

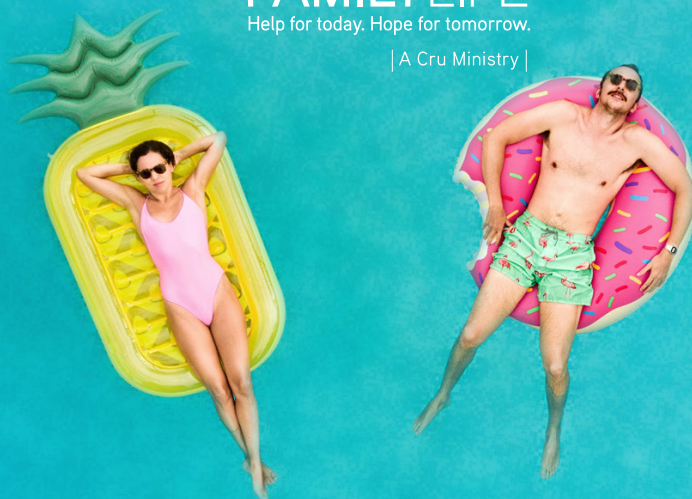
# MARRIAGE LIFE RAFT

For your marriage or someone you love.

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## ARE YOU A GOOD LISTENER? 21 WAYS TO TELL

In a world where communication happens at the speed of light and we feel more “connected” after a 140-character tweet—listening is a dying artform. Few of us possess the time or the training to receive the stories of those around us. Unfortunately, this means people are withering around us. They carry their lives tucked deep within them, and long for somebody (anybody!) to simply have the occasion to ask for and absorb what’s on their minds; what makes up their lives.

So we’ve created a brief inventory to help identify some strengths and weaknesses of your personal listening style. Again, it’s an artform. So expect to need a lot of practice! But don’t let that stand in the way of you taking a few definitive steps to loving better through listening.

**INSTRUCTIONS** In the blank before each statement:

- Place a ‘+’ to indicate a **strength**: *Hey, I’m doing something right! This describes me.*
- Place a ‘-’ to indicate a **weakness**: *Nope, I’m not there yet.*
- If you find a statement neither a strength nor a weakness of yours, leave the area blank.
- Then, select 3-4 weaknesses you’d like to improve.

People come away from talking to you and possess a better understanding of themselves.

You wait a few seconds after the person has stopped talking, to see if they have more to say.

You practice “reflective listening,” using words like, “So I hear you saying that you’re...”

You’re comfortable with abstaining from advice at times, to simply be with someone in their grief. (Think of what Job’s friends didn’t do.)

You ask questions that cause people to explore what they haven’t before.

People often respond to you, “That’s a good question”--but it’s okay with you if you’re not the person with all the good questions.

You refrain from interrupting.

You’re comfortable with not having an answer for some of life’s “unfixables”.

You use facial expressions that are receptive: soft eyes, nodding, eye contact.

You pray silently for a person while listening, and ask God for wisdom in responding.

You refrain from finishing a person’s sentences.

You ask for clarification when you don’t understand what the other person means.

You don’t feel the need to prove yourself as wise or helpful.

Rather than planning your responses, you try to set those aside in your head and focus on what’s being said.

People are noticeably comforted after you spend time listening to them.

\_\_\_\_\_ Your advice to a person is highly individualized, reflecting back what you've heard them say and steering clear of pat answers and cliches.

\_\_\_\_\_ You have time in your schedule to listen to friends.

\_\_\_\_\_ Before offering advice, you offer compassion and understanding: "I am so sorry. That sounds incredibly hard."

\_\_\_\_\_ You share your own circumstances that relate, but are careful not to refocus the conversation on you, or to indicate your circumstances were worse/harder.

\_\_\_\_\_ You think of your friend's experience after you've left the conversation, internalizing their struggle. They're on your heart, so you pray for them, too.

\_\_\_\_\_ More than a problem being fixed, you prioritize that the speaker feels heard, received, and understood.

## BONUS

Have your spouse take this inventory evaluating you as a listener.



## 4 REASONS YOU MIGHT BE DRIFTING APART—AND WAYS TO PADDLE BACK TOGETHER



When I was in elementary school, I realized what all children must at a certain age: Breakfast cereal in general has a disgusting aftertaste.

