Hurting Well

Creating a Healthy Relationship with Suffering & Pain

A short course
by Dr. Matthew Green



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All scripture quotations are the translation of the author



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An Introduction

When you get right down to it, life is basically about relationships: our relationship with ourselves, our relationship with others, and, ultimately, our relationship with God. However, it is also about our relationship with each aspect of life. How we interact with our circumstances, our emotions, our sensations, and so on, is a huge piece of how we get through it all.

Any book that tried to define how to interact with every aspect of life would require enough volumes to fill several libraries, and perhaps that is exactly what libraries already are. Rather than attempt to duplicate the Library of Congress, this small course is centered specifically around the matter of suffering and pain. Most people, especially in industrialized worlds, seem to have never created a working relationship with pain. For the most part, we're at odds with it. When was the last time most of us sat down and thought about how to be better friends with suffering – or at least

how to face it when it comes as it inevitably will? It's not typical, and if we did, those watching might be tempted to very politely and gently refer us to the nearest shrink.

We don't like pain, and it's a terribly understandable response. I don't think God designed pain to be likable. If it were, it would defeat its own purpose. Still, we have to learn to relate with it in a respectful manner. Many people fear spiders; others study them and build a relationship with them out of fascination, respecting and even finding a strange sort of beauty in them. Finding beauty in pain might be a stretch for most, but we ought at least learn to respect it. Our wrong relationship with pain affects us. It affects how we live our lives overall because pain is part of our lives.

I just realized that there's going to be a lot of painful times in life, so I better learn to deal with it the right way.
- Trey Parker and Matt Stone

And that's the whole point of this short course – to take a look at our present relationship with suffering and learn how to respect it, honor it, and find ways to work with and within it. As noted, it's a short course, so not everything is going to be covered, but hopefully a foundation can be set for a greater openness and willingness to learn and grow.

Each section is designed to be read one week at a time. This gives some time to reflect on what's been presented. It also gives some time to work through the exercises at the end of each chapter. Don't worry! At no time do I encourage you to whack your fingers with a hammer or any such thing. Inflicting pain on ourselves is hardly a part of a right relationship with it. These exercises are designed to help you engage with pain in a healthy manner and open you up to how it can be more than the brute adversary we seem to see. You're free to do all of them or just some of them. I can't stop you from doing none of them, of course, but you won't get as much out of your time. Remember that we learn our deepest lessons by experience, not just absorbing text. One suggestion if you're not wanting to do all of the tasks is to look for the one that you're most drawn to and the one you're least drawn to. Do what's interesting, by all means, but don't forget that what we most resist can often be what we most need.

The world is full of suffering, it is also full of overcoming it.
- Helen Keller

One last thing: there is one task that carries through every week. This task is designed to heighten your awareness of pain. That almost sounds like it will make it worse, and it might if we're determined to fight against it. The real point, however, is not to make us hurt more, but to keep us attentive to this unwanted companion. Only when we're willing to engage with it can we build a right relationship.

Bless you and your relationships with yourself, your neighbors, God himself, and your suffering.

What this Course is Not

While the intent with this course is to examine how we deal with pain and suffering, this isn't a course to help us deal with suffering when we're in the midst of it. Think of this as a fire drill: it's something we should practice and put in place long before the emergency happens. We plan and decide what to do in advance so that when we're in trouble, we don't have to think too hard; we're already ready to do what needs to be done.

So if you're in a position where you're struggling with grief or fear or pain in this moment, this may not be the right time for you. If you're facing suffering right now, instead of continuing with this course and planning what to do next time, in this moment, gather people who love you and lean on them for support while you work through the present. When you're ready, when things are stable again, then you can come back and work through the course.

This course also isn't a panacea. The hope is not to eliminate suffering but to build a relationship with it. Jesus said that we should love our enemies (Matt. 5:44). If suffering is an enemy, then perhaps we can learn to love even our pain in some way. Jesus, at the right time, welcomed it, knowing joy was set in front of him (Heb. 12:2). May we follow in his footsteps and learn to suffer well, trusting in God's goodness in the midst of it.

Activity

Throughout this course, any time you feel hurt, before you try to fix the pain, stop and ponder what that pain is telling you. It might be as simple as "My finger is cut open" to as complex as "This crowd reminds me of how alone I feel." Write these messages down whenever you can. At the end of each week, journal about any difference you feel. Did this ever change how you dealt with the pain? Try to include all kinds of pain and suffering – physical hurts (cut, bruises, body twinges, etc.) and psychological pain (anxiety, grief, depression, etc.).



Hurting Well

Creating a Healthy Relationship with Suffering & Pain

Part 1: Don’t Shoot the Messenger

Separating Pain from its Source

There’s a reason that God crafted everything and placed it into this vast and wonderful creation. Everything God made has a purpose (though it’s true that most are still searching for the purpose of the mosquito). No doubt sin has tainted much, and the Fall has warped what was originally intended, but even what has been spoiled had an original shape and plan. Remember that God looked at all he created and said it was very good.

Part of that creation was the senses of the body, and part of what the body senses is pain. It’s built into us. We’re hardwired to experience pain, and that means that hardwiring is part of God’s “very good”.

Very good? Pain? Admittedly, it’s not the easiest concept to wrap your mind around, but it’s true. The sharp jolt of fire that hits when you break your arm, the panicking sweat that overwhelms you

when in danger, the dull ache of having to say goodbye… They're not meaningless. It's not merely a horrible consequence of the Fall. Pain serves a purpose. One group of people know this more than any other.

Few diseases have had more horror and repulsion attached to it than leprosy. In Old Testament days, lepers were cut off from their community, forced to live apart from their friends, their loved ones, and the daily life of society. When they arrived in a public place, they had to shout out to announce their presence, "Unclean! Unclean!" and people would stay very clear of them. Even when the ten lepers came to ask Jesus for help, they stood at a distance, unable by the laws of the culture to come near to a healthy person. (Luke 17:12) Two thousand years later, most lepers were still outcast, shunned by their countrymen, forced to live in communities away from "normal" people.

These are our unwilling teachers. They are the ones who know the wonder of pain because they no longer have it themselves. Leprosy deadens the nerves that register pain. Slowly, without this dreaded sensation, the people begin to destroy themselves. They hold pans that are too hot. They cut themselves and never realize it. They wear sores on their feet with poorly fitted shoes, and these wounds never have time to heal because more break open faster than the body can rebuild. Without pain, lepers find themselves forgetting to blink, and their eyes dry out. They tear open their hands until they hardly function, and they never feel a thing. The curse of leprosy is that it offers the blessing so many long for – a life without pain.

