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Pain in the Family

Dealing with suffering
from within.



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Pain in the Family

Dealing with suffering from within.



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Introduction

God Is Our Strength

By Dana Wilkerson



I have a friend who says her family is great fodder for a Jerry Springer episode. Divorce, abuse, abandonment, addictions, incarceration, harassment, and many other infringements upon the comfort, happiness, and welfare of others run rampant among her relatives. She alone has been able to escape the insanity, the fear, and the downward spiral of that kind of environment. Why? She has a vibrant relationship with Jesus. Has it come easy? No. But has she seen grace in much more abundance than I probably ever will? Absolutely.



Pain in the Family

God Is Our Strength

Dealing with the failures and sins of our family members can be messy. It can leave us drained and empty. It can weaken our faith and trust in our loving God. It's one thing to dispense advice to someone else about dealing with a husband's affair, a child's drug addiction, or a sister's abandonment of her faith. It's another thing entirely when *you* are that person who has to cope with and experience daily the failure of a loved one.

But while these kinds of situations have the ability to take us down with them, they don't have to. As Christians, we have a resource that others don't have. We have the strength of God. Exodus 15:2 says, "The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation." This verse doesn't say that God can be our strength or even will be our strength. He is our strength.

This collection of articles is written by women who have been in situations where family members have let them down, yet have triumphed over the evil in their homes and families—some even while still in the midst of trying times. They have "been there and done that," and they have shared their stories with you. My prayer is that the experiences of these women will make you more aware of the strength of God that is present within you, help you to cope with disappointments within your own families, and give you strategies to help others who are struggling.

Blessings,

Dana Wilkerson

Contributing Editor, KYRIA downloads,
Christianity Today International



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Leader's Guide

How to use “Pain in the Family” for a group study



“Pain in the Family” can be used for individual or group study. If you intend to lead a group study, some simple suggestions follow.

1. **Make enough copies for everyone in the group to have her own guide.**
2. **Depending on the time you have dedicated to the study, you might consider distributing the guides before your group meets so everyone has a chance to read the material. Some articles are quite long and could take a while to get through.**
3. **Alternately, you might consider reading the articles together as a group—out loud—and plan on meeting multiple times.**
4. **Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting women to open up.**
5. **When working through the “Reflect” questions, be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It’s important for women to know that others share their experiences. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.**
6. **End the session in prayer.**

Honor *My* Mother?

The difficulty of honoring the
cause of much heartache.

By Myra Langley Johnson



As our Bible study group began focusing on the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20, I felt pretty smug. After all, I didn't worship more than one God, steal, commit adultery or murder, lie about my neighbors, or plot to cheat them out of what was rightfully theirs. But one evening we came to the command to honor our father and mother (v. 12).



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Honor *My* Mother?

Against my will, I thought of my mother, who'd passed away ten years earlier. Honor her, when I felt more relief than sorrow at her death? The tears I cried at her funeral were those of an adult daughter who had never heard the words I most needed from her: "I'm proud of you."

My birth was Mother's "midlife surprise." When my father died less than four years later, I gave her a reason to go on. But in many ways my mother treated me like a small adult, and our relationship developed into an unhealthy codependency. Her attempts to shelter me from the world's influences only fueled my insecurities; I grew from a spoiled child into an anxious, introverted adolescent.

Complicating matters, Mother battled deteriorating health and depression, but because of the rigid faith-healing religion she adhered to, she shunned medical intervention.

By the time I reached my teens, my mother had sunk into a state of apathy. The more I attempted to earn her praise—with high grades, awards, and interscholastic competitions—the more rejected I felt by her indifference. During my senior year, I earned a major role in a drama production that she never attended. Her only explanation was, "I didn't feel up to it."

The following years were the same. When at age 20 I met the man I'd later marry, my mother openly resented him. Her bigoted remarks about his ancestry horrified us both. During more rational moments, she showed brief motherly





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interest in our wedding plans, but at the last minute threatened not to attend. I cursed the cruelty of a God who took away my father and left me with an ill, elderly mother who seemed impossible to please.

After my wedding, Mother's downward spiral continued. Our visits usually deteriorated into criticisms about how I raised my children, reproach for my leaving the church in which she'd raised me (my husband had led me to a true faith in Christ), and unfavorable comparisons to other family members who "obviously" loved her more than I did.

Mother's poor health made travel difficult, and as a busy mom of two, I came up with excuses to avoid traveling to visit her. I let my older brothers worry over her. In the meantime, I struggled through several rounds of counseling to deal with low self-esteem and depression, all of which I blamed on my mother.

Mother's health finally worsened to the point she committed herself to a nursing home. I attempted a few family visits, hoping she'd enjoy seeing her granddaughters. But she showed little interest in them and often received me with such hostility that I left in tears. Congestive heart failure finally ended her life; she died a bitter, lonely woman.

It wasn't until after my mother's death that I made the connection between her physical illness and her mental state. When I discussed her health symptoms with my





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physician, he suspected the culprit was hypothyroidism, which left untreated can lead to serious physical and psychological problems, including personality changes and even psychosis. Grasping the role Mother's illness played in our broken relationship, I resented even more her tenacious reliance on the pseudo-Christian faith-healing religion I already blamed for taking my father before his time.

At my mother's funeral, I studied her features as she lay in the casket. Even in death, her lips seemed pressed into a condemning frown, the same embittered expression that stared back at me from her last professional photograph. Two years after her death, a job-related move took my husband and me to another city. I didn't even unpack the portrait, but hid it away in a box in the attic.

As we settled into a new church home, I found spiritual nourishment. Day by day I fell more deeply in love with God as he filled my emptiness and revealed himself as my perfect parent.

My studies helped me recognize the spiritual growth I'd experienced during those difficult times with my mother. Her neglect of health increased my determination to take care of myself for my family's sake as well as my own. Her disinterest in my life prompted my enthusiasm for my children. Her unwholesome dependence helped me release my now-adult daughters into God's care as they went their own ways. Accepting the promise of Romans





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8:28, that God works all things together for the good of those who love him, I stopped blaming God for giving me a "defective" mother and thanked him for the life lessons I'd gained. Yet repeatedly my spiritual path brought me to the fact I still carried a grudge.

Finally, that night at the Bible study, I came face-to-face with my hardened heart. To harbor con-tempt and anger, to shut someone out of your life and memory because of perceived hurt or injustice—these aren't the heart attitudes of forgiveness. I knew firsthand they punish the "victim" far more than the "villain." I left the Bible class that night convicted to the core.

Honor my mother? I asked God. In spite of everything?

Yes, God answered, in spite of everything.

But how was I to honor—to love, respect, and esteem—a parent I held responsible for so much heartache? I began by admitting I needed God's help not only to confront my feelings toward her but also to confess my selfishness and lack of compassion. I acknowledged with gratitude that she gave me life and nurtured me the best she was able. I took into account the factors that had shaped her life, not the least of which were her own dysfunctional parents and later the lure of religious teachings that distorted God's truth.

The fact is, there are no perfect human parents, so I had no right to expect perfection from my mother. Since sin entered the world, every succeeding generation has carried its own "baggage" into parenthood. Hadn't I done





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so with my children? As desperately as I wanted not to repeat my mother's mistakes, when I battled recurring bouts of anger, resentment, and depression, my family inevitably suffered.

The next step was to let my mother back into my life, emotionally if not physically. Resolutely I climbed the attic stairs to retrieve her portrait, carried it to my desk, and stared at it a long time.

I'm sorry, I silently told my mother. I haven't honored you. I've tried to push you from conscious thought. I forgive you, and I pray you've also forgiven me for turning away from you. I want your memory to be a part of my life.

An incredible peace filled me as God enabled me to do what I couldn't do on my own: remember my mother with love. Suddenly I saw her as God created her to be, and was able to forgive—and in a small way forget—the hurtful things that had passed between us. Then an even more amazing thing happened. The bitter, condemning frown I'd always seen in Mom's portrait now appeared as a serene smile. In my mother's eyes I saw the acceptance and approval for which I'd yearned.

Did the picture change? No. Nor were past hurts wiped out. What changed was my perception of the past, which in turn has positively affected my present and future. In forgiving and honoring her, I'm breaking the chains of bitterness in my life.





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My greatest regret is that I was unable to reach this place of forgiveness while my mother was still alive. For other adult children of "difficult" parents, there may still be time—even if you see little hope that he or she ever will become the loving, responsive parent for which you long.