Of all the times I conned my mom into thinking I brushed my teeth before school, I was a willing convert to dental hygiene on cereal days. How could something that tasted so good suddenly leave my mouth in such vast disappointment?

Surely, there's a metaphor for marriage here. Ever found your once sweet, nourishing relationship to leave a bad taste in your mouth?

One Italian study found that the brain chemistry of the first flush of passion lasts at most two years. Inevitably, the heart-pounding, nerve-quickening twitterpation of first love dissolves into little more than an aftertaste.

Hmm. Add the one, carry the four... That two years seems to be about three percent of the time we actually need marriage to last.

So yes, you could blame the drift in marriage on hormones. But what else might be causing you to drift? And—barring a scientific breakthrough of intravenous aphrodisiac therapy—what could you do to stop it?

Ephesians 5 describes marriage as a picture of Christ and the church—a mural for the world, observed household by household. Paul holds up Jesus' love for His bride, and her devotion to Him, as the pinnacle of marital love. And in Jesus' last recorded prayer for her before His death, He pleads "that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you" (John 17:21). It's a level of oneness eons beyond a peck on the cheek before falling asleep.

So as much as it's tempting to address the "drift" as a self-help problem, there's a lot more at stake than our satisfaction. Our unity as couples is to follow Jesus' example of oneness with God; his sacrifice for his bride. (To be clear: She is infinitely more than an aftertaste or a has-been to Him.)

Is your level of unity just a great add-on--and equally dispensable? Or could your oneness be an act of holiness, praise, and godly delight?

What could be tempting you to drift?

## 1. The significant other.

I'm not talking about the other woman or man, necessarily--although that may indeed be what draws one of you away. But what if I told you the "affair" could be with work? The kids? Money? Busyness?

Allow me to ask a different way. When asked about its greatest competitor, online media giant Netflix answered, "Sleep."

As Christians, we can fail to discuss how our hearts are "prone to wander" until it's too late. Money, the ambition of schedules, our own selfishness--they're subtle, engaging lovers. And then there's the problem of real people. Emotional affairs, in particular, can flourish because there's not a clear line between appropriate...and not. We drift into them.

Some of our greatest competitors aren't what we think they might be. Get jealous. What's the main competitor and life-sucker for your marriage?

### **FIGHT THE DRIFT:**

Be honest. What perpetually stands in the way of you and the closeness you crave. And what's one definitive, ruthless thing you could do about it?

## 2. Untended wounds.

Few of us stand starry-eyed at the altar during our vows and think we're doing this for worse, for poorer, and in sickness. *I can't wait to love you when we're struggling with infertility, or your mom dies, or my business is forced to file bankruptcy, or when you're hardening our hope, delight, patience, and the ability to forgive beneath layers of protective callus.*

1 Peter implores, “Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind” (3:8). The level of unity God’s calling us to isn’t just a pleasant nod to your spouse—“Whatever you say, dear!”—benignly bumping along without argument. He calls us to unity of mind. To brotherly love not just by continuing to pay the bills and pack the lunches and show up to the big events. It’s love like Jesus did, that lays down its life to go the distance.

### **FIGHT THE DRIFT:**

Take the time you need to personally and privately sort through your emotion toward your spouse.

How would your marriage change if you dealt with your resentment, disappointment, sadness, or fear? What would happen if you agreed to the counseling you’ve been wondering about? What if you forgave your spouse?

What if it was the two of you against the problem--rather than against each other?

## 3. Missing what marriage is about.

From our breakfast-cereal years on up, we marinate in Disney-esque tales where relational success is defined by happiness. Scriptwriters steer us to yearn for happiness for onscreen characters, and help us believe those characters’ unhappiness would end entirely upon exiting a marriage. There within fiction, our defenses are down. We forget that love triumphs not in getting what we want, but in laying down our lives for another.

Paul Miller writes,

*You have a love-hate relationship with love. You want intimacy, but you become overwhelmed with the work of love.*

*...“How I feel” or “my happiness” is the new standard.*

*...The great barrier to love is ego, the life of the self. In long-term suffering, if you don’t give in to self-pity, slowly, almost imperceptibly, self dies. This death of self offers ideal growing conditions for love.*

Our culture can translate love as getting to do what you want and be happy with the person for whom you have affection. (Ask the spouse of the person who has the affair, or the child whose home went up in smoke, if he or she felt “loved.”) But the Bible defines love this way: “By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers” (1 John 3:16).

