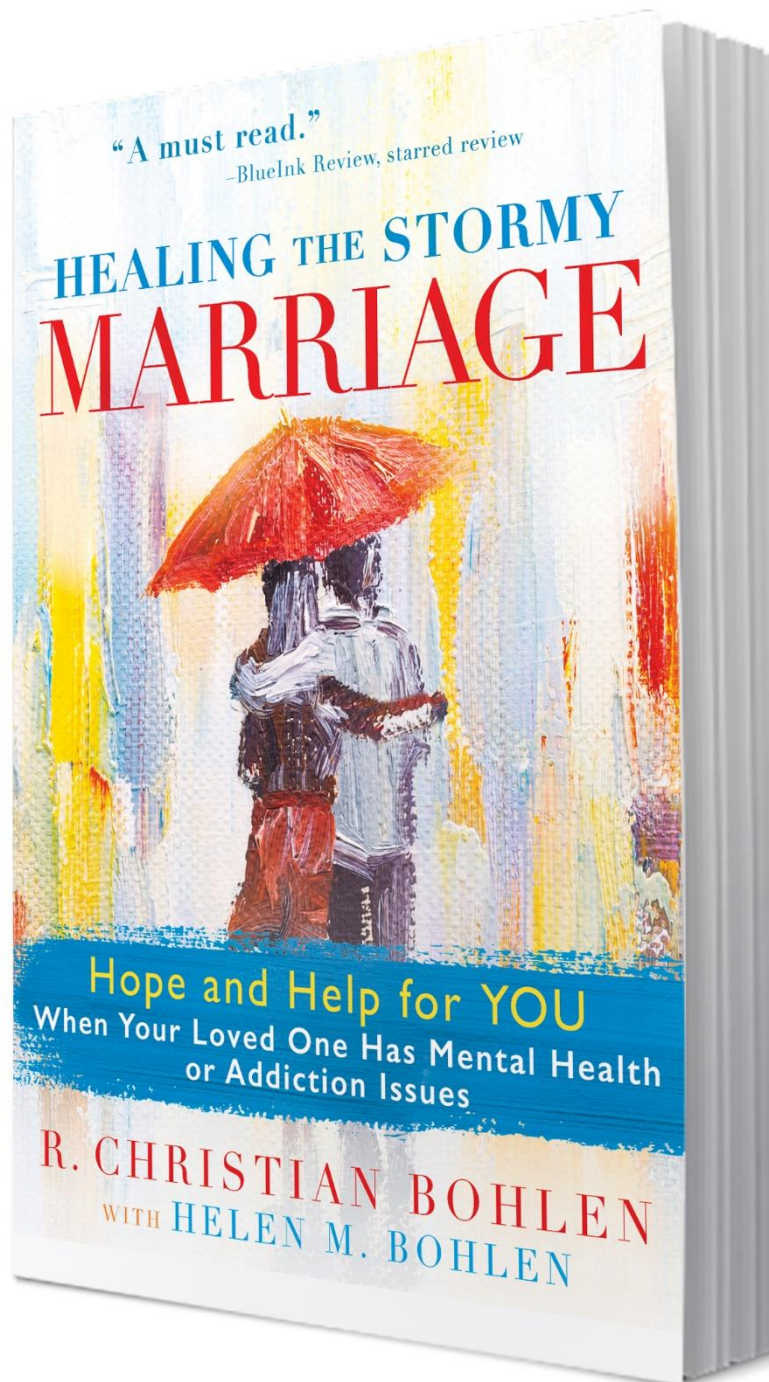


HEALING THE STORMY MARRIAGE

We hope you enjoy these sample chapters!

Visit <http://StormyMarriage.INFO> to learn more.



What Critics and Readers are Saying

. . . for Christians dealing with the challenges of mental illness in their spouse, this is **a must-read**.

— *BlueInk Reviews, starred review*

. . . empathetic . . . relatable . . . practical . . . **a warm, inviting faith-based self-help guide** for married couples seeking to understand and overcome their respective challenges and remain together.

— *BookLife Review*

. . . **highly recommended** . . . neatly wound into Christian beliefs in a way that psychological perspectives alone can't fully address.

— *Midwest Book Review*

What a **profoundly helpful and moving** book! . . . full of hope and wisdom for any marriage in an easy-to-read format. . . practical, spiritually sound recommendations. The author and his wife's transparent stories of their struggles provide **rare windows into the complexity of these challenges** and illustrate how spouses can rise above through Christ. **Highly recommended**.

— *Robert Reich, synod leader and pastor*

So thrilled that a book like this is available. Coupling marriage and mental health, with a lens of faith, is a gift for newlyweds to forty-year partners.

— *Ganel-Lynn Condie, bestselling author, video host, suicide prevention advocate*

Healing the Stormy Marriage **opened my eyes** about ways to improve my own marriage of 41 years! I have not seen any other book that addresses mental illness, marriage, and relationships with so much hope and practical advice. . . The book is respectful and balanced. The format was especially helpful to me for referring back to key passages, charts, and points. I found the Scripture references accurate and doctrinally sound. . . It was lively and kept me wanting to read . . . **This book fills an important need!**

— *Mardi, reader*

I like the way it's written—straightforward but kind. I feel supported reading it. . . I think it will help many couples.

— *Kendra, reader*

. . . a **fresh approach with an inspirational perspective** to a multitude of issues in marriages. Don't all of us need help to some degree?

— *Margaret, reader*

Happy After All . . . offers a **wide variety of tools and practices** that will allow you to pursue health as an individual and a couple.

— *Emily Louis, Abundant Grace podcast*

HEALING THE STORMY
MARRIAGE

Healing the Stormy Marriage

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Another book by R. Christian Bohlen:

**Jesus Christ, His Life and Mine: The Story of Jesus
and How It Applies to Us in the Twitter Era**

Learn more:



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Disclaimer: Readers and their spouses are advised to seek professional diagnoses and personalized recommendations from qualified mental health professionals. This book is not a substitute for medical care from credentialed professionals. Recommendations in this book are not to be construed as instruction, direction, or prescriptive, medical advice.

If you suspect that a mental illness or disorder may be present, it is very important that you encourage your spouse to meet with a qualified mental health professional. Whether or not you have been able to meet with a mental health professional, this book can help you develop strong, healthy foundational habits for self-care and a healthy marriage.

Caution: If at any point your spouse is demonstrating any self-harming behaviors or mentioning thoughts of self-harm or suicide, seek emergency medical care by calling 911. Never be afraid to take such action if there is serious concern about their safety.

A New Destination

*Circumstance,
Which HURT me cruelly,
Crept in without invitation.*

*The frightening guest,
A monster it seemed,
Made OUR home its habitation.*

*Though I failed to evict,
Great PEACE became mine
Through choice and inspiration.*

*Correct knowledge was key,
More so, power from GOD.
We have hope in a new destination!*

—R. Christian Bohlen

Introduction

Imagine you just moved to a new city. Within days, you become friends with a neighbor—a talkative, energetic woman who makes you laugh and feel loved and accepted.

Soon, your new friend begins sharing more about her life situation. She is separated from her husband for the fourth time. She says she loves him deeply, but he never gives her the unconditional love she deserves. And now he left her here all alone—but this time he’s intent on divorce.

Days later, she lets it all out with surprising transparency. She’s been in and out of mental hospitals with occasional suicide attempts. She says her husband wants her to be perfect and she’ll never live up to his expectations. She admits freely to fighting with him and yelling “more than she should” and having some impulsive, addictive behaviors. She takes medications sometimes, but she’s convinced the doctors don’t understand her and “they always take sides with her husband,” even though her husband of fifteen years has a diagnosed mental condition himself and now claims to have PTSD because of her!

“We prayed about our marriage beforehand,” she tells you. “I guess my husband just doesn’t trust God enough to stay with me. And he was so cold when I last saw him. It was like he never even loved me.”

She then stops, raises her head, and looks at you with anguished eyes and asks, “Do you think we have a chance of surviving as a couple?”

* * *

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Honestly, what would you think about the chance of your new friend's marriage coming together again and happily enduring through the rest of their lives? Dismal? A tiny chance?

Most would think this is a hopeless case. But in truth, the couple described above is *us*, the authors of this book.

The Secret

Congratulations on your decision to care for and pamper yourself by reading this book. You absolutely deserve it. You are not alone, nor is your situation anything to be ashamed of. From the American Psychiatric Association:


Mental illness is common. In a given year, nearly one in five (19 percent) U.S. adults experience some form of mental illness.¹

And would you have imagined this astonishing statistic could be true?

In the United States, almost half of adults (46.4 percent) will experience a mental illness during their lifetime.²

Most adults with mental illness are in a close relationship with a loved one—someone like you. This book is specifically for *you, their spouse*.

Like you, many spouses of mentally or emotionally unstable loved ones are under incredible stress. Often, such marriages crumble because the so-called “spouse who has fewer challenges” crumbles. They see no way out but to get out. But there is another way:

 If spouses of the mentally ill or addicted can be spiritually strengthened and learn practical things they can do independently, more marriages can be saved.

If there *is* a secret to saving such challenging marriages, that is it.

How to Read This Book


Feel free to jump to any chapter or topic that meets your needs. We do recommend reading the short but essential chapter 1 first, but after that, skip around to your heart's content.

