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## ***"The Silent Killer of Christian Marriages"***

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**from *Healing the Hurting*, Catherine Clark Kroeger & James R. Beck, Editors**

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Emotional abuse, as well as all other forms of abuse, is on the rise in our society, and the Christian community is not exempt. Emotional abuse in the marital relationship is often undetected or misdiagnosed. It is hoped that this text will be an informative tool to aid those who are in an abusive relationship or those in ministerial capacities to better counsel victims and their abusers. Effecting change is essential, as emotional abuse over time will destroy a marriage.

This text provides a diagnostic framework to help identify the victim and the abuser, includes a theological statement responding to the question of whether abuse is legitimate grounds for divorce, and offers a case study of emotional abuse. It is hoped that this material will be used to promote the growth of successful, fulfilling marriages and to provide the stimulus for further study and research. It is in no way intended to promote divorce.

Erica desperately wanted out of her marriage with Jack, but she could not connect her feelings of despair and an almost overpowering desire to escape with anything overtly destructive Jack was doing. Jack was a good father, had no problem with alcohol or drugs, did not chase other women, was a good provider, and had never harmed her physically. By contrast, Erica was aware of her own shortcomings as a wife and mother. She experienced guilt, feelings of inadequacy, and embarrassment over her inability to respond sexually to her husband.

Frequently, this is the presenting picture of a woman in an emotionally abusive marriage. In the absence of physical abuse, neither the woman nor the pastor she seeks out for help is likely to recognize that the emotional climate of the marriage is squeezing the life out of her.

There is little room for disagreement over what constitutes physical abuse, and its damaging or even lethal potential is recognized by almost everyone. The nature and impact of emotional abuse, however, is not so easily nor widely recognized. Although the signs of emotional abuse are not always clear, the abuser's behavior is not obvious, and the immediate results are not dramatic as in physical abuse, emotional abuse represents an oppressive and insidious process that strikes deeply at the hearts of its victims.

Even in cases of physical abuse, the most damaging element is not the violence that is done to the body but the violence that is done to the human spirit--a violence that is dehumanizing and leaves its victims feeling confused, vulnerable, trapped, and worthless. How then do we define emotional abuse?

It is fair to assume that in one relationship or another each of us has been emotionally hurtful but not necessarily abusive. That is, by something we have said or done, or by withholding love, we have caused emotional pain to someone. The frequency of these patterns varies among individuals. At what point do we identify a person as an emotionally abusive individual?

## The Characteristics of Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse cannot be reduced to a single list of negative behaviors. One must look deeper to identify and understand the motivational factors beneath the behaviors that create the oppressive, controlling climate a woman feels destined to live in.

### *The Traits of an Abusive Husband*

The key motivational factor that defines an emotionally abusive person is a deep-seated need to be in control. Because of the abuser's insecurities, feelings of inadequacy, and distorted beliefs about women and marriage, he feels he must control his wife or lose her. The abuser will use manipulative and heavy-handed tactics to keep his wife off balance. For example, the abuser may resort to

- intimidation
- eliciting fear, guilt, pity, or anger
- making a person feel vulnerable, in danger, unprotected, or helpless
- put-downs, criticism, or verbal abuse
- causing shame or humiliation
- controlling another's schedule
- keeping another ignorant regarding herself, the world, finances, or others
- keeping a person in crisis, and thus occupied and off balance
- conspiracy and turning others away from aiding the person
- creating situations in which there is no way to win
- lying or gossip
- threatening self-harm or suicide
- possessiveness and jealousy

Although the behaviors in and of themselves are forms of abuse, it is the constant climate of destruction that leaves a woman believing she is trapped, with no confidence or hope that there is a way out. A woman in an emotionally abusive marriage does not believe she has any choices. She believes she carries the responsibility for the bad marriage and that if only she could change, her marriage would improve. No matter what she does differently, however, the marriage never gets better.

The abuser has a typical profile. Like his wife, the abusive husband has low self-esteem, and his worth is often tied to his performance, image, or personal charm. He has a strong sense of insecurity that includes a fear of losing the love and esteem of others. He is generally distrustful of others and believes he does not have a secure place in important relationships.

The abusive person is self-referenced, meaning he sees things from his own frame of reference rather than empathically looking at things from another's perspective. This is not the same as

being selfish. It can be said that the self-referenced person would give you the shirt off his back, but he doesn't know you need it. The self-referenced person frequently violates the marriage partnership by acting without thoughtfully considering his partner's point of view and needs.

The abusive individual is also emotionally dependent, feeling that he is less than complete, of diminished worth, inadequate, or unable to live without the other person. The dependent person tends to assume responsibility for another, taking on the role of rescuer, enabler, or controller (e.g., "I know what is best for you."). The intent of the abuser is to prevent the loss of the partner because he is emotionally dependent on her. It is understandable, then, why possessiveness is another characteristic of the abuser. He tries to monopolize the time and attention of his wife, or claims exclusivity in areas when others move close to the object of his love.