Pain (any pain - emotional, physical, mental) has a message…. Once we get the pain's message, and follow its advice, the pain goes away.
- Peter McWilliams

Pain is, more than anything, a warning system. It is the warning system that the lepers no longer have. If they heard their body shout at them, surely they would pull away and the hurt would stop so that healing can begin, but their bodies can no longer cry out. They have been silenced. Yet it is this very silencing that so many people long for. Find me a medicine cabinet without ibuprofen or some sort of painkiller. It's quite the difficult task. Pain is the enemy! If only we could eradicate pain from out lives, then surely all would be well! So we reach for the acetaminophen, ask for the morphine, and deaden the sensations. Ah, bliss!

I've heard it said that the shortest distance between two points is always a straight line, but the longest distance between two points is always the shortcut. Maybe it's true that life would be better if we could be rid of pain – or at least what causes it - but painkillers can be that long-distance shortcut. If we rid ourselves of the pain but haven't fixed the cause, have we really done ourselves a favor? When the painkillers wear off, the hurt will return, and by that point, the problem may just be worse.

Pain is trying to tell us something. Its message is simple: something is wrong! Drivers don't (or shouldn't!) notice a light on the dashboard show up and then stick electrical tape over it, convinced that the problem is solved, yet this is the technique so many have employed with the "idiot light" of pain. How much better would it be if you stopped, opened the hood, and tried to figure out why the light is showing up in the first place. Then when you no longer see the dashboard lit up, you can be confident that there is no longer a threat. You can keep driving without fear of the car breaking down. (Fear of other drivers on the freeway is another matter.) Likewise, the solution to pain is not to find a way to blank out the warning but to find the source. If we are willing to listen to the feeling, unpleasant as it may be, it will lead us to something much more than relief, but potentially solution.

Illness is the doctor to whom we pay most heed: to kindness, to knowledge we make promises only: pain we obey.

- Marcel Proust

But why does it have to hurt? The unfortunate answer to that question is that if it fails to hurt, we may not respond in time – or at all. Pain demands our attention. In extreme circumstances, we can push it aside and find our attention on something more demanding, but the more terrible the problem, the louder pain will shout. It has to be bad because if it failed to hurt, we would fail to listen. It serves us by calling us to be aware to our own need and not letting us push it aside lightly. Consider your home smoke alarm. When it goes off, it is loud, insistent, annoying, and, dare I say it, painful. It works that way in order to demand all of our attention and make us do something about a potential fire that could kill us. Likewise, when something is truly wrong, pain doesn't merely tap us on the shoulder and politely request that we attend to it. The volume of its cry matches the problem it sees so that we can stop and prevent things from becoming worse.

But pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains.

- C. S. Lewis

This is true not only of physical pain, but of our emotional as well. The ache of losing a loved one is a message that something is wrong. The heaviness of depression calls us to admit that there is a problem. The shock of panic demands that we recognize a threat. They are not mere conditions, though there are certainly disorders that can call them up or worsen them. They are messengers that tell us that all is not well in our internal worlds.

It is different with the emotional world because our souls are so complex and because, to some extent, we decide what is painful and what is not. With a sentence like that, it would almost seem that we should be able to just decide that things don't hurt and move on with our lives carefree, but it's not quite that simple. When the soul hurts, it is because of the meaning that is impinging on it. A stranger dying may hurt. A spouse dying may be agony. It is because the meaning is so much greater. We decide how much things mean to us, though most often we don't consciously make the

choice. Life teaches us what things mean and how much by experience rather than by intentional choice. We gradually take in what it teaches over and over, accept it, and respond from these places in our hearts. There is, of course, the option of not letting anything mean anything to us at all, and some have chosen that route (or believe that they have), but if nothing means anything, what would be the point of living? Meaning is what gives substance to life. One thing that we can be sure means something is whether or not life means anything. Lack of meaning – that is inherently painful.

The complexity of the meanings we attach to things and the complexity of our souls makes finding the cause of some pain to be very difficult. Some psychologists have concluded that depression is "anger turned inward", but a feeling like depression seems so very different from rage. Still, many find that in times of depression, getting in touch with their anger is exactly the route that draws them out and brings relief.

Convoluted? Confusing? Perhaps. But the truth is that the pain has meaning, even if that meaning may not be so easy to figure out. Figuring it out, however, is most often part of what we are called to do with our pain. Numbing the sensation, and thus ourselves, without treating the cause is foolishness. Popping an aspirin while ignoring the splinter will only drive it deeper into the skin. Vegetating in front of the TV to escape from our anxiety will only drive it deeper into our souls. Pain is meant to be listened to, not merely extinguished.

Far be it from me to say that the occasional painkiller is wrong! I'd be mad to say to my surgeon, "No thanks. I don't need anesthesia. I'd just like to understand the meaning of the pain I'll be experiencing." The meaning is that somebody is cutting open a part of my body! It might be for my good in the long run, but my body doesn't know that, and you can be sure it will protest! I'll take the anesthesia. Likewise, a tension headache from work stress has an obvious source, and an aspirin is not a bad idea – so long as I find a way to lessen the stress at work.

Rather than trying to "solve" pain, by eliminating it, we must learn to listen to it, and then manage it.
- Dr. Paul Brand

And that's the issue at stake. The pain is trying to tell me something about my life – the immediate circumstances or the way I'm living on the whole. It's trying to tell you something. Your body, your soul, they are trying to get your attention, trying to tell you how to live without damaging yourself, how to live, ultimately, more freely and healthier. Listen to them! Listen to their messages of pain. Pain is not the enemy; it is the messenger.

Activities

1. Quickly list 10 words or phrases that come to mind when you think about pain. Write honestly (there's no quiz at the end).

   _____ _____

   _____ _____

   _____ _____

   _____ _____

   _____ _____

   Do you feel anything worthwhile about it? Are there things that might be worth reexamining?

2. Write a letter to your pain. Tell it exactly how you feel about it. ("Dear Pain, You stink! I wish you'd just go away…")
   Now write a letter from your pain to you. Try to imagine what your pain wants to tell you. What is it trying to communicate? How does it feel about you?

3. Take a few minutes to imagine what the world would be like without pain. Describe it with a few paragraphs or with a picture. What comes to mind? Relief? Bliss? Horror? Can't even imagine? What might this tell you about your feelings about pain? How well do your feelings match truth?

4. Imagine if all your pain were meaningless – that each thing that hurts does so randomly and for no reason at all. What would change? What would life be like?
   Now imagine that each pain did mean something – was rich with substance and meaning. What would life be like here? What would those meanings be?
   Which of these two scenarios seems most like your life now?
   Which would you like your life to be like?

5. Choose one day this week to go without shoes (at least as much as your life will reasonably allow). Walk on surfaces like you normally would but notice what your feet feel. Does the gravel hurt? Do you have to adjust your walk? How does the grass feel? Do your feet seem

more sensitive this way?

6. The more we are familiar with our pain, the more likely we will be to be able to understand their message. List 6 or 7 kinds of physical pain. Describe each one with a few words or phrases. Now list 6 or 7 kinds of emotional pain and describe them. For example: Muscle ache – squeezing, urgent, gradually growing dull ache. Anxiety – frantic, happens in my arms, coming unglued. What are some potential roots for each kind of pain?





