for almost all substance abusers, and it involves five stages: emotional trigger, craving, ritual, using, guilt. (See Figure 8.1.)

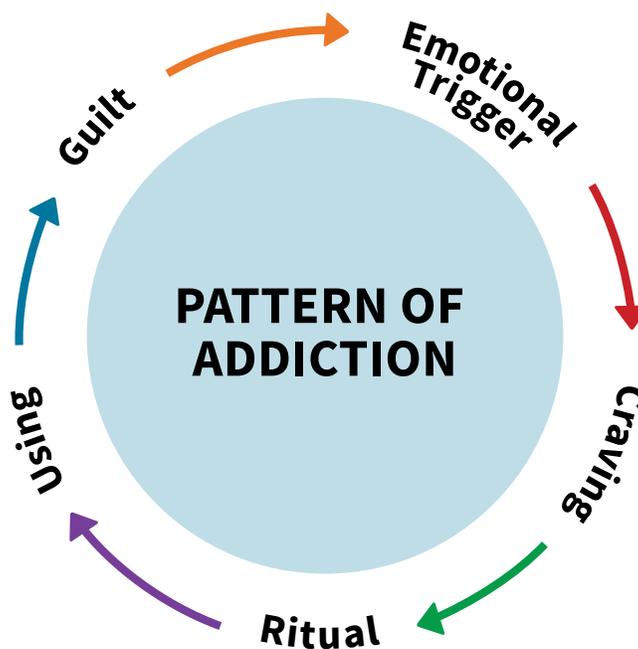


Figure 8.1. The Pattern of Addiction

Substance abuse is not all about substance use. Abuse and addiction begin with emotions—the same ones that trigger what Restoration Therapy describes as the Pain Cycle. People struggling with addiction often feel quite ambivalent about giving up their drug use as it provides them relief to significant emotional pain. No one plans on becoming an addict—they just get caught up in the vicious circle of pain, craving, and guilt.

Substance abuse begins when a person feels unloved, unwanted, inadequate, like a failure, out of control, or hopeless. These intense emotions trigger a person's cravings—not necessarily for the substance itself—but cravings for relief, cravings for human connection, cravings for the courage to make a big decision, cravings for respite from grinding anxieties.

The cravings lead to the next step: ritual. A ritual can involve getting a needle ready. Or walking to the store to buy a bottle of wine. Or cruising the neighborhood where a dealer lives. The ritual creates an excitement that both enables and enhances the using behavior. When people are craving the ritual, a mental switch gets turned off, and they simply cannot consider that anything negative is likely to occur related to their substance use. They descend into a fantasy state, dissociating from reality so that the substance use itself is the only possible next step.

After the use—and the physical recovery from the use—the brain clears and the fantasy state of craving and ritual dissipates, allowing most people to see clearly the problems they have created with their substance abuse. In this stage, guilt sets in. People recognize that they have broken vows to themselves or their families. They know that they have damaged their bodies or disappointed a friend. They realize their use caused them to make a significant mistake at work or miss an important appointment. The guilt can be crushing, and it can trigger feelings of inadequacy, failure, hopelessness—the same emotions that lead to the cravings. And the pattern repeats. Again.

As the addiction progresses, the losses mount, the guilt and shame multiply and the possibility of hope diminishes. A person become physically and emotionally dependent on something that brings comfort and support but also significant disappointment and seemingly insurmountable problems.

In order to break the pattern of addiction, a person must be able to identify their emotional triggers and learn new ways of responding to them. As a pastor or church leader, here is where you can employ Restoration Therapy concepts and RelateStrong resources to help people who are struggling with substance abuse and their families. Teach them about the Pain and Peace Cycles, and help them draw their

own (See Appendix for blank worksheets). Help them understand how painful emotions lead them to act in ways that trigger painful emotions and destructive actions in each other. It is critical to help both the addict and the family members learn how to interrupt their Pain Cycles and learn or relearn their Peace Cycles.

Teaching an addict very specific steps for altering brain responses is a critical part of the treatment process, and the Four Steps of the Restoration Therapy model can be a powerful tool in that process:

1. Say *what you feel*.
2. Say *what you normally do*.
3. Say *the truth*.
4. Say *what you will do differently*.

### **PAIN AND PEACE EXAMPLE**

Supporting a family who is dealing with substance abuse is never easy, and no two situations will look the same. But this example of a mother and son can provide a glimpse into how the situation might look and how you might use Restoration Therapy concepts to help a family in your community.

