

# Lesson Six

## WORKING THROUGH PAIN

Psychological studies rooted in Cognitive-Behavioral therapies are recognizing that Experiential Avoidance (the avoidance of thoughts, experiences, and memories that create pain or discomfort) is a bit of a Catch-22 in that, as a person strives to relieve themselves of in-the-moment pain, the more likely it is that the problem will persist.<sup>1</sup> But regardless of this fact, people spend countless quantities of time, money, and energy working to avoid pain in their lives.

As pastoral counselors, part of our job is to equip people with tools to work through pain

in order to break its power and cyclical effect on the lives of people that Jesus died to free!

I want to start with a parable entitled “The Frozen Heart,” which I wrote in *The Supernatural Power of Forgiveness*, because it illustrates how people get trapped in cycles of pain when their hearts are disconnected from its circumstances.<sup>2</sup> This allegory depicts many of the men and women you will counsel—people who have spent their entire lives never connecting to their emotions or working through pain. Throughout the excerpt, there are intermittent spaces for you to process the things that are revealed in the allegory.

<sup>1</sup> Hayes, S. C., Wilson, K. G., Gifford, E. V., Follette, V. M., & Al, E. (1996). Experiential Avoidance and Behavioral Disorders: A Functional Dimensional Approach to Diagnosis and Treatment. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 64(6), 1152-1168.

<sup>2</sup> Vallotton, K., Vallotton, J., & Baker, H. (2014). *The Supernatural Power of Forgiveness*. Minneapolis, MN: Chosen Books.

# The Frozen Heart

*Take a walk with me down a long, slender corridor, a place where life has been forgotten. The hardened walls of ice carry no ability in themselves to feel or breathe, for they have been sealed shut from the light of day. As you pass through the corridor, you can see the work of many hands. Carved deep within the walls of ice are the scars of ancient history. Murals from top to bottom tell the stories of incessant abuse and perversion that have plagued this place.*

*As you continue down the frozen corridor, you come to a set of steel bars and are unable to go any further. Lying on the floor are thousands of words of affirmation and love, all of them worthless--shattered to pieces--while words of hate and rage claw at the door, trying to find their way into the cage. Peering through the steel bars, you see a heart torn and cold from the empty promises of affectionate deceit. Upon seeing the bleeding heart, you begin to beg and plead to be let in. At the top of your lungs you cry out for mercy, but your words only echo off the ice-laden walls. There is no one here to care, no one to hear your plea. Quickly, your pleading turns to torment as you frantically search for the keys that unlock this door, for it won't be long until this cold heart is frozen in time, unable to ever feel again.*



## REFLECT

**What kinds of experiences and belief systems could lead to this level of bondage?**

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*Digging through the shattered words, your fingers begin to bleed, but it matters not. For somewhere among the wreckage there must lie a key... a way in. You dig and dig until the concrete floor meets your bleeding fingers, but still there is no way in. In your frustration you scream at the heart, "Who put you here? Who would leave you here to rot in this frozen grave?" Your words carry through the bars, sinking compassion deep into the freezing heart. At your words he moans aloud, for he only*

*hears the torment of past love. Without notice, the prison bars grow thicker, and the temperature drops in the corridor. Quickly you realize that the heart was the one that built this prison. No longer can it allow itself to unlock the steel cage that took so long to fortify. No longer can he risk the torment of hope deferred and love abused...*



## REFLECT

**This revelation is often a powerful and painful one for people to experience. What are some of the possible effects of this unveiling of truth?**

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*Looking through the ice, you begin to realize that your whole life was a horror of memories, a testimony of what happens to a heart that is left open to feel. Somewhere down the line, life became a routine of slowly shutting down. After all, one doesn't have to feel in order to live, especially when feeling is worse than dying. The tears try to run, but you're too cold; you're trapped inside yourself, inside the fortress you made. Running back to the heart, you pound on the cage screaming to be let in. "Can't you see we're going to die down here?" The heart groans at your words, but he's unwilling to move.*

*Falling to your knees, you begin to plead with him, recalling back to him your childhood. "I was there when love was abused, when all you wanted was the touch of a father. I was there when perversion became the comfort for a broken spirit, the only way out. I saw the pain in shutting down, knowing that it meant losing the possibility to ever bond again. And I see the hatred that you have toward me for not being able to protect you, for not being able to see through the deceptive lies."*



## REFLECT

**Why is it important that this kind of real conversation be allowed to happen in a safe place with a client?**

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*For the first time in ages, the heart begins to cry at the realization that there's someone who knows, someone who sees where he's been. For even though the heart lives inside of a man, he is very much his own person needing to be explored and understood. The tears pour and the ice slowly melts as the heart begins to feel again. Never before has the heart felt protected enough to unlock the steel cage, but one by one, the bolts begin to break as promises are made. "I promise to love you more than anyone else. I promise to find a way to protect you. I promise to not be afraid to feel even when it hurts. And I promise to never disconnect from you again, leaving you alone to fend for yourself!"*

*Leaving the corridor that day, the only thing that is going to change inside of you is the decision to be powerful, to not hide anymore. Many of us have spent our whole lives not realizing what our heart is really needing, or even being aware of the punishment that life has dished out. Without the ability to connect to your heart, you have no way of really meeting your deepest needs. This type of living leaves people desperate for a way to cope with the onslaught of normal life because a need unmet leads to pain!*



## REFLECT

**What steps could you take at this point to help a client move forward in the process of repentance as we discussed in Lesson 5?**

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## Valuing Emotions

No one sets out with the intent of locking themselves up inside a prison of ice. After all, who wants to be alone and unknown? The process of emotionally shutting down is our soul's last-ditch effort at surviving what it deems traumatic. When the pain fails to subside, your heart has to make a decision: go completely insane or disconnect from emotional reality.