Part 2: Down the Rabbit Hole

Learning Where Pain Leads

We all have 10,000 ways to escape pain. It's a natural reaction, and we'd be much worse off without it. The most obvious, as has already been mentioned repeatedly, is to reach for the ibuprofen. An icepack over the eyes for a headache can work wonders. Some people throw themselves into their work, and many click on the television. Sexual release can be a powerful painkiller, but so can books, shopping, and even helping other people. Depending on the kind of pain we feel and our personalities, there are all sorts of different ways we use to numb the insistent cries of our pain.

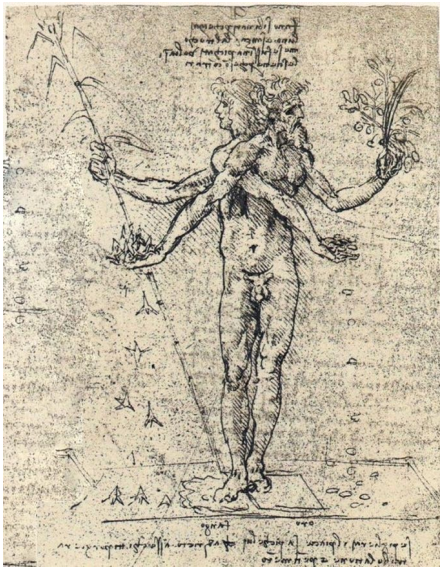
Not shooting the messenger was lesson number one, but sometimes shooting the messenger isn't entirely a bad thing when the messenger is so terribly loud and insistent that it inhibits you from functioning well enough to do what needs to be done. There is a line between pain and agony. Unfortunately, trying to define that line is rather difficult. It's sort of a fuzzy boundary, different for every person, constantly changing, dependent on the circumstances, and more of a region with blurred edges than a line anyway. Knowing when it is painful and when it is too painful can be tricky business.

As society gains the ability to limit suffering, it loses the ability to cope with what suffering remains.
- Paul Brand

Some of us, however, have "solved" this problem by simply turning the volume knobs on our pain tolerance all the way down to zero. This way, the line doesn't exist. All pain becomes too painful, so we avoid, numb, and blank out everything. We believe that all pain is bad, so we can't bear anything that looks vaguely like it.

There are numerous problems with this attitude, but here are just a few. First, there is some evidence to say that those that take painkillers excessively are more likely to contract disorders where the body experiences pain all the time, unaffected by painkillers. Some theorize that the body is so used to and even so values pain that when it is fooled into believing there is none, it begins manufacturing its own pain responses, just to reassure itself that it is still functioning properly. Ironically, forcing itself to function properly means that it no longer functions properly. The battle to silence pain backfires, and these people find themselves unable to escape it.

A second issue is that we live in a fallen world, and we are finite creatures. This means that there will come times when we will find ourselves in pain, and we will find it in situations beyond our control. In those times, if we haven't built up strategies for dealing with pain, as opposed to numbing it, and learned through experience how to live in the midst of the pain, we will be unable to function well when it happens. We can't stop all pain, and if we're not used to working within it at all, it will cripple us when it comes.



Finally, there is the matter that pain and pleasure are tied together. Leonardo da Vinci depicts this well in his illustration, Allegory of Pleasure and Pain. In it, pleasure and pain are seen as two people with a single lower body. They face away from each other, but they are joined. You never find one without the other, he explained. The implication is that a constant striving to

avoid pain may result in some sort of success, but the cost is that you must sacrifice real pleasure to obtain it.

Another way to conceive of this is to view it as on a graph. Most people see pleasure and pain as opposites, the far end of each spectrum on the line. However, a better way of conceiving it is to look at the graph as if it were like a bell curve. The two ends are numbness, inability to experience anything. The center peak of the curve is Life, the capacity to experience whatever reality has to offer, which includes pain but also pleasure. To numb oneself against pain is the sliding down of that curve. You numb not only the pain but all experience. You cannot defend against pain without defending against pleasure as well.

Some suggest that this is exactly what Jesus meant when he said he came to give life to the full (John 10:10) – a life that is open to all that reality has to offer, life that is accepting of the perils of pain because only in this manner is it also open to all the wonders of a creation that, even though corrupted, is still "very good". Surely a look at Jesus's life confirms that this is how he went through it. He felt grief when Lazarus died (John 11:33-36). He sweat drops of blood in Gethsemane because he was under so much strain (Luke 22:44), and, of course, he was willing to endure the agony and humiliation of the cross. Even there, he refused to drink pain-killing liquids (Matt. 27:34). He was open to experiencing pain. He didn't shy away from it; he went through it.

That's the great paradox of living on this earth, that in the midst of great pain you can have great joy as well. If we didn't have those things we'd just be numb.
- Kathy Mattea

Just as Christ did, going through the pain is sometimes the only cure for the problem, or if not the cure, it at least is part of the healing process. Midwives tell mothers giving birth not to resist the contractions but to work with them. Grief counselors tell people in times of great loss to lean into the pain. Fighting the pain often just prolongs what will happen to us anyway. We will experience the pain; it's just a matter of how long it will take and what it will do to us if we resist. There is something on the other side of it that we will never reach unless we're willing to face it and see what happens to us.

The grieving process is a perfect example of the need to go through your pain. It's not something that most people know how to do well because our culture often doesn't see it as proper or necessary. Ancient cultures gave people weeks and months as a matter of course to mourn great losses, especially their kings. Some corporations now are reluctant to give more than a day or two off for a funeral. We don't know how to grieve, but grieving is the tool God designed for us to get rid of the pain inside us. That means that the only way to truly settle with some pain is to experience another. So many people try to avoid the pain of loss with television, going Vegas, or throwing themselves into their work, but inside, the loss still howls to be let out if only we are

willing to howl with it, cry the tears that our spirit longs for, and experience the hole. Of course it's unpleasant, but that is the journey, and at the end of that journey, there is no longer a need to distract ourselves so much with television or work or giving away so much of our money in Vegas. The spirit is calm because it no longer feels the ache. The pain of grief has washed it away.

Athletes also know another value of working through their pain. Marathon runners must listen very carefully to what their body tells them as they pound the pavement. They are listening to their limits, which means they are listening to their pain. They know the line between their pain and their agony, and they stretch themselves. They hover at the threshold of too much, pushing their bodies to go just a little further. And as they stretch themselves to go just a little further, their bodies adapt, and they grow. Most people are familiar with the principle that exercise tears down muscles, and they grow back slightly larger and stronger than before. That tearing down is painful, but the result is something greater in the end. Athletes know that the real limit to their bodies is not when the pain starts. Pain is, at first, merely the warning. Instead, they keep going just a bit, knowing that they are capable of going beyond the first sign of pain. To them, the minor pains are not enough to pull them away from living.