Faye's youngest son, Luke, was addicted to cocaine. He had started using the drug when he was 16 to fit into his peer group and used only occasionally for years. Now at age 23, Luke was addicted. He had dropped out of college and was living at home—most of the time—and working an assortment of low-wage jobs. His family desperately wanted to help him stop using, but their attempts to help often led to devastating fights. Faye would plead with her son to stay home for the evening and become enraged when he refused. She would threaten to kick him out or report his friends to the police. When the fight became too intense, Faye was likely to turn to her computer, mindlessly clicking

through social media pictures of happy families and refusing to interact with Luke or anyone else in the family.

Faye realized that her behavior was not helping her son, and she didn't like who she became in these fights. She wanted to make some changes in her own life and began talking with her minister, who taught her about her Pain and Peace Cycles. Faye realized that she was feeling like a failure as a parent, out of control of Luke and her own emotions, and hopeless about changing anything. When she felt this way, she would rage at Luke and others, make wild threats, and then numb herself by getting on the computer and playing games or looking at social media.

When talking to the same minister, Luke realized that he initially started using cocaine because he felt insecure and isolated. His older siblings excelled at school and sports, but Luke had struggled in high school classes and failed to make his school's soccer team. He felt his parents overlooked him because they were so busy attending his siblings' games or helping them apply for top-tier colleges. Using cocaine had assured him a spot with a particular group of friends who looked up to him and helped him ease his gnawing sense of inadequacy.

Luke knew that his current cocaine use was affecting his health and ability to hold a job, but he felt out of control of his own fate. His parents were demanding a complete break with his friends and other behavior changes that he didn't feel ready to make. When he tried to explain his feelings to his mother, she would rage at him and threaten to have him arrested or take away his car and kick him out of the house. The fights left him feeling unwanted and unloved.

A fight with his mother would make Luke crave the company of his friends and the atmosphere of their favorite downtown nightclub. Just the thought of driving to that club could make Luke feel more in

control. When he was with his friends, Luke couldn't recall a single reason he should avoid cocaine. After a night getting high with his friends, Luke would feel guilty and stay away from home for several days. When he returned, he would blame his mother for driving him out of the house with her anger, which made her feel like a failure as a parent and out of control of her emotions or the situation. (See Figure 8.2.)

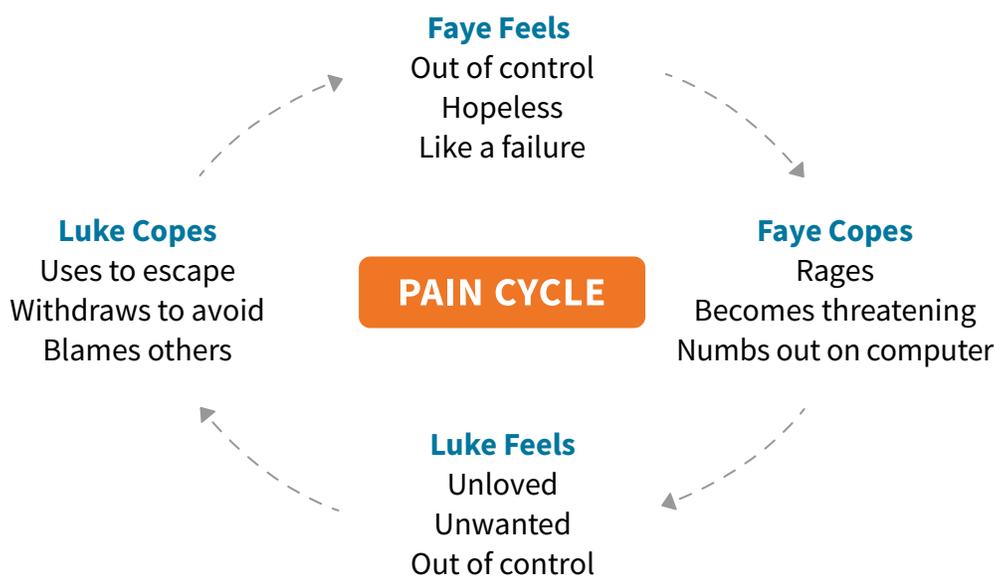


Figure 8.2. Pain Cycle for Faye and Luke

The minister taught both Faye and Luke to recognize their Pain Cycles and the actions and emotions that triggered their coping behaviors. Then she taught them to use the Restoration Therapy's Four Steps to break their usual reactions and establish their Peace Cycles. She reminded them that they were beloved children of God and helped them recognize their deep love and respect for each other. The minister also recommended that the whole family get help from a professional therapist who had years of experience working with addiction and substance abuse.

As Faye and Luke learned about the devastation of cocaine use and how difficult the addiction is to overcome, they realized they had to

change their own coping behaviors so that they could strengthen their relationship for this journey. The fights did not reflect how they truly felt about each other, and neither of them were actually helpless or hopeless. Faye came to accept that Luke’s drug use did not mean she was a complete failure as a parent and she learned to control her anger instead of letting it control her. She began to have hope. When she believed those things to be true, she could stay calm, listen to Luke, and be present in conversation.