Our feelings toward hurtful parents, and our response to those feelings, can be healed only as we allow God to change our heart. We can choose not to carry the hurt inside us forever. We can choose to respect the good in them and forgive the rest.

Mother, I honor you, I told her as I set the framed portrait on the bookshelf opposite my desk. Now I look at my mother's image every day and imagine her looking back at me with love and pride. My heart swells with gratitude for the healing power of forgiveness and God's command to "Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you" (Exodus 20:12).

Myra Langley Johnson is a freelance writer who lives in Texas. This article first appeared in the May/June 2007 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.





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Honor *My* Mother?

Reflect

- *In what ways have your parents' actions affected your life negatively?*
- *In what ways have your parents' actions affected your life positively?*
- *What might you need to do to be able to honestly honor your parents, for better or for worse?*





My Husband Was Addicted to Porn

How a marriage has survived the compulsion.

By Debbie Pierson

I have a confession to make: I've have been married to a sex addict for most of my 25-year marriage. For much of that time, I hid my shameful secret. I'd tell myself my husband, Paul, was normal, that every man was into pornography. All the while, I silently suffered tremendous damage to my self-worth, blaming myself for my husband's problem.



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I never caught Paul looking at pornographic magazines, watching X-rated movies, or surfing pornographic Web sites. Instead, I found out by his own admission. Since he was a Christian while involved in these activities, his guilt eventually got to him—and he had to confess.

When I finally stopped denying the seriousness of his addiction, life seemed unmanageable. How could I cope with my crippling emotions of pain, anger, and shame? How could we go on? I needed answers—but didn't know where to turn.

When Paul and I married, I wasn't a Christian yet, and Paul had become one just a month before we wed. When I finally accepted Christ, our marriage should have followed the "happily ever after" route. But we learned the hard way that becoming a believer doesn't automatically eradicate your family inheritance.

When Paul was 10 years old, his father left his mother for the neighbor down the street. Paul's mother went back to work, leaving him unsupervised with his two teenage brothers, who introduced him to porn. When Paul became a teen, he became sexually active. Sex made him feel cared about; it replaced the care and concern he missed at home.

Paul's addiction to pornography filled me with feelings of failure, guilt, shock, devastation, and hopelessness. I didn't know what to do when he came with a confession of his activity. I felt as though my heart broke into a million pieces. My worth as a woman plummeted, and I put up





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walls to close out any emotional or physical intimacy with him. It would take me weeks before I could allow myself to be intimate with Paul again.

Although Paul confessed, he was unable to stop. When he saw the unbelievable pain I experienced, he'd be overcome with remorse. We fell into a pattern: Paul would confess his involvement in pornography, beg for forgiveness, then promise never to do it again. But—he would.

I could always tell when Paul experienced a failure. He'd behave as someone who had something to hide but would become offended that I didn't trust him. Finally, after weeks of questioning him, Paul would confess that my suspicions were right.

One evening, as Paul and I took a walk, he confessed that while I was at Bible camp with our kids, he'd bought a pornographic magazine and indulged. How could I be of any value to Paul if he continued to repeat this destructive habit? What could I do to help him? So I'd take partial blame, then forgive him—again.

This happened at least a dozen times before I finally came to the end of my rope. After 12 years of marriage, I'd suffered in silence long enough. It was time to go to a counselor for help, I told Paul, or he'd have to live somewhere else. The threat of having our family and friends find out about his addiction forced Paul to get help.





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Paul confessed his addiction to a pastor, who challenged him to monitor what he watched, where he went, what he looked at. The pastor believed Paul should have a male friend who knew about his struggle and could question his purity at any time.

Paul took up his own crusade to conquer these evil "urges." He tried to follow the pastor's advice, but several months later, I confronted him again with my suspicions that he'd fallen.

We were at a crossroads. After doing everything he was instructed to do—and failing—Paul felt hopeless. For the first time in our marriage, I actually had a different reaction. I didn't feel as though I had to carry the responsibility of this whole mess myself. It was time to seek counsel together!

Through a Christian counselor, we discovered Paul used pornography to numb his pain. When life felt out of control, this "pleasure" made him feel better. It had nothing to do with me not meeting his needs—and everything to do with his feelings of inadequacy. Pornography gave him a sense of power, if only for the moment.

Through counseling, Paul and I learned to communicate our feelings and work through those painful, out-of-control times. We developed a new intimacy in our relationship with each other and with Christ. We stopped blaming each other for our feelings and actions. We took responsibility for our own disappointments.





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This isn't to say we never dealt with any more episodes. After almost two years of counseling, I found out Paul was disappointed with me one evening. I'd chosen to go out with a needy friend rather than stay home with him. He ran back to that "pleasure" to numb his pain.

We reached a turning point about a year after Paul's last failure. I again was a camp counselor at Bible camp with our kids during the summer, while Paul stayed home. That first week, Paul kept busy. He even called his counselor one evening in tears over his distress about being alone. It was a tough week for Paul—but he remained pure.

When we came home from camp for a week before we had to return for a second week, Paul did everything he could to manipulate me into not going back. He was convinced he couldn't go through another week of fighting his urges alone. But Paul needed to see that only Christ could save him from himself. It wasn't my job to be his savior.

As I stood my ground about returning to camp, Paul fell apart. We both ended up sobbing. I grieved over the incredible demands he put on me; he grieved over my refusal to take control. I never gave in to him—but he finally gave in to Christ, giving him complete control. Since this time he's been able to remain pure in our marriage. It's been three years now.

In the past, every time I faced one of Paul's confessions, a battle raged within me. One side had hope that God would use what was meant for evil for good. The other side wanted justice, pity, revenge! But I never quit pleading





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with God for healing in my marriage. I never quit forgiving Paul. And God always supplied me with the grace to persevere.

I've shared my story so others will find hope, too. I know what it's like to feel inadequate as a wife and woman. I know what it's like to have nowhere to go with your pain and shame. I know what it's like to wonder if you can go on in your marriage. I know what a struggle it is to act as though you're a Christian, yet be experiencing anything but joy.

But as I continue sharing my story, I find support, comfort, and real concern. God's given Paul and me some dear friends who care a lot about us. They've cried, listened, prayed, and celebrated our successes with us.

One of the most significant verses to me in this whole journey is James 5:16: "Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective." We have a God who knows how we feel—and really cares. He knows our doubts and despair. He can help when we're willing to bring those things to him. Nothing is impossible for God.

Debbie Pierson, a freelance writer, lives with her family in Michigan. This article first appeared in the May/June 2001 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.





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My Husband Was Addicted to Porn

**Want to connect with other women
struggling with the same problem?**

Where to get help:

Christian Recovery International
P.O. Box 215, Brea, CA 92822
714-529-6227
www.christianrecovery.com

Codependents of Sex Addicts (COSA)
P.O. Box 14537
Minneapolis, MN 55414
763-537-6904

Heart to Heart Counseling Center
719-278-3708
www.sexaddict.com

Overcomers Outreach
P.O. Box 922950
Sylmar, CA 91392
toll free: 800-310-3001
www.overcomersoutreach.org

Sex Addicts Anonymous (SAA)
P.O. Box 70949, Houston, TX 77270
toll free: 800-477-8191
www.sexaa.org





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My Husband Was Addicted to Porn

Reflect

- *In what ways can you relate to the author's situation? How did her story help you?*
- *What is your response to the idea that every person is susceptible to sexual addiction, including yourself and your spouse?*
- *How would you respond to and counsel a friend who revealed to you that her husband has a sexual addiction?*



My Son's Drug Problem

Surviving a family
member's addiction.

By Mary Burns



It was a bright August morning in 1997 when Bob, my husband of 20 years, and I got into our car with our son, Bobby, then 18. Parents of other kids Bobby's age were taking their children to college, but that wasn't our errand. Bobby sat hunched in the back seat, his long, greasy hair falling about his face. We were on our way to check him into SAFE (Substance Abuse Family Education), a residential drug-treatment program a few miles from our home in the Orlando area.



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Our admission interview was an ordeal. Bob and I had forced our son into drug treatment through the juvenile court. Bobby's anger, familiar to us after more than a year of family fights, burned in his eyes as two teenage boys, both SAFE clients, told him about the program. Away from family—we would see each other only in a weekly assembly—Bobby would follow a rigid schedule of in-house school and group therapy. He would have to earn the right to live at home, return to school, and work outside the program.