If we deny love that is given to us, if we refuse to give love because we fear pain or loss, then our lives will be empty, our loss greater.

- Margaret Weis

This is at least one reason for spiritual disciplines. We push ourselves to do that which we cannot so that we are capable of doing more another day. That kind of discipline, just the same as a parent punishing a child, is painful, but it leads to blessing later on (Heb. 12:11). Classical spiritual disciplines, such as fasting and study, and more personalized disciplines such as speaking up in a group for an introvert, are means of pushing through pain beyond our limits into a greater space of living.

Staying in your pain can often have another benefit. It acts as a teacher. When you listen to your pain, you are hearing the messages of the body and soul, as seen last week. Those messages can change us and teach us about who we are. As we are willing to sit under their tutelage, we discover more about ourselves: our limits, our preferences, our desires, our weaknesses. As we open ourselves to anxiety, grief, rage, fear, hurt, and more, we learn the pathways of our own character and its weaknesses. We cannot face what we do not know. If we don't know our desires, we cannot give to them. If we do not know our weaknesses, we cannot stretch them. Pain is one means of letting our souls and bodies teach us these things.

The truth that many people never understand, until it is too late, is that the more you try to avoid suffering the more you suffer because smaller and more insignificant things begin to torture you in proportion to your fear of being hurt.

- Thomas Merton

There are, of course, times when the pain is too great and sitting in it is overwhelming or inappropriate. Still, there are ways of dealing with pain that aren't merely shutting it down or numbing it out. Observation and studies have shown that companionship and sharing are wonderful salves for pain. A sense of control over your circumstances can ease it as well. Helping others and putting your mind and heart on someone else's needs can draw the pain away. A sense of wonder and joy, perhaps at nature, can make pain bearable. Direct, focused attention on the sensation of pain itself can sometimes make it more manageable. And then there's the curious fact that an overload of other stimulation can lessen our experience of pain. One doctor used to suggest his patients run hairbrushes up and down their legs because the stimulation of hundreds of bristles would overwhelm the pain sensations, and the body would pay more attention to the hairbrush! Similarly, mosquito bites can sometimes be calmed if you rub the area around the bite instead of scratching directly on it because the other sensations drown out the irritation. There are ways of living with pain without silencing it. Try a few.

Activities

1. List your 5 favorite methods of hiding from pain.

   _____

   _____

   _____

   _____

   _____

   Circle one (or more!) of those and devote this week to not engaging in it. At the end of the week, journal about how it felt. What came up?

2. Think about significant people in your past. When you think about how they related to pain, did any of them seem to constantly be running from it? Did any of them face up to it? Were there other ways they seemed to relate to pain? Do the groups seem different from each other? How? Wiser? Stronger? More radical? More honest?

3. How often do you take painkillers? The next time you're tempted to, choose instead to let it go and listen to your pain. What is it telling you? Are there natural things you can do to ease the pain such as relaxing or exercising? What worsens it? What might that be telling you about the reason for the hurt?

4. Do you see yourself as a survivor of your pain, a victim of your pain, or does pain have no effect on you? Which of these categories would you like to be in? If you're not in the category you'd like, what would it take to change your perspective?

5. The next time some anxiety starts surfacing, take note of it. Sit with it instead of trying to avoid or stop it. Where did it come from? Can you tell? What do you want to do with it? Let it run its course and see where it goes. If it ends, how do you feel afterward?

6. Many people use activity to extinguish their pain, often without knowing it. Plan at least a 4-hour retreat away from daily life when you can. Make the time and location the only plans; the rest leave up to the Spirit. Without books, work, media, and so on, how do you feel? Can you stay in whatever feelings come up, or are you tempted to find a way to escape them?

7. If you're a runner, this is sort of moot, but if you're not, plan an hour or so to go running this week. Listen to your body as you jog. When you start to feel like you want to quit, find a marker somewhere ahead of you and push until you get there. Once you get there, find another marker, and make that your goal. Try this a few more times. How do you feel? Can you keep going through your limit? What does it feel like when you try? What does it feel like after? Make sure you stretch before and after this exercise!



Hurting Well

Creating a Healthy Relationship with Suffering & Pain

Part 3: Fertile Soil

A Relationship Between Pain and Growth

Pain is a warning system. It shouts out at you when something is about to happen that is dangerous, and it shouts louder when that danger persists. But strangely, pain is often the precursor to something more. Sometimes, pain is the beginning of new life, new growth, and even goodness, beauty, and pleasure.

Nature is one of the most potent teachers of this truth, but we have a tendency to shut out nature. We're city-folks, many of us. I've heard it said that when the power goes out in LA, the police and the observatory get calls asking what are all those lights up in the sky. Some people have never been introduced to stars (the ones that aren't on a movie screen, that is). But nature moves forward whether or not we watch. A fallen tree crumbles, and from it tiny flowers pop up. The farmer gets

up early, works heartily, and in time, harvests his fields and eats like a king. Mothers clench, push, scream, and, finally, hold their tiny babies with contented (if exhausted) smiles. Pain can be the beginning of something new and good.

Scripture displays a great deal that seems to suggest the very same thing. King David was hunted down repeatedly, his family was plagued with infighting and murder, and in the beginning he was considered the runt, too insignificant to even take notice of. Somehow, though, this is the man that every king in Jerusalem would be measured by. This is the author of a significant portion of the Psalms. This is the one called "a man after God's own heart." Could it be that David's struggles were part of what made him the man he was?

Surely Christ's suffering brought about good! Isaiah prophesied of it hundreds of years earlier, saying we are healed by his pain. Christ's willingness to endure the agony and humiliation of being murdered in such an excruciating manner brought about the possibility for freedom, life, and rescue for any who are willing to accept the salvation of God.

Paul spoke of having some kind of ailment that he begged God to take from him, but when God would not, he realized that it was there to teach him to lean in to God and to grow in humility (2 Cor. 12:7-9). He wrote about this kind of principle in his letter to the Roman church: "Not only this, but we also boast in our sufferings knowing that suffering produces perseverance; and perseverance, proof of excellence; and proof of excellence, hope." (Rom. 5:3-4) James, Jesus's brother, echoed this: "Consider is all joy, my brothers and sisters, when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. And let perseverance perfect you so that you may be complete, whole, lacking nothing." (Jas. 1:2-4) Scripture repeats itself, saying pain can bring about good.

I've already said its primary function over and over: pain is a warning system. Like a smoke alarm, sometimes that warning system can be a wake up call. C. S. Lewis has a famous line from his writing and speaking on pain; he calls it "God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world." His point was that we have a tendency to move along blindly or foolishly until God has no choice but to wake us up with a jolt, and pain can be quite jolting! It can call us to open our eyes to the sin we've been committing or to the horrifying consequences of that sin. It can open us to see that the way we're living is empty. It shouts at us that something needs to change, and we can't keep going the same way we have been. And this is more than just "you've got your hand on the stove; you'd better pull that away." It can be as complicated and far-reaching as "you've spent most of your career making moral compromises to get to the top, and you've hurt people along the way; you must live honestly and

Take chances, make mistakes. That's how you grow. Pain nourishes your courage. You have to fail in order to practice being brave.