Because circumstances can vary significantly from couple to couple, and because, depending on your personal circumstances, there are things presented that could be upsetting or triggering for your spouse—like chapter 4, “Can I Survive This?”—we typically recommend you not read this book as a couple.

Let this book be your getaway and your means of strengthening yourself. After you read in private and have a better feel for what may or may not apply to your situation, you may choose to discuss the things you’ve learned with your spouse.

Seeking Professional Help

Your spouse need not have been diagnosed for you to benefit from this book.

 If you suspect a mental illness or disorder, your spouse (and/or you) should meet with qualified mental health professionals. This book cannot replace such essential care.

But while awaiting or after receiving a diagnosis, this book can help you tremendously in developing foundational habits.

About the Authors

I, Christian, am the author of this book in terms of putting the words on paper and writing from the spouse’s perspective. But this book contains the important contributions of my wife, Helen. In fact, the idea for this book started with my wife, who became aware that there are not many resources available to the *wives* of those with serious mental, emotional, and/or addiction issues.

We are deeply grateful we were able to “hang in there” and not give up. We each have multiple diagnosed mental illnesses. Yet we are “happy after all” in our thirty-fifth year of marriage and believe God has given us special experiences and backgrounds to be able to help others.


We are not mental health experts. However, the marriage and mental health recommendations set forth in these chapters are based on solid research and advocated by respected professionals. Be sure to visit appendix B, “Recommended Reading,” which points you to free online resources and six terrific books we strongly recommend.

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We *are* experts, however, in how to find increasing happiness despite overwhelming odds. You'll find many of our stories sprinkled alongside the science and professional recommendations. Plus, you can read our more detailed story in appendix A, "Our Story." In fact, if you want to understand our experiences first, feel free to jump there now.

Healing and Happiness

You've likely asked yourself, "Can we ever be happy after all we've been through?" That's what this book is about—helping you answer and achieve that. Note that our view of happiness is based on scripture, which usually refers to it as "joy."

 Healing and joy come when we believe, embrace, and humbly align ourselves with God's plan for our lives as opposed to resisting or angrily rebelling against Him.

We believe spouses can experience greater healing and joy when they strive to believe in and follow Jesus Christ. Marriages with mental health and addiction issues cry out, *scream*, even, for the divine help and healing God's grace provides.

We hope you have already discovered or are at least open to Jesus Christ as a source of strength in your life. In most chapters, we include Bible scriptures, principles, and stories that promote healing and wise decision-making.

We testify and even celebrate the truth that gospel peace and joy can exist amid pain. They do not require the elimination of pain.

Our life is rich and generally peaceful now. There are joy and understanding beyond words. We lie not, nor do we exaggerate. Thank God in heaven our marriage is preserved as two souls in love. And we credit the teachings of the Bible and mental health professionals as captured in these pages.

A Warning

A warning is in order, however. Studying this book without applying the principles found herein has little value. Happiness can escape us even as we hold the answers in our hands. As best-selling authors

Francis and Lisa Chan soberly observed, “*Christians in America have become experts at conviction—and failures at action.*”³

We promise your healing can be dramatic and, in some ways, instant, but that requires a soft, pliable, believing, humble heart.

Even though you can find healing and direction, neither this book nor any other can promise that your relationship will improve and survive. The unavoidable truth is that some marriages are destructive. These tragic, complex situations are discussed in chapter 4, “Can I Survive This?”

Our Backgrounds

It may help if we share a bit about our backgrounds to illustrate our own mental health issues and strugglings with spiritual darkness.

Christian’s Background

God must have smiled with compassion when He designed my family’s life. My dear mother suffered from anxiety much of her life. She was hospitalized for a month with a nervous breakdown during the 1950s, which many consider the dark ages of the psychiatric profession. Though based on good intentions, her “treatment” nearly destroyed her and almost prevented her from becoming my mother. But with faith in Christ and patience to accept her ongoing challenges, she emerged victorious and today is generally healthy and always cheerful.

My father almost certainly had a mild form of depression. His father was also likely depressed, became an alcoholic, and died rather young.

My brother was a brilliant and charming individual, among the top in his high school class and an outstanding science student in college. Suddenly, he started acting strangely. Within three years, his behavior became so bizarre my parents realized something was very wrong. He was diagnosed with schizophrenia, which means “separated from reality.” My brother suffered in the extreme, with multiple suicide attempts, hospitalizations, experimentation with medications that worked poorly, and little enjoyment in life. He lived in a group home and still acted oddly until he died—even with the more advanced medications available today. He passed away from COVID-19 in 2021.

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I have a form of bipolar disorder known as bipolar disorder 2, which is often misdiagnosed as “clinical depression.” Typical antidepressants don’t work for bipolar 2, and it took years for doctors to correctly diagnose me and find medications that worked. My medications now work spectacularly, and I feel amazing and healthy.

I’m also open about the fact that I’m a recovering drug addict. Many years ago, I got caught up in an illegal lifestyle and heavily used drugs that were difficult for me to give up. I credit the saving power of Jesus Christ in changing my heart and freeing me from the desire to use drugs.

Faith in God didn’t come naturally to me. I experienced a major crisis of faith in my twenties but emerged with an unforgettable experience and the ability to truly connect to the light of Jesus.⁴

Helen’s Background

My wife’s family experienced dysfunction and turmoil that deeply affected them all. Her father and mother stayed married through a great deal of struggle. They were lovely people who became positive influences on us in our later years, which illustrates how God works in His children over time to draw them closer to Him, if they will let Him.

Helen’s childhood is almost completely devoid of memories except for the summer camps for kids with disabilities she attended for a whole month every year from age eight to sixteen. (Helen was born with her left leg paralyzed from the knee down and required a leg brace to walk. Thanks to dozens of surgeries on her foot and legs, her ability to walk improved but today she typically uses a wheelchair.)

To this day she vividly remembers funny stories about the summer camp activities, pranks, other kids she loved, and her college-aged counselors. But her memories of home life are largely missing, which she finds strange and unsettling. Her doctors strongly suspect childhood abuse.

She recalls being a “model child” at home and believes she obeyed her parents until she reached age sixteen, when she increasingly came to loggerheads with them. Following one particularly bad fight, at age seventeen, she moved out of her parents’ home and into the home of her boyfriend’s family. Her relationship with her parents returned to normal by the time we were dating.

She was married for three years before we met. I later learned her first marriage was marred by constant fighting.

Helen has always been kindhearted toward the underdog and a friend to the geeks and weirdos around her (which explains how we ended up together!). But faith in God was never important until she reached her twenties. Even then, her commitment to God was off and on, and she struggled with addiction from time to time.

Professional Experience with Abnormal Behaviors

Shortly after my wife and I married, I started working at a drug and alcohol rehabilitation facility for court-committed juvenile males in northwest Pennsylvania. They ranged from rural pranksters and pot smokers to drug dealers, gang members, and killers. I'm convinced it was a heaven-sent opportunity for me to help others while helping myself.

I was a schoolteacher to the young men in that facility, but I was also involved in clinical discussions about their behavior and mental health. Through my own graduate-school studies as well as work-related training, I learned a great deal about human learning, abnormal psychology, sociology, and criminology, which greatly expanded my understanding of the human condition and the depth of suffering that exists in our fallen world.

It was at that juvenile facility, ironically, that I truly recovered from my own addiction and “grew up.” To this day, I love the Hindu proverb that aptly describes what I experienced while helping those young men—as well the growth I experienced while striving to support my spouse:

Help your brother's boat across and see!

*Your own has reached the shore!*⁵

Chapter 1

I'm So Confused

After all you've been through, you're probably craving relief from confusing thoughts and feelings like these:

"I'm afraid of what might happen today."

"Who is this person I married? I don't know him anymore."

"Why are my efforts never good enough?"

"How much of this is my fault (like she says it is)?"

"Why can't she handle even a little stress, like I can?"

"Sometimes he talks in circles and makes no sense at all."

"I feel stuck inside this terrifying, emotional roller coaster."

"I can't hide this from other people anymore . . . but I'm so embarrassed."

"Why aren't my prayers working? Doesn't God see all this?"

"I'm starting to question everything I ever believed."

Please know how much we empathize with you! We wish we could see you and look into your eyes. You deserve all the heartfelt love and compassion we can offer. We promise, you will feel it in these pages.


So many struggle with challenges similar to yours. Many suffer until they can't stand it anymore and give up. But you have made the decision to explore options that can make a difference. Your wise choice will pay off. But how?

2 Healing the Stormy Marriage

You'll be happy to know that finding initial relief from your confusion doesn't require your spouse to change. You can experience increasing clarity by learning and doing certain things independently. What a stress-relieving, empowering thought! You are in control, and this book will show you how to apply that control for your benefit and blessing.

Your confusion will diminish as you learn about and apply each of the following in your life and relationship:

1. The power of God
2. Principles that lead to a happy marriage
3. The nature of your spouse's condition and how best to deal with it

 This book takes the position that lasting progress in your relationship requires learning and action in each of the above areas.

Why All Three?

It's easy for us to forget that our spouses comprise much more than their mental or emotional issues. You may be used to focusing on their confusing jumble of mixed messages and erratic behaviors, but our spouses also have healthy, valuable, and delightful attributes.

It's harmful and shortsighted to think of your spouse only in terms of their unhealthy condition(s). You and your spouse each have unique and "normal" talents, preferences, personalities, etc.

