

Why We Shouldn't Date Non-Christians

Kyle Skaggs examines theological and sociological reasons why it's a bad idea for Christ-followers to date unbelievers.

Should you date a non-Christian? The world tells us, "Why not? You can't help who you are attracted to. As long as you don't force your beliefs on the person you're dating, there won't be a problem." But what do we say? To provide a biblical answer to this question, let's assume that you, the hypothetical Christian single, are dating with the purpose of marriage.

According to the Christian worldview, believers are to seek out a marriage that honors God. We are to leave our parents and join as one flesh with our spouse (Genesis 2:24), being faithful by reserving sex and romantic attention for that one person and only that one person (Exodus 20:14, Proverbs 6:20-35, Matthew 5:27). This way, a marriage that honors God places His will above your own desires. In order to best do this, your marriage needs to be religiously homogamous. In other words, you need to marry another Christian.

The scripture concerning marrying a non-Christian is straightforward. 2 Corinthians 6:14-18 warns against doing it because being unequally yoked will cause us to stumble in our walk with Christ. While there is no verse that explicitly mentions dating non-Christians, what applies to marriage clearly applies to dating as well. Dating is courtship, an intentional step on the road to marriage. How you go about dating will affect how you go about marriage. There are three areas of concern when it comes to dating non-Christians. The first is your personal walk with Christ. The second is loving and honoring your spouse. Third is raising your children as Christians.

Therefore, I find it's good to explore why we are told not to be unequally yoked beyond "because the Bible says so," as well as the practical concerns of courting non-believers. There are some who would argue that it is fine to date non-Christians. Some of the arguments they give are decent. Others are not so good. I will be paraphrasing some arguments I've personally heard. For context, we must first explore why we are told not to marry unbelievers.

When the people of Israel were preparing to enter the promised land, God commanded them multiple times not to marry or intermingle with the people they were being sent to drive out, because God was having Israel drive them out. They were marked for judgment because of their wickedness. The Lord makes the consequences of intermingling with the Canaanites clear:

"...lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and when they whore after their gods and sacrifice to their gods and you are invited, you eat of his sacrifice, and you take of their daughters for your sons, and their daughters whore after their gods and make your sons whore after their gods." (Exodus 34:15-16 ESV)

Again in Deuteronomy, the Israelites were commanded to drive out the nations who inhabited the Promised Land, "...that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices that they have done for their gods, and so you sin against the Lord your God" (20:16-18 ESV).

"So the people of Israel lived among the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. And their daughters they took to themselves for wives, and their own daughters they gave to their sons, and they served their gods. And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. They forgot the Lord their God and served the Baals and the Asheroth." (Judges 3:5-7 ESV)

Yoking with unbelievers creates a stumbling block for you in

your relationship with God, and as you can see from Israel's history, marriage to unbelievers leads to sin because it is the believer who compromises their faith. Take Solomon as an example. He was a man of wisdom and integrity who built the temple in Jerusalem. Like his father David, he disobeyed the Lord's command to Israel's kings not to take many wives (Deuteronomy 17:17). Unlike his father, many of Solomon's wives were foreigners who evidently did not stop worshiping the gods of their homelands, since Solomon was convinced to build altars for those gods. Why did he marry all these pagan women? I can't say. He probably thought he could handle them.

This set Israel on a cycle of idolatry, oppression, and repentance much like the one in Judges.

To this, some might say, "But we aren't living in the Old Testament," or "that applied to the Hebrews in their particular context of taking the Promised Land.". Even later scripture contains the exact same message.

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? . . . What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, "I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty."(2 Corinthians 6:14-18 ESV)

The believer and the unbeliever live in two different realities. One is light, with God revealing sin and calling the believer to be more like Christ, while the other is darkness, with an apathetic attitude towards God's values. The ungodly do not know or care for God's laws. As the believer pulls towards God, the unbeliever pulls away. They do this

because God intrudes more on the relationship as He changes the believer. Over time, the relationship will most likely become strained and bitter. The believer is forced to choose between pleasing God and pleasing the person they are dating. This conflict is amplified after marriage.

This is supported by scientific studies as well. Studies have found that couples belonging to differing religions have more frequent conflicts than those of the same faith.[\[1\]](#) In South Korea, a study found that Christian couples with similar attitudes towards religion and church attendance reported happier marriages.[\[2\]](#) The same trend was found in an American study.[\[3\]](#) Being unequally yoked has negative effects on your relationship with your spouse.

Being unequally yoked affects more than your relationship with God. It affects your children as well. After you are married, your children will be taught conflicting ways to live, which will more often than not lead them away from Christ. "When couples belong to different faiths or have different levels of religiosity, their children cannot easily acquire a shared set of beliefs."[\[4\]](#)

It also has a negative effect on your relationship with your children.[\[5\]](#) In a study by George Fox University based on a survey by Knowledge Works, religious discord in heterogamous marriages (marriages between spouses with religious differences) in turn affected the children. Fathers who were more religious than their wives felt less close to their children because of their differing attitudes towards faith. In a study by Petts and Knoester,[\[6\]](#) school-age children with unequally yoked parents are twice as likely to use alcohol and three times as likely to use marijuana than children with same-faith parents." According to Petts' study, children younger than school age in low income urban homes have been found to experience a negative correlation between their parents' uneven religiosity and positive behaviors. In Bartkowski's 2008 study,[\[7\]](#) the frequency of parental

arguments over religion is negatively associated with child development at kindergarten age. From these studies, it can be inferred that choosing to marry a fellow Christian will benefit your future children far more than yoking yourself to a non-believer.

Some Objections (Good and Bad)

Two objections I have heard after presenting the scriptural and scientific evidence are “I still don’t think it’s a big deal, because God has told people to be unequally yoked,” and “What if I use dating as an opportunity to witness to them?”

A possible third option is the “I don’t care” response, which is not an objection, because there is no argument being made. It is beyond frustrating, because it makes the conversation meaningless. If you find yourself saying something along those lines at this point in the article, then you’ve already made up your mind.

As a Christian, your first responsibility to nonbelievers is to live a Christlike life, showing the love of Jesus with the intent to introduce them to the Good News of the gospel of Christ. This especially extends to your dating. Christians are told to date and ultimately marry other believers because they are taught that marriage is holy before God.

One objection I’ve heard against what I’ve been saying goes: “But didn’t Hosea marry a whore on God’s command? What if God told me to date this person?” This was an attempt to argue that God’s singular exception justifies courting a non-Christian.

Yes, God did tell Hosea to marry a prostitute. No, it is not the same thing, because the woman Hosea married was a sinner, not a non-believer. First, this argument is too divorced from the context of scripture to be valid. Second, Hosea was a unique individual, one whom God raised up as a prophet. Third,

the purpose of this marriage was to show Israel how they were unfaithful to God when the woman inevitably slept with other men! It was certainly not a good marriage. So unless you're a prophet whom God is telling to use your horrible dating life as an object lesson, you can't say that it's good for you to date a non-Christian.

Missionary Dating: A Lukewarm Fantasy

Speaking of exceptions, there is one scenario people have been using to excuse being unevenly yoked for decades if not centuries: missionary dating. There's this prevailing idea among young Christians that you can date someone for the purpose of sharing the gospel with them.

This is the fiction of missionary dating. It is what Christians tell themselves to justify an unwise decision. First, it attempts to wed (pun intended) two activities that do not complement each other. Courtship involves getting to know someone in order to decide whether you will marry them, while evangelism involves getting to know someone as part of a discipleship process. Dating with the intent to bring someone to Christ tries to reconcile the equal power dynamic of courtship with the mentor-student power dynamic of discipleship. This is not a good plan.

Second, missionary dating leaves you as your date's only window into Christianity. Evangelism can require more than one person ministering to the unbeliever. It is a team effort even when we don't see it. Dating, on the other hand, is more exclusive.

Third, no one can serve two masters. You will love one and hate the other. You will favor either ministry or dating to the exclusion of the other. The temptation to stop ministering in favor of dating is stronger. The consequence of this is that you make compromises as all close relationships do, and present an imperfect picture of God's kingdom. If in your

date's eyes, you live just like everyone else, they will not see what it means to give oneself up to Christ.

When you date someone, always be examining yourself. Pray that the Holy Spirit will reveal the contents of your heart to you. The Lord does not tell us to sin against Him. Anything contrary to what God commands us to do in Scripture is from the devil. To that end, missionary dating can only be effective for those who are able to use wisdom and discernment. It is inadvisable for those who are not spiritually mature. I'm sure Christians have been saved because of missionary dating, but they are few and far between.