- Mary Tyler Moore

go back to make amends." Sometimes, God has to bring part of our world crashing down around us before we realize we've been living in a house of cards, and only then can we pick up the pieces and try to find something better to build. It's painful because we're content and attached to our houses. We don't want to lose them. But they're not real homes; they're just cards. And we're the jokers.

The funny thing about waking up is that, if we're willing, we wake up to more than just a single message. When pain strikes, we find ourselves more open to everything around us. Recently, I was talking with a friend who had just lost someone very dear to her. She said it seemed strange, but she could hear so much more – the birds in the trees and the rushing of the cars. She smelled the gas from the trucks behind her. She was awake to all sorts of things that had nothing to do with her loss, but she was awake. Pain wakes us up to one thing, and we find ourselves awake to much more. We may find ourselves opened to the fact that we've been controlling others or lying to people, but now that we're awake, we can also suddenly see that we're frightened of God or angry with him or avoiding our responsibilities. Many have been told that the truth hurts. What is also true is that hurt can open us up to truth.

Pain is also part of what gives us a sense of self-definition. People born without the ability to feel pain seem to find it much more difficult to feel secure in themselves. They can feel easily shaken and like they'll be torn apart inside at times. Pain is part of what first teaches us where we start and stop, what our limits are, not only physically, but emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. It's also part of what happens when we try to stretch our limits. If we don't press up against them and push through the pain that is warning us, we will never grow beyond them. We'll simply stagnate. Remember the line between pain and agony. The first is a warning, but it is not announcing damage, just the potential for it, and in that space of potential comes growth.

Most people know this is true for physical exercise and so forth, but it's true of our internal makeup, too. In places of fear, we have to keep going, and once we're on the other side, then we may realize that we're not as easily frightened anymore. We have to press beyond our emotional, spiritual, and mental limits, just as we do the physical. Once we do, we are stronger, more capable, and more confident.

Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, vision cleared, ambition inspired, and success achieved.
- Helen Keller

Almost paradoxically, pain can make us more vulnerable and dependent. The fact that we made it through painful times can often give a greater sense of confidence and independence, but there is something strange about it that also seems to make us more willing and able to look to others for their help, love, and companionship. During the pain, people can find themselves

wanting and needing other people for support and to help them do the things they can't. Then afterwards, they suddenly realize they really enjoyed and appreciated the others and are more eager to seek out companionship than they were before. It's also possible that now that they're more confident and independent, they're not so scared of people and so they're more willing to engage with them in ways that weren't comfortable before. However it works exactly, going through painful times can make us both more comfortable with being independent and more comfortable with being dependent!

Pain and suffering can also draw us close to God. It might be for some of the very same reasons as drawing us close to others – we can't go on alone anymore and need help, so we turn to God. Sometimes, we also want answers. Why is this happening to me? What's the point? What's going on? We have to look to something or someone bigger than us to explain, and so we go to God. We want to know the meaning. Sometimes, people even find that to be the meaning – pain was given to draw us close to God. In that case, it's something of a circle – we look to God for meaning, who tells us that the meaning was to look to God. Many people also find a great deal of meaning in being able to relate with Jesus and his suffering. The apostles rejoiced that they were able to suffer for Christ (Acts 5:41), and Paul talks about sharing in Jesus's suffering so that we may later share in his glory (Rom. 8:17). There is something about suffering that links us to Christ, if we let it, and even when we don't, still we may find ourselves reaching out to God.

No pain, no palm; no thorns, no throne; no gall, no glory; no cross, no crown.

- William Penn

I've also heard it said that pain is part of being prepared for love. If we didn't know how bad it could be, would we truly know how good the love of God is? I'll leave that to the philosophers to answer, but it's difficult to deny that once you have tasted of what pain has to offer, you can much more appreciate love and goodness when it's in front of you. You know what it feels like when it's gone. I'll not forget when a 70-some year old friend who is currently suffering from a brain tumor and constant pain, including terrible twinges at random moments, once looked at me with an amazingly contented and gentle face and said, "It really is a wonderful life." She knew, and still knows, the depths of suffering, loneliness, emptiness, and pain, yet she says that somehow, that was the way that God readied her to fully experience his love.

And then there's the bell-curve of Life once again. Pain is part of living. If we aren't open to pain, we aren't open to pleasure, and we aren't open to really living. Some British have reflected back on the bombings that occurred during World War II and the terrible times they went through, and they look back with a strange fondness. Some say it was some of the happiest times they've had. Right after the terrorist attacks and collapse of the World Trade Center in New York,

Everywhere a greater joy is preceded by greater suffering.

- Augustine of Hippo

people bound together, and that was where many found an amazing sense of solidarity, friendship, and harmony.

Pain is part of the refining process. It is, if we allow it, a place where we are made into something greater. Nature shows us this too: under great stress – that is where diamonds are forged. Our own souls may well be the diamonds forged in the place of pain.

Activities

1. What are the 3 most painful experiences from your past?

   _____

   _____

   _____

   How did you respond to each of them? Would you change any of your responses? Would you change any of those times? Is there any value from the pain you experienced?

2. What were the most significant times of growth in your past? Did struggle or hurt at all play a part in those times? What would the time have been like without (or with!) any struggle

3. Some people feel closest to God when all is right with the world. Others feel God most closely when they are in deepest need. When do you experience God most immanently? Do either of these fit, or does struggle and need not seem to affect your closeness to God? If your relationship feels lacking in one of these two times, can you take conscious steps to bolster it?

4. Has pain ever drawn you close to God? Pushed you away? What were the differences between those times? How did you feel about God in those circumstances?
   Write a letter to God about how you felt about him and about the suffering. Be as real as you can: if you are angry, rage! If you are grateful, rejoice!

5. Draw a line graph of your life. Low points are painful; high points, bliss.
   Add another line showing your growth rate. Are there connections between the two lines?





Hurting Well

Creating a Healthy Relationship with Suffering & Pain

Part 4: Games of Hide and Seek

Pain and the True Self

Pain helps to define us from the moment we're born, probably earlier. It also shapes us as we develop. We become who we are, at least in part, based on the kinds of pain we've encountered over the years and the way we've dealt with it and continue to deal with it. Since we're fallen people, we've all made poor choices. It's been said, "Sow a thought, reap an act. Sow an act, reap a habit. Sow a habit, reap a character." The little things add up, and before long, we can create a false self – a mask of who we really are.