When the session was over, the counselor, a big, calm man, stood up.

"Bobby, do you want to hug Mom and Dad good-bye? You won't see them for a while," he said.

"No. I'll never forgive them for this," Bobby said, then left the room without looking at us.

We drove home to our daughters, Jasmine and Rose, then 16 and 13. They took their brother's absence quietly; I, on the other hand, struggled not to cry. I wasn't supposed to have a child who used drugs and hated me for trying to help him. Though my husband, Bob, doesn't share my faith, we both taught our kids morals. And I always urged our kids to bring their emotional bumps and bruises to me. Somehow, though, I'd failed to help my son.

Sunny-natured Bobby had once packed a serious bear hug and given the family affectionate nicknames. He did well at school and church. He began to change, however, when he was a junior in high school. A sullen sneer replaced his





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smile. He quarreled regularly with his sisters. He fought our rules in order to stay out late with his new buddies.

Bob and I tried to respond with firmness and patience, even when we found drugs in Bobby's room. But it was a losing struggle to keep Bobby under control. Over the course of 18 months, our son dropped out of high school and was in court twice for alcohol and drug possession. On probation, while attending drug counseling, he continued to use marijuana, ecstasy, cocaine, and alcohol. He was ordered to live at home under our supervision, but his defiance and verbal abuse kept the family in an uproar.

Bob and I had little time and energy to give our other children, and we argued over what to do. Bob wanted to turn Bobby out of our home. As a big brother, he was a terrible example for his sisters. But I was afraid for our son. He looked dirty and unhealthy, and he didn't take care of himself.

In my prayers I often broke down crying. I hated feeling that everything, even my communication with the Lord, was so out of control. I quit my job and worked instead at looking for ways to battle Bobby's drug use. That's when I found SAFE, a reportedly tough but effective program. The cost was steep, about \$25,000 for an eight-month-minimum stay. But I knew, and managed to convince Bob, that our son could die if we didn't do something.





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We first saw Bobby at a SAFE assembly a few days after his admission. We sat in a big room on plastic chairs with about 60 other parents. Bobby, his hair cut short, sat with 37 other youths at the front of the room.

I wondered what he was feeling. For so long he'd come and gone as he pleased. Now, after a long day of school and group, he went straight from the program to the home of another SAFE family for dinner and an early bedtime. In the first "phase" of his treatment, he was to focus on the feelings that had led him to use drugs. He couldn't watch television, listen to the radio, or read anything outside of schoolwork until he earned these privileges.

I steeled myself as the assembly began. We were told resentful clients sometimes misbehaved and even swore at their parents. But when Bobby took the microphone to introduce himself to the group, he didn't rage at us. He said he'd felt desperate and lonely for a long time. His voice broke when he said he needed God in his life again.

He cried when Bob and I, emotional ourselves, each described to him before the group a time his drug use had hurt us. Bob and I went home exhausted but hopeful our son was at last seeking help for his problem. We had another challenge ahead of us, though—we and our other children had changes to make, too.

SAFE's philosophy is that substance abuse is a "disease" that affects entire families. Loretta Parrish, SAFE's executive director who founded the program in 1992,





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believes that while the addict alone is accountable to God for the sinful choice to use drugs, the family, like the addict, must learn a healthy pattern of life called "recovery."

Recovery involves principles summed up in the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. One of them, the need to give control of our life to a Higher Power, I thought I'd learned when I became a Christian at 19. SAFE made me uncomfortably aware, however, that I wasn't in control of getting my family well.

Bob and I felt out of our depth in the hours of songs, role-playing, and sharing in our mandatory parent sessions. We had difficulty talking about the feelings Bobby's drug use stirred up, though we were told exploring our emotions was the best way to help our family. I found I hardly knew what my feelings were after focusing so long on those of my family. Bob, my "strong, silent" husband, hated the sessions.

A crisis at home changed Bob's attitude. Rose had gone along with the change in our lives, but Jasmine seemed to take over Bobby's rebellion. We discovered she was drinking and using drugs with friends. We were devastated. At our program counselor's recommendation, we had Jasmine admitted to SAFE for assessment.

The same week, two months after his admission, Bobby earned the right to come home. After the announcement in assembly, he ran to hug us. My joy at touching him again broke through my grief about Jasmine, now sitting among the female clients. Bob's eyes filled with tears as he held





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our son. Later, Bobby told us he'd worried about Jasmine and asked God to help her—the day before she entered the program.

We prepared to host SAFE clients in our home along with Bobby for the remaining months of his treatment. I felt jittery as we emptied Bobby's room of everything but mattresses, and fitted the door and window with alarms.

I need not have worried. Soon our evenings were filled with the laughter of young people crowding around our table, calling us "Mom" and "Dad." The boys or girls—we had them separately—helped in the kitchen, did laundry and their homework. Occasionally someone refused to take medication or fussed at having to get up at 5:30 a.m. to prepare for a day at SAFE. But often the kids seemed well-behaved and wise beyond their years.

To our joy, Jasmine was discharged from SAFE after a few weeks. Not an addict, she had learned about herself and the risk she had taken by following her brother's example. She came home eager to make a new start.

In group therapy I began sharing more of my feelings and frustrations. I didn't feel my family was progressing as I was. Bobby struggled with fear that he'd always feel guilty about his drug use. Bob closed himself in our room, away from conflict, as he often did in our marriage. Rose said little about her feelings, but Jasmine poured out new resentment over her stay at SAFE.





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I expected sympathy from the group, but I didn't get it. Several parents reminded me of the Twelve Steps. They suggested I turn my will for others over to God. I felt misunderstood. How could trying for a happy atmosphere at home be willful? More group sessions showed me.

I learned many of us in the program were afraid of strong feelings. But we didn't turn to God for help. Instead, we clamped down on emotion in ourselves and our children. Many parents tried to reason their children into obedience instead of setting limits and risking the children's anger. All of this helped to set our families up for substance abuse, which thrives on repressed feelings.

My habit of emotional control was strong, and I wrestled with it. I experienced a breakthrough when I called to encourage a mom whose son had run away from the program. When I heard her anxious voice, I wanted to reel off advice. But I remembered the group sessions and found myself saying, "We're powerless, but God isn't"—and really believing it. Perhaps for the first time in my life, I trusted in God's strength instead of my own. I worked to increase that trust as the weeks went by. In my prayers and on paper, I told the Lord my hopes and fears for myself, Bob, my children, and other people, and I asked him to take them.

Amazing things happened. In one joy-filled week I saw Bobby, who had returned to church and school, get baptized and receive his high-school diploma. My relationship with my daughters and Bob improved. Before, I often spent hours thinking up ways to get them to see things as I did. Now I became comfortable





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accepting my girls' gripes over a boundary such as a curfew, as long as the disagreement was respectful. I also stopped trying to make Bob over emotionally and spiritually. Instead, I worked at sharing how I felt about our differences. He did the same, and though we had our setbacks, we became closer than we'd been in years.

In September 1998, 13 months after his admission, Bobby completed active treatment at SAFE. He graduated after six months of outpatient supervision. Before an Open Meeting audience, he thanked everyone who had helped him. He was in tears when he turned to me. "I wouldn't be here without you. You saved my life, Mom," he said.

I felt joy and awe. While I was learning to let go, the Lord was giving me back my son.

People sometimes look at me strangely when I tell them I'm grateful for the year and a half our family spent in drug treatment. I believe, however, God used this experience to teach me to genuinely "cast my cares" on him.

Bobby worked at SAFE for 16 months as a peer counselor, and I still volunteer at the program. Hearing the new families' stories, knowing that similar ones are afflicting our communities and congregations, I sometimes feel fear at the destructive power of sin. But I give it to the Lord, and thank him for the strength he gives when we lean on him.

Mary Burns is an editor living in Florida. This article first appeared in the January/February 2005 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.





Reflect

- *How have you responded to situations where a child or other family member has been involved in substance abuse?*
- *In what ways have you seen substance abuse affect entire families—either your own or others?*
- *How has this article changed your thinking about dealing with substance abuse?*



I Was Sexually Abused

Finding healing from the pain.

By Joy Michaels



It was a sunny afternoon, and my parents were at a church function when my 13-year-old brother called me into his bedroom to show me some magazine pictures. "This is how a man and woman have babies," he told me, pointing to a photo of a naked man and woman having sex. My eyes grew wide as he turned the pages. I'd never seen pornography before.