Childhood upbringing is the most common place of pain I've found in people who are emotionally shut down. People are at their most vulnerable state as young children because they are powerless to change their circumstances. Kids often become victims of their parents' dysfunction, and they learn lessons about love and vulnerability that teach them to hide at all costs. For example, when the character in the allegory above looked back at his childhood and realized he was never really loved and cared for, he began to understand, for the first time, why his heart had locked itself up in the steel cage. Because the decision to hide and avoid pain usually happens at a young age, it's really common for adults to be unaware of what is actually happening.

There are countless ways that people protect themselves from having to take risks, keep themselves from feeling emotions, and compensate for the pain in their lives. But the important thing to realize is that God designed us to have feelings, and He is with us as we explore them. When God created man, He created in him a masterpiece of emotions. Here are some important things to consider:

- **Emotions are motivators.** Emotions are meant to excite us to action and actually help us get things done! Emotions stimulate our brains to tell our muscles to tense or relax, motivating us or de-motivating us to act. Without emotions, we wouldn't accomplish much!
- **Emotions assist in decision-making.** For example, when you think about doing something that contradicts your core values, your emotions will let you know that it's probably not a good idea based on the way that you *feel*. Even imagining a scenario will trigger your emotions and let you know if it feels like a good idea or not.
- **Emotions create strong bonds of connectivity and harmony between you and your environment.** I can't count how many times I've talked with kids who are completely heartbroken over the fact that their parents have never said the words "I love you" to them. Even as adults, the pain of living your whole life without having your parents ever emotionally connected to you is incredibly damaging. On the other hand, if you look back at some of the best times in your life with your friends or family, it was probably a time when you felt really emotionally connected. On the most fundamental level, we are created to connect to the world around us on a heart-to-heart level.
- **Emotions help us survive and thrive!** Negative emotions signal warnings and prompt us to act by running away, avoiding, or even fighting back. Positive emotions are so important that they actually boost your immune system, promote good self-esteem, and ward off depression.

God created both positive and negative emotions. There have been entire studies done on this subject! The important thing to understand is that it was God's original intent that we would live connected to our hearts. Checking in with our hearts each day to find out what's going on inside of us is a practical way to validate our emotions and become consciously aware of how we are doing. Here are some questions that someone can ask their heart in order to practice giving it a voice and identifying the places that need attention:

- How do I feel today?
- Why do I feel the way that I do?
- Heart, what do you need in order to be okay?
- What can I do about it?

*If your emotional abilities aren't in hand, if you don't have self-awareness, if you are not able to manage your distressing emotions, if you can't have empathy and have effective relationships, then no matter how smart you are, you are not going to get very far.*

DANIEL GOLEMAN

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## **Mourning Leads to Comfort**

Most of the time, pain causes us to feel so incredibly powerless and hopeless that focusing on it seems to make it worse. The typical response to pain is to stuff it down or ignore it. However, without the process of mourning, there is no comfort! Mourning is a significant process on the road to wholeness! It is necessary, but because people are averse to addressing their pain, they typically rob themselves of this powerful experience.

*Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*

MATTHEW 5:4, NIV

Mourning is the process by which people receive the real comfort they so need and desire, but because addressing the pain has to happen in order to mourn it, people often short-circuit their process, which leads them back around their mountain, feeding the pain cycles in their lives.

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## **Processing Pain**

Many people you see in your counseling office will not know how to deal with their pain in a thorough and healthy way, but before you begin the process of leading someone to address their places of mourning and pain, you will want to consider a few important things. Not every person will respond or react to the process the same way, so it's important to inform them that there is no cookie-cutter way to navigate through this time. Your clients will experience a range of emotions depending on their levels of pain, their personality types, and the circumstances they've walked through. As a counselor, be ready for this and give your client enough information that they don't feel confused or scared because you didn't communicate well. Here are some things to remember:

- Working through pain uncorks a person. Like a bottle that has been corked up and shaken for years, a person may be afraid that they'll explode if they open up. Make sure that your client knows what to do when they feel undone. For example, it may be helpful for them to process their emotions through journaling or talking with a really safe friend so they don't get too overwhelmed. Having a plan and a good support team is vital when processing pain.
- Painful thoughts are a gift. They should be allowed to come so that they can be validated and dealt with in a healthy way. Work through each painful thought or memory, one at a time, and give it permission to make you feel deeply. It's in the embracing of the pain, mourning the loss that took place, and asking for the Holy Spirit to come that a person can receive real comfort and God's truth about the pain. It's important to note that working through pain and dealing with unforgiveness go hand in hand. In the next lesson, we will go through this process step-by-step.
- Crying is a good thing. Crying is the body's instinctive way of purging negative emotions. To deny yourself the gratification of tears is to invalidate the emotions and hide the truth about how you feel. I always encourage people to go to a quiet place, to process through thoughts by crying, and writing and asking God what He thinks. After literally crying it out, pain subsides and the thoughts that were once painful don't hurt like they used to.
- Be wise about processing pain. It is not a good idea for a person to process when they are emotionally drained. This can lead to depression, anxiety, hopelessness, and other challenging things. One of the most important ingredients in processing pain is fun. When people have fun, they emotionally reset and recharge, making it possible to process more without burning out.
- Emotional health is linked to physical health. When processing through pain, a person should be exercising, eating well, sleeping well, and recharging on a daily basis. This will help them to work through the process in a safe manner without hitting extreme highs and lows.

Once people learn how to deal with pain instead of avoiding it, they are able to live a free life because they are not afraid of it anymore. When we successfully navigate through pain, we gain confidence to confront the old fears that once held us bound.