Even so-called healthy spouses are a bit wacky, making this lovely quote ring true for most of us: *We are all a little weird. . . . When we find someone whose weirdness is compatible with ours, we join up with them and fall in mutual weirdness and call it love.*¹

We begin improving our relationship as soon as we begin viewing it holistically to include 1) the needs of the soul, 2) the typical needs of the marriage relationship, and 3) the unique challenges that accompany mental, emotional, or addiction issues.

Consider the needs of the soul for a moment. From a biblical perspective, we each have a spirit.

But there is a spirit in man: and the inspiration of the Almighty giveth them understanding. (Job 32:8)

In both your life and your spouse's, spiritual vision and understanding are darkened to a degree because we live in a fallen world and we sin in various ways (see Romans 5:12). Therefore, some of us have embraced and reflect more of God's light, and some are more attached to Satan's ways and darkness.

Why point this out? Because spiritual darkness adds yet another layer of challenge and confusion to your marriage. When we do not accept or live by the light of God's word, we are—according to scripture—in the bondage of sin. We're stuck in our selfishness.

This means *us*, not only our spouse (see John 8:31–36). It is as if a mist of darkness partially veils our perception and taints the way we act (see 2 Corinthians 4:4 and 1 John 2:11). Such darkness is not the *only* destructive force in a marriage but it can be a major one that is overlooked.

As Denis de Rougemont put it, “*Why should neurotic, selfish, immature people suddenly become angels when they fall in love?*”²

We don't become instant angels when we marry, do we? Sin and selfishness follow us into marriage. But deep spiritual change through Jesus Christ helps us rise out of the darkness in our lives, making it easier to interact peacefully and progress in our relationships.

God Sees Us Entirely—Past, Present, and Future

As spouses, we cannot clearly see why our mate is acting the way they do. Is it because they are selfish and stubborn? Is it because they have underdeveloped relationship skills and quite literally don't know any better? Is it because of their mental condition?

You and I cannot judge. But know this: God knows the root cause of their behavior. God knows what is possible given your spouse's circumstance. God sees your spouse's spiritual potential and their future willingness to change and deal with their mental health or addiction issues. This is why making it a priority to rely on God's power and guidance is the number-one recommendation of this book.

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💡 Only God fully understands what is going on in your relationship now and what it can become in the future. He can guide you.

You: The “Seeking” Spouse

In reality, nearly all marriages involve two spouses who have varying degrees of mental, emotional, or spiritual issues and unhealthiness. You may feel this is untrue or even unfair. We ask that you be open to this important point: neither spouse in your marriage is the good guy or the bad guy, the healthy one or the unhealthy one. One of you may have greater challenges and disruptive behaviors than the other, that’s true.

But how shall we think of you versus your spouse? Surely, calling you the “healthy spouse” would be an oversimplification.

Perhaps it’s more accurate to think of you as the “seeking spouse.”

You are seeking relief from confusion and pain, correct? You seek guidance. You seek strength and inspiration from God. You are rightly seeking all of these important and positive things. Yet you likely also have issues and challenges contributing to the stressful dynamic in your marriage. As you seek solutions, please be on the lookout for personal issues that may require you to seek professional support and change.

Chapter 2

How Can I Start Feeling Like Myself Again?

My life and health were severely affected by my wife's disorders. Within two years of our marriage, I was seeing a licensed psychologist seeking guidance and relief. Some years later, I was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), just like soldiers in a war zone, although my war zone was the chaos of our marriage. I couldn't believe it. But the diagnosis did make sense, and my symptoms matched. And I *had* been through an excruciating war on my psyche and senses.

My hopes for a peaceful relationship and my tender efforts to be a good spouse were being blown to bits. I started to seriously doubt nearly everything I had ever understood or believed about who I was and what marriage could be like. I became jumpy, easily frightened, and was always waiting for the next battle. Deepening depression sapped me of energy and smothered my ability to function normally and feel joy. But I still had to go to work every morning. I still had to try and cope with my wife's struggles.

What's Happening to Me?

It's common for spouses of challenging, unstable partners to feel like they themselves are changing in ways they don't understand.

So, how can you start feeling normal and feel like yourself again?

Let's start by understanding the nature of what you're going through. The disturbances from our spouses and the unpleasant effects on us come in three flavors, like vanilla, chocolate and twist:

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1. Extreme or erratic emotions
2. Nonsensical perceptions, ideas, words, and actions
3. Both extreme/erratic feelings and nonsensical communication in the same episode

Your spouse's illness has probably served up generous helpings of all three flavors. Mine did. But I did recover, feeling better and stronger than ever, and we are confident you can too.


Feelings Happen . . . Now What?

Let's take a close look at that first flavor of disruption you've been served: extreme or erratic emotions.

How do you think any rational person would react if they lived with someone exhibiting one or more of the behaviors listed below? Would you fault them if they felt frustration, fear, or anger?

- Angry outbursts, sometimes for long periods
- Overreactions to mildly stressful situations
- Intense fears, thrashing or hitting during nightmares
- Rapidly changing moods (e.g., from sobbing to laughing)
- Frequent somber, withdrawn behavior
- Lack of interest in anything, including fulfilling responsibilities

Anyone would have an emotional response when experiencing these behaviors from someone they love. *Anyone*. It is normal and unavoidable. You have surely felt fearful, angry, frustrated, hurt, ashamed, accused, guilty, powerless, unloved, impatient, panicked, and more.

 Grant yourself this gift today: believe that feelings are okay. Once they start flowing, they should not be suppressed. Feel them and let them flow out of you.

The wise, healthy response is to allow yourself to feel even unpleasant feelings. But that doesn't mean you have to act on those feelings. Feeling and acting on feelings are two very different things.

- Feeling impatient doesn't mean you have to make that nasty remark.
- Feeling angry doesn't mean you have to curse or hit.

- Feeling unloved doesn't mean you have to lecture your spouse about all the ways they have been unkind to you.

Feelings flow like a river. You can't dam them up. There is a never-ending wellspring of conscious and unconscious emotion that feeds your feelings.



Photo by Esa Hitula

Whether because of your interpretation of scripture or your expectations for yourself, you may have tried to stop them from flowing. But that doesn't work in the long run. The emotional waters keep flowing in. If you try to dam them up, you run out of fingers and hands and toes to plug the holes as the waters keep spilling over and through your dam. Ultimately, you *will* feel them in one way or another.

If we have been severely and constantly mistreated, our emotions can swell into confusion and rage.¹ They become like hungry dogs in the basement who won't settle down until they are released. Ignoring them or telling ourselves we must be evil because the angry dogs keep barking is not going to work, nor is it healthy. Do not tell yourself you are evil because of negative thoughts or overwhelming

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and unmanageable feelings. Seek help from a qualified mental health professional.

Also, chapter 7, “I’m Totally Drained and Afraid” will show you how God can help you bear the painful situations you face.


Emotional Self-Abuse

Emotional abuse is very real and painful. You may be experiencing it from your spouse already. But have you ever considered that by not allowing yourself to truly feel your feelings, you’re unwittingly abusing yourself?

When inflicted upon us by another person, emotional abuse aims to “diminish another person’s sense of identity, dignity and self-worth.”²

Whenever I hid from my own feelings or tried to squash them, my “sense of identity, dignity and self-worth” evaporated. I did to myself what abusers do to their victims.

And then where was I? I had turned into someone I didn’t recognize. I had lost who I was because my emotions had been demoted to a swirl of hidden forces deep within me—but never gone.

 Your emotions are a big part of who you are. You can’t disconnect your heart and put it in a jar for safekeeping and expect to feel well.

If this seems far-fetched, we invite you to research the dangers of suppressing your emotions. There’s even a severe form of it diagnosed as emotional detachment disorder (EDD). The physical effects of emotional detachment are significant, including memory issues, high blood pressure, obesity, digestive issues, fibromyalgia, frequent illness due to a suppressed immune system, and more.

Studies have shown that repressed emotion can be linked to a wide range of physical and mental health complications in the long run.³

How to Feel Your Feelings

How do we get back to our true selves—our natural childlike state of being authentic with what we feel and free of guilt?

It may seem silly to have a section in this book called “How to Feel Your Feelings.” It’s not. You may even need professional help to get in touch with your feelings again. But you may be able to make progress as simply as this:

1. When you suspect that your emotional river is starting to rise, name the feeling in your mind. “I feel angry,” “I feel disappointed,” “I feel frustrated,” or whatever it is, and then say to yourself, “And that’s okay.”
2. Allow yourself to feel the swell of anger or disappointment or frustration come in. Notice it, acknowledge it, accept it, and then finally let it flow right out of you. The energy will flow out of you once you feel it. The act of acknowledging it and feeling it without judgment or repression constitutes “feeling it.” It’s done at that point. You felt it. The energy has passed through you.
3. Practice feeling pleasant feelings in the same manner. When you are relieved, relaxed, or enjoying a laugh, feel it more deeply than usual. Notice it. Enjoy it as long as you’d like.
4. Notice when you physically exhale in relief, like “Ahhh.” Often, this involuntary physical reaction accompanies the simple act of feeling the emotional waves that are part of you.

In crisis situations, feelings quickly come from every direction. Learning to feel and let those feelings flow out of you takes time and requires reasonably calm situations in which to practice and build confidence. Eventually, even explosive situations will not overwhelm you. If you are regularly exposed to crises and extreme emotions, you will certainly need support from a mental health professional.

