

Dealing with the Emotions of Those with Special Needs

By Mark W. Baker, Ph.D.

In my role as a psychologist I am often asked the question, “What’s the point of feelings, anyway?” People come to my office disturbed by their feelings and struggling with everything from being overwhelmed to being completely cut off from their emotions. As it turns out, feelings are vitally important to who we are—and a crucial aspect of how we were created to be.¹

I often hear statements like, “I have to tell you up front, I’ve never really believed in psychology,” or, “I don’t want to spend a lot of time wallowing in feelings. I don’t want you to just sit there and listen to me; just tell me what I should do to get better and I’ll do it.”

These statements are predicated on the notion that emotions get in the way of effective living and should not be trusted. These people think a lot of reasoning is good, and a lot of emotion is bad. While this disdain for feelings can be traced back hundreds of years among Christian authors, it has led to a number of difficulties in the lives of those trying to live authentically with their suffering. John was someone who didn’t understand the point of feelings.

Living in Denial

A successful businessman who is married with three children, John was just about the perfect picture of success until his car was broadsided at an intersection one day. John suffered a back injury, resulting in paralysis in both legs and confining him to a wheelchair. With his typical determination and drive, he recovered from the accident, returned to work and refused to view himself as disabled—even though he is never expected to walk again. John would simply say he is just a man who uses a wheelchair to get around. However, what John *said* about himself differed from how he secretly *felt* inside. Although he tried to hide it from everyone, over time John started battling anxiety. He was so embarrassed by his anxiety that he planned his business meetings carefully so he could leave at a moment’s notice if necessary. Sometimes he would cancel meetings altogether if he thought he was going to have a problem with anxiety.

The event that finally convinced John to seek help happened when he was about to leave for an important business trip. He had taken a car to the airport and was about to fly to New York to close an important deal. Although John was a frequent flyer before the accident, he had cut back on his traveling because of the anxiety. He didn’t admit it to anyone, but he was worried about how the trip was going to go. As he approached the airport that day his hands started to feel clammy, his heart started beating faster and he was feeling dizzy. *Oh, no!* John thought to himself. *This trip is too important for me to blow it. I have to control this anxiety no matter what.*

But try as he might, John couldn’t stop what was about to happen next. He learned willpower is not enough when it comes to dealing with anxiety. As the driver pulled up to the curb at the airport, John’s

chest began to constrict and he was afraid he might be having a heart attack. He couldn't get out of the car. In fact, he was afraid to move.

"Take me to the hospital," he cried out. "What?" asked the driver.

"The hospital!" John shouted back. "I think I'm having a heart attack!"

Two hours later, when John's wife arrived at the hospital, they both learned that John did not have a heart attack. He had experienced a panic attack. In spite of his impressive willpower and positive attitude, John had run up against a problem he couldn't solve with pure determination. He had figured out how to overcome his inability to walk, refused to view himself as a victim and even returned to a successful career. He had become an expert in facing difficult problems in life. But he was about to embark on a journey of self-discovery to understand how to deal with a new problem he didn't even know he had—understanding the purpose of his emotions.

John entered therapy with me within a week of his panic attack. As he had with the other areas of life, he started therapy with an agenda. He opened our first session with, "I'm looking for someone to help me get control of my feelings."

"Why is that?" I asked.

"Because they're getting in the way!" he said, frustrated that I didn't understand the obvious nature of his goal.

"I see. So your feelings have become your enemy?" I responded.

"I guess so. I mean, I have so much going for me. The doctors tell me I am one of the best examples of recovery from this kind of spinal injury, so whatever problems I have now must be in my head. There are no victims in life you know, only people who think they are," John said, defiantly.

"Well, control is a tough one," I replied. "Before I prescribe a treatment for you, I think I need to understand the exact nature of the complaint."

Over the next several months of therapy John learned that his feelings were not his enemy, and, in fact, they were his friends. All of them—even the *uncomfortable* ones. He learned that his *take charge* attitude had helped him return to a successful career in business despite the fact that he was now in a wheelchair, but it was causing him to fail in his emotional life. John's attempts to *control* his anxious feelings and talk himself into positive feelings had been making matters worse. It was only when he stopped trying to *control* his painful feelings and started learning to *express* them that he began to remove the roadblock that anxiety had become in his life.

The Bible tells us that "*it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved*" (Romans 10:9). The action of confessing the truth out loud changes us. When we take the convictions of our heart and speak them out loud something is transformed in us. Just as confessing the truth in our hearts about the Lordship of Jesus connects us to God spiritually, so, too, confessing the truth in our hearts about our deepest feelings connects us to God and others emotionally. Then we are no longer alone in our pain.

In therapy John learned that he had not felt safe to express vulnerable feelings like sadness, hurt and fear. His recovery from the accident had been rough and he had to set aside his hurt feelings to do it. Although his strategy helped him survive a painful, life-changing injury, it was no longer helping him. John didn't know it at the time, but trying to control his anxiety was the main cause of his panic attacks. It was blocking up his emotional system and causing him to overload. Accepting his feelings, especially the painful ones, helped John release his anxiety. Trying to make his feelings go away had the opposite effect. He came to see how his panic attacks were the result of his attempts to *over control* his anxiety. John learned that all feelings are an important source of information, which can't be ignored. This realization was fundamental for his recovery.