Proverbs actually cheers us on in the choice of delight to love the one we’re with (as in, married to): “Rejoice in the wife of your youth, a lovely deer, a graceful doe. Let her breasts fill you at all times with delight; be intoxicated always in her love” (5:18-19). Will you choose to be intoxicated with the slice of God’s image He’s given you?

What if we gauged genuine love not by our level of personal pleasure, but by enduring, selfless commitment—and the choice to love?

### **FIGHT THE DRIFT:**

For the next two weeks, ask God to give you unconditional love like his for your spouse. Actively “take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5)—including all those thoughts convincing you the grass is greener elsewhere.

Maintain a no-secrets policy between you and your spouse. And share your social media passwords.

Develop accountability relationships that ask the hard questions, and are informed when you’re struggling with satisfaction, pornography, or attraction elsewhere.

## **4. What’s robbing you?**

The fable is told of a jewel thief who succeeded not by robbing jewels outright, but by switching the pricetags. Sometimes, our marriage is conned out of its value when its “pricetag” is exchanged for what’s culturally shiny—or simply more urgent. What’s of the highest value and craftsmanship is pilfered from beneath our noses.

The young husband of the ancient Song of Solomon has a similar plea: He longs to drive the foxes from his vineyard (2:15). It’s a metaphor for what was robbing his relationship. You might not imagine foxes could steal much from a vineyard. But one bunch at a time, profit and enjoyment and investment is gradually ripped from the vineyard of your marriage.





What “small” robberies, seemingly innocuous exchanges of value, are eating at your marriage? Could it be the standing-room only in the schedule, the late nights at work, the bigger paycheck, the late nights on the internet, the unresolved conflicts, the growing irritation.

### **FIGHT THE DRIFT:**

Gently come to your spouse with your concerns about the “thieves” in your marriage—and genuinely accept responsibility for your contributions. Together, pray about a plan that makes a priority of your marriage, rather than your relationship getting the leftovers.

# A BUCKETFUL OF EASY IDEAS TO STOP THE SUMMER DRIFT

## 1. *Read a Book Together*

at night, on vacation, or on a road trip.

## 2. *pray together.*

If you don't pray together already, try setting aside one night a week to pray together.

## 3. SIT TOGETHER.

Set aside 10 minutes after work to sit on the porch (or on the sofa?) together. You could have some popsicles (easy recipe), lemonade, or iced tea ready as your together-down-time.

## 4 .

GO TO BED. WITH LESS CLOTHES ON OR TAKE A SHOWER TOGETHER. 'NUFFF SAID.

## 5. *Take time to ask your spouse some heart-level questions.*

(See our conversation starters as a warm-up.)

## 6. *Grab a walk after dinner once a week to talk about what matters.*

Take a football, basketball, or baseball with you and end at the park, or pick some wildflowers on the way.

## 7. pick up his or her favorite iced drink while running errands, just to say, "You were on my mind."

## 8 .

**SEE IF YOU CAN IDENTIFY ONE WAY YOU'RE HOLDING BACK EMOTIONALLY FROM YOUR SPOUSE.**

This summer, make it a goal to take the next step in being transparent and vulnerable, just one step closer to "the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed" (Genesis 2:25).

## 9. *Read scripture together.*

once a day, and spend at least five minutes chatting about it.

## 10. *Have a family "media fast,"*

putting away all devices for a number of days. Use the extra time to spend together.



## “HELP! MY FRIEND’S MARRIAGE IS TANKING”: 7 NON-PUSHY, PRACTICAL WAYS TO HELP

Maybe you’ve been there: On the phone call where the voice on the other end is hitching with tears. Or at the playdate where, as you watch your kids munch goldfish or play house, your friend confesses things at home aren’t going well. Or over lunch or coffee, where your friend’s eyes look distant, bewildered, and wounded as they explain a marriage with pieces falling off in raw, giant slabs.