Helen’s Perspective

[How she felt years ago]: I don’t like it when Christian starts talking about himself and how he feels. It makes me nervous. I already know I’m not good for him, and then when he tells me he feels hurt and mentions what I’ve done wrong in any way, it scares me and makes me feel guilty. It’s always my fault. So I don’t want to talk about his feelings. I’m the one who needs help and understanding. Let’s just leave him out of this.

When I feel a little more emotionally stable and my meds are working, I can handle it a little better, but I still don’t like it. What he

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is really saying is that he wants me to do something different. I never feel like I can be successful when somebody tells me I have to do something different, so it feels like I'm being set up for divorce.

Even when he tries to say what he is feeling in the way our mental health coaches tell us to, like "I feel (such and such) when (such and such) happens," it still feels like a finger-pointing session. Just because he doesn't say "you," doesn't mean I'm not at fault. I still started it, he's saying, and that scares me. I'm the problem. I'm always the problem.

[Fast-forward twenty-seven years with effective meds and therapy]: I gradually learned how to recognize my own fears and let Christian express his feelings. I'm still not good at it when he just blurts things and sounds mean, but even then I can separate "him" from "me," and I know he needs to feel and express himself. I couldn't understand or accept that years ago. I just didn't have it in me, and no amount of him begging or lecturing me could get me to understand it. I just got more scared and angry. We now talk openly about our feelings, and we are both careful not to blame but simply share and then try to say positive things and to love at the same time. It works really well.

By the way, even though Christian is the principal author here, I want the spouse with mental health conditions to know how much I feel for you. It's not easy always feeling like the bad guy—the one who is always causing pain for their spouse. That's a burden neither your spouse nor anyone else can understand. On top of everything else that was happening, I had to bear that. Don't give up.

Get to the Root of Emotional Triggers: AGRUP

Here's a practical technique that will help you understand your feelings and gain insight into what triggers your spouse's feelings. Mastering this technique can help prevent emotional escalation—for your spouse and you.

In the early-to-middle years of our marriage, I often tried to sit down with Helen and calmly talk through important matters. But how was I to know that asking her to talk about our mutual needs in a respectful and calm way would lead to an instant blowup where she said I was trying to set her up for divorce? What was the chain of thought that led to her instant anger and drawing that kind of conclusion? I was baffled, angry, and left shaking my head.

It always happened lightning fast. In later years, I was able to recognize when it was happening by observing her expressions. In an instant, irrepressible anger would fill her eyes and further conversation became futile.

The book *Key Core Beliefs* provides brilliant insight into understanding human emotions. Authors Otis, Williams, and Messina explain it like this: “*Because [negative feelings] occur so quickly, it is crucial to emphasize that we are almost never conscious of our underlying primary feelings.*”²⁴

In other words, there are “triggering” *primary* feelings that fire off so fast we’re not even aware of them. These feelings are the real troublemakers.

Get ready for an astonishing, game-changing fact.

The key, it turns out, is to identify these primary feelings, which precede becoming angry, sad, or anxious. Research shows this applies to *all* human beings, whether mentally healthy or ill. The primary feelings that trigger anger, sadness, or anxiety form the acronym AGRUP.

- A – Accused
- G – Guilty
- R – Rejected
- U – Unlovable
- P – Powerless

Let’s do a quick exercise to illustrate how game-changing an awareness of the AGRUP feelings can be for your relationship.

Think back to a recent conflict with your spouse where *you* were emotionally upset. Try to recall the conversation from the very beginning and when you started to feel angry, sad, or anxious.

Take your time.

...

This is important.

...

Don’t continue reading until you recall your feelings.

...

Do you feel those feelings? Let yourself feel them again.

...

Now, let’s consider the AGRUP feelings one at a time.

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- Was there anything your spouse said or did that made you feel **accused**, directly or indirectly (or even self-accused)?
- Was there anything that triggered you to feel **guilty**?
- Did you feel **rejected**?
- Did you feel **unloved** or unlovable?
- Did you feel **powerless**?

Identify these feelings one at a time, if they were there.

Did you recognize one or more?

Can you see why the AGRUP feelings are considered “primary”?

Research shows that one or more of these *always* precede anger, sadness, or anxiety.

Very likely, you did recall one or more of the AGRUP feelings prior to getting angry, sad, or anxious that day. Just now—that scintillating insight probably impelled you to do a series of jubilant cartwheels, flips, and somersaults all through your neighborhood and you are back home in your seat and reading again. Phew!

Okay, perhaps you’re not that exuberant.

Yet.


Now, let’s consider what your *spouse* likely felt during that same conflict. Go through the AGRUP feelings again.

- Was there anything said or done that may have triggered him or her to feel **accused**, directly or indirectly or even self-accused?
- Was there anything that may have triggered feeling **guilty**?
- How about **rejected**?
- **Unloved** or **unlovable**?
- **Powerless**?

Can you see how these underlying feelings could cause a major bout of anger, sadness, or anxiety in your spouse? Are you looking at that incident a bit differently now? Is the fog of feelings and emotional reactions clearing just a bit?

Knowing that all humans are triggered by AGRUP feelings is one of the most important breakthroughs in understanding and preventing emotional flare-ups. We recommend you read *Key Core Beliefs* for more detail and practical activities to do with or without your spouse.

Understanding these reactions within yourself will help you monitor and feel your own feelings.

 It's easier to deal with a lightning-fast snake when you know exactly what it looks like, where it's hiding, and how it acts.

AGRUP feelings are like snakes hidden within us and others.

Instead of being confused by your spouse's jumble of intense emotions, you can become more sensitive to how your words, tone, and facial expressions may trigger your spouse to feel accused, guilty, rejected, unloved, or powerless—and vice versa.

Ideally, you can introduce your spouse to the concept of AGRUP feelings, and you can both experience an enlightenment.

A Word about Culture and Speaking Openly

Perhaps it's not okay to talk about mental health issues and difficult feelings where you live and worship. Or so it seems. You may worry that people will fear or blame you if you mention that you or a family member are dealing with mental health or emotional issues.

Thankfully, the stigmas surrounding these issues have decreased in recent years. My wife and I made a decision years ago to speak openly about our conditions not as a badge of courage but rather as an acknowledgment that these conditions exist and are no more embarrassing than discussing a broken arm or a diagnosis of diabetes. This stuff happens, it's real, and we all need support and guidance to get through it. And it feels fantastic when you can be more open.

Being prudently and appropriately open about your experiences is good for others and therapeutic for you. It says, in effect, "I'm okay. My feelings are okay. And I may be able to help you."

I regularly speak to church congregations, and I often feel impressed to share relevant and encouraging bits of our story and mental health conditions as part of my message. I am never graphic or demeaning, nor do I glorify what we have been through. Without exception, people come up to me afterward and thank me for speaking

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candidly about this topic, or they ask me for additional information. There is a hunger for being open about these conditions because these issues are pervasive, especially in modern societies.

Your courage to share can encourage others to be more open and get help. This assumes you have your spouse's consent, which, of course, may be a huge decision that can take months or even years to reach. I have that consent to share our story, but even so, I focus mostly on my issues and recovery.

Hope and Help

Scriptures to Ponder

What time I am afraid, I will trust in thee. In God I will praise his word, in God I have put my trust; I will not fear what flesh can do unto me. (Psalm 56:3-4)

Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time: Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you. (1 Peter 5:6-7)

Happy is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that getteth understanding. For the merchandise of it is better than the merchandise of silver, and the gain thereof than fine gold. (Proverbs 3:13-14)

What You Can Do Today

- Name a feeling as you feel it rising within you. Notice it, acknowledge it, accept it, and then let it flow right out of you. Do this as you interact with your spouse, family members, friends, coworkers, or anyone at all.
- To help you recognize the AGRUP emotions in yourself and stop triggering them in your spouse (which is not always possible), do the following exercise recommended by Otis, Williams, and Messina:
 - Mentally revisit a past conflict or painful experience in your life, from childhood through today, with any other person.

- Try to recall which of the AGRUP feelings you felt that caused the pain. You will be astonished at how well you may remember specific feelings from long ago.

Do this exercise at least once every day. The more you do it, the quicker it will go and the more it will become ingrained in your emotional intelligence and repertoire.

Spiritual Blessings for You

Look forward to these wonderful blessings of patiently persevering with your spouse or loved one in partnership with God.

- Greater emotional intelligence, meaning the ability to perceive your own and others' emotional states and respond appropriately⁵
- More precise, intentional use of words, including avoiding words that inflame and trigger negative responses
- Greater empathy when communicating with those who are emotionally erratic and make you uncomfortable
- Greater love and tolerance for those who are different than you, in your workplace, community, and the world generally

Chapter 3

I'm Starting to Doubt Myself and My Faith

In the previous chapter we considered the impact of your spouse's emotions on your emotions. Now, let's take a closer look at the other flavors of disruption you have likely experienced: nonsensical, irrational perceptions, ideas, and words, often combined with extreme or erratic emotions.

How do you think any rational person would be affected if someone they loved exhibited one or more of these behaviors?

