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Facing the Emotions

A time to cry and a time to laugh.
A time to grieve and a time to dance.
Ecclesiastes 3:4 (NLT)

I wished I could take away all the pain.

Sitting silently across from Jeannie so as not to wake her from her third round of chemotherapy, the dreariness of the white, plain room lined with rows of recliner chairs devastated me. The light streaming in from the window and the view of the parking lot below could not add a trace of brightness to this desolate, quiet place. The only sounds were the footsteps of the nurses and the machines beeping as they released another round of treatment to the three patients, each with their own IV pole and drip bag.

Four recliners to my right, a young woman sat beside her loved one, who was wearing a beautiful headscarf to hide her hair loss. On the other side of the room, an old man rested alone with no one by his side. Glancing at him, sadness filled my heart. *I am so glad Jeannie's not alone.* I was thankful to be there to support my friend.

Jeannie struggled to stay asleep during the exhausting four-hour chemo session. As she napped, my mind drifted back to a special evening a few months earlier at Saddleback Church. Standing near the outdoor

pool next to the children's ministry building, Jeannie and I clapped and cheered for our younger boys at the annual Kids Small Group (KSG) baptism celebration. The U-shaped amphitheater around the pool was packed with happy kids, parents, and grandparents watching the third grade KSG students, all in matching T-shirts, take their turns stepping into the water to be baptized. The crowd erupted with applause and excitement each time a child arose from the pool.

The children's pastor spoke individual words of encouragement to both Conor and Lucas, Jeannie's son, as they each made their public declaration of faith in the Lord. I love how God brings certain friends into our lives for a reason, knowing what the future holds. For Jeannie and me, God had purposely interweaved our paths so we could help each other through difficult times and create some amazing memories along the way. One of the greatest of those was being coleaders of KSG together alongside her daughter, Sophia. That joyful night at the KSG baptism, I snapped a picture of Jeannie with her husband and children, completely unaware of the cancer already growing inside of her and what the next months would bring.

Ping. The beep of the machine pumping drugs into Jeannie's frail body startled me back to reality—much the same way her shocking cancer diagnosis had startled me when she first told me about it. Honestly, her news left all of her family and friends on high alert.

Now, sitting with her in this clinic, I still struggled to make sense of it all. Jeannie was halfway through her six treatments and had already been to chemotherapy two times in just the last month. At her first chemo appointment, she had been talkative and full of life, befriending a man next to her and spreading joy to others.

However, this time was different. The cumulative effect of the drugs was taking its toll. Her body was restless. She was struggling to get comfortable in her chair. She even shared how her body ached in pain as she drifted in and out of sleep,

I knew my friend was fighting hard to battle her cancer. Hop-

ing to stop its spread, the doctor had suggested a very aggressive approach; however, the treatment's side effects were just as aggressive. Jeannie was constantly sick to her stomach. Sometimes we wondered, *What is worse, the treatment or the cancer?*

After each round of chemo, it took about two weeks for Jeannie to feel like herself again, just in time for her to have to go in again for the next treatment. The side effects compounded each time, and Jeannie became weaker as she struggled to keep food down and continued to lose weight.

It was so hard to see her in such pain. I remember picking her up one day to drive her to another chemo appointment. I gasped as I saw the abrupt weight loss in her face. She looked like skin and bones. My heart sank. I was surprised at how quickly her body was deteriorating.

Storms can do this. Raging into your life, they can completely change its trajectory. Cancer is one of those violent storms. Thundering from out of nowhere, cancer can definitely turn your world upside down and leave you dealing with a gust of painful emotions.

I felt helpless to calm Jeannie's storm. Deep sadness overwhelmed my soul as I watched her suffering. Angry that she had to weather this storm, I was like a ball of pent-up frustration ready to burst.

What do you do when such hard emotions build up inside of you? How can you offer support to your loved one when you are exhausted from the storm? How do you deal with that grief in a healthy way when your life is not turning out how you hoped or planned?

Through years of talking with a counselor, I have learned that you have to walk through painful emotions in order to completely heal from them. My advice to you is to be completely honest about your hurt. Put a name to what you are feeling, and share it with someone you trust. Give yourself time to process and feel difficult emotions. The only way to begin to heal is to allow yourself time to feel.

When feelings are raw and the pain is too real, you might try to avoid your feelings, but Pastor Rick Warren accurately stated,

"If you don't let it out in healthy ways, you are going to act it out in unhealthy ways."[5]

Don't suppress the hurt and push it down deep as though it does not exist.

Don't numb the pain with alcohol or drugs, hoping it will disappear.

Don't escape the discomfort by distracting yourself from the reality of the situation. You will be tempted to keep busy by working longer hours or binge-watching television, but these responses will not help.

All of these methods will only prolong the agony and leave you feeling stuck.

You cannot go around your feelings. You have to go through them.

You cannot go around your feelings. You have to go through them. Only then are you able to process them and release them.

Here are some practical ways to process your emotions and take care of yourself when you are experiencing heartbreak.

Spend time with God.

Your ability to successfully deal with these hard emotions is directly proportional to the amount of time you spend with God. Let me encourage you to just hold on to God through it all. Lean in and share your heart with Him. Through prayer, studying your Bible, and reading devotionals, God will guide you along the path. Ask the Lord for energy and strength for each day, and allow God to fill you up with His love, comfort, and peace so you can pour all three into the life of your hurting loved one.

