

STRUCTURES OF COPING

From the moment we are born we are introduced to the struggle of pain and the battle to have our needs met. Just the same, we by default seek to find comfort, satisfaction and experience the good and pleasurable things of life. From the beginning, therefore, we have to absorb the reality that pain exists and that the needs and desires we have may not always be satisfied.

We may have varying levels of exposure to pain, and thus develop different ways at a young age to manage it. For those of us that had stable upbringings, pain may have been easily expressed, and comfort and support attainable. Thus pain could be worked through effectively, and its long term effect minimal. But for those of us in more detached early childhood experiences, we may have dealt with overwhelming circumstances that provoked pain, with no actual method to manage that pain. In some dysfunctional family systems, feelings and emotions are considered weak, and some children were punished for expressing pain. This means that pain causes disconnection, and often forces a repressive state. Furthermore, if pleasure, happiness, fun and the good things of life feels deprived, children will begin by default to pursue their own abilities to create independent pleasure or shelter from pain.

The cycle of fleeing from pain and seeking pleasure is as much the human experience as anything we will learn in life. While not often taught through the educational system, it is a basic life skill that we must acquire from the day we enter this world.

Is All Pain Bad?

Most people would believe that by default pain is a negative emotion that must be eliminated. Pain is a byproduct of a broken world, so from that perspective it was not God's original design for us to experience pain. However, since we live in a broken world, pain is a part of that experience. Pain must not be pushed away or minimized. Neither can it be controlled through change necessarily. Pain is actually a signal or alert system that notifies us that something is injured or hurting internally. It tells us that something is going on that requires an expression. Therefore, like any alert system, it requires a response.

It's important to understand the all painful emotions are reactionary, not choice-driven. This means that when something is driving pain, it is an automatic response. In fact, how we think or what we believe directly impacts how we feel. Thus, if we try to eliminate our emotions without figuring out the underline driving message provoking it we'll find that it's impossible to do.

Think of the physical body. It has a system of pain that has been meticulously created by God to force us to find the underlying causes of a problem or condition. Therefore, pain sets off an alarm that invites us to seek help. People without the ability to physically feel pain would never discover or deal with any physical injuries or deeper ailments. They could risk serious infection or even death if they never pursued the necessary care for a medical condition. The lack of pain, therefore, isn't a gift at all -but

could be death trap.

In the same manner, our inner life experiences pain when something has provoked it. Trying to remove the pain without understanding the rooted issue attached it is like putting a band-aid on a raging, infected wound. It may cover it up, but it will not eliminate the deeper cause. Over time, a careless covering will in fact make the original problem that much worse, creating deeper injury and systemic infections of the heart.

Coping Mechanisms

How we learn to manage and deal with our pain is telling of how we will live life. Most of us acquired some sort of coping skill at a young age that we brought into adulthood. We are going to look at four primary methods used when pain occurs.

1. We disconnect from our emotions, closing ourselves from having to feel pain

Many of us learned from a young age how to detach and distance ourselves from emotional pain. In the process of disconnecting emotionally, we also distance our ability to be close to people. This creates a multitude of relational problems. The lack of being able to feel emotionally is an indication of deeper injuries that need to be addressed. While men and women process emotions different, we were all made in God's image, thus male and female were both meant to process emotionally. When that area of our lives is broken, our emotions are masked, hidden, medicated or fabricated. While it does provide a means of coping in the moment, it has longterm ramifications. How exactly do you know if you are emotionally disconnected? Ask yourself.

1. When someone hurts or violates, what is my initial reaction?
2. Am I able to feel the hurt and pain of my situations right now, or do I grow numb?
3. Am I empathetic towards the emotional needs of others?
4. Have I genuinely grieved, felt deep pain or processed internally trauma or sadness in my life?

When we are emotionally disconnected internally, we will usually be emotionally disconnected to God and others. What to do? Emotional disconnection is coping - it isn't the cause. We must always be willing to go into our rooted issues (last week) and understand how we are processing in a given moment.

2. We medicate pain through substance use

If we struggle in this area, we are doing what the world has already taught us to do: medicate pain. The problems emerge, however, because substance addiction drives erratic, immoral and other behaviors strongholds. Addiction overtakes the body, and numbs the emotion. But it not only can't resolve the underlying issue - is promotes a faulty system to gain false pleasure that

quickly crashes into devastating bondage. Substance addiction is oftentimes not perceived as a problem by the person under its influence until it has caused much pain and suffering.

While addiction becomes the problem, the initial problem was the pain that caused an addict to check out initially. Addiction is not a moral issue or spiritual battle alone. It is a coping tool.