Sending the Wrong Message

Finally, choosing to date a non-Christian instead of ministering to them is foolish because of the message you send. When you date someone like this, you are telling them that you either don't care about God or you don't care they are going to hell. It is more important to you that they pour themselves into a relationship with you than it is for them to come to know Christ. On the other hand, prioritizing evangelism and discipleship shows them you want them to share in the kingdom of God.

In conclusion, dating a non-Christian is counterproductive to your walk with Christ. Scripture warns us against marrying non-believers, so why risk falling in love with one? We see time and time again just how easily it can indirectly damage your relationship with God. They do not know your God, nor do they honor Him. The excuses for dating non-believers are logically unsound at worst, and at best cannot stand the test of God's word. Dating a non-Christian will also cause unneeded drama, and should you choose to tie the knot, that conflict will become worse. This will make the lives of your future children needlessly complicated, their development will be hindered because of you

and your spouse's fighting, and they will not be shown what a stable and godly family looks like, nor will you be able to effectively raise them to love and fear God. Missionary dating is counterproductive for both dating and evangelism. The people I know who were successful in it admitted that they went through a lot of unnecessary hardship. It is better to remain as friends at least until they come to know Christ. This shows that you care more for the state of their relationship with God than your own wants, and enables you to minister to them through your relationship.

Notes

1. Meyers, Scott M. Religious Homogamy and Marital Quality: Historical and Generational Patterns, 1980-1997. *Journal of Marriage and Family*,
2. Lee, S. and Lee, M.-J. (2023), Religious Homogamy and Marital Satisfaction in South Korea: Exploring Variations across Religious Groups. *J Sci Study Relig.*, 62: 672-693. doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12861
3. Meyers, op. cit.
4. Kim, Young-Il, and Isaak Swan. 2019. "Religious Heterogamy, Marital Quality, and Paternal Engagement" *Religions* 10, no. 2: 102. doi.org/10.3390/rel10020102
5. Ibid.
6. Richard J. Petts, Parental Religiosity, Religious Homogamy, and Young Children's Well-Being, *Sociology of Religion*, Volume 72, Issue 4, Winter 2011, Pages 389-414, doi.org/10.1093/socrel/srr021. Cited in Kim and Swan, 2019.
7. John P. Bartkowski, Xiaohu Xu, Martin L. Levin, Religion and child development: Evidence from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, *Social Science Research*, Volume 37, Issue 1, 2008, Pages 18-36, ISSN 0049-089X, doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2007.02.001. Cited in Kim and Swan, 2019.

Further Reading: Vaughn R. A. Call and Tim B. Heaton, Religious Influence on Marital Stability, *Journal for the*

Scientific Study of Religion Vol. 36, No. 3 (Sep., 1997), pp. 382-392
(11 pages)

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Your Work Matters to God

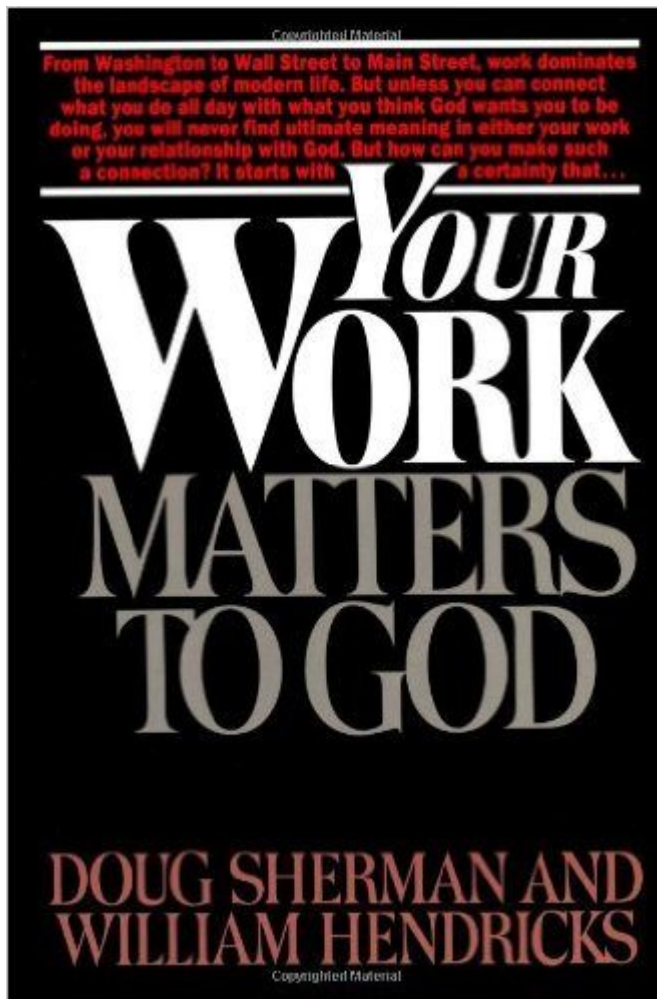
Sue Bohlin helps us look at work from a biblical perspective. If we apply a Christian worldview to our concept of work, it takes on greater significance within the kingdom of God.



This article is also available in [Spanish](#).

Many Christians hold a decidedly unbiblical view of work. Some view it as a curse, or at least as part of the curse of living in a fallen world. Others make a false distinction between what they perceive as the sacred—serving God—and the secular—everything else. And others make it into an idol, expecting it to provide them with their identity and purpose in life as well as being a source of joy and fulfillment that only God can provide.





In their excellent book *Your Work Matters to God*,[\[1\]](#) Doug Sherman and William Hendricks expose the wrong ways of thinking about work, and explain how God invests work with intrinsic value and honor. Rick Warren echoes this idea in his blockbuster *The Purpose Driven Life* when he writes, “Work becomes worship when you dedicate it to God and perform it with an awareness of his presence.”[\[2\]](#)

First, let’s explore some faulty views of work: the secular view, some inappropriate hierarchies that affect how we view work, and work as merely a platform for doing evangelism.

Those who hold a secular view of work believe that life is divided into two disconnected parts. God is in one spiritual dimension and work is in the other *real* dimension, and the two have nothing to do with each other. God stays in His corner of the universe while I go to work and live my life, and these different realms never interact.

One problem with this secular view is that it sets us up for disappointment. If you leave God out of the picture, you’ll have to get your sense of importance, fulfillment and reward from someplace else: work. Work is the answer to the question, “Who am I, and why am I important?” That is a very shaky foundation—because what happens if you lose your job? You’re suddenly a “nobody,” and you are not important because you are

not employed.

The secular view of work tends to make an idol of career. Career becomes the number one priority in your life. Your relationship with God takes a back seat, family takes a back seat, even your relationship with other people takes a back seat to work. Everything gets filtered through the question, "What impact will this have on my career?"

The secular view of work leaves God out of the system. This is particularly unacceptable for Christians, because God calls us to make Him the center of our life.^{3} He wants us to have a biblical worldview that weaves Him into every aspect of our lives, including work. He wants to be invited into our work; He wants to be Lord of our work.^{4}

Inappropriate Hierarchies: Soul/Body, Temporal/Eternal

In this article, we're examining some faulty views of work. One comes from believing that the soul matters more than the body. We can wrongly believe that God only cares about our soul, and our bodies don't really matter. The body is not important, we can think: it is only temporal, and it will fade and die. But if that view were true, then why did God make a physical universe? Why did He put Adam and Eve in the garden to cultivate and keep it? He didn't charge them with, "Go and make disciples of all nations which aren't in existence yet, but they will be as soon as you guys go off and start making babies." No, He said, "Here's the garden, now cultivate it." He gave them a job to do that had nothing to do with evangelism or church work. There is something important about our bodies, and God is honored by work that honors and cares for the body—which, after all, is His good creation.

Another wrong way of thinking is to value the eternal over the temporal so much that we believe *only* eternal things matter. Some people believe that if you work for things that won't

last into eternity—jobs like roofing and party planning and advertising—you’re wasting your time. This wrong thinking needs to be countered by the truth that God created two sides to reality, the temporal and the eternal. The natural universe God made is very real, just as real as the supernatural universe. Asking which one is real and important is like asking which is real, our nine months in our mother’s womb or life after birth? They are both real; they are both necessary. We have to go through one to get to the other.

Those things we do and make on earth DO have value, given the category they were made for: *time*. It’s okay for things to have simply temporal value, since God chose for us to live in time before we live in eternity. Our work counts in both time and eternity because God is looking for faithfulness *now*, and the only way to demonstrate faithfulness is within this physical world. Spiritual needs are important, of course, but first physical needs need to be met. Try sharing the gospel with someone who hasn’t eaten in three days! Some needs are temporal, and those needs must be met. So God equips people with abilities to meet the needs of His creation. In meeting the legitimate physical, temporal needs of people, our work serves people, and people have eternal value because God loves us and made us in His image.