Luke learned he was truly loved—he found out for the first time how excited his parents had been when Faye learned she was unexpectedly pregnant and how happy they had been to welcome him into their family. That helped him acknowledge all the ways his family had tried to support him in recent years—he had to admit they had tried to help, even if their attempts were sometimes counterproductive. Luke also began to realize that he did have control over his decisions. When Luke believed those things to be true, he could make different choices and stay connected to his family and others around him instead of withdrawing into drug use. (See Figure 8.3.) Both understood they had to practice these thoughts and behaviors to change.

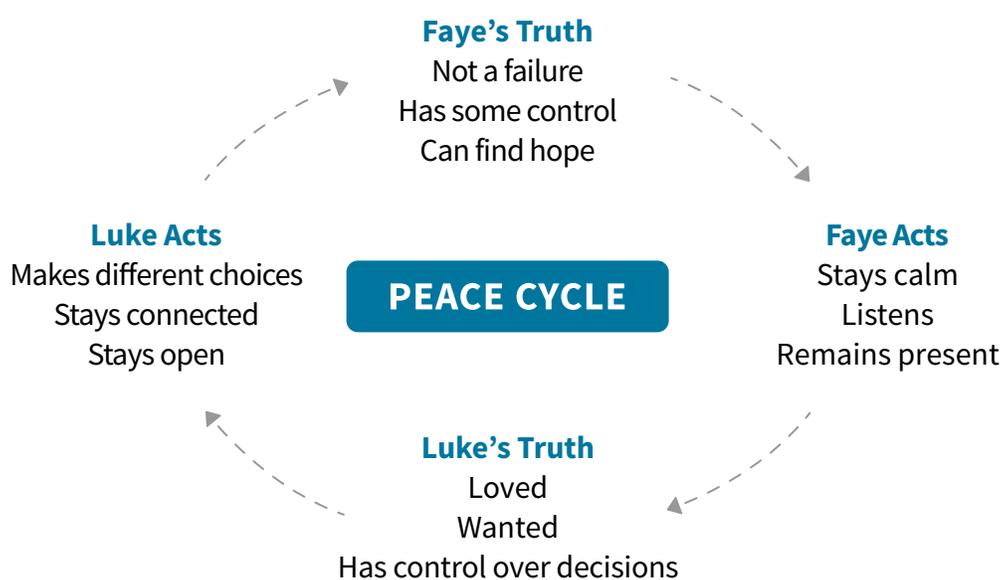


Figure 8.3 Peace Cycle for Faye and Luke

## STAGES OF CHANGE

The example above should help you see one way that you can use your role as a trusted pastor, minister, or spiritual leader to intervene in meaningful ways. However, you should also understand that the path of recovery from addiction is never a straight line and is different for everyone. Understanding the stages a person must go through in order to change an entrenched behavior will help you understand why some people respond to your suggestions quickly while others seem incapable of hearing you.

The Stages of Change model was created by researchers who studied how people actually change, and it has become one of the most widely used models today in addiction therapy. It offers great promise in helping people break away from many kinds of addictions, including alcohol and drugs.

The Stages of Change idea, explored in a 1994 book called *Changing for Good*, identifies six stages leading to, during, and following a significant life change.<sup>3</sup>

- *Precontemplation*. At this stage, people are not considering changing troubling behaviors. In fact, they may not even recognize their behavior is causing problems of any kind. Or they may be quite willing to accept any negative consequences of their behavior because they think the benefits outweigh the problems.
- *Contemplation*. At this point, people may begin to recognize the problems associated with their behavior and start to weigh the pros and cons of making a change. Sometimes an external event, such as a warning from a boss or a health scare, pushes a person from the precontemplation into the contemplation stage. Sometimes the prompt comes from an event that produces a strong emotional reaction, such as the death of a friend or the birth of a child.

- *Preparation.* When the contemplative scales tip people from just thinking about change to actually wanting a change, they begin to plan, to prepare for something different. At that point, they begin to talk about committing to something new and setting goals for enacting new behaviors.
- *Action.* When the preparation is complete, action begins. The plan is implemented; new behaviors occur; goals are reached.
- *Maintenance.* In order to maintain the new behaviors, larger lifestyle changes are enacted.
- *Relapse.* Often, a person will fail to maintain the new behavior and may relapse into previous problematic patterns. Frequently, a person who relapses will return to the Stages of Change cycle, and they may enter it at any of the previous stages, depending on their level of motivation and support.

Knowing about the different stages can help you determine the best ways to meet people where they are and the best paths that lead to where they want to be. Mismatched stage interventions can be about as effective as dispensing cold medicine to someone suffering from a stomach virus. For example, expecting someone in the precontemplation stage to commit to sobriety is a prescription for failure. Interventions offered at the wrong stage can lead to defensiveness, frustration, helplessness, superficial compliance, and higher rates of drop-out or poor follow-through.

