

How Emotional Pain Impacts Us

Pain comes in many forms, such as emotional pain and physical pain. While physical pain is often recognized and validated, emotional pain is often minimized or even missed all together. While dismissing emotional pain might be helpful in the short-term, this approach will lead to increased suffering in the long-term. No matter the form, the pain we experience has an impact on us. As emotional pain often impacts us and those we love in a negative manner, awareness of emotional pain can often bring increased compassion and reduce long-lasting negative impacts. Properly addressed emotional pain can become the catalyst to cultivating growth and beauty even when challenges continue.

Acknowledging emotional pain and its impact is a critical first step in working through the internal pain we experience. One way to define emotional pain is “experiencing emotions that are unpleasant, such as sadness, anger, rejection, or loneliness.” Emotional pain just like physical pain can be measured in both the level of intensity and duration of the pain. Low levels of emotional pain for a brief period have minimal impact whereas high intensity for an extended time have a significant impact. It is important to keep this in mind as you think about the emotional pain you have experienced as well as the emotional pain someone else has experienced. Emotional pain will impact an individual in at least three ways: physically, relationally, and spiritually. Pause for a moment and consider how the emotional pain of discouragement may have impacted Paul (2 *Corinthians 4:6-11*), the emotional pain of loss may have impacted Naomi (*Ruth 1*), and the emotional pain of suffering may have impacted Job (*Job 6:1-10*).

PHYSICAL IMPACT OF EMOTIONAL PAIN

God has created us as very complex, interconnected beings. One of the ways we see this is the connection between emotional pain and physical pain. Emotional pain impacts our body in many ways, from how we breathe to the functioning of glands such as adrenal glands. Emotional pain impacts our breathing as it makes us to take shallower breaths. Shallow breaths then impact our oxygen levels and when our bodies lack oxygen, many important processes in the body are disrupted. Along with impacting our breathing, emotional pain can also increase muscle tension. Muscle tension can act like a vice that locates and enflames physical pain. This physical pain then loops back and increases frustration, irritation and other painful emotions leading to a vicious cycle where emotional pain leads to physical pain which continually increases emotional pain.

Once this cycle is recognized, one of most important things we can do is move into identifying and then validating the emotional pain. To be sure, these are often difficult steps. However, without knowing what emotions we are experiencing, it is very difficult to consider and work through our emotions. This often leads to emotions festering and potentially causing more suffering in the long run. Along with identifying emotions, we can benefit from validating those emotions. Validating can be thought of as letting the emotion be present rather than trying to make it go away. Letting emotions be present does not mean liking the emotions or purposefully keeping them close. Rather it means engaging them with truth rather than trying to force them away. Trying to force our emotions away often leads to internal dialogue such as “I shouldn’t feel this way”, “I hate this feeling . . .”, or “This is more than I can bear.” If this internal dialogue is not followed with truth and is stuck on “repeat” in our mind, it can increase our suffering. A helpful strategy is to speak truth while validating the difficulty. It might sound something like “This is so difficult, and I know the Lord is with me” or “I don’t know if I can bear this pain and I will seek to trust the Lord in it.” A helpful ACCFS resource to consider is *Our Negative Thinking versus God’s Promises to Us* (<https://accounseling.org/our-negative-thinking-versus-gods-promises-to-us/>).

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RELATIONAL IMPACT OF EMOTIONAL PAIN

Relationships are often complicated and mixed with great joy and great sorrow. Emotional pain adds another layer of complexity to relationships and can easily lead to being hurt, feeling hurt, or hurting someone else. Consider for a moment how sadness, anger, fear, worry, or frustration impacts how you interact with or receive someone else's interactions with you. While it may be obvious that emotional pain impacts relationships, it is often something we forget during or even after painful relational interactions. When we do not recognize how emotions impact our perceptions of events and the actions we engage or avoid, we will come to inaccurate conclusions. For some, they are convinced no one cares about them or they are not worth caring about, and they disengage from those who desire to be in relationship with them. For others, they believe lies that everyone is against them, or they have an entitled mindset that leads to anger and bitterness. For example, we may attribute wrongdoing to others when there was none, or we may justify our own wrongdoing. In slowing down and recognizing how emotions are impacting us, we will be better able to assess how our actions or perceptions may be affected by our emotional pain. Proper assessment can then lead to helpful action. Sometimes this might mean recognizing and, if appropriate, confessing our emotional pain was the driver of our response rather than what another person did or did not do (*James 5:16*). Sometimes corrective action might mean recognizing the other person's response came from their emotional pain so we can be quick to forgive and extend care toward their hurt rather than holding onto our own hurt (*Ephesians 4:32*). While emotional pain will impact us, it does not have to end with us being isolated or scary to be around.

SPIRITUAL IMPACT OF EMOTIONAL PAIN

When we experience pain, it impacts our relationship with God. It often leaves us feeling painful emotions such as confused, abandoned, fearful, or weary. These are understandable, and we are not alone in feeling these emotions. Consider *Psalms 42* where the psalmist is experiencing a great deal of emotional pain, stirring very difficult and honest questions. One of the difficult things about emotional pain is the questions and thoughts that it brings. These questions and thoughts may scare us or feel foreign to what we believe or desire. *Psalms 42* gives us a helpful template for being able to recognize, acknowledge, and speak truth into these thoughts and questions.

Emotional pain will move us to seek relief. Sometimes relief comes quickly and naturally, and other times relief never seems to come no matter how hard it is pursued. It is important for us as God's children to recognize we too will be moved by emotional pain. Those we love and care about will also be impacted by emotional pain. While we may not always be able to remove the pain, we can recognize, validate, and speak truth into our pain and the pain of others. In doing so we can become a shelter for the hurting that points hurting hearts, including our own, to the One who will one day wipe away our tears once and for all (*Revelation 21:4*). Until that day may the Lord grant us grace, wisdom, and strength to recognize and work through the negative impacts of emotional pain.