Bad news is, often by the time couples have gotten to this point? Your friend has already flirted with the idea of splitting up. They could have one foot on a banana peel, sliding out the door.

What can you do to help?

We say these ideas are non-pushy. But in reality, let us encourage you to care enough to be just a little intrusive. Popular culture may tell you to keep your nose out of it. But pray about what it looks like to be your brother’s keeper; to be the Samaritan who sees a person robbed and bleeding, and carries them out of harm’s way. Imagine addressing a child of this couple one day, looking him or her in the eyes, and honestly being able to say, “I did everything in my power to fight for a whole home for you.”

Here are a few ideas to fight for your friends.

## 1. BE THERE

Our society doesn't live with a ton of margin for—well, anything. But particularly for in-depth relationships that go the distance. Walking with friends through hard times often seems to take time we don't have. But compared to some of the other less-consequential items that consume our schedules, it's a tremendous return on investment to create the time to help friends save what matters. To love them well.

Intentionally wrap your head around the worth of just being there for these people God has placed in your path. Ask Him for the wisdom and love to remain fully present and engaged, even if helping doesn't end in success.

Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk and activist, wrote wisely,

*Do not depend on hope of results. When... doing...essentially an apostolic work, you may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no results at all, if not perhaps results opposite ... The big results are not in your hands or mine...*

*All the good that you will do will not come from you but from the fact that you have allowed yourself, in the obedience of faith, to be used by God's love.*

## 2. SPEND ENERGY AND RESOURCES ON TENDING SYSTEMIC ISSUES, MORE THAN SLAPPING ON BANDAGES.

Though romance unquestionably keeps a marriage in the more "satisfied" zone, expecting to renovate years of damage with a single weekend or a date, though helpful, may not be realistic. The person we speak to first in a conflict is psychologically the story we're prone to believe. But ask questions of both parties to uncover not just the presenting issues (the lack of sex, the financial issues) but the pain and communicated values beneath them (we're not attracted to each other; my spouse has no self-control or respect for the systems that help our family thrive).

Maintain a bigger picture about what it takes to keep a relationship together. Sometimes a parched marriage just needs a drink of water. But other times, it needs to get to a hospital for dehydration, and the issues that caused it.

## 3. INSPIRE RATHER THAN GOAD.

In general, people are far more motivated to create change for problems and solutions they've come to themselves rather than solutions thrust upon them. Muscling through may work for awhile, but those slogging through marriage are

Listen well. Ask lots and lots of wise questions to truly understand. Then gently (!) remind them of truth. Help them remember why they married in the first place, and to sort out cultural norms (“I deserve to be happy!”) from truth (“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us” [1 John 3:16]).

## 4. HELP CARRY THE LOAD.

Then, examine how you could share the weight:

*“Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.”*

**- GALATIANS 6:1-2**

Is mommy-fatigue killing the marriage? Maybe swapping babysitting could help, or offering a date-night.

Is an addiction involved? Troubleshoot counseling, accountability, and/or rehab options. Offer to help watch the kids or to help hold the person accountable.

Is abuse present? Help a friend get the counseling he or she needs, and possibly work with the counselor to plan a separation with the purpose of reunification after mutual goals and heart attitudes have been met.

## 5. RESIST THE URGE TO TAKE SIDES.

Yes, there are spiraling marriages where one party is primarily at fault. But far more often, there are two sides to the story; two profound needs.

And either way, one of the overarching themes of the Gospel that saves each one of us is this: Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless (1 Peter 3:9).

Why? Because it’s what Jesus did for us. We were His enemies. He brought us close—at the cost of His own life.

Both parties in any marriage are in need of forgiveness; of the Gospel. Yes, one may be more responsible for this train wreck than the other. But in the end, casting one party as the villain, adding to the drama and sense of entitlement, does not help the other spouse go home and stay married.

Help the spouse you’re working with to take 100% responsibility for the log in his or her own eye—even if their contribution was only 10% of the problem, in your mind. God is judge here. It is not your responsibility to make someone pay, but rather for yourself and your friend to love as Jesus did.

(Note: “Loving” does not equal “doormat”—particularly in cases of abuse! Protect your friend as God would—but with discerning, wise love that renders neither spouse as expendable.)