- Unreasonable statements or accusations
- Relentless repetition of thoughts or accusations
- Intensely self-centered thinking and actions
- Little or no empathy for others' feelings and needs
- Inability to focus, listen, or pay attention
- Impulsive, irresponsible behaviors, spending sprees, etc.
- "Wearing a mask" of normalcy outside the home
- Eating binges and dietary fixations
- Compulsive, repetitive behaviors and obsessions
- Drug, alcohol, pornography, or other addictions

These behaviors wreak havoc on our homes. Some days, the spouses we love act like the beautiful people we fell in love with. Other days, even hour to hour, they hurt and bewilder us.

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How do we make sense of it all? As humans and spouses, we crave consistency and reliability. Yet most of us can relate to this statement written about someone with borderline personality disorder (BPD).

Trying to define the BPD is like staring into a lava lamp: what you see is constantly changing.¹

The impact of our spouse's irrational conduct and endless inconsistency is often twofold:

1. We begin to doubt our own perceptions, opinions, desires, and beliefs.
2. If faith was ever an important part of our life, we may doubt that God is there anymore. Or, worse yet, we feel “played” and betrayed by God. Perhaps God played a nasty trick, yanking the rug out from under our feet with an evil smirk, watching us fall helplessly onto our backs and ignoring our cries for help.

Your experiences with your spouse constitute God's advanced training for you in the topics of “What is reality?” and “What is faith?” Your first objective is to get clear about what is real.

The Defective Helmet Analogy

Imagine for a moment that your spouse has a helmet covering their whole head. It has eyeglasses, earpieces, and a mouthpiece, kind of like an old-fashioned diver's helmet. Imagine each of those pieces is not functioning properly. What your spouse sees isn't accurate. What they hear isn't accurate. And often, what comes out of their mouth is not coming from the heart of who they *really* are—the person you truly know and love.

Here's a quote that applies in some ways to all mental conditions. It was written by a person with BPD:

Borderlines and non-borderlines live in two different worlds that coexist in the same space but not always in the same time. Comprehending the “real” world, for me, is as formidable as the task of understanding the borderline world is for you.²

That's astonishing, isn't it? Two different worlds? As hard as it is for the mentally ill person to understand our "real world," it's that hard for us to understand their world. That's a sobering thought.

Whether your spouse has PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) from military service, OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder), clinical depression, adult ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), or any other disorder, you and your spouse see, hear, and perceive many things differently.

Apart from my spouse's conditions, you may recall I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder 2, which makes me frequently depressed if untreated. Then, on top of that came the PTSD from the stresses of our challenging marriage. For years, I felt like I was in a slimy emotional pit I simply couldn't climb out of. But the effects went far beyond emotional depression.

I watched other people who seemed to have amazing energy and mental acuity. It was like their brain had a computer processor ten times faster than mine and they were just wired better.

How do they laugh so heartily, what makes their eyes sparkle, and how do they talk with such vigor and joy? I wondered.

How can they deal with great stresses and complicated situations so quickly and easily when I get bogged down, depressed, and lack confidence all the time? I tried so hard to be positive and have energy, but I sensed people could tell I wasn't all there. And I could tell I lacked something fundamental.

My interpretations of what I heard and felt were filtered through my mental illness. My brain chemistry was affecting how I perceived the world and myself. It was affecting what I said and how I said it.

My depressive behaviors were torture for my wife, who needed me to be consistent, strong, and positive. It didn't matter that her issues aggravated my issues. The fact is that I had an illness and my behavior was affecting her happiness and satisfaction in our marriage, as well as the other way around.



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How to Set Your Feet on Solid Ground

Let's take a look at three actions you can take to stop second-guessing your perceptions and ground yourself in what is real.

1. Learn about your spouse's condition.
2. Don't engage in unproductive conversation.
3. Say simple, positive, hopeful things.



Photo by Benjamin Lambert

Action One: Learn about Your Spouse's Condition

There is something enormously stress-relieving when you understand what is really going on with your spouse. This miracle of understanding clears the fog and helps you confidently stand on ground you know is real.

For the first ten years of our marriage, I hadn't "cracked the code" to understanding my wife's condition. I can't begin to describe the relief I felt when I found a book called *Stop Walking on Eggshells* and I read this brief story:

Being married to [my spouse] is heaven one minute, hell the next. My wife's moods change by the second. I'm walking on eggshells trying to please her and avoid a fight for speaking too soon, too quickly, in the wrong tone, or with the wrong facial motions.

Even when I do exactly as she asks, she gets mad at me. One day she ordered me to take the kids somewhere because she wanted some time alone. But as we were leaving, she threw the keys at my head and accused me of hating her so much I couldn't stand to be in the house with her.

When the kids and I got back from the movie she acted like nothing had happened. She wondered why I was still upset and told me that I have problems letting go of my anger.³

I could relate to every detail. It was so similar to what I had experienced for *years!* The book was full of stories and perfectly described my wife's disorder. My confidence about what was real and

reasonable began to grow. Had I been the one who was unreasonable in so many of our conflicts, as she asserted? Did I have an anger problem, as she so often accused, because I was still upset and fearful after yet another mind-bending episode?

No! *Exhale* No.

The first step for a victim of emotional abuse and mental chaos to planting their feet on solid ground is to understand the nature of their loved one's condition. Decipher the code.

💡 Once I understood the nature of my spouse's condition and how it all worked, I felt like a new man. I had hope and clarity.

Fortunately, you don't have to figure it out yourself.

If you haven't already, save yourself years of self-doubt and confusion by getting heads-down busy researching your spouse's condition. Even if they haven't been diagnosed, you can begin reading based on what you are observing. If it's not a mental illness you suspect but an addiction, the same applies. You will gain insights into the behavior patterns, underlying thought patterns, and coping skills needed for you and for them. And, of course, do your best to get a medical diagnosis or addiction treatment, assuming your spouse will cooperate.

Action Two: Don't Engage in Unproductive Conversation

Try to vividly imagine this scenario: you are trying to communicate with a deep-sea diver who is wearing a helmet that has eyepieces with red tint and earpieces that play sounds of swirling sharks and creepy background music.

This diver is convinced his experience is real.

The diver repeatedly explains that there's blood in the water. There are awful sounds of sharks brushing past him. Yet for an hour, you attempt to correct him about anything he says that isn't accurate. He gets angrier and counters everything you say. You explain that his helmet must have a problem, but then he accuses you of being unsupportive, unhelpful, inconsiderate, and not grounded in the facts. "You are out of touch," he says.

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Clearly, you are wasting your time and potentially confusing yourself.

Typically, a mentally ill or addicted person in denial will become more and more annoyed. They will try to force you to see things *their* way. They may be extremely articulate and persuasive and actually start shifting your thinking.

💡 Get off the merry-go-round. Do not participate in unproductive conversation. Create a boundary that says, “I have the right to stop engaging in a conversation that has become harmful.”

This doesn’t mean you have to stop talking altogether, but it might. Consider this advice from the coauthor of a book on marriage and mental illness:

Trying to have a rational, meaningful discussion when a [mentally ill] person is in a psychotic state is nearly impossible. . . . The best thing I ever learned was that I could not fix [my spouse]—all I could do was control and repair myself. I realized I couldn’t go up and down with his highs and lows. It was emotionally impossible and would drive me crazy trying to do it.⁴

We cannot pry the helmet off our spouse’s head. Nor is that our role. Helping our spouses learn to understand their condition is the role of a mental health or addiction recovery professional. We can acknowledge and thank our spouses for positive behaviors. We can appropriately express our feelings and communicate boundaries. But we cannot be the primary healer, rescuer, and teacher.

Resist the temptation to show how right you are, thinking that you will enlighten your spouse. In small doses, perhaps, and when the Holy Spirit gently prompts you, yes. But too often we’re just trying to make ourselves feel better by “helping” our spouse. Ponder this biblical advice:

A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion. (Proverbs 18:2, ESV)

A fool uttereth all his mind: but a wise man keepeth it in till afterwards. (Proverbs 29:11)

*Whoso keepeth his mouth and his tongue keepeth
his soul from troubles. (Proverbs 21:23)*

That last scripture is profound. How many times I desperately tried to reel the words back into my mouth because the consequences and backlash of my lectures or well-meaning explanations were so brutal. Too often, my attempts to counter, teach, correct, and enlighten my spouse got me into trouble.

In today's language, it's worth asking,

"Would you rather be right or be married?"

—Anonymous

Helen's Perspective

[How she would have felt years ago]: My husband hates me. All I hear when he lectures me is, "You're ugly. You're fat. He hates you. You're no good for him." I mean, I really hear those things in my head and don't even hear what he is saying. I just stare and think how much I shouldn't live anymore because nobody loves me. Why can't anybody love me? I'm a nice person. I try to be nice to people. Why do they have to treat me like this?

[Fast-forward twenty-seven years]: Sometimes I feel the same as above, although now I usually know he loves me. I've received better medications that really, really help and almost make the voices go away. But Christian is also a lot smarter about how he talks to me. If he were to start being mean again, I would get really depressed. Those voices are never too far away.

My dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) changed our lives, too, I have to say. I was in a full-time treatment program for three months. For the first time, I understood that how I was responding to things was not helpful for either of us. I saw other program participants who were not well, and they thought they saw things that weren't even there—I mean really hallucinating, like yelling for us to run because the building was on fire. I saw that it's possible to be seriously out of touch with what is real. That was eye-opening and really scary.

But for me, the biggest problem has always been my feelings getting out of control, and they taught me tricks for managing that. It

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changed my life, our life. Thank you, Heavenly Father, for saving our marriage because of the good people who taught me these things.