What's the easiest way to deal with pain? Make it go away, of course! The human soul is so powerful that we can almost completely numb out certain feelings if we urgently feel that we have to. As they say, denial ain't just a river in Egypt. It's a lifestyle that everyone adopts at least to

some extent. “I’m not afraid.” And yet... “I don’t need you.” Don’t you? “That didn’t hurt.” Or are you trying to avoid a different hurt?

Kids are smart. They’ll figure out the best way to adapt to the world, even if that adaptation isn’t what they really feel or want. Over time, they just learn that that’s the way the world works, and if they want to survive and get something that’s more important, they shove down those desires and feelings, defending themselves with denial, blame, excuses, or whatever else they can come up with. Eventually, they grow up – into us. And we’re still denying, blaming, and making excuses. And why not? That’s how the whole sin game started back in the Garden: it’s not my fault; she did it.

“Ah, but we’ve learned better,” you might say. “We’re not kids anymore.” Have we? “The heart is deceitful in all ways and desperately sick; who can know it?” (Jer. 17:9) If there’s one thing I’ve learned about myself, it’s that nobody is a better liar than I am – at least to myself. We’re all excellent at it. We’ve convinced ourselves. But every now and then, something creeps up. Depression. Exhaustion. Emptiness. Divorce. The mid-life crisis (and sudden drain on your life savings that accompanies it). There are innumerable ways that we can suddenly find ourselves confronted with the fact that something is wrong. And not merely wrong, wrong with us – on the inside.

Way back when, we learned how life works, and with that, how love works. Be good, and you won’t get smacked. Put on a happy face because then you’ll be loved. Succeed at whatever you try, or else no one will pay attention to you. Keep your eyes open, or something bad is going to happen and you won’t be ready. But what happens when you’re not “good”? (And how good is good, anyway?) What happens when you’re not happy? What happens when you can’t succeed no matter how hard you try? What happens when you miss something? We’re too scared to let that happen. We’ll be hurt. We won’t be loved. We’ll be forgotten. We’ll be punished. So we work all the harder because we can’t let that happen. It’s too painful.

And that’s where pain comes in. What we’re really trying to do with so many of these is deny, avoid, and escape from pain. We hurt once. We won’t hurt again. We twist ourselves into pretzels, struggling to do what we have to do to prevent that hurt from happening ever again, even if the shape we’re in is no longer anything like what our souls were supposed to look like. We put on a happy face, fight tooth and nail to get to the top, retreat from the world, or plunge into activity frantically, not because we want to (though to some extent, of course we do), but primarily because we’re too scared of how much it will hurt if we don’t.

May it be the real I who speaks; may it be the real You I speak to.

- C. S. Lewis

The result: we turn ourselves into something we're not. We make our very character into a lie. The truth, in some part of our souls, is no longer in us.

There are a couple of serious problems with this. First, when you twist your soul into shapes that it was never meant to be in, you gradually hurt it. Strain starts to set in, and damage follows over time. Try sitting in an uncomfortable position for a while. It may be just awkward or annoying at first, but in time, it will start hurting. Keep sitting like that, and your body will shout more and more for you to change position. The soul reacts the same way, only its pain announcements are anxiety, depression, exhaustion, lack of motivation, irritability, impulsiveness, demands, and so on. You might not feel anything for a while (and you might not ever if you're determined and skilled at avoiding it), but gradually the feeling gets stronger, warning you of more and more danger. The soul wants to be back in the shape it was designed to be in, not twisted around to hide parts of itself, at least not long term, even if that's hiding from pain.

The other major problem with this is that it's only the true self that God loves. The core being, the one person at the center of the soul who still has those desires, who still feels that pain, who is still frightened or angry or sad, that's the person God loves. God cannot love this false self because it's not real. God lavishes his love on creation, but how can the Father love something that doesn't exist? The false self isn't a real person; it's a mask. You can't have a true, nourishing, living relationship with a mask. It's only possible with another person. God wants that relationship, but as much as the mask of the false self is in the way, we fail to receive the love of God. We cheat ourselves because we fear pain.

We have to remove the mask. There are lots of pieces to it, and we can only remove it one bit at a time, and that's probably for the best anyway. To suddenly expose ourselves completely would be so utterly terrifying and potentially so painful that we would be overwhelmed by it. So one piece at a time, we take off the costume, and the pain makes its way back into the picture again – at least for a moment.

There are a number of theories about how pain plays a part in this process. One of them says that the only way to fully bring out the true self is to shatter the pieces of the false self by re-experiencing what we couldn't in the first place. The idea is that we weren't able to let ourselves really feel the pain when it actually happened, so we lock away the pain along with part of our real selves, in hidden corners of our souls. When we delve in and pull out that pain, that is, when we fully experience the pain that we couldn't when it first happened, then there is no reason for the soul to keep that part of itself back anymore. It's free. When we feel the original hurt as it really was in its full intensity, then we reintegrate the hidden part of our soul, and that portion of the false self disappears.

We are healed of a suffering only by expressing it to the full.
- Marcel Proust

Another concept is somewhat related. It goes back to the concept of grieving and the idea that we must release one pain by experiencing a different kind of pain. We lock away parts of ourselves behind this false self because we're afraid of the hurt that we felt, often long ago. We're storing up our pain because we can't bear to feel it in its full measure and because we're afraid to feel it again. In this framework, the solution is to open up that tender place and bring out the feelings, not necessarily to feel the original hurt, but to acknowledge it in the open. John talks frequently about light and darkness and specifically about bringing things into the light (e.g., 1 John 1:7). That's the only place, he says, that there can be healing and salvation. Thus, once we bring these hidden pains into the light, then we may grieve them and release them. Grieving, if you remember, is the way we release other pain, so once we have grieved an old wound, it no longer has the same pull on us, and we can be free to be our true selves.

And the day came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.
- Anaias Nin

A third way of looking at the matter is a sort of retraining. We spend our lives working out patterns of various sorts, and it's the pattern of pain that we hide from by creating a false self. If we can create a different pattern, then it's possible we can let go of this mask and be real. To do that, however, requires that we find new pieces to form a new pattern, but this means that we must find ourselves in a situation that reminds us of the original ones. We must be in danger of pain all over again, but once we're there, we must not hide from it. If we find ourselves in a place that we might be hurt once again, yet we take the risk and let the circumstances go their course without hiding, it may be that we experience pain again and nothing changes. Here, the negative pattern is simply reinforced. But alternatively, it may be that we go through the experience, and the pain doesn't happen. That begins to chip away at this perfect cause-and-effect pattern we have in our minds, and we begin to wonder if maybe it won't be painful every time. A third possibility, and one that's actually quite frequent, is that pain does happen, but it's not as bad as we expected. Our fears are often worse than the reality, and perhaps this time things are different: the suffering is manageable or it's okay because we're not alone or we can get through it because we're loved or more mature or any number of things. In this case, again, there's a chipping away at the fear. Now that we made it through, maybe we can make it through again. The ideal outcome is that regardless of whether or not there is pain, we are supported by love in the midst of it. The best possibility is that we re-experience a fearful scenario and find love in the midst of it. "Love covers over a multitude of sins" (1 Pet. 4:8) as well as a multitude of hurts. Best that we go through the circumstances with no pain and are loved, but whether or not we are, that love will mitigate pain from the past and the

Many of us spend our whole lives running from feeling with the mistaken belief that you cannot bear the pain. But you have already borne the pain. What you have not done is feel all you are beyond that pain.
- Kahlil Gibran

present. If we let it, life will retrain us to understand, not just from a cognitive standpoint, but from experience, the ultimate truth that no matter what happens, we are loved.