For anyone who works with abusive men, the most frustrating characteristic is their lack of insight. When interacting with this type of individual, one is often left feeling as if he or she has just gone in circles. Issues presented are minimized, denied, or turned around to make someone else responsible, or a host of other topics are brought in to sidetrack the conversation. The process of change is most often slow or nonexistent.

### *The Traits of an Emotionally Abused Wife*

Every woman in an emotionally abusive relationship can be characterized as having low self-esteem. Although low self-esteem is always characteristic of an abused woman, it is not always obvious. Many women with low self-esteem appear confident and in control, and many seem to "really have their act together."

Low self-esteem makes a woman vulnerable to the controlling tactics of the abuser. Because she feels she has little value, she looks to her husband's acceptance of her as the measure of her worth. Instead of mirroring to her the truth about her value and dignity, he pulls her down even further by his critical and nonaffirming posture toward her. He exercises a form of mind control that results in the victim's taking on the frame of reference of the abuser, developing feelings of guilt and inadequacy for not meeting his standards and needs. This is complicated even more by her need for the marital relationship.

A woman's identity is often based on her relationships. This is generally not true for a man. Men need relationships, but they tend to draw their identity from vocational expression, academic achievement, athletic success, or material gain. Because a woman's identity is often based on relationships, she is vulnerable to being involved in an abusive relationship. A strong part of her identity is being a wife, and she will do anything she can to maintain that identity. As a result, she forms a false sense of dependency, believing that she cannot stand emotionally without her partner. The husband reinforces this with statements such as "No one will ever love you like I do," "All you are to men is a sex object," or "You can't make it on your own financially." A victim of emotional abuse believes her husband is right, or at the least she has strong doubts about herself.

One of the most consistent characteristics of an emotionally abused woman is her inability to sexually respond to her husband. Loss of sexual desire for her partner is an inevitable consequence of the deterioration of trust and the lack of friendship and intimacy that result from long-term abuse. This loss is not voluntary on the woman's part. She hears messages from her

own upbringing, her husband, or the church that accuses her of not being a good wife if she does not meet her husband's sexual needs. This causes her to experience feelings of guilt.

The wife in these situations experiences intercourse as an indignity, almost as rape, because the physical and the deeply personal, loving aspects of sex have been torn asunder. Intimacy and trust, which lay the necessary foundation for a woman to respond sexually, have been removed from the relationship. Yet, she is still expected to meet her husband's sexual needs.

In order to manage her emotions, the woman will often detach herself emotionally from what is going on, becoming more of an observer than a participant. The guilt over not being able to be more responsive can be overwhelming. Yet, no matter how hard she tries, she cannot respond. Her partner adds to her dilemma with statements such as "If you really loved me, you would do this for me," "A good wife is supposed to satisfy her husband," or "If I just wanted sex, I could get that anywhere, but I'm a faithful husband. You should take care of me or maybe I'll have to get my needs met elsewhere." She is left feeling guilty, inadequate, afraid, and helpless.

These feelings commonly result in depressive episodes alternating with reactive behavior. If a woman has no effective means for handling feelings of hurt, helplessness, fear, guilt, and anger, she may engage in self-mutilation or self-deprecating behavior, or she may find expression of her strong emotions in organic disease. At the extreme end of the continuum, a woman may plan, attempt, or commit suicide.

It cannot be emphasized enough that even if individual controlling and hurtful acts of the abuser are not extreme, the cumulative effect of his tactics is oppressive and destructive to the woman experiencing them.

## **Responses to Emotionally Abusive Marriages**

What is the prognosis for an abusive marriage and what options are open to a woman who is a victim? When a woman begins to recognize manipulation and control and finds the resources to grow toward increasing independence, the marriage is brought to a crisis point. Most likely when the woman is no longer able to be manipulated, the husband will escalate in his abusive patterns.

It may be extremely difficult for the wife to convey what she has experienced. The community will probably be unable to see past the charming ways of the husband. People will often respond in a scrutinizing or critical manner toward the wife or reject her altogether. Many may give the husband a supportive ear instead of holding him accountable. This behavior inadvertently encourages him to continue his abuse. Abusive men draw energy and self-justification from people who listen in silence. When the crowds disappear, the wife becomes the target of his increased anger.

With the escalation of abuse and/or the response of unsupportive friends, the wife may either sink back into a depressed, helpless state or move toward separation and divorce. At this point a husband may become desperate and be willing to work toward change because he knows he will no longer be able to sustain the marriage through control. If the husband is truly broken regarding his behavior, intensive individual and marital counseling are vital for the restoration of the marriage. Some men, however, refuse to change. If a man does refuse to change, what

option remains for a woman who is the victim of emotional abuse? What about separation and divorce?

These questions can be answered properly by first understanding the biblical view of marriage. Marriage is, primarily, a covenant with God to love and honor one another, to participate in partnership and mutual submission. Submission is often greatly misunderstood.