Surround yourself with people who care.

Stay connected with those who are understanding and will support you no matter what. This could be your family, friends, or your small group at church. Choose trustworthy people who will listen and encourage you. Find family members who can empathize

and cry with you. Talk with loved ones who share your beliefs and can offer wisdom and advice. Be honest with how you are feeling and let others know what you need and how they can support you.

Journal your emotions.

Journaling is one of the ways that I just let out all of my raw emotions and really talk with God. It is extremely therapeutic for me. My pen gets writing, and I find it freeing to share the sadness, anger, disappointment, and *why* questions. To be completely honest, you will even find some swear words intermixed in my writing as I just pour out exactly how I am feeling—the good, the bad, and the ugly. I just write all of it. God can handle it. He wants to help you through the pain as you process your emotions.

Give it a try. Remember, there is no right or wrong way to journal. Just give yourself complete freedom to write the real, genuine emotions that you are feeling. Going back and reading my old journals has been faith building for me. Seeing examples of how God answered prayers ignites a fire within me. I can see time and again where God met me and guided me through the whole journey, every step of the way.

Talk with a therapist or professional counselor.

Talking with a professional counselor has been a huge part of my healing. As I sat on a couch pouring out my heart, she helped me identify and work through the many emotions from my heartbreaks. I found the "Feeling Words List" helpful, especially when I was struggling to put a name to how I felt. Her listening ear and helpful insights were instrumental in my recovery. I recommend meeting weekly with a counselor to help you process the emotions you are experiencing.

Join a support group.

Knowing others understand what you are going through will help in your healing. A support group is a great way to connect with others who are facing the same difficulties. Churches or community centers offer grief support groups centering on a specific need like

cancer, divorce, infertility, or miscarriage. (I further discuss joining a group for added support in more detail in Chapter 7.)

Guard your heart and fill your mind with truth

Take a break from social media. For me, I needed to stop looking at Facebook for a short time. Social media can make you think that everyone has it all together and you are the only one whose life has been shattered. This was especially true for me during my divorce. Seeing pictures of families together reminded me that mine had fallen apart. Summer was especially tough because there were so many posts from happy couples celebrating their anniversaries. Each one felt like a dagger to my shattered heart. To protect yourself, take time away from social media.

A great way to fill your mind with God's truth is to listen to worship music. Songs are powerful and can put words to how you are feeling. If you find one that helps, listen to it repeatedly and let the lyrics flow over you. I remember lifting my hands in the air and just crying through certain songs.

In each of my heartbreaking circumstances, reading books played a huge part in my healing. Diving into their stories and hearing the authors validate what I was feeling helped me not feel alone. Knowing that someone understands you is important as you walk through grief. Books also gave me hope. As the writers shared how God brought them through their struggles, God whispered to me that He would guide me too. Books will not change your painful circumstances, but they can alter your perspective.

Practice self-care.

Dealing with difficult emotions will drain you physically and emotionally, so taking care of yourself is very important. Recharging with a good night's sleep is a necessity. Whenever possible, try your best to continue to eat a balanced diet and get some exercise so you don't end up run-down or sick.

I know that many times through a storm, you are giving to everyone else. Your loved ones need your support, extra time, and energy. If there are kids involved, you pour your love and time into them to help them process how they feel. Everyone needs so much from you that you can easily burn out because the emotional withdrawals are happening faster than the deposits.

Imagine you have a gauge like the fuel meter on your car. You can't afford to let yourself go empty. Therefore, find some ways to make deposits back into your life. What fills you up? Is it taking a walk to clear your head, a nap, a hot bath, reading, or journaling? I understand that you don't have big chunks of time to recharge, but sometimes just a little break or fresh air will help. Keep checking your gauge so you don't end up completely drained and out of gas. You know yourself best, so continue to fill up so you can pour out.

Give yourself time and grace.

You cannot rush your grief. Sadly, many people will want to hurry you along faster than you are ready, but you need to set your own pace. Don't worry about other people's expectations either. It is okay not to be okay. Give yourself lots of time and grace as you walk through your heartbreak.

Author Philip Yancey shares a scuba diving analogy when he speaks on grief.[6] He describes it as being underwater. Most people want to get you up to the surface as fast as possible, but it is not safe to ascend too quickly. Scuba divers know there are safety stops at certain depths where they need to wait and breathe to equalize their pressure. When someone is experiencing loss and grief, they need loved ones to wait submerged underwater with them until they are ready to come up to the next level.

Grief will take longer than you expect. Take the time to feel all the emotions at each level before rising to the next stop. "Grief is the place where love and pain converge,"[7] Yancey said. Remember, all the tears and sadness are evidence of how much you deeply cared and loved.

Let's Pray

God, help me process my emotions in a healthy way. Please guide me in finding a Christian counselor or godly friend to share all that I am feeling. I know it is easier to suppress the hard emotions or try to escape the pain, but God, I pray you will empower me to be brave enough to walk through it. I want to allow myself time to feel so that I can begin to heal. God, help me journal my thoughts and feelings to You daily. Guard my heart and mind so I can stay focused on You through the grief. In Jesus's name, Amen.

Truth

The only way to begin to heal is to allow yourself time to feel.