The Sacred/Spiritual Dichotomy; Work as a Platform for Evangelism

Another faulty view of work comes from believing that spiritual, sacred things are far more important than physical, secular things. REAL work, people can think, is serving God in full-time Christian service, and then there’s everything else running a very poor second. This can induce us to think either too highly of ourselves or too lowly of ourselves. We can think, “Real work is serving God, and then there’s what others do” (which sets us up for condescension), or “Real work is serving God, and then there’s what I have to do” (which sets

us up for false guilt and a sense of “missing it”).

It's an improper way to view life as divided between the sacred and the secular. ALL of life relates to God and is sacred, whether we're making a business presentation or changing soiled diapers or leading someone to faith in Christ. It's unwise to think there are sacred things we do and there are secular things we do. It all depends on what's going on in our hearts. You can engage in what looks like holy activity like prayer and Bible study with a dark, self-centered, unforgiving spirit. Remember the Pharisees? And on the other hand, you can work at a job in a very secular atmosphere where the conversation is littered with profanity, the work is slipshod, the politics are wearisome, and yet like Daniel or Joseph in the Old Testament you can keep your own conversation pure and your behavior above reproach. You can bring honor and glory to God in a very worldly environment. God does not want us to do holy things, He wants us to be holy people.

A final faulty view of work sees it only as a platform for doing evangelism. If every interaction doesn't lead to an opportunity to share the gospel, one is a failure. Evangelism should be a priority, true, but not our *only* priority. Life is broader than evangelism. In Ephesians 1, Paul says three times that God made us, not for evangelism, but to live to the praise of His glory.[\[5\]](#) Instead of concentrating only on evangelism, we need to concentrate on living a life that honors God and loves people. That is far more winsome than all the evangelistic strategies in the world. Besides, if work is only a platform for evangelism, it devalues the work itself, and this view of work is too narrow and unfulfilling.

Next we'll examine at how God wants us to look at work. You might be quite surprised!

How God Wants Us to See Work

So far, we have discussed faulty views of work, but how does God want us to see it? Here's a startling thought: we actually work for God Himself! Consider Ephesians 6:5-8, which Paul writes to slaves but which we can apply to employees:

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, *as if you were serving the Lord, not men*, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free.

It's helpful to envision that behind every employer stands the Lord Jesus. He sees everything we do, and He appreciates it and will reward us, regardless of the type of work we do. I learned this lesson one day when I was cleaning the grungy bathtub of a family that wouldn't notice and would never acknowledge or thank me even if they did. I was getting madder by the minute, throwing myself a pity party, when the Lord broke into my thoughts. He quietly said, "I see you. And I appreciate what you're doing." Whoa! In an instant, that totally changed everything. Suddenly, I was able to do a menial job—and later on, more important ones—as a labor of love and worship for Jesus. I know He sees and appreciates what I do. It forever changed my view of work.

God also wants us to see that work is His gift to us. It is not a result of the Fall. God gave Adam and Eve the job of cultivating the garden and exercising dominion over the world *before* sin entered the world. We were created to work, and for work. Work is God's good gift to us!

Listen to what Solomon wrote:

After looking at the way things are on this earth, here's what I've decided is the best way to live: Take care of yourself, have a good time, and make the most of whatever job you have for as long as God gives you life. And that's about it. That's the human lot. Yes, we should make the most of what God gives, both the bounty and the capacity to enjoy it, accepting what's given and delighting in the work. It's God's gift!{6}

Being happy in our work doesn't depend on the work, it depends on our attitude. To make the most of our job and be happy in our work is a gift God wants to give us!

Why Work is Good

In this article we're talking about how to think about work correctly. One question needs to be asked, though: Is all work equally valid? Well, no. All legitimate work is an extension of God's work of maintaining and providing for His creation. Legitimate work is work that contributes to what God wants done in the world and doesn't contribute to what He doesn't want done. So non-legitimate work would include jobs that are illegal, such as prostitution, drug dealing, and professional thieves. Then there are jobs that are legal, but still questionable in terms of ethics and morality, such as working in abortion clinics, pornography, and the gambling industry. These jobs are legal, but you have to ask, how are they cooperating with God to benefit His creation?

Work is God's gift to us. It is His provision in a number of ways. In *Your Work Matters to God*, the authors suggest five major reasons why work is valuable:

1. Through work we serve people. Most work is part of a huge network of interconnected jobs, industries, goods and services that work together to meet people's physical needs. Other jobs meet people's aesthetic and spiritual needs as well.

2. Through work we meet our own needs. Work allows us to exercise the gifts and abilities God gives each person, whether paid or unpaid. God expects adults to provide for themselves and not mooch off others. Scripture says, "If one will not work, neither let him eat!"[{7}](#)

3. Through work we meet our family's needs. God expects the heads of households to provide for their families. He says, "If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever."[{8}](#)

4. Through work we earn money to give to others. In both the Old and New Testaments, God tells us to be generous in meeting the needs of the poor and those who minister to us spiritually. [{9}](#)

5. Through work we love God. One of God's love languages is obedience. When we work, we are obeying His two great commandments to love Him and love our neighbor as we love ourselves.[{10}](#) We love God by obeying Him from the heart. We love our neighbor as we serve other people through our work.

We bring glory to God by working industriously, demonstrating what He is like, and serving others by cooperating with God to meet their needs. In serving others, we serve God. And that's why our work matters to God.

Notes

1. Doug Sherman and William Hendricks, *Your Work Matters to God*. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1987.

2. Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002. p. 67.

3. Philippians 1:21

4. Romans 12:1, 2

5. Ephesians 1:6, 12, 14

6. Ecclesiastes 5:18-19, The Message.

7. 2 Thess. 3:10

8. 1 Tim. 5:8

9. Leviticus 19:10—Nor shall you glean your vineyard, nor shall you gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the needy and for the stranger. I am the LORD your God. Ephesians 4:28—Let him who steals, steal no longer but rather let him labor performing with his own hands what is good in order that he may have something to share with him who has need. Gal 6:6—The one who is taught the word is to share all good things with the one who teaches him.

10. Matthew 22:37-39

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Margin: Space Between Ourselves and Our Limits

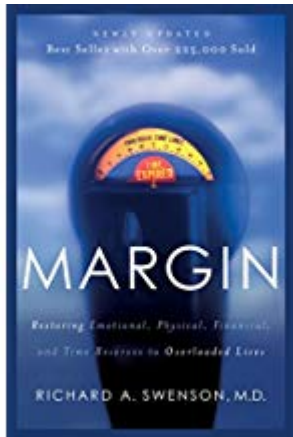
Margin is “The space that once existed between ourselves and our limits.” When we reach the limits of our resources and abilities, we are out of margin. Former Probe staffer Lou Whitworth reviews a very important book by Dr. Richard Swenson, Margin: How to Create the Emotional, Physical, Financial, and Time Reserves You Need.

The Problem with Progress

Until very recently most Americans had a blind faith in progress; we acknowledged that modern life brought problems but considered that such were inevitable and could be dealt with and eventually overcome. Over the past few years, however, discerning people have begun to ask, “What went wrong? With all the advancements we have made, life should be better. Instead, many aspects of



our lives are worse than they were just a few years ago. What happened?"



In this article we are looking at a very important book by Richard A. Swenson, a medical doctor. The book is *Margin: How to Create the Emotional, Physical, Financial, and Time Reserves You Need*. Dr. Swenson's thesis is that though scientific progress benefits us in numerous ways, it also brings with it inevitable pains that must be ruthlessly resisted if one is to live a balanced life, and especially a life that reflects Christian values/virtues.

Margin is "the space that once existed between ourselves and our limits." When we reach the limits of our resources and abilities, we are out of margin. Progress, contrary to our expectations, is like Pacman; it incessantly eats up margin. Progress and margin are often opposing forces.

The author recognizes the pains of the past and acknowledges that life for previous generations was no picnic. Nevertheless, he amply illustrates the staggering number of challenges facing contemporary mankind, challenges that have no precedent in human history. The pace of modern life has been steamrolled by progress.

Many have resisted the notion that life in the waning years of the 20th century was unusually painful and stressful. After all, didn't our history teach us of those intrepid men and women who crossed oceans and braved the harsh winters of the new world to have personal and religious freedom? Shouldn't we be ashamed to complain about the stress in our lives when brave pioneer men, and their even braver wives, piled their children and all their belongings into covered wagons and headed west across unknown and unforgiving lands surrounded by potentially hostile Indians? Did not our fathers win World War

II? After 50 years of strife and struggle and staring eyeball to eyeball with Russia, didn't America finally face down the threat of world dominion by implacable, godless communism? Where then do we get off saying that life today is hard and stressful?