Both men and women are called to submit to God first and then to each other (Eph. 5:21; James 4:7). This submission to God and one another constitutes the biblical basis of the marriage covenant. In evangelical circles, the neglect of this teaching, or the misinterpretation of it, has led to an erroneous view of submission. The submissive role is assigned to the wife, while the husband fails to submit to Christ in his role as the head of the home. Headship is then defined as the man being in a higher position in the home, apart from the teaching of Christ, and in practice gives him the authority to rule as he desires. When a woman is not seen as being equal to her husband in dignity and is not treated with love and respect, people have distorted the scriptural view of marriage.

Biblical submission, by contrast, symbolizes the relationship between Christ and his church. We are always to look to Christ as our role model. Christ submitted willingly, in a place of strength, and for a purpose. A victim of emotional abuse submits involuntarily, out of weakness, and such submission does not glorify God. Therefore, a woman is not submitting and suffering for the sake of righteousness. She suffers because an abusive man cannot control himself and victimizes her in order to elevate his own self-esteem and sense of security.

Some people respond by saying that in Christ all things are possible and the woman should trust God to bring healing and restoration. All things are possible with God, but God, while willing, able, and wanting to do his part, leaves man to do his. God can bring healing, but both persons must be willing to do what God has called them to do or healing will not take place. No matter what a woman is willing to do or does, the marriage cannot be healed unless an abusive man changes his beliefs and his behavior, brings significant resolution to emotional pain from his own life, and grows in character.

The marriage relationship is intended to be a permanent one in which both partners are to have mutual respect, love, and knowledge of one another. This kind of relationship and abuse are mutually exclusive. When abuse occurs in marriage, the relationship becomes a setting for oppression, personal disintegration, and pain rather than a context for promoting the well-being of the partners.

To suggest that women who are being abused remain in the relationship rejects Scripture on several counts. First, God places great value on those whom he has called (1 Chron. 16:34; Pss. 6:4; 139:13-18; John 3:16; Rom. 5:8). Abuse, therefore, is in direct contradiction to how God's children should be treated. Second, by allowing an abuser to continue in his destructive patterns, a woman is not loving him. She enables him, permits him, to continue in sin. Finally, abuse places a woman in a relationship in which she is unequal to her husband. She becomes an object to satisfy the abuser's dependency and his need to continually act out unresolved hurt and pain. The victim is a means to an end.

What constitutes grounds for divorce has been an issue of debate within the Christian community. The Westminster Confession of Faith acknowledges two grounds for divorce:

adultery and abandonment. Abandonment is sometimes limited to physical desertion, but this interpretation holds to the letter of the law and neglects the spirit of the law. Let us pursue this concept by way of hypothetical examples.

What if a husband chains his wife to a basement wall, freeing her only to do household chores? Has he not abandoned her as his wife? Or, suppose a man moves away physically and sends his wife enough money to live on but has no emotional or physical contact with her. Has he not abandoned her as his wife? If, then, a man is emotionally abusive, creating a new definition of marriage quite inconsistent with what Christ intended, has he not abandoned a woman as his wife?

When abuse exists, and the abuser refuses to change his attitudes and behavior, he has in fact abandoned his wife. He has chosen to serve himself instead of carrying out his marital obligations to love, honor, and cherish her. When this occurs, the marriage covenant has been broken. He has in effect chosen divorce by defiantly neglecting his marriage vows, giving the woman the right to file a legal suit.

Some people appeal to 1 Corinthians 7, saying a woman has grounds for divorce in the case of abandonment only if her husband is an unbeliever. This forces the question, Can anyone secure protection by claiming to be a believer? If a person continues in sinful patterns, the church is to treat the person as an unbeliever and send him or her out of the community. If the person discontinues the sin, then he or she may return. If someone continues in destructive patterns, it is reasonable to question whether that person is a believer. If a husband is destroying his wife by his words and behavior and refuses to change, is his heart right with God? "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matt. 12:34 NRSV).

Although we cannot know a man's heart for certain, 1 John does give us a framework for discerning if someone is a Christian. One criterion is whether a person loves others according to the definition found in 1 Corinthians 13. A second criterion is whether he obeys God's commandments. In ongoing abusive relationships, neither love nor obedience is carried out. There is reason to doubt that an abusive person who refuses to change is a Christian.

It seems that an emotionally abusive marriage can survive only if the woman breaks free from manipulative control and moves to a place of strength, thereby forcing the husband either to change or to lose the relationship. The husband is unlikely to change unless the cost of staying the same is too great.

Unless pastors and counselors can recognize the often subtle and always complex dynamics of emotional abuse, women will continue to be victimized first by their husbands and then by the church or the community. An abusive man who is not held accountable is indirectly supported and given license to continue his destructive patterns, and those around him become enablers. Women are not treated with dignity and respect, as God intended, and so God is not honored.

If the church is committed to saving marriages, understanding emotional abuse and applying proper counseling strategies are necessary conditions to make this happen. There is hope for victims and their abusers if the right steps are taken. If they are not, emotional abuse will continue to kill Christian marriages.

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