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"You want to try it, just for fun?" he asked, as he stuffed the *Penthouse* magazine under his mattress. "You're too young to have a baby anyway," he assured me.

I followed innocently as he led me to a twin bed stored in the basement. Instructing me to undress, he did the same. Then he fondled me. I was only seven.

For the next few years, my brother periodically compelled me to meet him in his bedroom or in the basement. We never had actual coitus, but a few times he tied my legs to the bed frame, and when I let out a scream, he threatened to get me in big trouble. One time he left me naked and strapped to his bed. Alone in his room, I wept as I struggled to wriggle free.

Confused and ashamed, I couldn't bear to tell anyone—especially my Christian parents—what was going on. They trusted him implicitly, letting him baby-sit my four-year-old sister and me. My brother swore me to secrecy, and I felt the heavy burden of that secret.

At school, I discovered none of my girlfriends knew much about sex, so I played dumb. I was fearful and insecure, putting pressure on myself to appear normal. But at night, I'd often cry and pray to Jesus to let me die in my sleep so I could be with him in heaven.

Once my mother discovered a cartoon I'd drawn of a naked person being tickled by a big feather machine. When she asked me about it, I was so embarrassed, I cried and denied there was any significance to the cartoon. She





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let it go, crumbling the paper and dropping it into a wastebasket. There went my chance for intervention.

When I turned 11, my independent nature kicked in. Although I'd always felt ashamed about what was going on between my brother and me, it was then I finally realized something was seriously wrong with his behavior. In a moment of courage one evening while my parents were out, I turned down his advances. When he tried to persuade me with a few quarters (a temptation, because money was tight in our family), I still said no. He stopped pursuing me for sexual stimulation, but I later learned he went after my precious sister, a sweet, sensitive girl who wanted that money in order to buy candy.

In high school and college, I masked my insecurity and poor self-image by getting high grades. Although I'd always wanted to remain a virgin until marriage, I often wondered if I still qualified. So when a college boyfriend finally pressured me into sex, I felt too defenseless to say no.

After graduation, I drifted from my Christian upbringing, moved out of state, and continued to date guys who weren't good for me.

My secret continued well into my twenties, until I flew home to spend a weekend at my sister's house while her husband was out of town. While chatting on her bed, we ended up cautiously and painfully revealing some of our childhood secrets. My little sister cried as she remembered the horror of being chased and cornered





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in the basement, where my brother and his buddy took advantage of her. We each knew about the magazines he'd kept under his mattress. We each suspected my brother's friend had introduced him to pornography just when his male hormones were kicking in.

After unearthing some of those long-buried secrets and drying each other's tears, my sister and I felt some relief, but also self-pity and anger. I wondered if my relationship woes were somehow tied to my loss of innocence in childhood. My sister figured her lack of interest in sex was because of the incest. Naively, we encouraged each other to forgive, forget, and get on with life. I tried, but didn't get very far.

When a volatile relationship I was in ended in heartbreak, I decided to move closer to my roots. Depressed from failing to fix my life, I temporarily stayed with a friend who, unbeknownst to me, had become a Christian. She told me daily about the power of Jesus to heal and save. I'd grown up hearing the gospel, but never considered having a personal relationship with Christ before. I soon surrendered my life to him, and began to pray God would restore my innocence and heal me from the sexual abuse of my childhood.

I craved justice, but didn't want to cause a family feud. One night I decided to tell my father just enough to indicate my brother hadn't acted appropriately toward me as a young girl. My timing wasn't so great (it was Thanksgiving), and my father found my story distressing and hard to believe. (He said he'd spent a lot of time with my brother growing





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up, fishing and mowing lawns, for example, to keep him out of trouble.) I was devastated. How could he think I'd make up something like that? On another occasion, my parents came to visit me, and I lamented the way my life had gone, suggesting my brother was partly to blame. My mother sympathized with me, but I was desperate for my dad to acknowledge what had happened and to put his arms around me and comfort me. Instead, he told me he'd asked my brother about it, and wondered if I was confusing incest with "child's play." I raged at my dad until my mother frantically called a halt to our argument.

Eventually, I saw a Christian counselor who tenderly prayed with me. He used the Bible to show me my view of God was incomplete. Yes, God was almighty and powerful, but he seemed unfamiliar and distant—not the heavenly Father who cared deeply for me. Over time, my counselor helped me change my viewpoint and deal with the issue of forgiveness—toward my brother *and* my father. I began to accept that my dad may never respond the way I'd like, but that God understands and has adopted me into his family (Rom. 8:15-18). As I've grown in my faith, my desire to be vindicated has lessened, and my relationship with my parents has improved greatly. My sister and I also remain close.

A few years ago, I met with my brother, now married with his own family, and prayerfully confronted him about the past. He talked of a somewhat strained relationship with Dad, but denied most of his incestuous conduct or diminished the severity of it. I told him I forgave him anyway, that my attitude didn't depend on his response.





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However, when another relationship fizzled months later, I felt anger and sadness all over again. Forgiveness, I'm realizing, is something I'll need to practice whenever hurt feelings come to mind.

On one occasion I tried to talk to my brother about the dangers of pornography—its addictive nature, its degradation of women, its perversion of sex—but he didn't fully agree. He says he's a Christian, but it's not clear he's turned from this sin, as the Bible commands.

Despite the far-reaching ravages of pornography and sexual abuse, I don't blame my brother for the botched-up decisions I made in adulthood. (After all, I alone am responsible to God for my sinful actions.) Instead, I pray my brother will one day experience the forgiveness and grace I've experienced. And I thank God for saving me from a few potentially disastrous marriages and for teaching me to trust him with my life and future—whether or not I marry. Thanks to my church, I'm learning to adopt healthier dating habits and use discernment in my friendships with men.

God, who brings good out of evil, has given me an empathy for abused women. Some statistics show one out of five girls are sexually abused before they reach adulthood—usually by a close relative. That number is likely to increase as long as society tolerates pornography, the impetus for sexual molestation, rape, and other crimes. My prayer is that Christians will oppose porn at every level—on the Internet, on screen, in bookstores, in their home.





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The greatest healing I've received isn't from a psychologist or a counselor, but from God's Word. I agree with Psalm 27:1, which says, "The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear?" I don't need to dredge up the past repeatedly; I don't need to hold a lifelong grudge against the one who stole my innocence; I don't even need to claim victim status. I'm of inestimable worth to the God who fashioned me in my mother's womb. His Son, Jesus, has borne my griefs and carried my sorrows. Through his power, I can overcome my past. The longer I follow God, the more optimistic I am that I can laugh at the days to come.

Mother Teresa once stated that Jesus Christ is the Way to be walked, the Truth to be taught, and the Life to be led. I've found this to be true. He can redeem any life. He can restore innocence and joy. I'm living proof.

Joy Michaels is a pseudonym. This article first appeared in the November/December 1999 issue of CHRISTIANITY TODAY.





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Get More Information

Here's how to connect with a group specifically designed to help adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse:

Childhelp: 24-hour national hotline; call 800-4-A-CHILD.

Child Welfare Information Gateway: 800-394-3366;
www.childwelfare.gov. Free material on all aspects of abuse.

Mastering Life Ministries: 615-507-4166;
masteringlife.org. Interdenominational ministry focusing on all types of sexual sin and related issues. Offers resources and referrals for: crisis pregnancy centers, sexual addiction, Christian therapy-counseling programs, pornography, sex offenders, and survivors.

Mercy Ministries of America: 615-831-6987;
mercyministries.org. Offers books and teaching tapes. Also provides structured live-in environment for 13- to 18-year-old girls with substance abuse, unplanned pregnancy, suicidal tendencies, eating disorders, lesbianism, depression related to past abortions, physical and sexual abuse.

Mothers Against Sexual Abuse:
www.againstsexualabuse.org.

One Voice: 202-667-1160. National alliance of adult survivors and child victims of sexual abuse.





Reflect

- *How have you seen the effects of childhood abuse played out in the lifestyle and choices of adults—whether yourself or others?*
- *How has childhood abuse affected your relationships with family members? What could you do to improve those relationships?*
- *The author says, "Some statistics show one out of five girls are sexually abused before they reach adulthood—usually by a close relative." What can you do to help prevent that abuse or provide healing to those who have been abused?*





The Suicide

How a loved one's death
can alter your life.