As Swenson clearly points out, without minimizing the horrors of the past, modern progress brings problems never before faced by mankind. Some of our problems are very different from those of the past perhaps, but they are real, formidable problems just the same. For example, a partial list of problems would include the speed of travel, the power of computers, levels of litigation, pervasiveness of the media, specialization, business layoffs, indebtedness, vulnerability to terrorism, spiraling medical costs, AIDS, numbers of teen mothers and illegitimate births, aging population, overcrowded prisons, environmental pollution, overcrowding, traffic congestion, prevalence of divorce, disintegration of the family, drugs, prevalence of sexual diseases, complexity at all levels, and on and on the list could go. Never before have we had to face problems of this – and certainly we have never before had to face them all at the same time.

As Swenson writes, "Each item has played a significant role in making our era different from all those that preceded it. And when we factor in the interrelatedness of issues, the dimensions involved, and the speed of change, then unprecedented become too mild a word."

The Pain of Life Without Boundaries

In his book *Margin*, Dr. Swenson says that our problems have no precedent because of the rate of change. In the past we faced a slightly upward pattern of linear change; now we are looking at a skyrocketing pattern of exponential change in practically every area of life. Yet most of us still think and live with a linear mind-set. Suddenly we are encountering limits in our

time, energy, health, finances, ability to concentrate, to care, to even feel. Minds, bodies, systems, plans that were adequate on a linear timescale may self-destruct at warp speed. We are perilously close to burnout. We hope beyond hope that things will level out and slow down, but even if that happens, much that makes life worthwhile and manageable will be destroyed in the meantime.

Examples abound of life without natural boundaries. Once it was a given that the night was for sleeping, and the day was for work. Now a hundred years after the electric light bulb, whole cities never sleep. Sunday was once a day of rest; nearly everyone had one day off from work. Now the boundaries between work and play and home and the office are so confused some people can never relax or let down. A few years back we might have known someone who had borne a child out of wedlock, been divorced, had emotional problems, or gone bankrupt, but today we are in an epidemic of such problems.

Swenson asks, "Is there a critical mass of problems beyond which a society—or, for that matter, an individual—will be destroyed no matter how wonderful the benefits it enjoys? If so, what is that critical mass? Are we approaching it? Have we reached it?" He answers, Yes, there is a point of critical mass; what that point is we don't know, but clearly we are approaching it. He says it remains to be seen whether we have already reached it. As George Gallup wrote, "I've come to feel a deep sense of urgency about the Future Forces at work today. . . . If swift, forceful steps aren't taken to defuse the political and social time bombs facing us, we may well find ourselves on a track that could lead to the destruction of civilization as we know it."

It is critical to note here that progress has brought man much power— power that can be used for good or for evil. The sobering truth, then, is that the power to do evil advances exponentially, and modern secular man is not known for restraint nor does he recognize his fallenness and the danger

it holds for himself and all humanity.

We have benefited from progress in two main areas. First, we have seen positive gains in medicine, technology, and in our standard of living and material well being. Second, our intellectual and educational opportunities have expanded enormously, and knowledge and information are increasing with unimagined speed.

The pain that progress has brought us is evident in three areas. First, we have lost ground in the social sphere as pressures have increased on all relationships: family, friendships, neighborhoods, community spirit, and church life. Second, we are often emotionally drained, stressed, angry, isolated, and frequently unfulfilled and don't know what to do about these problems. Third, we are spiritually weakened by the pace of life, the lack of community, lack of time and energy to cultivate our relationship with God and with our fellow man. This, Dr. Swenson says, is the price we have paid for progress.

The Problem of Stress

Because of the unprecedented level of problems today people live with very high levels of stress. Stress is "the nonspecific response of the body to any demand made upon it." Note that stress is not the circumstance but the response to the circumstance.

We normally think of such a crisis as the "fight or flight" reaction which pumps adrenaline into our system, makes us stronger and more alert, etc. If these responses are occasional there is little harm done, but if triggered too often or if "stuck" in a constant state of anger, rage, anxiety, fear, or frustration, we begin to overdose on our own adrenaline. This can bring about irreversible damage to the body and set it up for heart attack, stroke, cancer, etc.

Our stress levels are unprecedented. One reason is that most of us today experience constant mental strain without the offsetting benefits of strenuous physical work. When, for example, the commercial property deal we've worked on for months falls through, or the accounts don't balance, or the computer just won't cooperate, there is no place to run and no one to hit. We just have to try again. The physical laborer, even if he has some mental strain, still has the labor to drain off his adrenaline, and he usually has the ability to think about other things occasionally as he works.

Closely related to stress is overload; in fact, overload is a primary cause of stress. Our culture adds detail on top of detail; one more choice, one more option, one more change, and the details never end. "We must now deal with more 'things per person' than at any other time in history. Yet one can comfortably handle only so many details in his or her life. Exceeding this threshold will result in disorganization or frustration. . . . The problem is not in the 'details.' The problem is in the 'exceeding.' This is called overloading."

The facts are that there are physical limits and man has performance limits, emotional limits, and mental limits. The work load a twenty-five year old athletic, single man can carry may differ greatly from the load a fifty-five year old man can carry if the latter has two teenage children and two children in college, dependent parents, and a wife in menopause. When such overload occurs, the person may experience anxiety, have a physical or nervous breakdown, exhibit hostility, slip into depression, or become bitter and resentful.

We are overloaded with activities, change, choices, commitments, competition, debt, decisions, education, expectations, fatigue, hurry, information, media, ministry, noise, people, pollution, possessions, problems, technology, traffic, waste, and work.

So why do we overload? First, we are usually unaware of our overload until it's too late. Second, some people are too conscientious. Third, others get overloaded because their bosses are driven people who overload their employees. Generally people don't intend to go down the path to overload; they just think that "one more thing won't hurt." But if they are at or near overload, it will hurt.

As the author says, learning "to accept the finality and non-negotiability of the twenty-four hour day" will help us avoid overload and excessive stress.

Building Margin into our Lives

Of all the areas in which we need margin, having adequate emotional energy is the most important because with emotional margin one can work to gain the other margins.

The amount of emotional energy we have is finite and must not be squandered. Though it is difficult to measure and quantify we must not be embarrassed to admit to ourselves or to others when our emotional reservoir is low. Then we need to replenish our emotional reserves for the good of others and ourselves.

Restoring emotional margin is aided by cultivating our social and family support network. Serving others or doing volunteer work is proven to enhance and lengthen life. Extending forgiveness and reconciling relationships can stop the negative drain on our emotional stores. Cultivating a spirit of gratitude, a hopeful outlook, and love for God and our fellow human beings is energizing, whereas their opposites are negative and debilitating. Finally, establishing appropriate limits and boundaries will help in maintaining emotional reserves.

Dr. Swenson's recommendations for gaining a margin in physical energy are fairly routine to the knowledgeable reader, but he puts particular stress on the need for the need for rest and

sleep. The need for correction is clear since America has now become a 24-hour society: many of our cities never sleep and many businesses never close. People of all types, college students, policemen, nurses, taxi drivers, shift workers, and mothers of young children, may go long periods without a good night's sleep. Such people push (or are pushed) to their limits during the day and push on into or through the night. Sleep disorders plague more than 50 million of us; in fact, sleep deprivation "has become one of the most pervasive problems facing the U.S." Unfortunately the ability to go without sleep is sometimes a matter of pride for some, but sleep and rest are God's ideas, and we should not be ashamed of our need for both. The author gives several helpful suggestions on making sleep more natural and effective.

Dr. Swenson strongly stresses the need for all types of physical exercise, but says that aerobic exercise for the heart "will do more to establish margin in physical energy" than anything else. He endorses exercise not only for its physical benefits but also for its emotional and mental benefits.

When the subject turns to time the author writes, "The spontaneous flow of progress is to consume more of our time, not less . . . to consume more of our margin, not less." He adds that for "every hour progress saves by organizing and technologizing our time, it consumes two more hours through the consequences, direct or indirect, of this activity."

Clearly time becomes a problem for a society like ours. Some the author's suggestions for countering the time crunch are countercultural and tough to implement, but then continuing on in the same direction most of us are going is difficult as well. He suggests practicing saying "No," turning off the television, practicing simplicity, and getting less done but doing the right things. Many of us need to make some thoughtful and hard choices.

The author's suggestions for gaining a margin in time are preceded with a reminder that of the ten top stressors of family life, four have to do with insufficient time: insufficient couple time, "me" time, family play time, and overscheduled family calendars.

Why do we need to prune our time wasters? Because time is for people and relationships, subjects very dear to God.

A Plan of Action

There are many ways we can spend our time. We could follow the "Excellence" gurus and pour all our energy into one part of our lives. We would probably have no extra margin since other parts of our lives had been sacrificed and in a condition of "negative excellence."