Addiction can occur in non-substance ways as well including gambling, religion, codependence and sex. Those compulsive behaviors attempt to medicate the heart just as a drug would do. Simply put, addiction of all types masks pain, but it is counterfeit. It is a prison-inducing bondage that forces the true infection and disease to lurk and even grow within. The only cure of addiction will be found in redemptive-based formulas and a personal encounter with the love, grace and provision of the Holy Spirit.

3. We use anger to overcome pain. Anger hardens the heart and keeps us from having to feel.

Anger is a secondary emotion that masks an initial emotion. Anger is the response to the perception of the loss of something or someone that is considered valuable. It also occurs when our basic sense of security and worth is obstructed. When we use anger, we develop a system of power and control to attempt to overcome the circumstance. By nature, anger isn't wrongful emotion. It provokes us to change something that is negative. But when unchecked, anger runs its own course and knows no end. Anger unmanaged leads to rage, hate, violence and the formation of all relational breakdown.

More than anything, anger is a different form of a drug. It hardens the heart like a drug, and prevents a person from being able to emotionally process. When you are angry, you no longer have to feel pain. It literally is pain replacement. But anger, like everything else, leads to destruction. Angry people are hurting people, and until they are willing to deal with those deeper issues through healing, they will not be set free.

4. We focus on trying to please, fix, manage and change people and circumstances to overcome challenging circumstances. (Codependence).

Codependence is an attempt to manage people and circumstances through self effort. It involves needing to focus on the function of fixing rather than reality of having to feel. Since people who struggle with codependence are usually out of touch with their emotional needs, they try to gain a sense of worth and control by trying to manage other people. In reality, it stems from the unmet needs and pain that wasn't properly addressed early in life. Once a person engaged in codependence as a learned coping skill, there are no limits to its hazardous and dangerous conditions. Lacking self worth and the ability to think, feel and make decisions for themselves, a codependent feels regulated and controlled by what others need. Over time, this leaves them drained, defeated and overwhelmed. Finding these original unmet needs and embracing the unhealthy coping sets a person to experience true freedom.

The atmosphere of healing and recovery from injuries of the heart requires more than anything else the identification of the source of pain. This is no easy task. Sometimes our layers of pain have been woven so deep, we have completely lost touch with the

original pain, and now are dealing with new experiences where we act out of that pain. Therefore, we may not be able to identify pain simply by answering the question "what is hurting me right now?" Instead, we need to seek God - the power of the Holy Spirit to do the work of revealing.

The Role of Comfort

In healing our hearts, we need a power larger than ourselves to engage us in our moments of need and crisis. It all begins through the gift of brokenness and surrender. Our self destructive behavior is only the motion of "acting out." God doesn't identify us by our behaviors, He sees our heart. Believing in God only marks the beginning. We need to not only have intellectual knowledge of His presence, but our heart needs to have an intimate relationship with Him where we can build trust. This is the fatherly role of tenderness, concern and comfort that our earthly experience was meant to mimic, but often wasn't attained. It is God's desire to become our coping tool - our method of resolving pain. He meets us in our pain, He doesn't simply scream commands telling us to stop our "bad behavior".

The Holy Spirit's job is to provide comfort. (John 14:26, Romans 8:26). But to do that, we first need to be able to even get in touch with our pain to ask God to heal us. It is critical to first analyze the type of pain of we are feeling. Pain usually falls in one of the following categories:

1. We feel pain as a result of violation of an action of someone else.
2. We feel pain as a result of a loss - including a person, thing, dream, etc.
3. We feel pain as a result of bad choices.

Once we know where our pain stems from, we can seek solution. Using a "Step 4/inventory approach can oftentimes help us see this truth. We can also write out our life story, or draw our life story on a timeline. If we start at a young age, we can begin to identify where pain developed. God's love is by the far biggest weapon to overcome pain. But God doesn't comfort alone - He also has power to overcome, including:

1. In the pain of violation, God summons us to process and to learn the gift of freedom found in releasing those who have harmed us. He validates our pain, before inviting solution.
2. The pain associated with grief has no boundary - it is a loss that only God can absorb. He meets us in our pain, and is willing to comfort us. But over time, He is able to fill that hole up with His love.
3. The pain of our bad choices has one remedy - the blood. Forgiveness is the gift of a lifetime. It holds the key to overcoming the deepest forms of destruction. God wraps us with grace when we come to Him honestly and sincerely wanting change.

Discuss:: Are you willing to process pain? Can you identify the source? Have you ever worked through rooted issues? How can you be comforted in your circumstances or situation? Do you need offer forgiveness, be forgiveness or simply learn to grieve?