

How to Engage your Emotional Pain

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What is your response to emotional pain? Do you shove it down or pretend it isn't there or just hope it goes away on its own? We haven't been taught how to deal with it. And it's scary to face it head on, so we resort to resisting it, denying it, masking it, or blaming others. I suggest trying to develop a relationship with your emotional pain. That is the only way it can be fully healed.

This article specifically addresses emotional pain, not physical pain. We usually experience emotional pain in our bodies, but its origin is in our thoughts and emotions. Examples of emotional pain would be grief, extreme sadness, regret, crippling self-doubt, self-hatred, damaged self-esteem, profound shame, overwhelming anxiety, or unexpressed rage. The resulting emotional distress and mental anguish often disrupts our lives, hijacks our thinking, corrupts our behaviors, and manifests in our bodies as stress-related symptoms. It can take a huge toll on us.

Pain is Not Our Enemy

Our attitudes toward our emotional pain will determine how we engage it. If we view it as terrifying or unbearable, we will seek to avoid it. The reality is that we can't avoid it since it resides in us. So we employ methods of coping such as lashing out, self-harm, retreating into ourselves, addictions, obsessive-compulsive behaviors, or shutting down our emotional nature. These behaviors are attempts to manage or mask our emotional pain because we don't know what to do with the pain we feel. More often, we unconsciously act out our pain through destructive behaviors.

The pain *itself* is not our enemy and shouldn't be viewed as such. Pain is a by-product that results from an originating event or ongoing events. We need to separate the two as cause and effect. The pain itself is a symptom of something that is wrong or broken inside us. In this regard, pain functions as a messenger informing us that something needs attention. Our bodies use physical pain to tell us that some part is hurting and needs attention, such as when we tear a muscle. In this example, the muscle needs attention and care. The pain is secondary and serves to point to the cause (the muscle tear). Similarly, we need to follow our emotional pain to its source and address the cause.

Pain is a Part of Life

Pain is a universal and necessary part of life, one part of the entire spectrum of the human experience. In my book, *Four in the Garden*, Cherished asks, “Why should I experience pain at all?” Ennoia answers, “The soul attains full maturation when transformed by life of which pain is an integral component.” Pain has the ability to teach, mature, and transform us, if we let it.

Twenty years ago, I struggled with severe low self-esteem that put me into a descending spiral of devaluing and rejecting myself, and withdrawing from others. Recognizing that I couldn’t rescue myself, I sought help. My emotional pain was an impetus to understand and address the thought patterns and triggering events that were at the root of my pain. In the end, I learned to value and accept myself more, to create better boundaries, and to look for affirmation from God and not others. I gained these benefits because I was open to learning from my pain.

Changing our Perspective

The truth is that emotional pain need not destroy you or last forever. All pain comes to an end and can be useful to make us better people. 2 Corinthians 4:17 says, “For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.” If you want to delve further into the spiritual purpose of pain, read this [article](#).

My advice is that we cease judging emotional pain as something unbearable or awful, when the pain *itself* is a neutral messenger. Instead of focusing on your pain, focus on the cause of your pain that needs attention. When we change our negative and fearful attitudes toward pain, we are better prepared to deal with it in a healthy way.

First Steps of Relationship

Emotional pain is part of the package we get, like our families. When young, we learned to cohabit with our family members along with all their unpleasant traits. In the same way, we can learn to coexist with emotional pain. We don’t lock up our siblings so we don’t have to deal with them. Instead, we find ways to navigate our relationship with them. So we don’t lock up our pain, but allow

it to have room to exist. In *Four in the Garden*, Cherished reflects on his emotional pain: “I decided to not hide it or hide from it, but just hold it in view and allow it to be. If I held it in the open, like a ladybug on my palm, maybe it would fly away. Whereas, an insect kept in a closed container stays in the dark and never escapes.”

When we begin a relationship with our emotional pain, we start by holding hands with it. That means to engage it and not shun it. We make ourselves open to it. We don't judge it, but give it permission to be present in our lives.

Full Engagement

Once we get comfortable holding hands with our emotional pain, we take it further. We increase our engagement by learning to sit with it. At this stage, we allow ourselves to feel it, without judgment. The point of this exercise is to understand it. Where does it reside in my body? What is its energy, texture, and temperature? How does it affect me, and my thoughts and behaviors? We do NOT ask how to get rid of it. Instead, we study it with curiosity and objectivity. As during courtship or dating, we get to know it. One benefit of this step is that our emotional pain becomes less mysterious to us, and, therefore, less threatening. We see it for what it is, not some looming, terrifying menace.