At some point, all things being equal, we would become quite accomplished in a given area. The end result, however, might be similar to having one magnificently developed right arm attached to puny, stooped shoulders, a scrawny left arm, and skinny, weak legs. This is like the person who is a powerhouse in his professional life and a dwarf in his relationships.

Dr. Richard Swenson suggests a different way in his book *Margin*. He suggests an approach to life that neglects no important area. He suggests being willing to sacrifice excellence in one or two areas in order that no area be in a condition of negative excellence. This would be similar to the athlete who is toned and conditioned all over, but not overly developed in any one area.

A similar balance in our lives will increase our emotional margin because we and our families will be happier.

Simplicity has much to offer harried twentieth-century man. But it isn't easy. It takes effort to discard the superfluous and concentrate on the core elements of life. There has always been an attraction to simplicity; the difficulty has been in

achieving it. The simple life the author calls us to is not so much to escape modern life as to transcend it.

Envy is the enemy of contentment and form of self-inflicted torture. Yet because envy is the chief ingredient of advertising and the mainspring of political and social movements, it is difficult for many to see its destructiveness. We need to follow Paul who learned contentment in whatever circumstance he found himself (Phil. 4:11-12; 1 Tim. 6:6-10). The practice of contentment brings margin into our lives.

The pain that progress has brought us is mostly in the area of our emotions, our relationships, and our spiritual natures. What are some additional steps start dealing with the pain and achieving some margin?

First, thank God for the pain. The pain pointed out that something is wrong. Second, repent in a way that leads to permanent, tangible change. Third, prune activities and habits that waste time, sap energy, and stifle relationships. Fourth, cooperate with God. Bathe plans in prayer and leave wiggle room for yourself, your family, and people God may send your way.

- How did we relate to God?
- How did we relate to ourselves?
- How did we relate to others?

The road to health and blessing in the path of relationship. Love and relationships are hard work, and sometimes costly because superfluous, unimportant things may need to be put aside, but the payoff is happiness, contentment, peace, and margin. I hope some of the things we have shared in this article turn you from the path of overload and start you down the path of margin.

Coddling of the American Mind

Drawing on the book The Coddling of the American Mind, Kerby Anderson examines the insanity on college campuses where students cannot handle ideas and people they disagree with.

In this article we will talk about what is happening on college campuses, and even focus on why it is happening. Much of the material is taken from the book, *The Coddling of the American Mind*. [\[1\]](#)



Greg Lukianoff was trying to solve a puzzle and sat down with Jonathan Haidt. Greg was a first amendment lawyer working with the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE). He was trying to figure out why students (who used to support free speech on campus) were now working to prevent speakers from coming on campus and triggered by words or phrases used by professors.

Greg also noticed something else. He has suffered from bouts of depression and noticed some striking similarities with some of the comments by students. He found in his treatment that sometimes he and others would engage in “catastrophizing” and assuming the worst outcome. He was seeing these distorted and irrational thought patterns in students.

After a lengthy discussion they decided to write an article about it for *The Atlantic* with the title, “Arguing Towards Misery: How Campuses Teach Cognitive Distortions.” The editor suggested the more provocative title, “The Coddling of the American Mind.” The piece from *The Atlantic* was one of the most viewed articles of all time and was then expanded to this book.

That book used the same title: *The Coddling of the American Mind*. Jonathan was on [Point of View](#) last year to talk about the book. The authors believe that these significant psychological changes that have taken place in the minds of students explain much of the campus insanity we see on campus today.

They point out that two terms rose from obscurity into common campus parlance. Microaggressions are small actions or word choices that are now thought as a kind of violence. Trigger warnings are an alert the professors now must use if they may be discussing a topic that might generate a strong emotional response.

Before we talk about some of the insight in the book, it is worth mentioning that though there is a psychological component to all of this insanity, there is also an ideological component. When the original article appeared, Heather MacDonald asked if “risk-adverse child-rearing is merely the source of the problem. For example, why aren’t heterosexual white males demanding safe spaces?”[\[2\]](#) They all had the same sort of parents who probably coddled many of them.

It would probably be best to say that the mixture of psychological deficits also with the liberal, progressive ideological ideas promoted on campus have given us the insanity we see today. We have had liberal teaching on campuses for a century, but the problem has become worse in the last decade because of the psychological issues described in the book, *The Coddling of the American Mind*.

Three Untruths (Part 1)

The book can easily be summarized in three untruths that make up the first three chapters of the book. The first is the “Untruth of Fragility: What Doesn’t Kill You Makes You

Weaker." Nietzsche's original aphorism was, "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger." The younger generation has turned this idea on its head.

It is true that some things are fragile (like china teacups), while other things are resilient (and can withstand shocks). But they also note that some things are *antifragile*. In other words, they actually require stressors and challenges to grow. Our muscles are like that. Our immune system is like that. And university education is supposed to be like that. Students are supposed to be challenged by new ideas, not locked away in "safe spaces."

Unfortunately, most young people have been protected by a culture that promotes what they refer to as "safetyism." It has become a cult of safety that is obsessed with eliminating threats (whether real or imagined) to the point where fragility becomes expected and routine. And while this is true for the millennial generation (also called Generation Y), it is even truer for the iGen generation (also called Generation Z) who are even more obsessed with safety.

Part of the problem in these untruths is what they call "concept creep." Safety used to mean to be safe from physical threats. But that has expanded to the idea that safety must also include emotional comfort. In order to provide that comfort, professors and students a few years ago introduced the idea of creating "safe spaces" for students. And in order to keep those students emotionally safe in the classroom, professors must issue "trigger warnings" so these students don't experience trauma during a classroom lecture or discussion.

The second untruth is the "Untruth of Emotional Reasoning: Always Trust Your Feelings." You can get yourself in some difficult circumstances quickly if you always trust your emotions. It is easy in this world to get frustrated, discouraged, and even depressed. Psychologists have found that

certain patients can get themselves caught in a feedback loop in which irrational negative beliefs cause powerful negative feelings. We are seeing that on college campuses today.

Psychologists describe “the cognitive triad” of depression. These are: “I’m no good” and “My world is bleak” and “My future is hopeless.” Psychologists have effective ways of helping someone break the disempowering feedback cycle between negative beliefs and negative emotions. But very few adults (parents, professors, administrators) are working to correct mistaken ideas.

Three Untruths (Part 2)

In a college classroom, students are apt to make some sweeping generalization and engage in simplistic labeling of the lecture or reading material. In that case, we would hope that a professor would move the discussion by asking questions or even challenging the assertion.

Instead, many professors and colleges go along with the student comments. In fact, many even argue that any perceived slight adds up to what today are called “microaggressions.” In many cases, slights may be unintentional and actually wholly formed from the listener’s interpretation.

Here is how it develops. First, you prevent certain topics from being discussed in class. Next, you prevent certain speakers from coming to campus because they might present a perspective that aggrieved students believe should not be discussed. In the book is a chart illustrating how many speakers have been disinvited from universities. Five years ago, the line jumps up significantly.

The third untruth follows from that assumption. It is the “Untruth of Us Versus Them: Life is a Battle Between Good People and Evil People.” The authors argue that “the human mind is prepared for tribalism.” They even provide

psychological research demonstrating that. But that doesn't mean we have to live that way. In fact, conditions in society can turn tribalism up, down, or off. Certain conflicts can turn tribalism up and make them more attentive to signs about which team a person may be on. Peace and prosperity usually turn tribalism down.

Unfortunately, in the university community, distinctions between groups are not downplayed but emphasized. Distinctions defined by race, gender, and sexual preference are given prominence. Mix that with the identity politics we see in society, and you generate the conflict we see almost every day in America.

The authors make an important distinction between two kinds of identity politics. Martin Luther King, Jr. epitomized what could be called "common-humanity identity politics." He addressed the evil of racism by appealing to the shared morals of Americans using the unifying language of religion.

That is different from what we find on college campuses today that could be called "common-enemy identity politics." It attempts to identify a common enemy as a way to enlarge and motivate your tribe. Their slogan sounds like this: Our battle for identity and survival is a battle between good people and bad people. We're the good guys and need to defeat the bad guys.

An Example: Evergreen State College

One good example of how these untruths play out can be found at what happened on a college campus in Olympia, Washington. The entire story is described in chapter five but also is featured prominently in the opening chapter of the book *No Safe Spaces* and in the movie with the same title.

Just a few years ago, Evergreen State College was probably best known as the alma mater for rapper Macklemore and Matt

Groening, the creator of *The Simpsons*. That all changed with an email biology professor Bret Weinstein sent.