Action Three: Say Simple, Positive, Hopeful Things

Consider this approach for halting or redirecting unproductive conversations: when your spouse is having trouble communicating effectively, instead of countering their actions and thoughts, find ways to slow things down and say, “I love you.”

Later in our life, when my wife was exhausted from arguing, she came to understand the risks of continual arguing. And I learned how to diffuse situations by simply hugging her and saying things like:

“I love you.”

“Things will get better.”

“I know it hurts and it’s hard right now.”

“I’m sorry you’re hurting.”

“I love you.”

“Today was a tough day.”

“I love you.”

“I know this is hard to deal with.”

“I love you, and I know God loves both of us.”

“God is here, and He will never leave us.”

“I love you.”

Obviously, saying such things cannot be mechanical or insincere. It takes the power of God within you to lift you above the crisis and strengthen your heart. God can help you focus on the positive feelings you have for your spouse and say tender things even amid unkind words and accusations. My spouse didn’t magically stop fighting when I said such things, but it prevented further escalation and gradually calmed things down.

Sometimes the issues that cause a fight are important and pressing, like the demands of a job, the kids’ needs, commitments to attend an event, etc. The desire to keep talking about the issue to resolve it can feel intense and necessary. But if the conversation isn’t working, it is harmful, and it’s best to change course. Consider this wise counsel from Thomas S. Monson:

💡 “Never let a problem to be solved become more important than a person to be loved.”⁵

What your spouse often needs most is language and behavior that builds, compliments, and soothes.

On the other hand, our patient, kind words simply may not help. When a spouse is having a severe episode, they may reject your attempts to love them. They may want to keep arguing. In such cases, you must breathe deep and enforce your boundaries.

Chapter 8, “My Spouse Is Walking All Over Me” is dedicated to this important topic, but here’s a sneak peek about what constitutes boundaries in a relationship:

*Boundaries are guidelines, rules, or limits a person creates to identify reasonable, safe, and permissible ways for other people to behave towards them and how they will respond when someone passes those limits.*⁶

When your limits are repeatedly passed, you risk losing your sense of self and your reality begins to be compromised. For many spouses of the mentally ill, allowing their boundaries to be grievously and repeatedly crossed is a key reason they feel so confused and awful. Feel free to jump to chapter 8 if you sense this is an important topic for you.

My Faith Is on the Ropes!



Photo by PA Photos
(Ricky Burns v.
Terrance Crawford, 2014)

The most important grounding in reality we need is our faith in God and the gospel of Jesus Christ.

But is your faith ever challenged? Are you ever like this boxer?

A boxer is said to be “on the ropes” when he has backed up as far as he can and continues to be pummeled mercilessly by his opponent.

Our faith in God can also be pummeled by repeated disappointments, unfair accusations, emotional drain, evaporating dreams, and constant

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confusion. A spouse who is trying to maintain faith may start wondering:

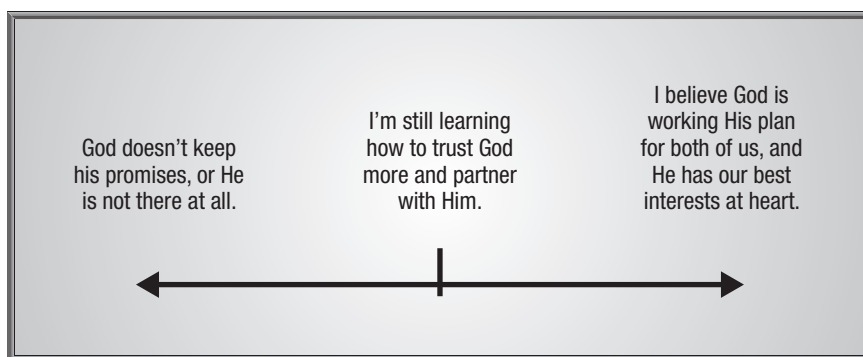
- “Why don’t I feel God helping me when I need Him most?”
- “I prayed about this marriage and felt it was right.”
- “Why am I not experiencing God’s blessings? I’ve been so faithful to His commandments!”
- “I think my faith has been a waste.”

Personally, I have to confess I never experienced a sense of betrayal or doubt where God was concerned. I had already been through a faith crisis before we were married. My experience emerging from that crisis was so positive, vivid, and powerful that I never seriously doubted the divinity of Jesus Christ or the truthfulness of the scriptures again.⁷

I did, however, have doubts about specific doctrines and wondered if I was being punished. I also questioned if I was hearing God’s answers correctly, and I struggled to trust those answers.

How We Respond to Hard Times

When a believer faces hard times, it’s tempting to move a bit toward the left on this continuum of possible responses.



This book is designed to help you move to the right—to deepen your faith and see how God’s purposes for you are being fulfilled through your challenging relationship. Ideally, you feel yourself more solidly moving from the center to the far right, where you accept God’s plan for your life and develop spiritual skills that help you thrive.

If you feel yourself moving to the left, give some careful thought to these faith-restoring recommendations inspired by author and pastor Jim Stout, who also suffers from mental illness:⁸

1. **Accept the wisdom of the old question: “If I feel like God is far away, who moved?”** We are the ones who allow our hardships to move us away from God. God didn’t simply leave us. We can correct this through a submissive spirit, regular prayer, and immersing ourselves in scripture again. God may withdraw His Spirit to a degree, but He never truly leaves us. He is ever near and waiting.
2. **Pray what you feel in raw, bluntly honest terms, if necessary.** Don’t just pray “pretty things” you think you’re supposed to pray. Have it out with God. Go where nobody can hear you and tell Him out loud everything you ever wanted to say to His face. Tell Him what you’re feeling, frankly and bluntly, with all your emotional hurt pouring out like blood. Then, in the days that follow, keep silently talking, listening, and feeling.
3. **Reflect on the many past heroes** who endured affliction and crises of faith, like Job, David, Paul, and, more recently, Martin Luther, who wrote: *“I was close to the gates of death and hell. I trembled in all my members. Christ was wholly lost. I was shaken by depression. . . . I disputed much with God with great impatience.”*⁹
4. **Come to terms with your losses and allow yourself to grieve over them.** Consider that God’s pruning of the things you hoped for may be preparing you to bear His fruit in more abundance but in a different way. *“Every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.”* See John 15:2.
5. **Be constructively honest and open with others about your sagging faith.** Abandon worries about what people think of you (or the image you hoped people would have of you) and get real about your truest feelings. Seek others’ perspectives. There is relief in heart-to-heart conversation. You will find your credibility is even greater as you are willing to be vulnerable and work through it. And know, too, that God respects and answers honest, open questions. (See Jeremiah 33:3 and James 1:5.)

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6. **In the end, believe God wants to help you.** Eventually, make the conscious decision to believe that God truly is good. At some point, you have to make up your mind and just commit. Walk over the line of doubt and anger. Step over it. Stay there. Keep walking with the daily thought, *I believe in Jesus Christ. I believe He is good. I believe the Father loves me and knows what is best. I believe His promises are fulfilled but I may not understand how long and hard the road may be before I see their fulfillment. I believe Jesus is ready and eager to fill me with His gifts. I choose to bow before Him in worship and humbly accept His gifts.* (If desired, jump to chapter 12: “Joyful After All” and read the section, “Surrender: It’s Not a Dirty Word” for a vivid metaphor of how to make this choice.)

Hope and Help

Scriptures to Ponder

Call unto me, and I will answer thee, and show thee great and mighty things, which thou knowest not. (Jeremiah 33:3)

He that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him. (Hebrews 11:6)

Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now have I kept thy word. (Psalm 119:67)

What You Can Do Today

- Research your spouse’s mental health condition or addiction. Search online support groups or join live discussions with others so you can share your stories and receive validation.
- Express your feelings in a letter to your spouse’s *disorder*, not your spouse. If your spouse has an OCD diagnosis, write what you would like to say to the OCD disorder if it were a person standing in front of you. Let it rip. Rail away. Share your feelings and get them on paper. This will help you separate the illness or condition

from your spouse. The imposter/monster is not your spouse, and this activity can relieve boatloads of stress while addressing your feelings to the correct party.¹⁰

- If a tense communication situation comes up today:
 1. Don't engage in unproductive conversation.
 2. Say simple, positive, hopeful things.
 3. Look to the Holy Spirit to prompt you on how to communicate. Stop relying on your own thinking and have a prayer in your heart, such as, "Dear Father, guide my thoughts and words to be wise."
- If your faith is sagging, work through the action steps recommended earlier in the "My Faith Is on the Ropes!" section.

Spiritual Blessings for You

Look forward to the wonderful blessings of patiently persevering with your spouse or loved one in partnership with God:

- More steadfastness and commitment to follow God first
- Greater ability to rise above adversity—including personal attacks—and stay positive and constructive
- Greater wisdom to communicate well in tough situations, which benefits you inside and outside the home
- More compassion for human weaknesses and foibles

Appendix A

Our Story

Helen and I met on the very first day that I became a traveling musician. My band was booked at a hotel in her New Jersey town for two weeks and we saw each other every day for fourteen unforgettable days.

Within days of meeting her, I sensed she had every quality I didn't have and more. I was completely in love and admired so many things about her even though we scarcely knew each other. To this day, people often describe Helen as a "light." She has an amazing energy, playfulness, humor, and sweetness about her. Everyone loves her.