Pastors and church leaders find that teaching someone about the model can be the first step on the road toward success. Helping a person struggling with addiction to identify these stages and chart a path through them can be like providing a roadmap to a destination the person wasn't sure existed. Just knowing that each individual can make and implement a custom-designed plan—instead of following a one-size-fits-all approach—can sometimes spur a person into action.

## **HOW THE STAGES OF CHANGE LOOK IN REAL LIFE**

John, 35, has been a heavy drinker for many years. His months-long process of change provides a glimpse into how the Stages of Change process can play out.

### **Precontemplation**

John, who is married and the father of a young child, has a good job as an accountant. He drinks alcohol most days and drinks even more heavily on the weekends. In the past few years, he has gained a significant amount of weight and sometimes displayed inappropriate behavior while drinking in front of colleagues and friends. But he believes his drinking is normal and assumes that such negative experiences happen to everyone at one time or another.

### **Contemplation**

After a company picnic, John's boss privately confronts him about his behavior, describing embarrassing incidents that John cannot even recall. The boss tells John that any such actions in the future could negatively affect his job. John, mortified, goes home and has a long talk with his wife, who supports the boss's conclusion that John has a problem with alcohol. So John agrees to see a counselor, who helps him sort out the pros and cons for changing his alcohol intake. The pro-change list is much longer than the con list, so John agrees to make a significant reduction in his alcohol intake.

He plans to quit drinking on weeknights and to have no more than two drinks per day on the weekends.

### **Preparation**

After John is cleared by his doctor to begin his alcohol reduction plan, he describes his new plan to his drinking buddies and explains that he will likely not be hanging out with them as often. His friends are supportive and agree to help him make his changes.

### **Action**

John begins tracking his alcohol intake and working to develop new ways to reduce his stress without drinking. He continues in therapy, getting help in dealing with his urges to drink and in managing his emotions.

### **Maintenance**

John joins a gym and starts attending a men's therapy group as he looks for ways to make some healthier friends. He eventually decides to quit drinking completely for six months to measure the impact on his life.

### **Relapse**

At a wedding he attends with his wife, John has about six drinks and gets sick, which further reinforces his decision to not drink any more. With his therapist's help, John works to understand what happened that night and how to return to the Action stage of his change cycle.

## CHANGE ISN'T EASY

Restoration Therapy concepts and the Stages of Change model offer pastors and church leaders greater understanding of what leads someone into addiction and hope that there is a way out. But they also should remind you that making behavior changes—especially ones involving physical reactions and emotional trauma—is never easy. Recognizing the degree of difficulty can allow you to be more patient and gentle with someone who is struggling with substance abuse and help you model the type of active love described in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7:

*Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

Christians embrace love as an action because that is the model that Jesus set for us. Science has begun to validate this approach, proving that empathy, kindness, and connection can greatly enhance a person's motivation to conquer an addiction.<sup>4 5</sup>

Other motivation enhancers include:

- *Making a person feel acknowledged, understood, and accepted;*
- *Providing information without pressure;*
- *Offering options;*
- *Giving logical reasons for a particular choice;*
- *Demonstrating a sense of confidence in a person's ability to change; and*
- *Giving positive feedback for positive change.*

The more motivation enhancers you can supply, the more likely a person will be to seek change.

On the other hand, some all-too-common tactics can be motivation crushers for anyone struggling with substance misuse. These include:

- *Making the person feel misunderstood and judged;*
- *Pushing too hard;*
- *Giving a person only one option;*
- *Yelling; and*
- *Displaying no confidence in the other person's ability to succeed.*

The biggest motivation crusher is a tactic that far too many people believe is necessary in dealing with addiction: confrontation. Although movies and TV advice shows often demonstrate confrontational tactics, confrontation is likely to increase a person's resistance to change.

Yelling at or angrily confronting a substance abuser who has let you down might feel good in the moment. It might even win you short-term compliance. But confrontation typically interferes with the addict's development of intrinsic motivation and can lead to more pain and resistance.

## **COMMUNITY SUPPORT**

As a pastor or church leader, you can display empathy and kindness in one-on-one situations and also from the pulpit or in other settings. Wherever you are, never describe addiction as a moral failing—instead acknowledge it as an illness like cancer or diabetes. Pray publicly for those who struggle with addiction—just like you would pray for those struggling with cancer. When talking about addiction, say things like, “I've learned that addiction often is the result of an individual's attempt to cope with the tremendous pain they feel.”