John misunderstood his panic attacks as the result of being *too* emotional. The truth was he wasn't being emotional *enough*. He wasn't just feeling anxiety; he had a good deal of fear, hurt and shame that needed to be acknowledged as well. He learned that his anxiety did not have to mean something bad was

happening. Anxiety can be a signal that we need to pay attention. Once he stopped being afraid of his anxiety and started listening to the feelings underneath, he stopped struggling with himself and allowed his feelings to flow. John learned that the intensity of his anxiety wasn't his real problem; it was his fear of being anxious at all that was causing the panic attacks.

John came to see that feelings are not the problem—refusing to deal with them is. He couldn't control his feelings because feelings are not meant to be controlled. Feelings are meant to be acknowledged and expressed to help us connect to God and others. Although it isn't always easy for John to do it, he doesn't try to control his feelings anymore and his problem with anxiety has been greatly reduced. His panic attacks are relatively rare now, and when he does have one it's much less intense.

The Purpose of Emotions

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” –Mark 12:30

Jesus tells us to *love the Lord your God with all your heart*. The purpose of emotions is to connect to God and others, and motivate us to grow. We were made for the purpose of relationship, first to God and then to others. Feelings are instrumental in helping us do this. Feelings are the language of connection. When expressed as they were intended, we know and feel known.

Proverbs 16:23 tells us that a man's heart guides his mouth. Psychologists have now learned that the emotional part of the brain responds five times faster than the thinking part of the brain. This means we feel things five times faster than we can think. You have a feeling, and then come up with the reasons why you feel the way you do. You might not like to think it, but you are not really a rational person. You are probably more of a rationalizing one.²

Of course, this does not mean that we are to be guided solely by our emotions. That would be just as out of balance as trying to over-control them. What it does mean is that God has made us perfectly equipped to deal with a complicated and sometimes difficult life. 1 Thessalonians 5:23 says, *“May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole **spirit, soul and body** be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ”* (emphasis added). We have a spirit which is transcendent, a soul which is the seat of our emotions, and a body which is our physical vehicle in this world. If we are wise in honoring all three, we will grow into the whole people God made us to be.

The Problem of Pain

“My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” –Matthew 27:46

Even though God created emotions to help us connect to him and others, it doesn't always work that way. Sometimes when the pain of suffering is too great, the very emotions that were intended to bond us to others actually create a separation. This is not due to a lack of faith; it is due to an emotional reaction to intense pain. It is important to understand that the feeling of isolation is a psychological property of trauma.

When Jesus was on the cross he uttered the loneliest words ever spoken. The son of God cried out in his most intense moment of suffering, *“My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”* Theologians have wrestled with this statement over the years, but one thing is certain. This is not a statement about a lack of faith. It is a statement about a psychological property of trauma. Extreme trauma can make you feel very alone. If you've ever felt isolated from others, or even abandoned by God in your suffering, you are not the only one. Jesus himself felt this type of suffering.

One of the most helpful books on the subject of suffering over the last century is *The Problem of Pain* by C.S. Lewis. He takes a realistic and sympathetic look at the intellectual problems raised by human suffering. Lewis says Christianity “creates rather than solves the problem of pain.”³ His argument is simple: “If God's goodness is inconsistent with hurting us, then either God is not good or there is no God.”⁴ Other religions

that don't speak of a personal and loving god don't have this problem. Pain is simply a part of life and there is no personally loving god to complain to about it. In this way, Christianity creates the problem of pain.

After Lewis wrote *The Problem of Pain* he met Joy Gresham, a divorced American poet studying in England. The two married and developed an intimate love relationship unlike any Lewis had ever experienced. Tragically, Gresham died of cancer leaving Lewis heartbroken and despondent. It was after his own intense suffering that Lewis wrote *A Grief Observed*, his own story of surviving the intense pain of grief and loss. In it he wrote,

Meanwhile, where is God? This is one of the most disquieting symptoms. When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing Him . . . and turn to Him with gratitude and praise, you will be welcomed with open arms. But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away.⁵

Lewis' honesty helps us understand intense suffering. Trauma is alienating and can make you feel like no one understands. If suffering is too great it can drive a wedge between you and others, even God. This is not a failing or a weakness. It is a psychological property of trauma that you may experience someday. If this happens, you may feel afraid and alone. But do not stop there. Even if you feel that the Bible does not offer a good answer as to *why* pain exists when you feel alone and traumatized, it does offer some pretty good answers as to *how* to deal with it when it comes your way.

The Solution to the Problem of Pain

When most people think of finding a solution to the problem of pain, they usually think about how to make it go away. However, pain is an essential element in life as we know it. One of the reasons God made us able to feel pain is to keep us safe. Without pain we would not get through a day without injuring ourselves unknowingly, which could have disastrous results.