By Suzy Ryan

It's a sobering statistic: Every 42 seconds, someone attempts suicide in America; every 16.9 minutes, someone completes it. According to the Suicide Prevention Advocacy Network (SPAN), the suicide rate among 15 to 19 year olds has quadrupled in the last 40 years, making it the third leading cause of death in this age group today. Yet what these statistics don't take into account are the living victims of suicide—family members and friends left behind to grapple with their inability to prevent such a self-destructive act. Here, one woman talks candidly about her sibling's death, and how it impacts her even today.





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When my vacuum broke recently, I felt as though my heart broke, too.

Why was I so upset that my old sweeper went on the blink? After all, I thought I'd fully recovered from my 18-year-old brother Bart's suicide. I'd bought the vacuum from Bart six months before he killed himself in May, 1988. As a newlywed at the time, I could barely afford the expensive appliance, but I knew no one else in my family would buy one from him. I suddenly realized why I couldn't bear to throw it away; its purchase symbolized my love for Bart. Through the years, that vacuum had relieved me of the one thought that used to terrify me: *Could I have prevented Bart from committing suicide?*

It's a futile question, because even today I still don't understand what made Bart take his life.

Growing up, Bart trailed me, and I loved it! He was seven years younger than I and had a different father. Since our mother was on her fourth marriage, our loyalty to each other was our security. Bart attended my high-school football games where I was a cheerleader, just to watch me cheer. He kept special gold medals I earned from running track. When I was a lifeguard at the town pool, Bart sat by my chair, enjoying my Coke. His shadowing me filled a void all my achievements couldn't. I depended on Bart—and he depended on me.

Bart's charming personality and chiseled good looks made him appear to be a healthy boy—and sometimes, he was. But other times, he was detached. He didn't seem to have any close friends; he never made good grades, and he rarely experienced success.





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At 18, when I left for college, I felt as though I were abandoning my own son. I glanced in my rearview mirror to see Bart pedaling his bike as fast as he could, yelling out, "Please hurry home, Suz. I'm gonna miss you!" It took everything I had not to turn around and take my 11-year-old brother with me.

When our mother remarried again, they left the state, so I didn't see much of Bart during his high-school years. But when I was 22 and Bart was in the 10th grade, I learned of his first suicide attempt. Afterwards, Bart was diagnosed with manic depression, something he never liked to admit he suffered from. While Bart sporadically took medication for his depression, at other times, he insisted he was perfectly normal. Unfortunately, Bart's disorder dug deeper than my ability to comprehend or cure.

It wasn't until I got married at 24, during Bart's 17th summer, that our relationship rekindled. I lavishly praised him for receiving his GED despite quitting high school, and landing a job selling vacuums. He often spent the weekends with my husband, Ken, and me at our condo. Although Bart lived with our mom seven hours away, we relished spending weekends together.

One unexpected visit, however, concerned me. His car broke down near my house. He called me, needing a place to stay. When I picked him up, Bart seemed different. He looked edgy. He flew into a rage because his car would take two days to fix, then paced for hours in frustration.





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Mom had told me she suspected he was into drugs. Concerned, I sat Bart down and said, "I love you, and I'm here for you. Mom's told me you're into cocaine, and I'm worried!"

"Oh, Suz," he replied, his nose crinkling, "you know Mom and her exaggerations. I'm fine. She isn't telling me what to do, and it makes her mad."

I couldn't deny our mother loved to control her children, so I believed him. Still, when he drove off the next day, I had the fleeting thought, *I'll never see him again*. I ignored the impulse to chase him as I raced to get to work on time. How could I know this feeling was prophetic?

Two days later, my stepfather called. Bart's body and numerous drugs had been found in his car, along with a bizarre cassette in a tape recorder. With loud heavy metal music in the background, Bart had taped a slurred diatribe about wanting to find out what death felt like. Then the cassette abruptly stopped. Bart took his life by carbon monoxide poisoning two days before his 19th birthday; I'd been the last person to see him alive.

After I heard the news of Bart's death, I clung to my belief in God like a drowning man clutches a life preserver. Even after I stopped crying outwardly, inwardly I felt shame and guilt. Bart had always needed me. Should *I* have found a psychiatrist for him? Should I have insisted on therapy? How could this catastrophe have been prevented? And oh, how I missed my baby brother!





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I knew I needed to appropriate God's strength in this tragedy—but how? Numb, I trudged to church, hoping to sing a comforting song. Obediently I taught Sunday school, frantically praying to find a calming Scripture.

While Ken and my friends were supportive, as time went by, they expected healing—but the opposite occurred. I felt suffocated by the weight of grief, shame, and loss. The "old Suzy"—fun-loving, organized, hopeful—had all but vanished.

Working hard at my sales job provided limited relief during the day, but nighttime became my enemy. I had trouble falling asleep, and when I did doze, I experienced horrific nightmares. In these terrifying scenes, I always arrived too late to rescue Bart, and powerlessly watched him die. For the first time in my highly organized life, I was too tired to return a phone call, clean my house, or even wash my hair.

Meanwhile, my aunt worried about me. She suggested I attend her national nondenominational group called Bible Study Fellowship (BSF). Desperate for help, I thought, *Why not?*

As I attended the group each week and studied the Bible each day, I began experiencing God's love in a new, powerful way. Although I'd attended church since I'd become a Christian, for the first time I really learned how to apply Scripture to real-life situations. Then I read in Mark 14:8 what Jesus said to those who accused the woman who washed his feet with expensive perfume:





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"She did what she could." It was as though God spoke directly to me: *Suzy, you did what you could. I know how much you loved your brother. You couldn't do any more.*

God's promises became a balm to my broken heart. They salved the raw, deep gash left in my spirit by the loss of my brother.

As I surrendered my memories, once again my tears flowed freely. Soon my numbness started to give way to a deep sadness, and sadness, to a gradual release from my grief and guilt.

Although I'm learning to relinquish responsibility for Bart's death, his suicide continues to influence my life, especially with my children, Keegan, eight, Lauren, six, and Trent, five.

To this day, I have the hardest time leaving them with babysitters. I frequently sense I'm saying good-bye to my children for the last time. When I tuck them in, I find excuses to return to their room, sometimes four or five times. Tonight my daughter, Lauren, finally said, "Mom, I'm almost asleep. Could you not come back in and talk to me any more?" I had to laugh.

When the kids are late coming home with Ken, I dread they may be dead. I mentally envision how I'll manage without them. I can't relax until they're safely back with me. But as I daily admit these fears in my life and allow God to heal the damage Bart's suicide inflicted, my anxiety about motherhood continues to diminish.





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I know I'll never understand why Bart felt the need to end his life. His suicide almost destroyed me, but I now know the onus for his death rests on his shoulders. Free choice is a God-given gift. Who am I to think I could have saved him? Am I God? Can I give and take life? Of course not. I couldn't even "save" myself; Christ did that for me. When I get to heaven, I know I'll receive the answers. Faith in action is deciding to believe in God's sovereignty.

I do know, however, that I wouldn't have missed the special bond Bart and I shared, regardless of the torment I experienced by his demise. I cherish my brother Bart.

Tomorrow the kids and I will go shopping. I'm finally ready to part with the sweeper that kept Bart's vivid memory alive. Bart will always hold a tender place in my heart, but God's peace is filling the huge void his death caused in my life.

As I throw away the worn appliance, I'm ready to let go of the accountability for my brother, and concentrate on God's good gifts—my children. They'll be with me at the store picking out our new vacuum.

Suzy Ryan is a freelance writer living in California. This article first appeared in the July/August 1999 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.





RED FLAGS

The following can be signs of depression—and possible suicide:

- **Personality changes:** withdrawal from friends and family; anxiety; hyperactivity; restlessness; extreme fatigue; apathy
- **Behavioral changes:** Inability to concentrate on school or routine tasks; heavy or increased use of drugs or alcohol
- **Physical problems:** insomnia or oversleeping; nightmares; loss of appetite or overeating; scratches or marks on the body, particularly at the wrists and neck
- **Low self-esteem:** worthlessness; overwhelming guilt; self-hatred; anger with the world
- **No hope for future:** belief that things will never change

WATCH FOR: verbal or written expressions of suicide; themes of death in music, art, speech, or writing; giving away favorite things; statements that he/she will not be missed if gone.





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Suicide Helplines:

Know someone who needs help? The organizations listed below can provide information, resources, or referral services.