## 6. PRAY WITH THEM IN YOUR HEART.

We're talking more than a laundry list of prayer requests mentally checked off. Though God has given us much power to affect change, much of life also falls squarely into the "not my might, nor by power, but by my Spirit" category. Columnist Andree Seu Peterson writes,

*I am keeping two separate piles from now on, based on Deuteronomy 29:29: the things I can do something about, and the things I can't; those that belong to me, and those that belong to God. Responsibility; sovereignty.<sup>1</sup>*

She's referring to this verse: The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.

As we help our friends pursue God's tender principles for marriage, we also commit to God all the battles that are His. We listen to His heart for them, and allow His Spirit to "intercede"—to intervene on behalf of—"us with groanings too deep for words" (Romans 8:26).

Ruth Haley Barton speaks of intercessory prayer this way:

*Now, as I sit quietly in God's presence daily, I see who God brings to mind and heart. As they come into my awareness, I invite them*

*into that place where God's Spirit and my spirit are communing, and we sit together with that person...I don't feel burdened by the need to figure anything out or to say words that indicate that I somehow hand a handle on the situation. It is enough to share the love, the rest and the care of God with them in this way.*

*If words do come or if there is something that I want to ask for, I certainly feel free to say this to God, but there is no pressure to do so. Most times there is nothing for me to do or say except to hold the people and situations that are of concern to me in God's presence and listen.<sup>2</sup>*

## 7. KNOW YOUR LIMITS.

You might find it surprising that the Good Samaritan had boundaries: He eventually left for his own trip. He delegated care of the robbed man to an innkeeper, and gave the the latter a budget.

Do love your friend extravagantly and sacrificially. But it's also okay, with your friend's permission, to seek help elsewhere as you help others.

It's a pretty sure bet you won't have all the answers. And there's a decent chance you'll feel overwhelmed at points, depending on how deep you go with your friends. Galatians 6 (above) reminds us "Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be

tempted.” You might not be tempted in the same ways as those you’re helping. But despair? Thinking you have the answers, or see things clearly? Gossip?

Peacemaker Ministries differentiates that gossip is sharing with people who aren’t part of the solution. So bring your spouse into things for help. Seek wise counselors with tight lips—best case scenario, after asking your friend. And prayerfully ask God to show you what you don’t know and can’t do, as well as where to find help. He created the Body of Christ for beautiful reasons: both within marriage, and outside of it.

<sup>1</sup> Peterson, Andree Seu. *We Shall Have Spring Again*. Asheville, North Carolina: World & Life Books (2008).

<sup>2</sup> Barton, Ruth Haley. *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership*. Downer’s Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press (2008), pp. 147-148.





## 20 EASY, PROMISE-YOU-CAN-DO-THIS WAYS TO HELP OTHER MARRIAGES THRIVE

1. **Set up a reminder to pray for them on your phone.** Ask your friend for specific prayer requests.
2. **Have them over for dinner.** Make it stupidly casual so the focus is your ability to connect.
3. **Go on a double date,** doing something where it's hard not to laugh, like bowling or mini-golf. Sometimes couples just need some positive memories in the bank.
4. **As you discover a tender spot**—finances, little kids, an unbelieving spouse—**pray about what ways you could practically help.**
5. **Give them a certificate** to a Weekend to Remember.®
6. **Create time and space to listen.**
7. **Meet with the same-gender spouse,** so you can listen and care for them individually, showing you're there if they're having deeper issues.



8. **Gently help your friend** see his or her spouse's perspective.
9. **Support an overwhelmed spouse with a way to decompress:** a gift certificate to a pottery class, childcare while they catch a weekend away, swapping babysitting so a fatigued young mom gets a little time to remember her identity outside of motherhood.
10. **Make dinner for them.**
11. **Tenderly help your friend** see how they might be contributing to the problem.
12. **Offer to watch** their kids for a date night.
13. **When it fits, invite them to a church event** (MOPS, a fall festival, parents' night out, etc.) to help open future conversations to faith. Save them a spot.
14. **Talk about ways you're intentionally working through your own marital issues,** without divorce as an option (and without spouse-bashing).
15. **Connect them** to a solid mentor couple.
16. **In conversation, mention things you appreciate about your friends' relationship.** ("I love how you guys take time for each other." "I love that he's so involved with the kids.")
17. **Encourage them** to take a weekend away.
18. **Slip a card in the mail** to the spouse you've been talking to, reminding them you're praying for them and encouraging them: I really admire the way you're choosing to love her in tough times.
19. **Affirm to your friend** the beautiful opportunity to, in a thousand decisions, resolve to love a spouse as God has loved us. God loved us—chose our lives in place of His own. He set aside His rights, status, all the love and honor He deserved, and wrapped himself in every reality of serving us ... to the point of death.
20. **Send a gift card,** encouraging your friends to use it for a date night.