Going further, we learn to hold our emotional pain with compassion. Anything that is a part of us, including our pain, is deserving of our mercy and grace as well as God's mercy and grace. It is the lack of mercy and grace that turns matters into monsters. When we hold our pain with compassion, we give it value and permission to engage us.

We also learn to nurture our relationship with our emotional pain. By this, I mean we give it freedom and opportunity to open up to us. To use a dating analogy, we get people to open up to us when we drop our defenses and shift our focus off of ourselves and onto the other. When we drop our defenses and give earnest attention to our pain, it will open up to us and show us why it's there and what beliefs are surrounding it. By lovingly engaging our pain, we create a space where it can speak to us and teach us about ourselves.

This is not easy to do. It takes a great amount of courage, patience, and compassion. No less than any other relationship worth investing in.

Pain's Journey

Although I said that emotional pain is a part of us, it is not intended to remain a part of us. Pain has a journey to make and we can assist it in its journey. I equate it to a toxin in our bodies. Our bodies' natural defense is to expel the toxin. In the same way, our souls seek to push our emotional pain outward to exit our beings. I remember a lady telling me she had been in a horrible car accident where glass shrapnel had entered her body. Years later, tiny glass shards began coming out through her skin. Her body had been slowly pushing the glass out of her body over time. Our souls desire to do the same thing with our painful emotions.

We shove things down because they hurt or scare us. If we keep doing so, we prevent them from making their natural outward journey to exit. Instead, we can cooperate with the process and assist our emotional pain to complete its journey and exit for good. To process our pain, we allow it to emerge. This can be scary because this is when our emotional pain is most prominently felt and most real to us. The help of a therapist or counselor may be needed for this step. If we fully feel our pain, then we give it an outlet and help it along in its journey outward.

Don't be discouraged or surprised when past emotional pain arises out of the blue. This usually is a good thing. It means that your pain is ready to begin its journey and that you are ready to engage it. By all means, don't shove it back down. It has emerged for a reason and it behooves you to discover the reason. Allow it to remain, commit it to God, and let it speak to you about its presence in your life. It need not terrify you. Instead, prepare yourself for a journey of discovery and healing.

When Pain Gets Stuck

When emotional pain is not dealt with, it remains with us and lodges in our being, sometimes for years. I believe it gets stored in our body at the cellular level. Unresolved pain has nowhere to go, no outlet, so it gets buried in us. The tragedy is that it ends up pervading our lives. It affects our thoughts and actions. And it can make us ill because it also affects our body as well as our souls.

I vividly remember an occasion when I was doing an exercise I had been taught by my therapist where I place my consciousness into different parts of my body. When I did so with my thighs, I was overwhelmed by intense feelings of shame. Not only that, but I was bombarded by memories of being shamed, all playing out in rapid succession in my mind like a flip book. To my astonishment, I discovered I had stored all this unresolved, unprocessed shame in that part of my body. Somehow, I had triggered a release of those painful memories along with an intense flood of emotions. I had locked those memories and feelings inside my body for years. What this tells me is that we literally carry our unresolved painful emotions with us in our bodies.

One helpful analogy is that of vomiting. As for me, I hate to vomit more than anything. When I have the stomach flu, I fight the urge to vomit and try hard to keep it down, but what I need is to vomit. Our bodies have the same pressing need to expel the negative emotions stored inside us. We must stop fighting to keep them down, but surrender to the natural urge and allow our bodies to expel those poisons and bring us into health again. We don't want to get stuck, but keep moving forward even when it's uncomfortable.

Completing the Journey

With our assistance, God's assistance, and the help of others, emotional pain can complete its outward journey. It will cease to be locked inside of us, but released for good, no longer to torment us. Healing is possible, but it means fearlessly engaging your emotional pain. To process your pain, you must befriend it for a season in order to understand it and let it teach you. As you allow yourself to fully feel it, you give it permission to become real to you. When our pain becomes real to us, we are able to engage it and manage it, instead of minimizing it, denying it, or antagonizing it. Once our pain has become embodied in its true form—and less scary form—we enable it to make its intended journey to exit us completely.

God's desire is that we be clear and full of light (Matthew 6:22), not baggage carriers. Yes, you CAN get rid of your baggage, but you must release your attachments to it and release your fear of the void and vulnerability that results when you let go of it. As you shed your emotional pain, you are freed to engage life more fully and to experience God to a deeper extent, as there is less to get in the way between you and God. 1 Peter 5:10 says, "After you have

suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.” As we entrust our emotional pain to God, it may be painful, but God is committed to make us whole and more securely grounded in Him.

Questions for Reflection:

1. How would you describe your relationship with your emotional pain?
 2. What scares you most about engaging your emotional pain?
 3. What specific request would you ask of God to help you take the first step toward engaging your emotional pain?
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