I proposed marriage within a month of our meeting and I felt like the luckiest guy in the world when she enthusiastically accepted. Because the band traveled throughout Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, and West Virginia, we spent far less time together while dating than most couples. Nevertheless, we were married in less than six months from that amazing day we met.

As surprising and hard as our marriage turned out to be, I have no regrets. I believe God led me to her and we were meant to be. Great blessings have come to us and to many of our friends and family as a result of our union.

The First Disagreement

I vividly remember our first disagreement. It was about two months after we met and my band was playing in her area again.

I was driving and she was a passenger as we navigated an area she knew well. At one point, she told me to take a certain exit. Just as I was approaching the exit, I said, “Wait a minute, are you sure this is the right one?”

She said nothing and turned her head away from me, staring out the window for the rest of the ride, completely shut down, barely acknowledging anything I said.

We were engaged to be married at this time, and I was totally confused. I grew more anxious by the minute. Then by the hour. Then by the day.

Three anguished days later, she came to see me with a little stuffed piggie wearing a sweater that read, “Hug Me.” She apologized and was incredibly sweet, which I perceived to be her “true self” again. But what had happened? Why had she not returned my calls? Why this prolonged anger?

Little did I know that my questioning her about something she knew better than I did would put her over the edge emotionally.

I have an intense need to understand my surroundings and the logic behind decisions. I resist fully trusting others and want to comprehend things myself. To this day, this tendency of mine understandably conflicts with Helen’s need to be validated and trusted (and it reveals issues of my own).

This was the first time I was stunned by Helen’s instant and unrelenting anger. It was definitely not the last.

Three months after this episode and just before we were married, I clearly remember walking through a park as she tried to warn me not to marry her.

“I’m a witch, and I mean it,” she said earnestly (and not in the occult sense of the word).

I laughed. Not this sweet woman. Sure, there had been a few stressful moments, I thought to myself, but with the light of the gospel, I was sure we could work through a few wrinkles.

She went on to say she had a lot of problems and didn't want to hurt me. I calmly assured her that everything would be fine, believing in my heart that our marriage was meant to be and that God would help us through it.

“Be ready to buy me ice cream when I'm mad,” she said.

I was unfazed and remained certain that happiness was around the corner.

I ended up buying a lot of ice cream.

Helen's Diagnoses

Helen has borderline personality disorder (BPD) and bipolar disorder, as diagnosed by several professionals. There was initially some debate whether someone with BPD could even have bipolar disorder, but experts now agree BPD is commonly combined with other issues, sometimes in clusters.

When a person's responses to stress consist of bewildering overreactions resulting in intense, long-lasting consequences, their condition may be considered “clinical” and require psychiatric diagnosis and treatment.

But as a young husband, how was I to know what was abnormal or typical of new marriages? I had heard marriage was hard. What I was experiencing certainly didn't seem normal, healthy, or fair, but I didn't suspect mental illness at first.

After terrible episodes that gradually escalated from prolonged silence, to angry words, to yelling, to Helen hitting herself, to nonsensical fears and terrible accusations against me and others, she would calm down and be as humble and kind and loving as anyone could imagine.

Sometimes she would instantly snap out of it and expect me to be perfectly happy and forget all about the problems. Over time,

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she resented my efforts to resolve or even understand what had just happened. She just wanted me to forget that anything had happened and snap back to normal like she had.

But I was whiplashed, hurting, and increasingly frightened.

“Why Are You Punishing Me?”

Helen had almost no ability to cope with my feelings or reactions to her behavior. Neither of us realized it at the time, but I have bipolar disorder 2, a depressive version of the more widely known manic (hyperactive) bipolar disorder.

Because of my issues, when Helen had an episode, I would become stressed out, quiet, and depressed. She hated it when I wasn't happy or talking. She would cry, “Why are you punishing me?” over and over. I thought this was nonsense and told her so. I wasn't trying to punish her at all. I tried to explain I was hurt and shocked and exhausted by the painful episodes, but she seemed unable to comprehend that.

It was years before I learned that Helen's disorder caused her to regress to the mindset of a young child when under stress, which is a known BPD behavior. If I, as her husband (whom she subconsciously viewed as a parent), was emotionally unavailable due to stress of my own, she took it personally and interpreted it as punishment. She felt abandoned and neglected, as if she were a child locked in a house and left alone because she had been “bad.”

The thought that her husband was an adult with feelings and needs of his own simply did not register. For nearly twenty years, it was incomprehensible to her no matter how I tried to explain it.

Separations and Progress

Throughout our first year, there were never more than two weeks that passed without some kind of bizarre, emotionally intense blow-up resulting in her lying in bed and staring at nothing in particular. Usually, it was every two or three days.

After a year of intensely painful experiences, I decided to separate from her. I was praying about my decisions at that time in my life and felt it was best because I was near collapse.

After moving away and taking a short-term, menial job for a few months, I was blessed with the opportunity to use my education as a math teacher at the juvenile correctional facility I described in the Introduction.

I stayed in contact with Helen throughout the separation, and we decided to reunite. She joined me in the remote forest where the juvenile facility was located—six miles down a dirt road to the nearest tiny town, and thirty-five miles from the nearest McDonalds. This isolation didn't help her much because Helen is a very social person and she prefers the energy and excitement of a city.

At the juvenile facility, I worked with brutally disrespectful, dysfunctional young men for twelve intensely stressful years. It's impossible to describe the combined stress of dealing with them every day at work while being overwhelmed at home. I became deeply, severely depressed at times and began to lose touch with myself.

During this time, my wife and I separated two more times. The separations were helpful because I was able to ground myself again and set limits. I was being emotionally abused and I knew it, and it was not healthy to allow it to continue. With each separation, I could sense progress being made. Individuals with BPD, bipolar disorder, and addictions need to have clear limits or they can wreak terrible havoc in others' lives.

During one of these separations, I had filed for divorce. Filing for divorce triggered in Helen another fundamental fear common to those with BPD: the fear of abandonment. Psychologists consider this the number-one fear for many BPD sufferers.

The abandonment issue places the spouse or family member in a tough spot. They must set limits to protect themselves and help the BPD individual view their own actions from an adult perspective. But

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setting limits and separating from them triggers their spouse's darkest fears: "I'm unlovable. I will be abandoned, I know it," which leads to "I hate you" and "You never really loved me" statements.

Nevertheless, looking back, separating was the right thing and our relationship progressed.

Medications

Back in our second year of marriage, I learned more about mental health issues and realized that Helen had some type of condition and needed care. She reluctantly began seeing a professional and was periodically in psychiatric hospitals during times of crisis.

Initially, none of the medications they gave her helped.

About ten years after we married, Helen was prescribed a medication that made a world of difference. Within days of first taking it, she walked up and looked right at me with such serene, hopeful eyes. "This is really helping me. I feel so much better," she said.

But medications have side effects, including weight gain. Because Helen's left leg is paralyzed from the knee down, she needed to watch out for weight gain, and so the years that followed were filled with trying different medications. Nevertheless, she continued to gain weight and that was concerning.

Around this time, her mother suddenly passed away, which was extremely hard on her. Soon after, her father began living with us.

Helen's overall mindset deteriorated, and no combination of medications or therapy seemed to help. At year fifteen of our marriage, there were still major emotional meltdowns about every three days, which was even harder to conceal with her father close at hand.

After a combination of bitter disputes, a miserably failed vacation, her new smoking habit which infuriated me, and discovery of her secret credit card that was nearly maxed out, I became despondent.

One day a voice inside me said, "That's it. You can't do this anymore." I just stared at the breakfast table and knew that was true.

I became resolute. I had given all I had to give at that point in my life. I was crumpling, and I felt the Holy Spirit sanction the decision to protect myself.

I told Helen we needed to separate and that I was going to file for divorce. This astonished both of us.

“How could this happen?” I agonized.

I knew our marriage was right. I had received so many witnesses from God! We had made progress in some ways. Yet I knew we were at a dead end and I had nothing left.

But God clearly approved the decision to separate and pursue the divorce.

A Life-Altering Accident

We separated for the fourth time. At great inconvenience to everyone, Helen and her father moved into other houses, and I remained in Virginia, where I had taken a new job. I bought Helen a modest home in Pennsylvania, where I fully expected she would live the rest of her life with me supporting her, and I would move on as best I could. I had to sell our recently purchased, lovely house and I moved into a rental, the basement of a townhouse.

To this day, Helen painfully reminds me of how cold I was toward her on the day we moved her belongings into her new house. She had tried to joke with me and act like nothing was different. But I had resolved that the relationship was over and I was actively trying to emotionally detach and protect myself. She was shocked and perceived it as a cruel, intentional punishment.

As the months of our separate living passed by, I continued to pray for guidance. I repeatedly felt I should not rush to file for divorce but that I should “wait for the Lord.”

*Wait on the Lord, and keep his way, and he shall
exalt thee to inherit the land. (Psalm 37:34)*

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After about four months of separation, I was at work one day and the receptionist came to my office in a panic, saying that a “crazy woman” was yelling on the phone demanding to talk to me. It was Helen’s sister calling to tell me Helen had fallen and twisted around in her bathtub and that her small leg had been shattered. She was going to be in the hospital, and the surgeons would do what they could.

I knew this could be a catastrophe for Helen. I decided to make the trip to Pennsylvania and drove into the night to get to her hospital room around 2:00 a.m. I dreaded what I might experience there.