# 23 QUESTIONS TO TAKE YOUR RELATIONSHIPS TO THE NEXT LEVEL

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Remember when mom wouldn't let you snack before a meal because it would spoil your dinner?

Let's just say our speed-of-light culture and social media can be a lot like Cheetos: They make us feel like we're getting fed socially. But in reality, a 140-character tweet or a status update can be full of a lot of air. And artificial flavoring.

Wondering how to take your relationships a little deeper?

We've compiled some questions to help you get to the stuff that matters. Grab a cup of coffee with a friend, start with a little small talk—and then try a few of these.

## **REMEMBER:** GENUINE CONVERSATION

- builds on our own authenticity and vulnerability
- sets aside our own agendas
- makes “charitable judgments”—assuming the best about someone until able to gather more information.
- When tempted to pass judgment or criticize, instead presents (non-pointed) questions to understand
- practices reflective listening
- seeks real understanding
- listens more than it responds
- seeks to love the other person well—not meet our own needs to be known as a counselor or confidante, or to “win the other person over” divorced from compassion and concern
- is patiently comfortable with others being “in process”, with silence, with deep emotion; it does not always seek to fix, advise, or solve



A heads-up, though. These differ from some other lists of questions in that they are not all necessarily conversation starters. In fact, some of them could really make people feel uncomfortable if they're not asked in the context of a relationship that really seeks to understand them and make them feel welcomed, received, and heard! Think of a beach on a cool morning: to acclimate, wade in first.

Let's get to it. Try asking one or two of these on your next date night, road trip, or coffee date.

1. **What are your dreams for your kids?**
2. **For what do you pray most often?**
3. **What's God been doing in you lately?**
4. **When you get to heaven, what are some questions you hope to ask God?**
5. **Talk about a realization** (or more than one) that changed your perspective and understanding of a past event. (i.e. I found out the parents of that bully in school were getting a divorce. I discovered I'd totally misunderstood my sister's perspective, and she hadn't been malicious at all.)
6. **When is one time in life when you felt most alone?**
7. **What's one regret you have of your past?** (Have you sought forgiveness from God and the people you affected?)
8. **Talk about meaningful things people have said to you** (not necessarily compliments). (i.e. I felt validated when someone with whom I'd had a conflict for a long time came and apologized. Or, My dad said he was proud of the man I'd become.)

9. **What qualities do you immediately find magnetic about a person—and what qualities are immediately off-putting?**
10. **At what times in your life have you felt closest to God, or when do you feel closest to God now?**
11. **If you could describe yourself in five adjectives, what would they be? What are three adjectives that you sometimes wish you were, but you're not?**
12. **What do you most want or wish for that you haven't (yet) seen realized? How do you deal with these "not yet's" or "no's" in your life—or what does it look like to still be wrestling through them?**
13. **Where, when, and with whom do you feel most at home? What represents "home" to you, and why?**
14. **What's a dark time you experienced that most people don't know about?**
15. **What kind of friend do you need? What could I do, practically-speaking to be a true friend to you?**

## TALKING WITH A FRIEND ABOUT TOUGH STUFF?

Here are eight questions to help you come alongside them.

- What was that like?
- What do you think you need?
- What are you afraid will happen?
- What do you wish you could say?
- I'm hearing that \_\_\_ is really important to you. Do you think it's become too important?
- What do you wish that person would understand?
- What do you feel like doing?
- What do you want most to protect, or just avoid?