National Crisis Helpline: 1-800-999-9999;
www.nineline.org

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention:
1-888-333-2377; www.afsp.org

National Depression Screening Project: 1-800-573-4433

National Mental Health Association: 1-800-969-6642;
www.nmha.org

The National Alliance For The Mentally Ill:
1-800-950-NAMI; www.nami.org

American Association Of Suicidology: 1-202-237-2280;
www.suicidology.org

Reflect

- *How has the suicide of a loved one affected your life?*
- *What have you done to grieve, relinquish responsibility, and otherwise deal with the suicide of a loved one?*
- *How has reading about this author's experience helped you?*



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When Your Child Disappoints You



Five ways to find
comfort in your pain.

By Susan Alexander Yates

His parents had clear "house rules" such as *No members of the opposite sex allowed in the house if a parent isn't home.*





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But one day, during Alex's junior year of high school, his mother came home from work in the middle of the day. Seeing a girl's purse on a chair, she marched up to Alex's bedroom and knocked on his locked door. To her surprise, Alex answered. She asked, "Why are you home from school? And is someone in there with you?" "No," he replied. Not willing to be misled, his mom marched straight into the room where she found his girlfriend struggling to get her clothes on.

Alex's mom was devastated. Her son had lied; he'd gotten himself involved in a wrong relationship. *How could I have prevented this?* she wondered. *I never thought something like this would happen to our family.*

Whether a painful situation is the result of sin, poor choices, or circumstances beyond your control, hard times happen. While God doesn't promise we'll avoid pain or trouble in this life, he *does* promise he'll be with us in its midst: "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble" (Psalm 46:1). What should you do when your child disappoints you?

I. Acknowledge Your Anger

When things don't turn out, it's easy to be angry at others—your child, your spouse, yourself, even God.

King David often got angry with God, too. He asked, "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart?" (Psalm 13:1,2) Don't pretend your anger isn't





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there. Tell God how you feel and ask him to protect you from bitterness. Ask God to forgive you for anger toward others, and to enable you to forgive the other person. This may be the hardest thing you ever do. It won't automatically "make everything feel better," but healing can't come without forgiveness.

2. Let Go of Guilt

Every parent makes mistakes. But you also may be taking on guilt that's not yours to bear. It's not your fault your teen chose to drink. Yes, things you did or didn't do may have enabled her to walk this path, but in the end it was *her* choice. Don't assume all the blame. Let it go. Confess it and receive God's forgiveness (Proverbs 28:13, 1 John 1:9). There's nothing God can't forgive.

3. Run to God

When a crisis occurs, it's easy to think, *My child's ruined his life*. You may feel as though it's too late to turn the situation around. But it's never too late for God. What keeps us from despair is remembering there's nothing God can't redeem ("For nothing is impossible with God," Luke 1:37). God also promises he'll use anything—even tragedy—for good, if you seek him (Romans 8:28).

So pour out your feelings and emotions to God: "The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe" (Proverbs 18:10).





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4. Protect Your Marriage

When our friends Jim and Sally discovered their son, Mac, was doing drugs, they were heartbroken. But they decided they wouldn't allow their marriage to become a casualty, too.

In the months to follow, as Jim and Sally grieved differently, they were tempted to blame each other and often were discouraged. Yet they clung to their decision, hung in there, went through family counseling, and supported Mac through rehabilitation. Recently we were with Mac and his family to celebrate his nine years of sobriety and rejoice in what God has done in all their lives.

5. Get Friends to Pray and Play

After Mac's arrest, Sally received a call from her friend Jenny Lou. "Linda and I want to meet with you every week to pray for Mac," she said. Both these women knew Mac and loved him. When they met with Sally, they didn't offer advice; they just prayed for Mac. The love of these women was a great comfort to Sally.

When you're going through a hard time, it's easy to become consumed with your problem. You need a friend to take you out to lunch, someone to go to a department store with and get a makeover. Spend time with girlfriends who make you laugh. Focusing on something other than "your child's issue" will help you restore some perspective.





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It's easy to let your problem become bigger than our mighty God. Whatever the difficulty you're experiencing, remember God's character. He's a good God; he knows everything. He has a plan, even if you can't see it right now. And *nothing* can separate you from his love—a love so powerful, he willingly parted with his only beloved Son for your sake.

Susan Alexander Yates is the author of numerous books, including And Then I Had Teenagers (Baker Book House). This article first appeared in the November/December 2002 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.

Reflect

- *In what ways have your children disappointed you? How have you responded to those disappointments?*
- *Which of the five pieces of advice in this article was most helpful to you? Why?*
- *If your best friend's child lets her down, how will you help her through the hard times?*



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Children of Divorce

Help for adult children of
divorced parents.

By Karen L. Maudlin



Research has documented the harmful effects on children when their parents divorce. So it's not surprising when some young adults wonder if their marriages are as doomed as their parents'. Do the now-grown children of divorce carry the same seeds of failure that doomed their parents' marriages?





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Children of Divorce

Happily, the answer is no. The assumption that adult children of divorce (ACODs) are destined to make the same mistakes that caused their parents so much marital pain is unfounded. It fails to take into account God's ability to heal us and to help us overcome our past. Young adults who saw their parents divorce often develop strengths and resiliencies that others lack. There are indications that the current generation of young adults, having suffered through their parents' divorces, will work overtime to find ways to avoid a similar fate.

But we also need to acknowledge the significant challenges. In many ways, it is more difficult for ACODs to succeed at marriage. People who grew up in a single-family home, or who watched their parents' marriage disintegrate into emotional estrangement and divorce, find themselves at a disadvantage. They didn't have the opportunity to learn commitment and problem-solving strategies by observing two parents who faithfully practiced those skills. However, while children are harmed by divorce, the effects can be minimized.

To avoid repeating your parents' failures, you need to confront three fears common to ACODs: the fear of failure, the fear of betrayal and the fear of abandonment. By taking a few practical steps you can prevent these fears from damaging your own marriage.

The Fear of Failure

When you grow up witnessing the gradual destruction of your parents' marriage, it's difficult to believe that's not the norm for all couples. Jana* was a 24-year-old woman who had been married only two years when she came in for





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counseling. She was a talented, attractive fashion designer married to an attentive husband who loved God. Yet Jana came to my office suffering from generalized anxiety about the future of her marriage.

When she was six, Jana's parents divorced. The police had been called to her home many times as a result of her father's drunken rages. Because of her childhood trauma, Jana was plagued by anxiety and worry. In her mind, her adult life was going much too smoothly.

Since her life had been a series of good moments followed by devastating crises, she had come to expect that good things can't last. "I'm just waiting for the next shoe to drop," she told me. While Jana's story is an extreme case, many ACODs share her insecurity about life and the good things it has to offer.

To overcome the fear of failure, take action in two areas:

Trust God's plan for you. "For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future'" (Jer. 29:11). Young adults who, as children, were imprinted with the prediction of failure need to grasp the healing power of this promise from God. Memorize this verse and repeat it to yourself when you fear that your marriage, no matter how blessed it is today, is ultimately doomed.

Take steps to conquer fear. Write down any thoughts that keep you from believing that God wants to rid your life of fear, then ask God to banish those thoughts and give you victory over the sense of impending doom.





The Fear of Betrayal

Jeff was a 30-year-old man who came to counseling seeking help with relationship problems. His parents divorced when he was seven, after they both had committed adultery. Knowing that the two people he loved the most were capable of unfaithfulness made him wonder if lifelong fidelity was even possible. Could he really trust his wife—or himself?

ACODs often have heightened concerns about sexual fidelity. Judith Wallerstein, a leading researcher on divorce's impact on children, found that when these children grew to adulthood they exhibited an unusually high degree of loyalty to friends and family members. So it's possible for heightened sexual concerns to produce a stronger commitment to fidelity.

However, if a parent's sexual infidelity has caused you to doubt yourself or your spouse, take these steps to rebuild your confidence:

Take inventory. Think about your mate's character traits and perform an objective assessment. Which of his or her characteristics do you admire? What traits lead you to regard your spouse as a good risk for lifelong loyalty?

Reaffirm your commitment. When you got married, you both promised to forsake all others. But it's not a bad idea to reaffirm those commitments from time to time. Pray together and rededicate yourselves to maintaining lifelong sexual fidelity.





Redirect your thinking. Meditate on God's faithfulness to you by singing or reading through the hymn "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" or memorizing Ps. 117:2 ("the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever"). Trust God to help you and your spouse fulfill your commitment to be faithful.