Pain has already been identified as a wake-up call, and it's been demonstrated to be a sign that we may be maintaining a false self, but to reinforce that here, pain can be a means of cracking us open to the fact that we maintain a false self. Painful circumstances can split open the mask and show us the frightened, angry, hurting soul beneath. This is not a pleasant process to be sure. Still, once exposed, the real self can be healed. The pain can be drawn out. But once the pain has awakened us, we may find ourselves more aware of the real self that hides beneath. Remember that once we're awakened to one thing, we are more aware of others. Thus, pain can crack us open to see the false self for what it is, but it can also stimulate us enough to see, even if that wasn't the original strike of the pain.

Lastly, there's the simple reality that the truth can hurt. We wouldn't hide from parts of ourselves if they weren't painful parts in some way. To have those parts exposed means that we're going to hurt, regardless of how it happens. Therefore, pain is simply part of the process of opening up to a real self. We hurt because of the truth itself. Still, not exposing those parts means we must hurt a little bit and in increasing measure over time. Exposing them can mean hurting more for a short time, but then not hurting because of that truth anymore. The threat gone, we find ourselves free.

We create a false self, at least partially, because we fear pain and we feel pain, and the longer we hold on to this lie, we will hurt more. The paradox is that the solution to the problem, the exposure of the real self, requires pain as well. One way or another, we're going to hurt. Freedom from the chains, the release from the building suffering, and the ability to experience the love of God towards our true selves, however, is the reward of being open to the truth, even if it does hurt for a moment.

Activities

1. Many people use media of various sorts to numb themselves from pain. For this next week, fast from your favorite media: TV, social media, video games, the news, etc. Watch what comes up.

   At the end of the week, journal about how you felt. Did any hurt come up? Anger? Anxiety?
   What happened like you expected? What didn't?
   Did you ever break the fast? How? How did it feel?

2. List 10 habits, maybe good, maybe bad. For example: picking my toes, watching TV after work, getting involved in a book until late in the night, taking over conversations in groups.

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

What's the payoff for each habit? Are you using any of them to hide from your pain? From yourself?

Choose one this week. Each time you're tempted to engage in that habit, stop and resist the urge. Think about what the payoff is and ask if it's worth it. How do you feel when you choose not to engage in it? Can you just sit with the feelings and let them happen?

3. Speed write: Don't think, just go!
   List 10 ways you avoid pain.

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

Now list 10 painful things you avoid.

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

(Remember, don't think; just write! It doesn't matter if your responses don't make sense. It might mean more than you think!)

4. Write a description of each member of your family growing up. Now write a description of what you wish each person had been like. What's different? Is there anything you might be carrying that you haven't processed through? Could you be idealizing anyone? Why would you?

5. Do you have any physical problems that seem strange or chronic? Headaches, upset stomach, tiredness, muscle tension, etc.? Sometimes physical problems are the result of the false self tightening against pain. Could your false self be the cause of any of your physical conditions?

   The next time something like this happens, try an experiment: sit quietly with your eyes closed. Now focus your attention for a while on the part of your body with the problem. What do you sense? Does the feeling move? Change? Do any faint emotions seem to come up? Do any feelings seem to want to push you or that part of your body somehow? What happens if you work with it and allow it to do what it's trying?



Part 5: Unhealthy Relationships

Wrong Interactions with Pain

There's an old standup comedy line: "Well, he's not a total loss; he can always serve as a horrible example." As a final section to this course, here are a few horrible examples of how to interact with pain.

Probably one of the most popular kinds of relationship with pain is to avoid it altogether. The best life, we say, is the one that feels no pain. The Apostle John's Revelation even talks about the end of the ages as being a time where there is no more pain (Rev. 21:4), so there's even scriptural evidence for this being good. Getting rid of pain is what so much of this course is even based on; I'm assuming that readers will have a desire and methods for escaping from, avoiding, numbing, denying, and just plain getting rid of pain. And why not? Pain, by its very definition, hurts! Hurt is

bad, so make it go away. Pain's even designed this way. It's supposed to be something we want to get rid of.

I can hardly argue with Scripture. If there's going to be no more pain in eternity, that's got to be a good thing. If it's not, it would hardly be heaven. So part of the ultimate goal is to get rid of pain. What I've been trying to get across, however, is that there are bad ways of doing that. There are, like I said, shortcuts to this goal of experiencing no pain. Giving morphine to a person with appendicitis will do wonders for making them feel better. The pain is gone. Unfortunately, the infection will continue to spread, and the pain will grow greater and greater until even the morphine isn't strong enough to blank it out. Simply blocking out pain is not enough to ultimately be through with it. Dealing with the problem, which may add to the pain temporarily, is the only real way to finish with it. All this to say, avoidance as a way of relating with pain and suffering doesn't work in the end.

The opposite of avoiding pain is, of course, to seek it out. Two types of people seek out pain, the masochist and the sadist. Most look on the first as insane and the second as just plain wrong. The masochist specifically seeks out pain of some sort because it generates something that he believes he can't get otherwise. Some people have so numbed out the world that the only thing they can feel, because it is so strong and piercing, is pain. Rather than going on feeling nothing, they hurt themselves just to escape from the void of numbness. Others use pain as a means of demonstrating to themselves and others that they can have control over something. They can't control most of their life, but they'll control when they hurt. People can use pain as a substitute for feeling more dangerous sensations such as anger, or they can use it to shore up against a weak sense of self since it gives such a powerful sense of definition. Some use it as a means of getting attention because of a lack of feeling loved or wanted. Some psychologists have expanded the idea to encompass not just inflicting pain on themselves but also for those that seek it out in other ways. Those that go through one abusive relationship to another fit this category. They seek situations that are likely to be painful, even if subconsciously, because there is something about it that remains safe or familiar.

I should not love my suffering because it is useful. I should love it because it is.

- Simone Weil

If you dig down far enough, I imagine that everyone has at least some masochistic tendencies. Most aren't so far into it that anyone would really call them masochists, but they still try to use pain for something. They feel more solid when they hurt and so they grab on to pain when it happens, or they relish the sense of strength that comes from being able to endure pain, so they use the pain to reassure themselves of their power. We're all, it seems, masochistic, even if only a touch.

