

The Pain Cycle

Reviewing the Past to Understand the Present

We know that you may feel stuck, discouraged, or hopeless in your marriage. But based on our many years of experience with troubled marriages, we are confident about something else: that you can do the work outlined in this brief book and turn your marriage around. You can move out of your crisis or stagnant mode and into a vibrant and growing marriage relationship.

Maybe a nagging feeling that you don't quite understand has you and your spouse living more like roommates than partners. Maybe something big like hate, a financial disaster, or the grind of argument after argument makes you wonder if you can live together or even be in one another's presence. Regardless, you can do this work of saving your marriage.

You can do this!

But in order for you to be able to do this work, you have to face some of the issues that brought you to this place of unhappiness. It is like when you were a kid and you got a bad scrape on the playground. The wound hurt enough as it was, but if you just covered it up and didn't get it properly treated, it festered and got worse with infection or other complications. We don't want you to just cover your marital problems and issues with some easy and unrealistic solutions. We want you to take

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the time to examine the wound, get it cleaned up, and learn what you need to do in order to get the issue healed. That means that you need to take a good look at the past and face some of the causes that brought you to where you are today.

Many people will argue that you should never look back and that you should only be forward focused. We do think that there are some advantages to being positive and looking to what can be done in the future instead of just rehashing the past. But most of the things that we talk about in this chapter are designed to help you understand the part of your past that keeps coming up when you don't understand it and causes you to do things that you don't like about yourself. We want to review this past, understand it, and disarm it so it doesn't control your emotions and your behaviors.

IDEA To Remember:

You can do this.

Of course, an easier solution would be to say that, if your marriage is not working, you don't need to look at the past but instead look for another spouse. In other words, divorce is the answer to marital problems. Could that be right? We don't think so. And we don't think God thinks so.

God is not so much anti-divorce as He wants couples to succeed at marriage. Divorce is a violent act that tears people down and makes it more difficult for families to exist in growing, prospering relationships. As Jeremiah 29:11 says, “*I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.*” Divorce, by contrast, wreaks violence on a family. Is it any wonder, then, that God doesn't want divorce? “*I hate divorce, says the Lord God of Israel, and I hate a man's covering himself with violence as well as with his garment, says the Lord Almighty. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith*” (Malachi 2:16).

As necessary as divorce is at times, we have to remember that it not only does violence to the marriage relationship itself but also does violence to the family and children from the marriage. God does not hate people who divorce but wants his people, their marriages, and their families to prosper. Just looking forward or looking at a quick solution like divorce won't work in the long run; we must look back for understanding.

Your Heart

In biblical terms, your “heart” is the part of you that feels and that drives much of your actions in everyday life. As Proverbs tells us, *“As water reflects a face, so a man’s heart reflects the man”* (27:19). The idea here is that whatever you feel in your heart is at the center of who you are and how you feel about your relationships.

Chances are, you know this already. When you feel loved, honest, and open in relationships, your heart feels at peace and experiences the freedom of being close to another person. If your heart is poisoned with feelings that you are unloved and unappreciated, your heart will hurt and you will feel terrible about yourself. If your relationships are unsafe, threatening, and manipulative, then your heart will shut down as you make efforts to protect yourself.

If your marriage is in trouble, your heart will likely be poisoned with feeling unloved and unsafe. The first step in moving yourself to a better marital relationship is recognizing where your heart hurts and why you do the things you do. Most likely, you and your spouse have hurt each other’s hearts by openly criticizing and attacking one another, by being stubborn and defensive with one another, by being hateful, sarcastic, or harsh with one another. Possibly you have shut each other out behind a wall of passivity, hopelessness, or lack of caring for one another. Whatever the interaction (or lack of interaction) with your spouse, it is necessary to get to the core of your feelings.

The following exercise will help you get to the feelings that you have in your heart with regard to being loved and feeling safe in your marital relationship. You do

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not need to think a lot about every aspect of your relationship with your spouse right now; simply think of the most recent unpleasant episode with your spouse and follow the instructions in the exercise.



EXERCISE 1 Pinpointing Your Emotions

When I am in conflict or argue with my spouse, I generally feel

_____.

(Circle the one, two, or three emotions that best fit the way you feel and then fill in the blank above.)

| | | | |
|---------------|------------------|----------------|-------------|
| Unloved | Inadequate | Powerless | Vulnerable |
| Unworthy | Unacceptable | Out of control | Invalidated |
| Insignificant | Hopeless | Unsafe | Abandoned |
| Alone | Unwanted | Insecure | Failure |
| Worthless | Discouraged | Disconnected | |
| Devalued | Disrespected | Unknown | |
| Defective | Not measuring up | Controlled | |

These are your primary emotions with regard to not feeling LOVED and SAFE.