To my astonishment, she smiled serenely as I walked in. I couldn’t believe her calm state of mind. She told me the doctors had already surgically implanted metal bars in her leg, hoping it would become functional again.

As I tried to sleep later that night, an impression seeped in that we might get back together again, somehow. I allowed for that thought to remain but held it at arm’s length, with severe caution.

With skilled doctors, prayers of faith, and the laying on of hands, she began to walk. Though never as well as before, she could at least walk again. Within a couple of years, however, she had to use a wheelchair whenever we went outside.

Ultimately, this experience was beneficial for Helen. During her recovery, we were still separated and she was stuck alone in the house with little help. Then amazingly, God sent our teenage nephew to live with her and help her, which was truly a miracle in terms of timing. Helen still felt the weight of caring for herself and—without me around—there was nobody to blame for whatever was happening.

The harsh realities of life seemed to close in on her, facilitating God’s treatment plan and personal tutoring. Had Helen not believed I was pursuing a divorce, she would not have felt fully responsible to act for herself and come face-to-face with her own fears, thoughts, and habits.

She started listening to religious programming on TV, its inspiring messages filling her with hope. Today she testifies that for the first

time, she began to live with faith and put the Lord first. She lost weight because nobody fed her, she would joke, but in truth, she followed a strict diet and quit taking all her weight-gain-inducing medications (which is not something we recommend doing independently).

And so it was that a perplexing prompting to pursue divorce led to progress in Helen's life and ultimately, a stronger union.

After a few months of talking by phone, I could sense the difference in her and naively assumed everything would be better now that the gospel had truly come into her life. *Perhaps the meds weren't necessary after all*, I thought. But quite soon she would need medications again.

We agreed to reunite, and that was our last separation (nineteen years ago as of this writing).

Breaking the Eggshells

As with the other separations, growth had occurred for both of us, and our relationship was functioning better than before. But our problems came back with intensity.

We bought another house near my job and moved in with high hopes and a few enthusiastic, peace-filled weeks together.

But gradually, she started to act a bit like "the old Helen." What was going on? Why? We were both so optimistic, trying so hard.

For the first time, I began to understand that I was a significant part of the problem. I was somehow triggering her upsets. In many ways, she had been living in greater peace without me. And she was getting more upset the longer we were together! What was I doing wrong?

This was all deeply concerning. "Were we not meant to be, after all?" But I had received powerful witnesses from the Holy Spirit that we were right for each other and should get back together again.

With some horror, I also noticed I was changing mentally too. I was slowing down a little and wasn't able to handle her behaviors as well as before. I was more easily fatigued, and that concerned me.

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One day, Helen was yelling something at me—probably a no-win situation of some kind where I felt trapped by her conflicting directions. I recall reflexively ducking behind a recliner in our living room as she hollered from the other side of the room.

It wasn't until after I had left the room that I realized what I had done. I had ducked behind the chair to shield myself from her words! I was afraid of her. I was terrified that the abuse would never end.

Reflecting on that incident later, I also feared I was being permanently harmed psychologically. Who on earth hides behind a chair during an argument?

Around this time, I discovered the book *Stop Walking on Eggshells*, which I strongly recommend for anyone living with a person with BPD. I began to understand how, when, and why a person with BPD is triggered. This book satisfied my deep need to understand what on earth was happening and how to prevent or minimize Helen's outbursts. (This illustrates why we so strongly recommend that you learn about your spouse's condition or illness and seek the guidance of mental health professionals. For your sake, you need to understand what's going on.)

I also realized that I had been unintentionally triggering painful emotional upsets for Helen. I understood why, in some ways, she had been happier living alone. I now knew better what *not* to do and say. I saw that my efforts to fix or prevent problems were misguided and harmful. I meant well, but I was not helping. I lacked understanding.

I gradually began to do better but monitoring my words and facial expressions while watching out for her feelings and mental state were draining on me. And it is impossible to prevent *all* conflict, despite our best efforts, even today.

My Near Collapse

I was so broken by the stress of our relationship, I hesitantly suggested we sleep in separate beds. I was surprised when she agreed, and I credit a merciful God with helping us both see the necessity of it.

For many years previous, whenever Helen was upset, she would fuss with me incessantly, even after we went to bed. This was her most dreaded, destructive behavior because she would wake me up as soon as I fell asleep. If she was still steaming mad, I wasn't going to have the pleasure of falling asleep. "You have to get me out of this!" she would often say.

I would just lie there as still as I could and try not to snore. It was traumatizing because in my near-subconscious state, she would be there again, saying awful things. This happened quite often for over fifteen *years*.

It took seven years of sleeping separately before I felt safe enough to sleep next to her again, and even then, I was nervous for weeks.

At the lowest point in my life, the mental fatigue was so intense I was pretty much in a depression for three years straight. My mental health professionals could not find the right medications; nothing helped.

But somehow, miraculously, Helen became very gentle with me. Not all the time, but sometimes. She allowed me to be weak and vulnerable. She exhibited saintly kindness and patience, which I craved and appreciated beyond words. She let me fully express myself and share how upset and hurt I was without having a meltdown herself. This was unheard of in earlier years. I can still picture several settings where such conversations took place. One time, I cried my eyes out while she just sat silently, hand on my back, occasionally saying things like, "It's okay. Go ahead. I know it's been really hard on you."

The relief was inexpressible.

I thank God for giving me an easy job during that time. I was so worn out I could not have handled anything more. I worked with kind and caring people who were having similar life experiences. God is so merciful. He has always given me what is needed—even if He doesn't fully take the problem away.

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That same year, doctors finally diagnosed my mental illness and found the right combination of medications to help me feel better. Bipolar disorder 2 is often misdiagnosed as clinical depression, they told me, and they confirmed that I had bipolar disorder 2. Today, I feel amazing most of the time, thanks to spiritual learning and healing, my medications, and a much more stable relationship with Helen.

Blessings from within the Furnace

Problems and hard times are often called the “furnace of affliction.” The problems may hurt terribly, but the intensity of the flame does positive things to our souls—if we accept those problems with faith in God.

I recall often thinking to myself, *Am I being destroyed by all these problems? Is my life being ruined?*

The answer was always no.

Deficits resulting from my drug-using years, character flaws, and poor social skills were gradually being addressed. *I'm better off now than I was before I met Helen*, I often remember thinking.

Her personality and strengths were indispensable to building my self-confidence. She drew so much out of me that just wasn't there before. Her innate talents, humor, energy, social skills, and love of children and domestic things brought us a great deal of joy, even throughout the terrible trials.

I had better jobs over time. I was effective at work and respected. Sure, there were hard days, but I was generally considered a solid, sometimes exceptional employee.

I was maturing in my knowledge of God and beginning to reflect more of His character. I could feel the foolishness being burned out of my soul, and I was spiritually maturing.

Many are the afflictions of the righteous: but the Lord delivereth him out of them all. (Psalm 34:17-20)

Dialectical Behavior Therapy

Nevertheless, some hard times continued for another six years after I was diagnosed and properly medicated. I had more strength to cope with the troubles, so it took less of a toll on me, but it was still highly disruptive and Helen was extremely volatile at times.

Of course, throughout all of these hard times from the earliest days of our marriage, there were many, many truly enjoyable good times and wonderful memories made. Nobody should imagine we experienced twenty-plus years of endless misery. But as of yet, we still hadn't been able to exit that dysfunctional rollercoaster ride. Round and round we went.

In 2012, she ended up in a psychiatric hospital again in a terrible, angry state, but it led to the most important, life-changing opportunity of our life.

The key to Helen's lasting and deep change was her decision to attend a three-month, full-time treatment program in Pittsburgh focused on dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), which is considered the most effective form of therapy for individuals with my wife's conditions. We had to move to Pittsburgh temporarily so that she could attend the program from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., five days a week. This was costly and highly inconvenient, but we knew it was a priceless opportunity. We decided it was worth the effort and prayed it would work. Tragically, Helen was there with an open mind and eager to learn while most participants were court-committed, required to attend, and had no interest in learning anything all.

DBT therapy *“aims to build mindfulness, distress tolerance, emotion regulation and distress tolerance skills.”*¹ In simpler terms, DBT helps the person manage their thoughts and feelings using specific techniques.

Helen had many unreasonable thinking and communication habits she believed were normal and other people should accept. Her participation in this program “popped a lot of bubbles,” as tactless participants in the program blasted her logic and criticized her.

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Afterwards, counselors patched things up, helping Helen understand her negative patterns and learn better ways to handle stressful situations. Every night we debriefed what she had experienced. She nearly quit during her first two weeks but thankfully, she began to feel better and became fully committed—and happier.

While Helen was in this DBT program, doctors placed her on new medications for her bipolar disorder, which still require adjustment sometimes. She still needs to participate in therapy from time to time, which brings those DBT skills back into focus and helps her avoid sliding into destructive thought patterns.

Joyful, After All



Today, Helen and I experience joy and peace in our marriage. I believe we are both more Christlike because of our experiences. We still have occasional-to-frequent tensions—severe at times—but discussions about differences of opinion are generally calm, and our marriage continues to be a God-inspired union that blesses us and others.

Looking back at our gut-wrenching experiences, we can see that God really did know what was best.

Scripture to Ponder:

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,” declares the LORD. “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8-9)