Stop and think for a moment about the impact of your words on people who may be sitting in your pews, struggling silently with addiction or dealing daily with a family member's substance abuse. If you speak of addiction as a weakness or moral failing, they will be driven further into shame and guilt and silence. But if you address addiction as a problem that can be solved, you can give them hope and courage to seek support.

Your church or faith community can take other steps to motivate change in people who fight addiction.

- *Offer Sunday School or other educational programs that address addiction and related topics;*
- *Be sure that youth and college ministry leaders are trained in recognizing and responding to addiction and substance abuse because addiction often starts in the teen years;*
- *Invite community-based groups like AA, NA, and SMART Recovery to hold meetings in your church; and*
- *Work with other community-based agencies during key recovery-based programs, like National Recovery Month each September (find details at [recoverymonth.gov](http://recoverymonth.gov)).*

One of the most effective steps your church can take is to encourage community members to discuss their journeys of addiction and recovery. When you open conversations about addiction, you are likely to hear from members who have successfully battled addiction or substance abuse. Allow them to speak publicly—if they are willing—and encourage them to walk with others in your church who are struggling with similar issues. Churches that provide this kind of community support are the most successful in helping people recover from addiction.

## PROFESSIONAL ASSISTANCE

Addiction and substance abuse are difficult issues, and they can cause significant trauma to both the user and the user’s family. This chapter and other RelateStrong |Leadership resources provide tools that ministers, pastors, and church leaders can use to help people who struggle with addiction, alcoholism, or drug abuse. Even so, you should never hesitate to refer someone in the grips of addiction to a professional therapist or recovery resource.

Pastors should develop a “go-to” resource they can refer to or consult when someone needs help for addiction. It’s a good idea to develop a relationship with one or two recovery specialists in your area so that you have back-up when you need it. In addition, be aware that there are numerous sources of help available to address addiction, including self-help groups like AA, NA, and SMART Recovery, intensive outpatient treatment, detoxification, residential treatment centers, and sober living homes.

Referring a person to a professional recovery resource does not mean you should now wipe your hands of the situation. Continue to be a pastor or spiritual mentor. Follow up with the person. Depending on the situation, you might even contact the professional to see how things are progressing.

Offer an extra measure of support for the family of the addict—and continue to check in on a long-term basis. Recovery is a long process, and people sometimes stop asking about it once a crisis passes, leaving family members feeling isolated and unseen. Encourage the family members of the addicted person to engage in self-care behavior and offer multiple opportunities to pray and talk with them.

If you’re working with someone who is resistant to getting professional recovery help, try not to get confrontational or demanding. Instead, find out why they are reluctant and reflect their concerns.

Allow the person to discuss the pros and cons of getting help. Offer to make the referral or to go to the therapist together. Ask, “What would it take for you to go for at least one session?” If money is an issue, either help the person find lower-cost services or try to develop a fund to help defray costs.

## GRACE AND HOPE

Addiction is a serious problem that can create tremendous trauma for a person, a family, and a community. Fortunately, there is hope. Restoration Therapy concepts and RelateStrong resources can help pastors, ministers, and church leaders show people there are ways they can choose new behaviors and move away from their pain. Researchers are now offering multiple models to help people break the physical, mental, and emotional cravings at the heart of addiction.

Pastors and church communities must put aside their fear of addiction and fear of addicts so that they can offer struggling people the grace and hope found in 1 John 4:16–19:

*God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him... There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. We love because he first loved us.*

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### ROBERT SCHOLZ

Robert Scholz is a licensed marriage and family therapist, educator, and consultant who has extensive experience and training on helping individuals and families struggling with addiction. He has helped hundreds of clients over his twenty-five-year career as a therapist, and has provided research-based training to thousands of professionals, clergy, parents, and others.

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## RelateStrong: Addiction

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# Acknowledgements

*By Sharon Hargrave*

In conducting the longest study on human happiness, Harvard Medical School concluded that “good relationships keep us happier and healthier,” Robert Waldinger, director of the Harvard Study of Adult Development, said in a recent TED Talk that you can see at [ideas.ted.com/4-lessons-from-the-longest-running-study-on-happiness](https://ideas.ted.com/4-lessons-from-the-longest-running-study-on-happiness).

This 75-year study confirmed that Christ’s command to love one another in John 13:34 is the key to living in peace, bringing not only life satisfaction but also ushering in the kingdom of God on earth.

In the study, people with healthy relationships lived longer, were healthier, had stronger feelings of self-worth and identity, were better able to face life’s challenges, and were more charitable. As Christian leaders, are we able to help the people we lead and serve develop these same characteristics? I think Scripture would encourage us to. Psychology and theology walk hand in hand if we let them. I see the church as the major player in helping Christians live well in relationships, and the mission of The Boone Center for the Family at Pepperdine University is to support the church in those efforts.