Your History

If your marriage is in trouble, you no doubt identified some heavy and troubling emotions with the exercise above. For almost all of us, however, emotional issues did not begin with our spouses but with how we grew up. This is not to say that your marriage is not the place where you are experiencing the most emotional

turmoil; it is simply to say that if you are going to understand what you are doing in your marriage, you need to first begin with your past.

Now, before you might close this book and think, “Oh great, another book that is going to blame all of my problems on my parents,” please understand what we are saying. We do not believe that everyone comes from a dysfunctional background and that everyone is “damaged goods” from the beginning. Some of us do come from families that are tough and abusive; some of us come from passive or somewhat manipulative families; and others of us come from pretty good situations. Regardless of your situation, though, it had an effect on you. Think of it this way: If you grew up in a family speaking French, there is an overwhelming chance that you learned to speak French. Likewise, our histories, influenced by the way we were raised, have a large impact on how we view and interact with the world.

You, like all humans, were built to be programmed with important information from your history with those who provided your care. Let’s first consider love, because the way you are loved tells you everything you will know about your identity and who you are. If you feel worthy, precious, and valued, you were likely loved in just that way by your parents or caretakers. If you feel unworthy, insignificant, and worthless, you probably picked that program from either bad information or no information from the people who were supposed to love you. You may feel one of these extremes in your heart, or you may simply have nagging feelings that you did not measure up or that you were a disappointment to one of your parents. No matter whether you feel loved, unloved, or something in between, your heart reacts to how it was loved within the family where you grew up.

Let us be clear: You were built to be loved. God loves you in a way that is endless, selfless, and sacrificing. What He said to Israel He would say to each of His children: “*Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken*” (Isaiah 54:10). Even though your parents or caregivers may not have expressed love to you, God intends you to know that you are precious and worthwhile to Him.

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In the same way you were built to be loved, God built you to be programmed in how to trust in relationships. If you came from a family where they provided for your needs, were there for you, were predictable, and taught you how to be responsible, you likely grew up believing that relationships could be safe and secure. If you grew up in a family where the opposite was true, you probably feel wary and suspicious of relationships and are guarded when you interact with others. Of course, some people grew up in families that were between being safe and being damaging. Perhaps you felt overwhelmed with responsibilities that you did not think you could handle or you consistently found yourself being closer to your mother or father than they were to each other. Some families are clearly safe and trustworthy, some are not, and some are between those feeling totally safe and those that damage.

God is resolute in expressing His trustworthiness to us through His faithfulness. He loves us, but He also expects us to trust Him and obey Him. *“Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant to love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands”* (Deuteronomy 7:9).

So we are built to know who we are by the way we are loved and to be safe by the ways we are taught trustworthiness. Maybe this was done for you growing up and maybe it was not. Perhaps it was done for you partially. For instance, maybe you were loved beyond a shadow of a doubt but your situation was not so safe because you grew up in a family with alcohol or drug abuse. Maybe your family was loving and trustworthy, but your heart was victimized by issues such as racial prejudice or crime. Whatever the source, violations of love and trust make you feel a deep sense of pain.

Now let’s relate this back to our subject: marriage. The point is that most likely, not all of the painful emotions you are feeling originated with your spouse. For most of us, in fact, the emotions we feel with our spouses are the very same emotions we have experienced since childhood.

These primary emotions from our histories are similar to “hot buttons,” representing sensitive issues that existed for us coming into marriage. When these

buttons from the past get pushed in our current situations, we are slammed with the weight of emotion that can be summed up as feeling unloved or unsafe. This weight of emotion comes, not just from our marriage, but also from our earlier history.

Now take a little time in **Exercise 2** to clarify your history a bit so you can understand the background of your feelings.



EXERCISE 2
Recalling Your Growing-Up Years

1. Think of one or two stories about your growing up that impacted you deeply. In these situations, what did you learn about who you are as a person? What did you learn about other people and relationships?

2. Still reflecting on your growing-up years, what were the harmful situations, tragedies, or difficulties that negatively affected your perception of yourself or your view of relationships or other people? What were the healthy situations, people, or occurrences that built into you a positive perception of yourself and relationships?

3. What did you learn about marriage in the family you grew up in? What did you learn about trustworthiness and safety in relationships? How is that similar or dissimilar to your marriage?