In the past, the school had a tradition known as the "National Day of Absence." Usually, minority faculty and students leave the campus for a day to make a statement. But in 2017, the college wanted to change things and wanted white students and faculty to stay away from campus.

Professor Weinstein argued in an email that there is a difference between letting people be absent and telling people "to go away." And he added that he would show up for work. When he did, he was confronted by a mob of students. When the administration tried to appease the demonstrators, things got worse.

Weinstein has described himself as a political progressive and left-leaning libertarian. But his liberal commitments did not protect him from the student mob. The campus police warned him about a potential danger. The next morning, as he rode his bike into town, he saw protesters poised along his route tapping into their phones. He rode to the campus police department and was abruptly told: "You're not safe on campus, and you're not safe anywhere in town on your bicycle." Weinstein and his wife eventually resigned and finally received a financial settlement from the university.

The Evergreen students and faculty displayed each of the three great untruths. The Untruth of Fragility (What doesn't kill you makes you weaker) came from a faculty member who supported the protesters and addressed some of her faculty colleagues in an angry monologue. She warned, "I am too tired. This [blank] is literally going to kill me." A student at a large town hall meeting verbalized her anxiety and illustrated the Untruth of Emotional Reasoning (Always trust your feelings). She expressed, "I want to cry. I can't tell you how fast my heart is beating. I am shaking in my boots."

And the whole episode illustrates the Untruth of Us Versus Them (Life is a battle between good people and evil people). The students and faculty engaged in common-enemy identity politics by labeling a politically progressive college and liberal professors as examples of white supremacy. One student (who refused to join the protest) later testified to the college trustees, "If you offer any kind of alternative viewpoint, you're the enemy."

What Can We Do?

The book, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, identifies many disturbing trends on college campuses that are beginning to spill over into society. What can we do to stem the tide?

Obviously, the long-term solution to the insanity on campus and in society is to pray for revival in the church and spiritual awakening in America. But there are some practical things that must be done immediately.

First, college administrators must get control of their campus. The riots at some of these universities resulted in violence and property destruction. Often the campus police and even the local police failed to take action. Sadly, the university administration rarely took action afterwards.

Some form of deterrence would have prevented future actions on the University of California, Berkeley campus. Instead, the inaction established a precedent that likely allowed the conflict at Middlebury College. Students not only shut down the lecture, but they assaulted one of the campus professors. Once again, no significant action was taken against the students and outside agitators. The problem will get worse if there is no deterrence.

Second, professors must get control of their classrooms. Students cannot be allowed to determine what subjects cannot be taught and what topics cannot be discussed. The authors of

this book are concerned about the tendency to encourage students to develop extra-thin skins just before they enter into the real world. Employers aren't going to care too much about their feelings. Students don't have the right not to be offended.

Third, we need to educate this generation about free speech. One poll done by the Brookings Institute discovered that nearly half (44%) of all college students believe that hate speech is NOT protected by the First Amendment. And since many students label just about anything they don't like as hate speech, you can see why we have this behavior on college campuses. More than half (51%) of college students think they have a right to shout down a speaker with whom they disagree. A smaller percentage (19%) of college students think it is acceptable to use violence to prevent a speaker from speaking on campus.

Finally, the adults need to make their voice heard. We pay for public universities through our tax dollars. Parents send their kids off to some of these schools. We should not tolerate the insanity taking place on many college campuses today.

The authors have identified certain concerns that colleges and universities need to address. They remind us how hostile the academic world has become, not only to traditional Christian values, but also to mere common sense. We need to pray for what is taking place in the college environment.

Notes

1. Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff, et al., *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure*. New York City: Penguin Press, 2018.

2.

www.thecollegefix.com/heres-the-9-best-takeaways-from-heather-

Addressing Anxiety in Tumultuous Times

Byron Barlowe connects the dots between the universal problem of anxiety, what brain science is teaching us about our minds, and how Scripture and spiritual disciplines can help. In a world consumed by violent riots and trauma surrounding the Covid virus, this is a timely topic that God and science speak to well.

Millions of people worldwide are battling anxiety in a tumultuous time. The Coronavirus pandemic response has created a new abnormal: heightened fear of sickness and death, economic damage, and social isolation. Loneliness is the number one health crisis in America according to many epidemiologists, psychiatrists, and social scientists.[\[1\]](#) While we're all still reeling from this, racial strife has erupted into looting, killings, and anarchy in American streets.

Mental health is an increasing concern too. One study found that during the spring 2020 mass quarantine, prescriptions for anti-anxiety meds spiked.[\[2\]](#) A San Francisco area hospital has seen more deaths by suicide than by Covid-19, prompting a call for an end to mass shutdowns.[\[3\]](#) *It's been a perfect storm of stress.*



Are there real solutions *right now*? Yes, brain science is

confirming the truths and promises proclaimed in Scripture in exciting ways! We have wonderfully adaptive minds—especially when they are focused on God. These built-in mind-morphing capabilities show the genius of our design as Image-bearers of God. Audiologist, cognitive researcher and outspoken Christian Dr. Caroline Leaf writes, “As an individual, you are capable of making mental and emotional change in your life. Through your thinking, you can actively recreate thoughts and, therefore, knowledge in your mind.”[\[4\]](#)

And this has profound implications for true hope. Leaf continues: “Thoughts are real, *physical* things that occupy mental real estate. Moment by moment, every day, you are changing the structure of your brain through your thinking [it’s happening right now as you read]. *When we hope, it is an activity of the mind that changes the structure of our brain in a positive and normal direction.*”[\[5\]](#) The biblical book of Hebrews defines faith as “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). The thankful, attentive, willfully hopeful mind creates positive emotions, thoughts, and acts of the will. In other words, we *significantly control whether we have a healthy soul.*

Dallas Willard writes, “The transformation of the self away from a life of fear and insufficiency takes place as we fix our mind upon God as he truly is.” As Scripture teaches, “Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” In this article we’ll explore this transformation.

Morphing Your Mind—It’s Mostly Up to You!

Everyday stress is hard enough—but what about work-related anxiety? Money? Riots, memories of abuse, bullying, and abandonment? We have little control over family, culture or epidemics. But we can make amazing internal changes through our responses. Science and Scripture *agree* on this.

The transforming mind-renewal encouraged by Scripture is

possible for us all, especially for people who have invited God to lead their lives. We can intentionally train our minds to reshape our brains—we are *not* perpetual victims of our past or circumstances. Nor are humans mere products of matter in motion. Dr. Caroline Leaf, author of *Switch on Your Brain*, claims that “Choice is real, and free will exists. You are able to stand outside yourself, observe your own thinking, consult with God, and [work with him to] change the negative, toxic thought or grow a healthy, positive thought. When you do this, your brain responds with a positive neurochemical rush and structural changes that improve your intellect, health, and peace.”[\[6\]](#)

Even traumatic memories can be starved, defanged, broken down, and replaced. Brought into conscious awareness, they can become plastic enough to be recreated. Leaf explains that “Neurons that don’t get enough signal (that is, rehearsing of the negative event) will start firing apart, wiring apart, pulling out, and destroying the emotion attached to the trauma.” Also, desirable brain chemicals that bond and remold chemical connections, increase focus and attention, and increase feelings of peace and happiness begin to weaken traumatic memories even more. So bad memories, hatred, hurt, and other negative thoughts and emotions that form toxic beliefs: “If they stop firing together, they will no longer wire together. This leads to . . . rebuilding new ones.”[\[7\]](#)

Ideas have consequences and our beliefs guide our behavior. In the words of King Solomon, “As a man thinks in his heart, so he is.”[\[8\]](#) That is, we construct frameworks of beliefs and *then* speak and act from them.

Science seems to confirm this biblical view of self-control. Measuring magnetic fields, electrical impulses, chemical effects, photons, vibrations, and quantum energy paints a picture of intricately [networking] neurotransmitters, proteins, and energy—that is, signals—that change the brain’s landscape.[\[9\]](#) This “neuroplasticity [seems to be] God’s design

for renewing the mind.”{10}

And there’s nothing magic about it: overcoming anxiety can be helped a lot through habits of the mind, heart, and soul.

Mindfulness & Meditation–Self-Control and Seeking God in Silent Solitude

It’s no wonder that the concept of “mindfulness” has become a “thing” these days. Meditation and concentration are new-old survival skills. How do they work?

Dr. J.P. Moreland, noted philosopher and author of *Finding Quiet: My Story of Overcoming Anxiety and The Practices That Brought Peace*, candidly shares his struggles with anxiety and the need he had for medications. He also discovered the power of seeking God in self-directed solitude. He emphasizes sustained habits of the praising, thankful, and self-controlled soul.