As church leaders help people navigate relationship issues, churches become more relevant. Many people turn to the church for guidance and help in their relationship joy or pain, and church leaders need to have answers. My first passion is to help strengthen those leaders’ relationships because I believe leaders will always be more helpful to those they lead and serve when they are healthy in relationships themselves. This book and RelateStrong programs have been developed to give leaders tips and tools about how to help others—and they

are also designed to help leaders find answers about their own lives and relationships.

The project has blossomed from the joy and hard work of many of my colleagues, and I want to acknowledge and thank them. First of all, to my husband, Terry Hargrave, whom I have had the privilege of walking with in developing Restoration Therapy, which provides the foundational theory of the RelateStrong programs. Your concepts of love and trust have revolutionized how we think about the development of healthy relationships. To authors Kelly Haer, Connie Horton, Melissa and Scott Symington, Robin and Jeff Reinke, Robert Scholz, and Rhett Smith: your love for the church and your expertise in your fields have inspired me to dream beyond the original idea. To Chris Adams, who originally signed on to partner with me in this endeavor: your understanding of the needs of pastors and the church has been extremely valuable as we have developed this program over the last two years. To the many ministers and pastors who came to our pilot programs and gave us good, honest, and helpful feedback: we are better because of you.

I am also grateful to Pepperdine University and the support received from so many here. To President Andy Benton and Vice President and Chief of Staff Marnie Mitze: your financial support, your guidance, and your willingness to let me set a vision and go for it have allowed this project to become a reality. To the Advisory Board of The Boone Center for the Family: your generosity in time, support, and funding forms the backbone of this project. The other departments on campus who have come alongside of us are too numerous to mention, but I have seen the vision of the University to graduate students and cultivate alumni for lives of purpose, service, and leadership living in many people in many areas, including The Office of Church Relations and our team in Integrated Marketing Communications. We are also extremely thankful

to the National Christian Foundation and their continued financial support of this project.

This project would never have happened without Fuller Theological Seminary, which first believed that training church leaders to live in healthy relationships contributed to their success and life satisfaction. We are grateful for the support of the School of Psychology at Fuller as we took our first steps and for the students who have participated with us in developing the program.

We are indebted to Sketchfolio, our marketing company, who gave us the vision to write this book and walked with us along the way. And to Tammy Ditmore, our editor, who has embraced this project with enthusiasm, intricate care of detail, and patience with the task of coordinating the work of so many authors and the ideas of one impassioned Executive Director.

My prayer is that reading this book changes your life and the lives of those you lead and serve.

**Sharon Hargrave, Executive Director**

The Boone Center for the Family  
Pepperdine University

# RelateStrong: Appendix

**199** Identifying Pain and Peace Cycles

**200** Individual Pain and Peace Cycle Worksheet

**201** Couple Pain and Peace Cycle Worksheet

## Identifying Pain and Peace Cycles

### Feelings

Unloved	Inadequate	Powerless	Vulnerable
Unworthy	Unacceptable	Out of control	Invalidated
Insignificant	Hopeless	Unsafe	Failure
Alone	Unwanted	Insecure	
Worthless	Disconnected	Devalued	
Unknown	Defective	Not measuring up	