## HOW TO BE AN EMOTIONALLY SAFE PLACE FOR A HURTING FRIEND

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It was after lunch. We stood on the curb before we walked out to our respective cars. She'd divulged some hard stuff, stuff that could easily be embarrassing outside of the little table we'd shared inside. I was about to step off the sidewalk—and then I thought what it might feel like to be her.

I think I said something really astounding, like, “Hey. Thanks. For just, y’know, sharing hard stuff. That is always a gift to me.” (My husband taught me that part. He says it’s always a holy gift when someone shares their heart with you.) “I know you could be tempted to feel kind of naked after all this. But thanks for just trusting me to keep stuff like that safe. I’m going to be praying with you.”

She looked me in the eye and said, “I hope I’m that place for you when you need it.”



## MOVE OUT OF “AUTHENTIC” ISOLATION

Most of us understand how Christians can be an intimidating bunch.

Even for us Christians.

As easily as “authentic” and “real” roll off the tongue, it’s a whole ‘nother ball o’ wax to engage on that level. Brené Brown writes wisely,

*The difficult thing is that vulnerability is the first thing I look for in you and the last thing I’m willing to show you. In you, it’s courage and daring. In me, it’s weakness.<sup>1</sup>*

It’s too easy to slather on a layer of language that sounds more revealing—while my heart remains submerged in insecurity, pride, pain, or layers of self-protective callus.

Honest relationships relay nothing short of what God says to us: *Come exactly as you are. I’ll give you rest where you’re limping and exhausted. You will be enveloped—beckoned, even—by kindness you don’t have to deserve. All you’re carrying, no matter what it looks like or where it’s been drug through — or where it’s at this very second — can be exchanged for beauty. We’re all equal in our need for Jesus.*

So how can we be the kind of people who are safe to come to? Isn’t this a way we all have space to grow?

## BE SAFE BEFORE YOU NEED TO BE

People who are bruised can have a hyper-sixth-sense. They may be super-tuned to our responses on how others totally bite it.

Say there’s a guy who struggles with porn. He overhears his friend doling out an outspoken opinion on a less-sensitive gray area, like alcohol. If I were in his Nikes, I’m thinking, *If he’s convinced my margarita is a sin, I can imagine what he’d say to urges of a more questionable caliber.*

How do we react, even in close circles, to those who offend us? Who disagree with us?

Clearly God’s opposed to diluting truth. Jesus didn’t mince words about the Pharisees, a.k.a. brood of vipers, to make other people feel safe...but the people he came down hard on were the self-righteous.

Our own authenticity frequently sets the tone for others to be themselves. But Ephesians 4:29 applies to venting, too: *Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.*

Slipping into character defamation or blasting or a group of people, snap judgment calls on someone’s motives—they matter. We’re setting a climate on what kind of people are acceptable, and which simply aren’t.

## ERASE THE SHAME FACTOR

Remember, shame makes people want to head for cover. Jesus shouldered all our shame, so now we're free of it; accepted wholly. Embraced. In a few words, that's what a person of refuge is in my mind: Not a guilt-denier, but a *shame-lifter*. We're lifting the message that we aren't worthy of connection because of what we've done; that we are inferior and condemned.

Of course it's okay to talk about what we disagree with, or what's wrong. But are people still picking up the vibe, *There, but by the grace of God, go I?* Our flippant creation of us/them categories can have long-reaching tentacles. Words have muscle.

Our humility is directly proportional to our level of relational safety.

## “DON'T TELL THEM, 'THIS WAS GOD'S WILL'”

I must have been seventeen. I still remember the room and where I was sitting in it. I do know someone had died. But I remember the youth leader giving us advice about how to help those around them, and I specifically remember this: *Here's what not to say. Don't tell them this was God's will.*

I recall listening intently to understand why we would be told not to say something that is the truth. I suppose in my mind, to comfort people, we tell them the truth. Which is accurate. But there's a reason Ephesians 4:15 adds a critical clause at the end: *speaking the truth in love.*

Truth without love lacks full truth, just as love without truth isn't fully loving. God tells the truth in the context of specific relationships. To Hagar, He is the God who sees. To Elijah, He is a whisper. To Moses, He is a bush aflame yet unconsumed. So from this, I'm taking lessons on how to be a person of refuge.