Jesus said, "*My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one*" (John 17:15). Our challenge is to be in the world, but not of it. This means we will have all the same physical and emotional challenges that everyone else in the world experiences, but we can face them empowered from above. Pretending we don't have feelings is trying to take ourselves out of the world in which we live. Acknowledging and confessing these feelings to God and others is how we live here and protect ourselves from the evil one.

The solution to the problem of pain is not to remove suffering, or ourselves, from the world. The real solution is to never try to suffer alone. When we have been traumatized we may feel alone, but we do not have to stay that way. The feeling of loneliness that often comes from suffering is God's way of driving us back into relationship with him and others. Feeling alone may not be a choice, but staying there is.

The Bible tells us, "*Anyone who withholds kindness from a friend forsakes the fear of the Almighty*" (Job 6:14). Even when our suffering causes us to feel isolated from God himself, we were not created to suffer alone. This is when we need others to stand with us. Sometimes we don't know what to say to those who are suffering. That's okay, because it is in those times that being with them is more important than anything we could say. There is a comfort that comes from simply being there that cannot be expressed in words. This is the solution to the problem of pain—do not try to suffer alone.

Grief Work

One of the most important emotions to understand when working with families with special needs is grief. It has been said that all emotional problems come from an inability to grieve. This means grieving

our losses is a necessary part of growth. In dealing with families with special needs there are often many things to grieve, which is the path to acceptance of the life God has given them.

Part of my work with John was to help him grieve his losses in order to free him to live a full life going forward. His panic attacks came from his refusal to accept his life and the feelings that came with it. When he came to me he was in the first stage of grief: Denial. He refused to define himself as disabled, and this attitude had helped him in many ways. But this did not mean he could deny the feeling of loss that comes with paralysis. God could heal him and give him the use of his legs again, as he has done for people before. But the reality was that God wasn't healing John.

Talking honestly about this brought John into the second stage of grief: Anger. Some days John was angry with God for refusing to heal him, and many days he was angry with God or himself for allowing the injuries to happen in the first place. This was not a lack of faith on John's part—it was simply a part of the process of grief in his life. Anger itself is not a sin. It is merely energy to help us do the emotional work that God has for us to do today. As the Bible directs, *"In your anger do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry"* (Ephesians 4:26). At its core, anger is energy to solve a problem. And in John's life his anger was part of the energy to motivate him to grieve his losses.

This facilitated John's progress to the next stage of his grief work: Bargaining. His prayer time often took on the quality of a business negotiation with God. Sometimes he would promise to devote his life to mission work if God would heal his legs, but mostly he would try to convince God that he could be a more powerful witness if God granted him success in his work now that he was in a wheelchair. This *"If you would only . . . then I would . . ."* type of prayer seemed earnest, but it was really a disguised form of bargaining that kept him from full acceptance of his circumstances.

Once John and I identified his bargaining as a part of his grief process, he came to the next phase of grief: Depression. The Bible says, *"Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of face the heart is made glad"* (Ecclesiastes 7:3, ESV). The ability to tolerate sorrow is a very important aspect of the grief process. Sometimes sorrow helps us get to the honest places in our hearts much better than laughter does. We do not have to fear sadness because we have a God who comforts us there. The depression that comes as a part of the grief process is God's way of clearing a place in our hearts for new growth. This sadness frees us from the way things were, to prepare us to fall in love with the way things are. The depression of grief can feel bad, but it is actually good. If we have the courage to honestly feel it, then we are ready for the final stage of grief: Acceptance.

Acceptance is not resignation or giving up—far from it. Acceptance is saying yes to the life God has given you. It is the decision to no longer live in the past and embrace the strength that comes from the indwelling of the Holy Spirit today. This does not mean that you will no longer have any feelings to process. In fact, grief work is something that we often go through many times. Sometimes John goes back and forth between the stages of grief without even realizing it. Grief work is not linear; you don't follow a straight line from denial to acceptance. You can bounce around between the stages depending on what you are going through each day. However, an awareness of the stages of grief can help us identify the feelings and understand them as a normal part of the process of healing that God has provided for us.

People Need People

God made us relational people, and he has given us emotions to help us connect and grow. Even when the same emotions that were designed to help us connect to others may drive a wedge in relationships, we still need relationships in order to be whole. Sometimes emotional suffering is so intense that you will be in need of special help.⁶ The Bible tells us, *"Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed"* (Proverbs 15:22). It may be difficult to reach out in our hardest moments, but this may be the most important time to act. Even if it doesn't feel like anyone can understand, you still need others. There

is a level of relationship that transcends understanding. This could come in the form of a special friend, pastor or a professional therapist. The point is that we deal with our emotional needs by acknowledging our feelings and confessing them to God and others. We live in a world with emotional suffering, but we do not have to go through it alone.

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Notes

1. Mark Baker, *Jesus, The Greatest Therapist Who Ever Lived* (HarperOne: San Francisco. 2007).
2. Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* (Bantam Books: New York, 1995).
3. C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (Macmillan: New York, 1962).
4. *Ibid.*, 24.
5. C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (Bantam Books: New York, 1963/1976) pg. 31.
6. *Ibid.*, 4.

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