We're also all sadistic to some extent. We're fallen, and we delight in the use of pain against another. So ingrained is the desire to hurt another that God had to remind us very clearly that it is his responsibility to take vengeance, not ours (Deu. 32:35), and Paul urges us to "Be angry and don't sin." (Eph. 4:26) All of us have desired, if so deeply that we never allowed ourselves to feel it, that we wanted to pay someone back for the hurt they caused us or someone important to us. We wanted to take back an eye for an eye, and maybe more.

The main trouble with masochism and sadism is that they are, of course, damaging to ourselves and others. They are not loving in a complete sense. But there is more to the problem: they are wrong relationships with pain itself. They are attempts to use pain for our own purposes. Part of this course has been spent trying to get across the fact that pain can bring about good things. However, trying to force pain to give us something good violates the way God designed it. We are not in control of the universe, and therefore we are not in control of suffering and pain. That is God's domain, though Satan usurps what he can. Pain is something that we must sometimes allow and deal with as it is delivered to us. We may even choose to do something that we know is painful if a greater good results, but the manipulation of suffering for our own desires is arrogance. It is the stealing of God's role as sovereign. It makes us into our own saviors, and that is foolhardy. Pain cannot save us, nor can we save ourselves by using it. We are finite creatures, and we are fallen creatures. We need a savior, not a tool.

I LOVE lacerations!
- Pete Abrams

A final wrong relationship with pain is an incomplete one, and, again, it is a two-sided issue where all of us have tendencies on both sides. Which side we lean towards depends on the situation, our personalities, and the state we're in when it happens. A right relationship with pain generally requires two steps. First, you must acknowledge the pain and attempt to recognize what it is that is causing the pain. What's the source? The second step is to do something about it. Take action.

People with more active and forceful personalities tend to more often skip past the first stage of the relationship. They don't stop to listen, they simply move, do whatever they can to get rid of the pain so that they can keep going. Some pro athletes are known for this. They sprain something, wrap it, then rush back into the game, only to have the sprain turn into a break or a rupture that requires them to sit out for weeks. They don't stop to consider why the pain is occurring or what the consequences might be if they don't deal with it properly. Instead, they push ahead, neglecting the warning because something else is more important to them.

There may certainly be circumstances where this is warranted. Soldiers sometimes rush back into the fray to defend their brothers and friends, sometimes even while injured themselves. The pain is there, but it's not sufficient to stop them, and with good reason.

The problem is not circumstances like this but like that of a workaholic who won't stop putting in 70-hour weeks despite the exhaustion and depression that are claiming him. This man won't stop even to acknowledge the pain (or perhaps he is latching on to it), because to do so would hurt too much in another way or would cause him to lose something that he values, perhaps wrongly, too much. We have to stop to listen and know our limits, or we throw ourselves into a different pain, and likely a stronger and more permanent one.

On the other hand, there are those that listen but do nothing about it. They want to know the intricacies of their pain, and they resist moving out of it. Perhaps they are so familiar with suffering that they are too scared of what happens when their life is without it, or perhaps the sheer familiarity brings a sort of backwards comfort. It may simply be that they are not confident enough in themselves or in God's power and love, and so they do not believe that there can be any resolution. Perhaps they've tried solutions and none have ever worked, and they don't know what more to do. Regardless of why, they wallow in their pain, or if they don't wallow, they simply accept it without making any efforts to escape from it. They are trapped by their misery or their hurt and no longer make any moves to find freedom.

Sometimes it's hard to make sense of the difference between not working to remedy a problem and when we are allowing God to heal us. Just a few paragraphs ago, I noted that we need a savior, and we do. Only Jesus can truly heal the wounds completely that plague us. However, we are not children, unable to do anything for ourselves. We are called to work with Christ, not watch him work. We are called to be both like little children (Matt. 18:3) and adults (1 Cor. 13:11), in how we need and in behaving as we are or aren't capable. It may be helpful, if nothing else, to look at it this way: when a splinter becomes lodged in your thumb, nature will heal the wound, but you must remove the splinter. The particle won't take itself out (c.f., Matt. 7:5), and you can't make the skin grow back together. Likewise, you must take action to do what you can towards solving a painful situation, but God must bring about the final healing.

The more severe the pain or illness, the more severe will be the necessary changes. These may involve breaking bad habits, or acquiring some new and better ones.
- Peter McWilliams

When it comes to an incomplete relationship with pain, we all fall on both sides of the fence at one time or another. It's sometimes harder to see when the latter technique of not taking action is happening, and it probably is less frequent, just given the natural reflex of making the pain stop, but we all do it. We both ignore pain's warnings, and we take no steps to resolve it. The good news is that we are forgiven for both, but the reality is that our development and growth depend on maturing in these places. We must be more aware of when we do not listen, and when we do not move, and we must push beyond our comfortable limits to become the adults – and the children – that God called us to be.

A right relationship with pain is a lifelong process because relationships are a lifelong process. But we can always benefit along the journey from a few bad examples.

Activities

1. Have you ever used pain for something? Being able to feel in times of numbness? Holding yourself together? Feeling control in chaos or helplessness? Getting attention or love? What made pain so useful for this? Are you hiding from something deeper when you do this?

2. Someone once suggested 9 different wrong kinds of relationship with pain:

    1. I solve everyone's problems so that they can someday take care of me
    2. I throw myself into everything because there is no pain
    3. I will not assert myself too much lest I cause or receive something bad
    4. I deserve pain because I make mistakes
    5. I push through all pain because I have to be the best
    6. I retreat from the world because it is painful
    7. It's not okay to be happy and so I must always be in a little pain
    8. I am constantly aware of frightening people (and may attack or comply, depending)
    9. I will never let my guard down

    Sit for a while with each of these. Do any of them resonate with you? Are there any that you feel don't make any sense at all? Sometimes we're so confused with something because we won't let ourselves understand it – it's too dangerous, so pay attention to the ones that seem very wrong (or confusing) and very right. How can you push beyond these limits?

3. Set aside an hour to pray with God about the following questions (maybe 10 minutes for each): To what degree do I use pain against other people? To what degree do I use pain against myself? To what degree do I not allow pain to tell me its message? To what degree to I not take action to resolve pain and let God heal me?
    Journal about the experience afterwards.

4. One fundamental state of human nature is need. How painful is that idea to you? What is it that scares you about it (and aren't we all scared, if just a little)? Can you comfortably need a savior, not just for eternity but for living and growing? Imagine Jesus sitting across from you, and talk to him (sure, out loud; why not?) about your feelings about this. Does he seem

to say anything back to you? In what way? Words? Feelings? Memories? Spiritual nudges?

5. What one thing are you not doing right now that you want to do or think it would be good to do because it's too painful? (Maybe following through with these exercises!) What's the payoff for not doing it? What would be the potential payoff for following through? If it's something big, write down the steps necessary (even the small ones) to go ahead with it. This week, do the first one (or more!).



Hurting Well

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A short course
by Dr. Matthew Green
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