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IDEA To Remember:

*Many of your feelings
and coping behaviors
were with you before
your marriage.*

Your Pain and Your Coping

Johnny, a middle-aged man who came to us for help with his marriage, was in a lot of guilt and shame over his behavior. “I just don’t know what happens to me,” he said. “I know that anger is absolutely the worst thing that I do to my wife and my family. After I get angry and I see all the damage that it does to my family, I swear that I will never get that angry again. But then something happens—big things like a car wreck or little things like the water hose left out—and it will be like I just lose control. I get angry all over again and do the same type of damage that I hate.”

Then he asked the question that so many ask: “Why can’t I stop myself?”

There is an answer. And it’s not just that Johnny needs more willpower.

To understand, consider that physical pain will put a person’s body into such distress that it will mobilize coping defenses. The human nervous system has automatic responses that increase our heart rate, respiration rate, and energy level to either battle what is hurting us (fight response) or get out of the situation to avoid further pain (flight response). The way we are made provides us with a wonderful gift, giving us a method to survive.

Emotional pain can put our body in the same level of distress. When we are not loved the way we want or expect, or when we find ourselves in hurtful relationships, our brain mobilizes the same type of energy to protect us either by fighting or by leaving. It is the brain's way of making sure we survive in the face of threat, whether that threat is physical or emotional. If we can understand the emotional pain we feel, then we will likely be able to understand our reactions to that pain as we try to protect and preserve ourselves.

When we have painful emotions such as those identified in **Exercise 1, page 16**—whether through a memory of our history or an unpleasant interaction with our spouse—our brains are built to react quickly to cope with the pain. Just as with anything that our brain practices, we begin to integrate it as a preferred style or a habit. In Johnny's case, when he feels painful emotions, his brain is practiced to respond with anger. But many of us will have different automatic reactions. For instance, if we feel unloved or unwanted, we might tend to withdraw from relationships. We will probably withdraw every time we run across that emotion in the future. The brain tends to practice what it is used to doing.

It is then almost automatic to start practicing as a habit certain reactions or coping strategies toward particular feelings. Remember, we practice these reactions or habits because we believe they will help us survive our emotional pain. Our reactions are totally understandable given the reality that we are simply trying to cope with painful feelings of not being loved or not feeling safe.

The problem is that these reactions become more automatic to us—even the reactions we hate. For instance, we may hate ourselves for always nagging at our spouse, blowing up in anger, running away into addictive behaviors, or going overboard in trying to control situations. We know that these behaviors only complicate our marriage and relationships, yet when the next situation occurs that causes us stress or pain, we find ourselves again committing the same behavior we hate.

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Is this beginning to make sense in the context of your own life? You may begin to grasp the words in Proverbs 26:11: “*As a dog returns to its vomit, so a fool repeats his folly.*” You do unproductive coping behaviors over and over again, not because you are weak or stupid, but because your brain has been habituated to cope with painful and distressing feelings in the same way. In other words, when you feel unloved or unsafe, you are into your coping behavior literally before you even realize what you feel.

It is hard to face the reality that you have some reactions to your pain that are not so acceptable or appealing. Right now, however, it is important not to judge yourself but rather to simply get the truth out regarding what you normally do when you feel pain. Knowing the pain you feel and the coping reactions you have is an important step in knowing your heart well enough to get to the bottom of the problems in your marriage.

**IDEA
To Remember:**

*Reactions to pain
become more and more
automatic to us—even
reactions that we hate.*

Exercise 3 can help you identify some of your usual reactions to pain.



EXERCISE 3
Pinpointing Your Coping Behaviors

1. When I feel the way I have identified in Exercise 1, page 16, I normally cope through these behaviors:

(Circle the one, two or three coping behaviors that best fit the way you act.)

- | | | | |
|--------------------|------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| Blame others | Depressed | Perfectionistic | Use drugs |
| Rage | Negative | Defensive | Numb out |
| Angry | Anxious | Judging | Impulsive |
| Sarcastic | Inconsolable | Demanding | View pornography |
| Arrogant | Catastrophizing | Critical | Avoid issues |
| Aggressive | Whiny/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 | Escape | Withdraw to avoid |
| Withdraw to punish | Perform | Drink | |
| Shame self | Controlling | Irresponsible | |

These are the primary coping behaviors you use to deal with lack of LOVE and to try and be SAFE in relationships.