Mindful meditation is not like taking a drug, is not a quick fix, or denying the senses to rid oneself of desire.{11} “By charting new pathways in the brain, mindfulness can change the banter inside our heads from chaotic to calm.”{12} New habits are formed over time. When it comes to our minds, “practice doesn’t make perfect; it makes permanent.”{13}

Remaining at rest via the practice of spiritual disciplines takes advantage of our mind’s ability to “move into a highly intelligent, self-reflective, directed state.” And the more often we go there, the more “we get in touch with the deep, spiritual part of who we are.” This exercise switches brain modes in a way that can create wisdom and potential connection with God.{14} As Jesus taught his disciples, “Keep awake (give strict attention, be cautious and active) and watch and pray, that you may not come into temptation.”{15} We can mentor our own minds, settle our souls, habituate our hearts, and free our spirits to respond to God. Brain

science is catching up on this reality.

So, what's going on physically when we stop to meditate in focused solitude and silence? A post at *Mindful.org* claims, "The impact that mindfulness exerts on our brain is borne from routine: a slow, steady, and consistent reckoning of our realities, and the ability to take a step back, become more aware, more accepting, less judgmental, and less reactive. . . . Mindfulness over time can make the brain, and thus [ourselves], more efficient regulators, with a penchant for pausing to respond to our world instead of mindlessly reacting."[{16}](#) How different would social media conversations be—especially on politics and race—if more people practiced patient contemplation!

Various regions of our brains change while meditating. The "fight or flight" area actually shrinks in size.[{17}](#) It's a real chill pill!

God keeps "him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You."[{18}](#)

Thankfulness and Happiness—Healthy Habits of the Mind & Heart

In trying times, we all want to return to happiness. It's a God-given right to pursue it, according to America's founders. The biblical worldview recognizes the inherent brokenness of both creation and human beings, so it is no surprise that confusion, discord, and tragedy—along with evil spiritual powers—"steal, kill, and destroy"[{19}](#) our joy. What can be done?

Christian philosopher J.P. Moreland writes, "You have it in your power to begin a regimen of choices, assuming you would choose the right things, and form a habit of this that can *substantially improve your happiness and decrease or get rid of anxiety*. There really is hope."[{20}](#) Our non-conscious mind

turns thoughts over and over. Through spiritual disciplines, we bring these into our conscious awareness, which manipulates actual proteins, creating overhauled memories. Intentionally bringing God to mind—His attributes, the wonder of creation and His blessings, promises, answered prayers—such a focus leads to a cycle of good thinking, feeling, and *knowing* that turns into believing real truth. Faith is a gift so we're not alone in doing this. But it is up to us to put to use the gifts described here to “work out [our] salvation with [reverence and proper humility].”[\[21\]](#)

Remember, we have a strong influence in reshaping our own brains—especially with God's help. Secular scientists are discovering the wonderful power of thankfulness. Scientific studies prove seven benefits according to *PsychologyToday.com*. Gratitude improves relationships, physical and mental health, sleep, self-esteem, and mental resilience. It even reduces aggression, the urge for revenge. Scripture aligns with physical reality again when it tells us: “Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.”[\[22\]](#)

Moreland jokes, “If we're not careful, we may even come to think we were designed to flourish best when we are thankful and grateful! Yet as exciting as these psychological studies are, we didn't need them to know the importance and value of expressing gratitude and thanksgiving to God. The Bible insists on this . . . [it's] filled to overflowing with exhortations to be grateful to God and express thanksgiving to him.”[\[23\]](#) As King David famously prayed in Psalm 23, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life”—he trusted a good God to lead, protect, and bless him. That's joy far beyond happiness!

Takeaways & Practical Applications

Brain networks form an inner life of the mind. We can switch between various networks constantly. Like a mom monitoring kids running around inside several contained rooms, this enables us to control the controllable—our reactions to events and circumstances. Brain scans confirm how we capture and police rogue thoughts in ways prescribed in Scripture: “We . . . take every thought captive to obey Christ.”[\[24\]](#)

UCLA researchers address how our habitual non-conscious thoughts can drive anxiety—negative self-talk like:

- “I’ll be in real trouble if...”
- “What if so and so happens next week?”
- “I’ll probably fail that exam!”

“It’s what we say to ourselves in response to any particular situation that mainly determines our mood and feelings.”[\[25\]](#)

“Forming a new habit requires doing things you may not want to do in the early stages of formation,” as any coach or teacher will tell you.

For retraining our brains, experts have devised methods like **The Four Step Solution**:

It goes as follows:[\[26\]](#)

Step 1: Relabeling: call out thoughts as having no necessary connection with reality: tell yourself “That is a destructive lie.” Call on Proverbs 4:23, “Guard your heart above all else, for it is the source of life.”[\[27\]](#)

Step 2: Reframing: take the power out of the bad thoughts. Reset your perception of the deceptive message by being mindful that it exists, its content, and how you are now feeling by correctly categorizing the distorted message. Bad

self-talk includes:

- all or nothing thinking (for example: “it was a *total* failure”)
- overgeneralizing
- singling out one thing to focus on
- catastrophizing (or making too big a deal out of things) and
- discounting the positive

Reframing them creates stable memories formed by repeated updating.

Step 3: Refocusing: Set your mind on anything else—distract yourself from the negative thoughts. Stop obsessing! Get into “the flow” of something. Focus elsewhere. And don’t ruminate about the message—analyzing it will deepen the grooves in your brain.

Step 4: Revaluing: After a while, reflect on how you did Steps 1-3. Recommit to repeat these steps throughout the day.

Over 21 days, a “newly formed neural network” will decay in less than a month: thoughts are like muscles that atrophy and die or get stronger with use.[{28}](#) Starve the bad, feed the good.

As Paul instructed the Philippian church, dwell on what is good and pure, true and worthy of praise.[{29}](#)

Notes

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spike amid coronavirus outbreak, new report finds,” posted April 18, 2020. www.foxnews.com/health/prescriptions-anti-anxiety-meds-spike-a-mid-coronavirus.

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6. Leaf, 39.

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10. Leaf, 65.

11. As with Buddhist meditation practices seeking utter emptiness.

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16. Ibid. Wolkin

17. Various Authors, *Psychiatry Research: Neuroimaging*, Volume 191, Issue 1, 30 January 2011, Pages 36-43. Posted Nov. 10, 2010:

www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S092549271000288X.

18. Isaiah 26:3.

19. John 10:10.

20. *Finding Quiet*, 54-55 (emphasis mine).

21. Ephesians 2:12, Amplified Bible.

22. Philippians 4: 6-7, New Living Translation.
23. *Finding Quiet*, 113.
24. 2 Corinthians 10:5.
25. Psychologists Edmund Bourne and Lorna Garano, cited by Moreland.
26. Entire section, *Finding Quiet*, p. ?
27. Proverbs 4:23, CSB.
28. Leaf, 151.
29. Philippians 4:8.

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Why Every Christian Student Needs Mind Games

You've probably heard or read that the vast majority of young Christians are leaving the church after they graduate from high school. But they don't have to "graduate from God" after they get their diploma.

There are several reasons young adults leave the church, and many of them jettison their faith as well. The biggest reason is that their questions and doubts—which started in junior high school—were not answered by their parents or youth leaders.

Another reason is that they don't believe Christianity is true. Immersed in a cultural brine of religious lies and deceptions, they don't know what the truth is and why biblical Christianity blows the false ideas and religions away.

A third reason is that they caught their unbiblical beliefs and practices from their parents and other adults in the

church. It turns out that Mom and Dad were almost as pickled in the cultural brine as their kids!

But Probe offers a great way to push back on these reasons.

Our summer [Mind Games](#) camp is a total-immersion, life-changing week of instruction in worldview and apologetics designed to build students' confidence that Christianity is true, and why Christianity is true. We lay the foundation of three major worldviews to give them understanding of how other people think and why Christianity is better because it matches reality. Then we teach them why they can be sure that God exists, why the Bible can be trusted, and how we can know that Jesus is God and the only way to heaven.

After these basics, campers learn how biblical principles apply to issues they need to grapple with: truth and grace about LGBT, how faith and science work together, why a good God allows pain and evil, the value of suffering, how to watch a movie with their brains turned on, genetic engineering, understanding Islam, and more.

But it's not just lectures. Plenty of free time is built into the schedule for processing what they've learned and developing friendships with other campers. The relationships that students form at Mind Games is one of their biggest takeaways. With a max of 40 participants, everyone can enjoy connecting to other campers, and many of the friendships endure year after year.

The biggest reason for leaving the church is unanswered questions and doubts. Probe staffers assure students that Mind Games is a safe place to ask any question—anonynously—and address any doubt. Many of the questions campers come with, are answered during the week in our lectures and discussion times. Whether in large group or the many opportunities for one-on-one conversations with Probe teachers, campers have many ways to get help wrestling with obstacles to their faith.