The Fear of Abandonment

Melody was only 13 when her parents divorced and her father married the woman with whom he'd had an affair. Then, when Melody was 16, her dad divorced his second wife. Up to that point, she had seen her dad regularly. But after his second divorce, he cut off all contact with her. By then, Melody had accepted Christ, and her faith pulled her through those dark times.

But at age 28, Melody feared she might be abandoned by another man she loved dearly. Her husband, Cliff, was diligent and hard-working, and he was devoted to their marriage. But he was quiet and often not emotionally available to her. Melody remembered her dad's emotional distance and it frightened her.

She tried not to worry, but she couldn't fight off the anxiety she felt about her husband. Even though he had given her no reason to doubt him, she was suspicious of his activities, often quizzing him when he came home. She couldn't escape the fear that her husband would abandon her just as her father had.

The fear of abandonment is common among ACODs, so try these strategies:





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Gain some objectivity. You were attracted to your spouse because he or she possessed admirable qualities. List the attributes that drew you to your mate. In a separate column, list the less-than-admirable characteristics you observed in your parents that may be keeping you from accurately seeing your mate's strengths.

Remember God's constant love. Meditate on Josh. 1:5: "As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you." God's love for us precludes the possibility that he would ever abandon us. Draw on the power of his constant love as you grow in commitment to each other.

Hope for the Fearful

Young adults whose parents divorced might struggle with one, two or all of these three fears. When anxiety and worry start to overwhelm your thoughts, equip yourself to combat them.

Review God's acts of grace. Keep a written record of the times when you have felt God's healing power in your life and marriage. What needs has he met in unmistakable ways? Regularly review that list and thank God for his love.

Record evidence of God's care. List the people God has provided to bless your life. Write down what they have said or done that has communicated God's care and provision.





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Seek the support of others. Find a member of your congregation who will pray for you. Ask that person to pray that God will enable you to rest in, enjoy and trust his goodness in your life.

Team up in marriage. Let your mate know that you need his or her verbal encouragement and reassurance when negative thoughts plague you. Also rely on your mate to help you differentiate between real threats to a successful marriage and what is only imagined.

Clarify your own uniqueness. God formed you in the womb, and he made you unique from everyone else—including your parents. It might help to say out loud: "My marriage is not my parents' marriage." Talk to your spouse about the gifts God has given each of you that help you solve problems in your marriage.

Don't lose hope. If the fears persist, make an appointment with a qualified Christian counselor.

I have seen God work miracles in the lives of those who diligently seek his healing grace. God can change the legacy that you have received into his legacy of love and faithfulness—which is meant for you, your spouse and your marriage.

Karen L. Maudlin, Psy.D., is a marriage and family therapist in private practice in the Chicago area. This article first appeared in the Spring 2000 issue of MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP.





Reflect

- *How has your parents' marriage and/or divorce affected your own romantic relationships or marriage?*
- *Which of the fears mentioned in this article can you best relate to? Which of the corresponding strategies do you think will best help you get rid of that fear?*
- *What are ways you have felt God's healing power in your life and marriage? What needs has he met in unmistakable ways?*





Dealing with Dad's Drinking

How to help kids deal with your husband's alcoholism.

By Karen L. Maudlin

Q: *"Our children—ages 16, 13, and 11—are really struggling with their dad, a non-Christian and an alcoholic. We pray for him often, but it's still difficult. When sober, he's a wonderful father and husband, but when he drinks he's sullen and moody. The older kids are pulling away from him. How can I help our children deal with this situation in a healthy way?"*



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A: First let me say how much I respect you for wanting to build healthy relationships in spite of a difficult family situation. This desire most definitely comes from God, the Great Healer, and he will be with you every step of the way.

The best place to start is to talk with your husband when he's sober. Share your concerns about the impact his drinking is having on the family and see if he is willing to seek professional help from a Certified Addictions Counselor. You may want a trusted friend or family member to join you for this conversation.

If you have already done this without success, consider pursuing Al-Anon/Alateen, support groups for families and friends of alcoholics (www.al-anon.org). Drinking problems tend to isolate family members from each other and from social circles, so the support and understanding of people in similar circumstances can be a tremendous help for you and your kids.

Your children pulling away from their dad is actually a healthy response to an unhealthy situation. As strange as it sounds, many parents in your situation expect their kids to put up with the drinking behavior without complaint. This is unhealthy and considered codependent behavior. It's important for you to validate your kids' feelings about their father's problem and the value of their coping strategies.





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There may be times when your husband is drinking that it is best for the children to just leave the room—possibly even the house. While normally this behavior might be disrespectful, in the abnormal world of drinking it's likely to head off arguments and spare your children from verbally or emotionally abusive behavior from your husband.

I also strongly encourage you to consider seeking a professional Christian family therapist who specializes in addictions. In counseling, you may consider doing an intervention with your husband. An intervention is a structured therapy session designed to help the person with the drinking issue to see the impact of the drinking on their relationships. If you do so, have a large circle of prayer warriors praying for the effectiveness of this intervention.

Finally, remember God's promise that "perfect love drives out fear" (1 John 4:18). Drinking problems have a powerful ability to shut people out, shut them up, and scare people off. Don't give into the fear when you confront it. Trust that God can and will bring good out of even the most difficult situations.

Karen L. Maudlin, Psy.D., is a marriage and family therapist in private practice in the Chicago area. This article first appeared in the Winter 2004 issue of CHRISTIAN PARENTING TODAY.





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Dealing with Dad's Drinking

Reflect

- *How do you help your children deal with a family member's addiction?*
- *How can you avoid fostering codependency in your household?*
- *What is your strategy for driving away fear caused by a family member's addiction? If you don't have one, consider making one.*



The Silent Epidemic

How to respond if you or someone you love is abused.

By Corrie Cutrer



Her husband's comments were so routine that for 20 years, Brenda Branson didn't realize she was a victim of verbal and emotional abuse.

"You breathe too loud," her husband would tell her. "Your smile is silly. You look terrible. Don't you have anything better to wear?"



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It wasn't until Brenda realized his comments weren't true that she approached him. And that's when he picked up a chair and hit her with it. Brenda knew she had to do something, so she went to her pastor. Unfortunately he wasn't equipped to handle domestic abuse; his suggestions about submitting to her husband only made her home life more difficult. "Our church didn't know what to do with us," Brenda says. "They just wanted the problem to go away."

Brenda got the help she needed by forming a support group with another domestic-violence victim. Then in 1995 she cofounded Focus Ministries, one of the few Christian organizations devoted to helping victims of domestic violence while also training churches on how they can assist members who are being abused.

According to Detective Sgt. Don Stewart, a retired police officer who handled domestic violence cases for 25 years, one out of every four Christian couples experiences at least one episode of physical abuse within their marriage. In fact, battering is the single largest cause of injury to women—more than auto accidents, muggings, and rapes combined. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists reports that 3 to 4 million women are beaten in their homes every year. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, approximately 2,000 women are murdered every year by an intimate partner.

"Domestic violence has become an epidemic," says Brenda, who is no longer married to her husband. The enormity of the problem, combined with the fact law enforcement officials and church leaders often lack the skills to address it, led Don to author *Refuge* (New Hope), a book helping





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victims understand and flee from violence in their homes. "I consider Don to be a missionary who offers hope to hurting women and presents a wakeup call to the Christian community to get involved," says Brenda.

TCW spoke with both Don and Brenda on how battered women can get help as well as how Christians can respond to this crisis.

Explain the different types of domestic abuse.

Don: Emotional and verbal abuse are the cutting remarks a spouse uses to destroy his wife's sense of self-worth. A man may label a woman fat or stupid. He may demean her personal accomplishments or scream at her that the dinner she cooked is terrible. Perhaps he yells at her because she's 15 minutes late coming home from work.

Physical abuse is when a man injures his wife in a nonsexual manner. Then there's sexual abuse—when a spouse forces sex on his partner. Most states have adopted laws protecting married women against spousal rape. But because there's so much shame involved for the woman, she may be hesitant to come forward about this.

Brenda: Emotional and verbal abuse can become so commonplace in a woman's relationship that she doesn't realize she's being harmed. It took me a while to realize my husband's attacks weren't my fault and weren't true. For example, we both used to work in our church's children's ministry. My husband often told me I was uncaring toward the kids. For a long time I struggled with this, until one day someone told me how blessed she was by the compassion I





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extended to her children. Suddenly I saw I'd been basing my identity on my husband's perception of me instead of God's.