### Coping

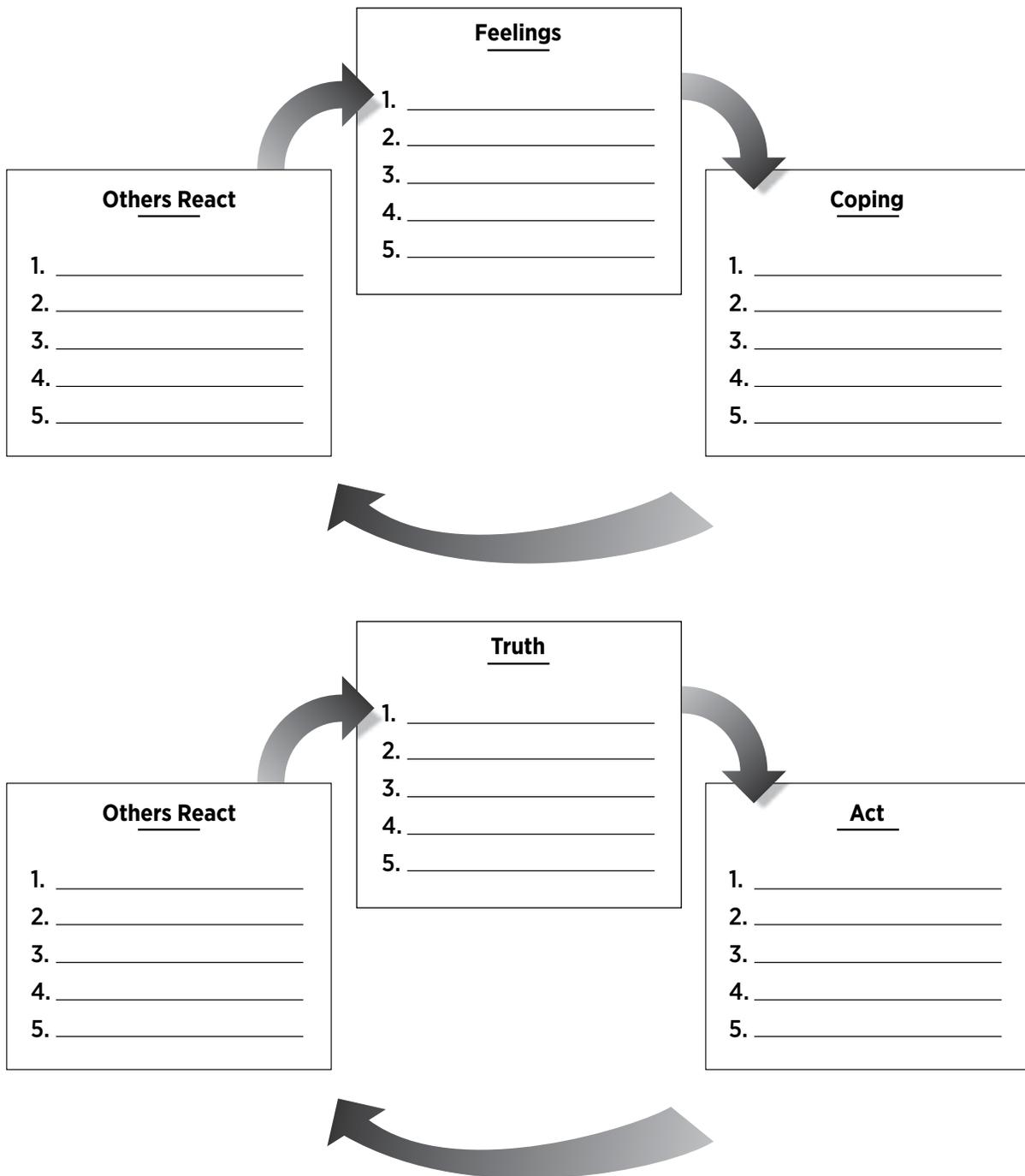
Blame others	Depressed	Perfectionistic	Drugs/Alcohol
Rage	Negative	Defensive	Numb out
Angry	Anxious	Judging	Impulsive
Sarcastic	Inconsolable	Demanding	View porn
Arrogant	Catastrophizing	Critical	Avoid issues
Aggressive	Whine/needy	Nagging	Hide information
Discouraging	Manipulates	Lecture	Get dramatic
Threatening	Withdraw to pout	Withdraw to defend	Act selfish
Hold grudges	Isolate	Intellectualize	Minimizes
Retaliatory	Fault-finding	Controlling	Withdraw to avoid
Withdraw to punish	Shame self		Irresponsible
Disrespectful			Escape

### Truth

Loved	Accepted	Can make choices	Encouraged
Priceless	Promising	Valuable	Connected
Treasured	Significant	Known	Can control self
Appreciated	Never alone	Full of worth	Wanted
Adequate	Valued	Celebrated	

### Actions

Accepting	Non defensive	Energetic	Nurturing
Vulnerable	Hopeful	Supportive	Communicate care
Respectful	Encouraging	Engaging	Open
Giving	Peaceful	Intimate	Welcoming
Let go/relax	Able to persist	Kind	Settled
Responsible	Gentle	Seeking good	Trustworthy
Listening	Merciful	Honest	Listening
Merciful	Honest	Empathic	Loving
Reliable	Humble	Valuing self	Stay connected
Inclusive	Positive	Self-controlled	Turn from addictive actions