We say things to hurting people like “God helps those who help themselves” or “God will never give you more than you can handle.” Sadly, it's the misplaced Bible verses and trite Christian sayings that poke out like a hangnail when we're processing grief, leaving us a little rawer, a little more inflamed.

The offense of platitudes can lie in what they're truly communicating: *Your problem is plug-and-play. I see a puzzle piece that fits; I press it in. I will choose something used for someone else's problem and apply it to yours.*

**Read:** *You are a problem to be solved. I didn't hear your heart and what you truly needed, but I would like to fix it.* (A favorite cliché of my own: To someone who only has a hammer in their toolbox, everything looks like a nail.)

Burden-bearing is messy and self-sacrificial and involved, and decidedly un-formulaic.

## DON'T AVOID THE DARK QUESTIONS

Sometimes, a hurting friend asks “Why?” But she really means, *This doesn't make sense. I'm lashing out.* If we answer the surface questions without understanding their source, we get the answer wrong. Is she ready for the answers we're so eager to give?

Dave Furman, in his excellent book, *Being There: How to Love Those Who Are Hurting*, composes in my favorite chapter yet a Ten Commandments of “Whatever You Do, Don’t Do These Things.” Among them is #7: Don’t be Hyperspiritual. He writes,

*“Praise the Lord your baby has passed away. Her pain is now gone, and she is with Jesus!”*

*I read a real story of a real pastor who went up to a real mother who had just lost her real baby and said those words above...The mom was shocked. She couldn’t believe the insensitivity of this comments.*

*It’s also wise to refrain from “playing God” in your interaction with those who are suffering. Don’t try to explain what God is doing behind the scenes: “That baby was just not meant to be born.”*

Sometimes we are hasty to set aside the ambiguity we loathe, about the great unfixables of life. I have flailed about for answers that often fail to fully encompass the horror before me. See? It fits. The world is right again.

On his knees in the dirt of Gethsemane, Jesus knew God had a plan, knew God would resurrect Him. But He needed to grieve, to cry out, to commune with God in his abject pain.

More than leaping to a resurrection, a safe person stops and absorbs some of the weight.

## DON’T BE AFRAID TO BE THE UN-HERO

Sometimes, a person of refuge embraces the humility of “I don’t know what to say.”

Furman, who suffers from a painful nerve disease, relates that the word sympathy literally means “a shaking of the head” with someone. So often a safe place is simply where someone will unpraise what has happened to us. This is not right. This stinks. It is not how God intended this world to be.

In safe relationships, we can be—in a broader sense than marriage—naked and unashamed, rather than naked and suddenly embarrassed (because the answer was so easy, or if we’d only known). We’re exposed and accepted, rather than exposed and rejected.

That, I think, is safety.

## BE JUST A LITTLE INTRUSIVE

My experience: Expecting someone to take the initiative to let me know when they’re trudging through Hades is unrealistic. So I don’t mind gently asking questions that might allow someone the opportunity to talk (...or to not take that opportunity). More often than not, I find that people are waiting, wanting someone to simply ask—maybe questions that weren’t even like those in their heads.





## LOOK BEYOND PRESENTING SYMPTOMS

Sometimes someone's overwhelming anger or grief or fear can be frightening to deal with. What if we don't know what to say to that kind of emotion?

Disproportionate reactions are a lot of times symptoms that something deeper's being triggered. We're acting out of the stressed version of ourselves.

Keep in mind that anger, in particular, is a secondary emotion. Is it proceeding from hurt? Embarrassment? Rejection? Fear?

If 70 percent of conversation is nonverbal, what are their tone and body voicing? When do they clam up? When do they look down, or collect tears in their eyes, or lean forward in anger?

Know, too, that suffering reduces us. "It lessens [sufferers'] capacities, not just physically, but mentally, emotionally, relationally, and spiritually as well. They become less of themselves. And this is true for unseen wounds just like it is for physical illnesses," Dr. Diane Langberg explains.

So we also reduce ourselves in their presence. Think of lowering your voice in a hospital room. "We want to use fewer words, quiet voices, and lots of patience and pausing, so they are not overwhelmed."

A lot more people than I realize are walking around, invisibly crippled. They could have some emotionally baffling responses, seem a bit jittery or hostile. Telling our story—feeling heard—heals.