What signs indicate verbal abuse may head toward physical abuse?

Don: When a husband starts saying things such as, "If you ever left me, I'd kill myself," or "If you don't do exactly as I tell you, I'm going to beat the daylights out of you." Those are clues the escalation from verbal to physical abuse may have begun.

Another sign is if a husband starts damaging household property that has sentimental value to his wife. A batterer never will demolish his prized possessions, but he often will shatter a piece of pottery or a family heirloom. If his comments intensify to the point he says something such as, "If you ever leave me, I'm going to kill you and the kids," or "I'm going to burn the house down," he's crossed a critical psychological barrier, and it's not long before he's going to act on his words. As soon as a woman no longer feels safe in her home, she needs to make arrangements to leave. She may have to leave only until she and her husband can get some counseling or until he's arrested and has gone through a treatment program—but she still needs to remove herself from the dangerous situation.

What are the typical personality traits of a batterer?

Don: Jealousy, hypersensitivity toward even the most constructive criticism, and the tendency to pressure a woman into a quick engagement, marriage, or live-in relationship. I encourage single women to watch out for





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these signs. Other indications include any use of physical force against you or an unusually harsh attitude toward children or animals. And any history of past battering should be of major concern.

How can we tell if abuse is happening in a woman's life?

Don: A batterer tries to isolate his victim. So if you see a woman being isolated from family, friends, or church, that's a red flag. The second thing to look for is if the woman's husband constantly monitors his wife's whereabouts. He may call her ten times a day at work, and if she doesn't answer each time, he demands to know where she was. Or if she doesn't arrive home in the evening at a precise time, he demands to know why.

Also, be on the lookout if a woman completely covers her body with pants and a long-sleeve shirt even when it's hot outside, or if she uses a lot of makeup. She could be trying to cover a bruise.

Should a friend who suspects abuse approach a woman about it?

Don: It depends on your relationship. If you're friends or even have a good casual relationship, invite her to breakfast or for coffee, and approach the subject gently by asking, "Is everything OK? Tell me about your personal life. How is your relationship with your husband?" Don't condemn her or try to push her out of her relationship with her husband.

At some point you need to say, "I'm concerned about you. If you'd like to talk about anything that's troubling you, I'm here for you." If she opens up, emphasize that she isn't





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causing her husband's abuse. Tell her: "You don't deserve what's happening to you. God doesn't approve of any man who beats, controls, or retaliates against his wife. And whenever you're ready to leave, I'm ready to help."

You may want to make an appointment for the two of you to sit down with a pastor, social worker, or law enforcement officer and decide where to go from there. If you discover she's being abused but she's unwilling to do anything about it, you also need to consider the option of calling the police for her. This is a difficult judgment call; it requires prayer and knowledge of the situation. But it may help save her life.

How can we better empathize with an abused woman?

Don: Be careful not to criticize an abused woman, because until you've walked in her shoes, you can't appreciate the unbelievable hell she lives in every day. It's very difficult for a woman to walk away from an abusive situation—often the batterer is the full breadwinner in the family and she fears economic hardship. Nearly 50 percent of all homeless women and children in the U. S. are without a home because they're fleeing from domestic violence. Also, a woman may fear greater harassment from her spouse if she leaves, and this could prevent her from getting the help she needs.

What can the church do?

Brenda: Church members are so afraid of promoting divorce, they often don't give women the help they need. Sometimes divorce is the end result of domestic violence, but I always tell church leaders that Focus Ministries doesn't promote divorce—we promote a woman's *safety*.





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That's why it's important leaders learn how to properly advise abused women. The techniques people use to counsel couples with other marital problems don't work with domestic abuse.

For example, when I went to my pastor for help, he encouraged me to be extra loving to my husband, to make his favorite meals, to extend empathy and ask if he'd had a hard day when he seemed agitated. Both pastors and abused women often mistakenly think if the *woman* changes, then things will get better. That's not true. Even the most gentle "confrontation" with my husband set him off and made things worse.

Don: Church leaders also need to realize batterers can be manipulative. I know a woman in my community who went to her pastor for help because she was afraid of her husband. The pastor called her husband and asked that he and the wife come in for counseling. The poor woman was absolutely terrified to sit in a joint counseling session with her husband and said nothing while the husband smoothed things over. Shortly after this, the woman made a decision to leave her husband. One night when she thought he was away, she returned home to get some of her things. The husband was there hiding and beat the woman so severely that parts of her brain were exposed.

Leaders also need to work to dismiss misinterpretations of Scripture such as 1 Peter 3:1-6, which abusers often use to defend their actions. It's unbelievable how many Christian men think they're entitled by God to discipline and control their wives. As 1 Peter 3:7 reminds us, no





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man has a God-given right to punish or retaliate against his wife under *any* condition. And a woman shouldn't be led to think that through her submission and suffering she'll become a better person. To allow someone to abuse you does *not* bring glory to God.

Are there any steps we can take to reach out to the abused?

Brenda: Order training materials or invite someone in your area who's qualified to speak at your church to promote awareness. Most church members don't know how prevalent domestic violence is among Christians and have no idea how to deal with it. Also, find out what local support groups are available for abused women and have that information readily available.

Don: Organize a list of resources within your church you can utilize if you need to help an abused woman flee from a violent situation. She may need a vacant apartment, money for food and clothing, a car, or an attorney. Let women minister to women while men play a secondary role from a distance. Also, work to establish a relationship with your local women's shelter. Most women who work at these shelters are dedicated, passionate people who do wonderful things for abused women. Often these workers are willing to come to a church and provide the kind of instruction and tools church members need to react appropriately when they learn someone's being abused.

The church is in a great position to reach out to women who suffer so badly. My prayer is they'll do it.

Corrie Cutrer, a TCW regular contributor, lives with her husband in Illinois. This article first appeared in the September/October 2004 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.





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Reflect

- *How does your husband treat you—emotionally, verbally, physically, and sexually? Does his treatment reflect the way God would want you to be treated?*
- *How do you think your church would respond to a woman who is being abused by her husband? What might you do to improve that response?*
- *How can you reach out to women who are victims of spousal abuse?*



Additional Resources



Adult Children of Alcoholics by Janet Woititz (Health Communications, 1990; 135 pages). The legacy of growing up in an alcoholic home or any other type of dysfunctional environment can follow us into adult life with negative consequences on health, work and love. Woititz offers answers on how to recognize, change and prevent the ghosts of our past from deleteriously influencing the present and future.

Every Heart Restored: A Wife's Guide to Healing in the Wake of a Husband's Sexual Sin by Stephen Arterburn, Fred Stoeker, and Brenda Stoeker (Random House, 2004; 224 pages). Here is the book for every woman who has become a casualty in the fight for sexual purity. Filled with stories from wives and husbands at every stage in the struggle for sexual purity, this book addresses the questions and real-life issues that matter to you most.



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Additional Resources

God's Healing for Hurting Families: Biblical Principles for Reconciliation and Recovery by David Thompson and Gina Eickhoff (Wesleyan, 2004; 224 pages). Thompson candidly offers his own family's experience as an example of God's healing, then offers solid, biblical principles that any family can use to find forgiveness, reconciliation, healing, and recovery.

Prodigals and Those Who Love Them by Ruth Bell Graham (Baker, 1999; 176 pages). Mrs. Graham recounts stories about five prodigals, interlacing them with the stories of those who loved them. She also includes her own poems and diary entries written during the prodigal years of her two sons, as well as hymns and Bible verses that brought her solace.

Reconciliation: A Study of Biblical Families in Conflict by Mike Moore (College Press, 1996; 182 pages). This book shows how family life has always been difficult and reveals that the hope for families comes from understanding that the power of God works to resolve problems, heal broken relationships, and reconcile persons in conflict.

When Someone You Love Abuses Drugs or Alcohol by Cecil Murphey (Beacon Hill, 2004; 96 pages). Cecil Murphey offers spiritual encouragement for people whose loved ones suffer from drug or alcohol addiction. These daily readings will help you focus on God in the midst of your trials.





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Additional Resources

The Wounded Heart: Hope for Adult Victims of Childhood Sexual Abuse by Dan Allender (NavPress, 1990; 255 pages). Sexual abuse is probably the most "soul-deadening" trauma there is. For adult victims, here is a way out of the rage, fear, and confusion. For their spouses, families, friends, and counselors, here are specific ways you can help the healing process. With Christ, there is indeed hope for the wounded heart.



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