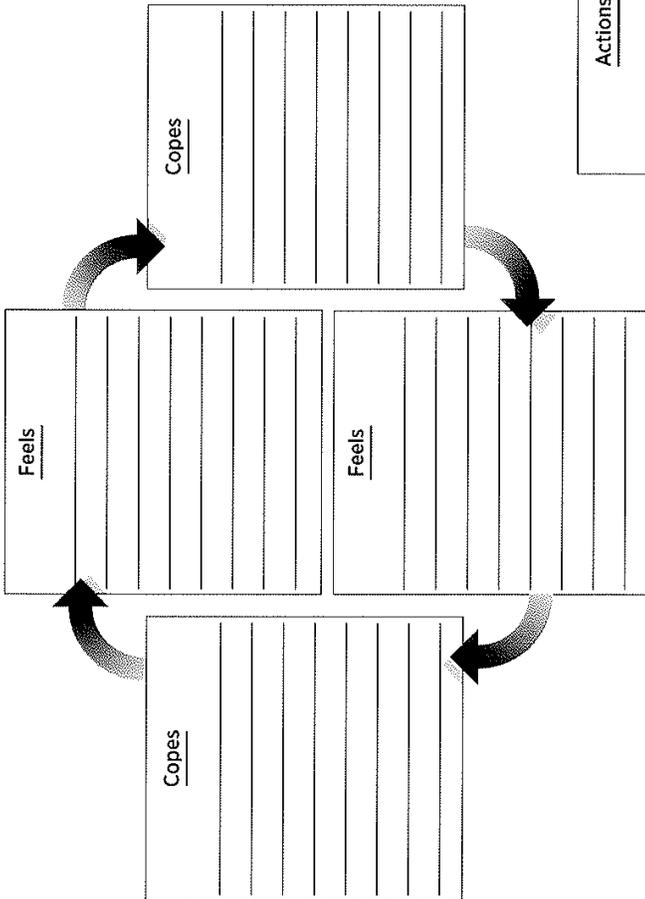


**THE FOUR STEPS**

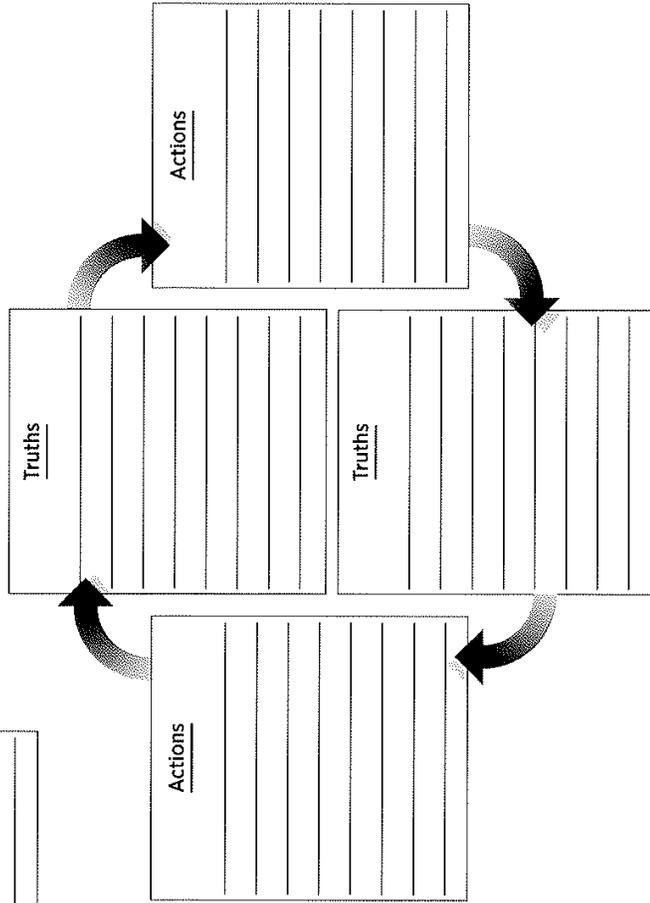
- Step 1: Say what you feel.
- Step 2: Say what you normally do.
- Step 3: Say the truth.
- Step 4: Say what you will do differently.

**THE FOUR STEPS**  
Step 1: Say what you feel.  
Step 2: Say what you normally do.  
Step 3: Say the truth.  
Step 4: Say what you will do differently.

**Pain Cycle**



**Peace Cycle**



*We are blessed to have you as part of the **RelateStrong** community. Thank you for your involvement — as an eBook reader, seminar attendee, eNewsletter follower or Boone Center for the Family donor. Together we elevate our communities by building stronger, healthier relationships.*

This eBook was born out of the many real-world ways we saw the Christian community using the Pain & Peace Cycles to address challenging relational topics. The topics covered in this first edition of the eBook are only the beginning. Please visit [boonecenter.pepperdine.edu/relatestrong-leadership-series](http://boonecenter.pepperdine.edu/relatestrong-leadership-series) to tell us how you use the Pain & Peace Cycles in your ministry and what you'd like to see in future material development.

We also invite you to encourage other ministry leaders to download the eBook, attend a **RelateStrong | Training**, attend the **RelateStrong | Leadership Series**, or relax and connect with their spouse at a **Minister's Marriage Enrichment Retreat**. Everyone can also join our weekly eNewsletter, read our weekly blog, and learn more about all Boone Center for the Family program dates and resources at [boonecenter.pepperdine.edu](http://boonecenter.pepperdine.edu). Thank you!

Learn more about having healthier discussions in the church:  
[boonecenter.pepperdine.edu/relatestrong-leadership-series](http://boonecenter.pepperdine.edu/relatestrong-leadership-series)

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