Putting Emotions and Coping Together to Understand

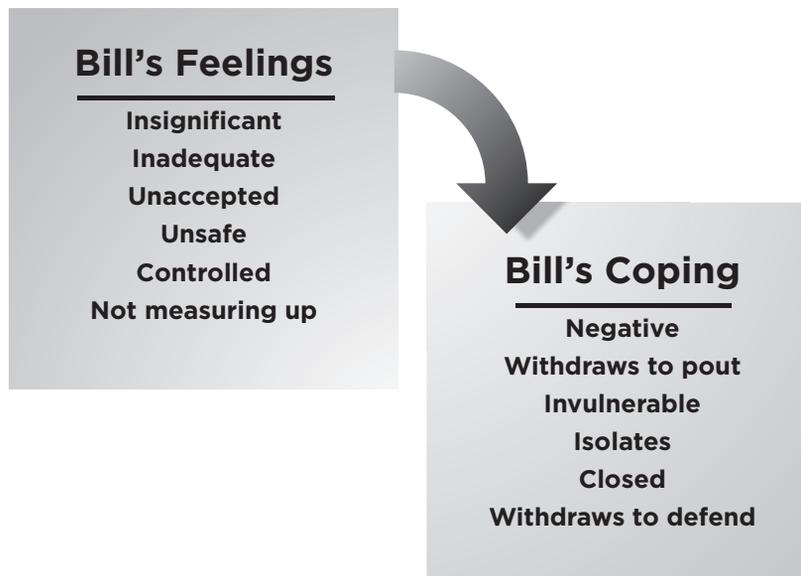
If you place the primary emotions that you feel when in conflict with your spouse beside how you find yourself coping or reacting in the relationship, then you will get a pretty good understanding of how you operate when you feel pain. To understand this better, let's consider a couple named Bill and Sandy. We'll be returning to them throughout the book.

Bill's history. Bill comes from a family in which he was the middle of three siblings. Bill's parents were caring people, but his father was somewhat passive. As a result of this passivity, Bill was never quite sure while growing up whether he was pleasing his father. Bill strove to achieve more and more success in order to try and get a more emotional reaction from his father, but his father simply was more distant and did not give much approval or disapproval, praise or criticism.

Bill's mother, on the other hand, was a take-charge type of person. She was the one who usually set the direction in the family and was not slow in making suggestions for what family members needed to do to be successful or correct problems. It was not that she was critical so much as she was involved in every aspect of the family and the leader in setting direction. Bill's father was more than happy to allow her to have this position and went along with almost all of her suggestions. Bill, however, felt smothered by his mother's suggestions and felt she interfered with his life. He learned from an early age to try and keep his relationships, business, and—certainly—his emotions to himself. When his mother would try and find out more, Bill would counter by giving her less. Even though his mother meant well and simply wanted to give him direction, he consistently felt that anything he did would never measure up to his mother's expectations.

Bill carries difficulties from deep-seated primary emotions from his family. He had the sensitivity and worry that he was insignificant and was unacceptable in some regard to his father. He felt that his efforts to make connection were unnoticed and he was unappreciated. Regarding his mother, he felt unsafe and controlled by her and felt that if he became too vulnerable, he would likely not measure up to

her standards. In order to cope with this pain, he was often negative about himself and focused on his feelings of self-doubt. But what Bill did most of all was to close off and keep his feelings to himself. He would often isolate himself and be suspicious of any effort that anyone made to get information—a fear that he would be controlled. And Bill withdrew from relationships. He withdrew when his feelings were hurt and he was feeling shameful, and he withdrew to control and protect himself from people knowing or controlling him.



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Sandy's history. Unlike Bill, Sandy came from a family in which her mother and father were very unhappily married. Sandy's father was a successful business owner who made his only daughter the apple of his eye. He was organized and hard working, and Sandy learned how not to disappoint him, by excelling in school and working to achieve awards that made her daddy proud. Sandy's father, however, was very critical of Sandy's mother, often criticizing her openly for being "incompetent, stupid, and underachieving." Sandy often felt the discomfort of being closer to her father than her mother was and felt disloyal to her mother for not defending her more. Sandy did not have much respect for her mother, because she saw her as

weak and dependent upon her father, but she consistently pitied and felt sorry for her mother.

When Sandy was in her early teens, she discovered that her father was having a long-term affair with one of his employees. Despite the airing of this affair, Sandy's parents stayed together, their relationship changing little. Apparently Sandy's mom wasn't concerned much about the affair. Sandy, however, felt that her hero dad had been removed from a pedestal and that he had betrayed her by living a lie. She felt that all the love her father expressed toward her as a youngster was unreliable. She began to doubt herself more and more as she felt that if she could not trust her father, she certainly could not trust what her father said about her.

Sandy felt this pain deeply. As a result, she would often cope by blaming and getting angry about the lies and betrayal. Whenever she saw anything suspicious or unsafe, Sandy would feel those old feelings that reminded her of the past, often responding out of suspicion and anger. In addition, Sandy felt unsafe and abandoned by both her parents. To cope, she would try to depend on herself only and set strict demands on how things should be done and whether they were done acceptably.