For over twenty years, Mind Games alumni have grown into leaders on campus, in public service, in the military, and in the church. The fruit of their time with us is “fruit that lasts” (John 15:16).

Mind Games Camp 2021 is June 13-19 at Camp Copass in Denton, Texas, in the Dallas/Ft. Worth area. Some scholarships are available. Check out videos and much more information at Probe.org/mindgames.

Can you think of a high school student who doesn't need Mind Games?

We can't either.

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Verbal Abuse: A Biblical Perspective

Kerby Anderson offers a distinctly Christian view of this important topic. Taking a biblical perspective moves this problem from strictly emotional to its full implications for our spiritual lives.



This article is also available in [Spanish](#).

I would like to address the subject of verbal abuse for two important reasons. First, our behavior is often a great indicator of our worldview. Proverbs 23:7 says, “For as he thinks within himself, so he is.” What a person thinks in his or her mind and heart will be reflected in his or her words

and actions. Verbal abuse and physical abuse result from a worldview that is clearly not biblical.

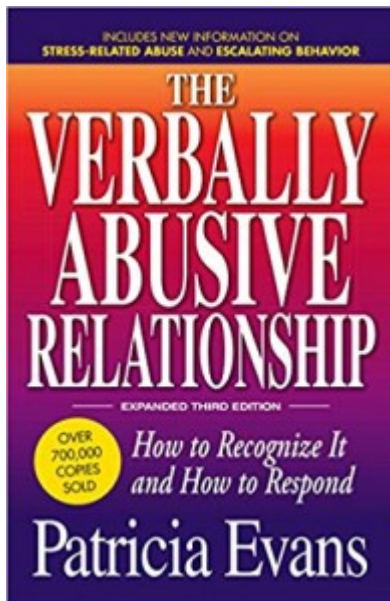
Second, I want to deal with verbal abuse because of the incredible need for Christians to address the subject. Ten years ago I did a week of radio programs on this topic, and I have received more e-mails from men and women who read that transcript than any other article. They were grateful that I addressed the subject. Since there are some new books and web sites, I wanted to update the original article.



Most of us know someone who has been verbally abused. Perhaps you are involved in a verbally abusive relationship. It is also possible that no one even knows your circumstances. Verbal abuse is a kind of battering which doesn't leave evidence comparable to the bruises of physical battering. You (or your friend) may be suffering in silence and isolation.

I want to tackle this very important issue in an effort to understand this phenomenon and provide answers. First, we should acknowledge that verbal abuse is often more difficult to see since there are rarely any visible scars unless physical abuse has also taken place. It is often less visible simply because the abuse may always take place in private. The victim of verbal abuse lives in a gradually more confusing realm. In public, the victim is with one person. While in private, the abuser may become a completely different person.

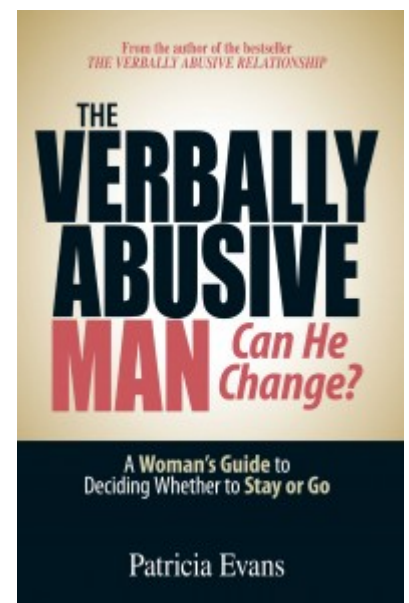
Frequently, the perpetrator of verbal abuse is male and the victim is female, but not always. There are many examples of women who are quite verbally abusive. But for the sake of simplicity of pronouns in this program, I will often identify the abuser as male and the victim as female.



One of the first books to describe verbal abuse in adults was Patricia Evan's book *The Verbally Abusive Relationship*.[\[1\]](#) She interviewed forty verbally abused women who ranged in age from 21 to 66. Most of the women had left a verbally abusive relationship. We will use some of the characteristics and categories of verbal abuse these women describe in this book.

Years later, she wrote a second book, *The Verbally Abusive Man: Can He Change?*[\[2\]](#) In that book she makes the claim that some men can change under certain circumstances. That led to the subtitle of her book, "A Woman's Guide to Deciding Whether to Stay or Go."

Is there hope that some abusers can change? Yes, but the key to healing is for the person being abused to recognize verbal abuse for what it is and to begin to take deliberate steps to stop it and bring healing. Since the abuser is usually in denial, the responsibility for recognizing verbal abuse often rests with the partner.



Characteristics of Verbal Abuse

What are some of the characteristics of verbal abuse? Here is a list as outlined in *The Verbally Abusive Relationship*.[\[3\]](#)

1. Verbal abuse is hurtful and usually attacks the nature and

abilities of the partner. Over time, the partner may begin to believe that there is something wrong with her or her abilities. She may come to feel that she is the problem, rather than her partner.

2. Verbal abuse may be overt (through angry outbursts and name-calling) or covert (involving very subtle comments, even something that approaches brainwashing). Overt verbal abuse is usually blaming and accusatory, and consequently confusing to the partner. Covert verbal abuse, which is hidden aggression, is even more confusing to the partner. Its aim is to control her without her knowing.

3. Verbal abuse is manipulative and controlling. Even disparaging comments may be voiced in an extremely sincere and concerned way. But the goal is to control and manipulate.

4. Verbal abuse is insidious. The partner's self-esteem gradually diminishes, usually without her realizing it. She may consciously or unconsciously try to change her behavior so as not to upset the abuser.

5. Verbal abuse is unpredictable. In fact, unpredictability is one of the most significant characteristics of verbal abuse. The partner is stunned, shocked, and thrown off balance by her mate's sarcasm, angry jab, put-down, or hurtful comment.

6. Verbal abuse is not a side issue. It is *the* issue in the relationship. When a couple is having an argument about a real issue, the issue can be resolved. In a verbally abusive relationship, there is no specific conflict. The issue is the abuse, and this issue is not resolved. There is no closure.

7. Verbal abuse expresses a double message. There is incongruence between the way the abuser speaks and her real feelings. For example, she may sound very sincere and honest while she is telling her partner what is wrong with him.

8. Verbal abuse usually escalates, increasing in intensity,

frequency, and variety. The verbal abuse may begin with put-downs disguised as jokes. Later other forms might surface. Sometimes the verbal abuse may escalate into physical abuse, starting with “accidental” shoves, pushes, and bumps.

Categories of Verbal Abuse

What are some of the categories of verbal abuse? Here is a list as outlined in *The Verbally Abusive Relationship*.[\[4\]](#)

The first category of verbal abuse is *withholding*. A marriage requires intimacy, and intimacy requires empathy. If one partner withholds information and feelings, then the marriage bond weakens. The abuser who refuses to listen to his partner denies her experience and leaves her isolated.

The second is *countering*. This is the dominant response of the verbal abuser who sees his partner as an adversary. He is constantly countering and correcting everything she says and does. Internally he may even be thinking, “How dare she have a different view!”

Countering is very destructive to a relationship because it prevents the partner from knowing what his mate thinks about anything. Sometimes the verbal abuser will cut off discussion in mid-sentence before he can finish his thought. In many ways, she cannot even allow him to have his own thoughts.

A third category of verbal abuse is *discounting*. This is like taking a one hundred-dollar item and reducing its price to one cent. Discounting denies the reality and experience of the partner and is extremely destructive. It can be a most insidious form of verbal abuse because it denies and distorts the partner’s actual perception of the abuse.

Sometimes verbal abuse is disguised as jokes. Although his comments may masquerade as humor, they cut the partner to the quick. The verbal jabs may be delivered crassly or with great

skill, but they all have the same effect of diminishing the partner and throwing her off balance.

A fifth form of verbal abuse is *blocking and diverting*. The verbal abuser refuses to communicate, establishes what *can* be discussed, or withholds information. He can prevent any possibility of resolving conflicts by blocking and diverting.

Accusing and blaming is another form. A verbal abuser will accuse his partner of some wrongdoing or some breach of the basic agreement of the relationship. This has the effect of diverting the conversation and putting the other partner on the defensive.

Another form of verbal abuse is *judging and criticizing*. The verbal abuser may judge her partner and then express her judgment in a critical way. If he objects, she may tell him that she is just pointing something out to be helpful, but in reality she is expressing her lack of acceptance of him.

These are just a few of the categories of verbal abuse. Next we will look at a number of other forms of verbal abuse.

Other Forms of Verbal Abuse

Trivializing can also be a form of verbal abuse. I discuss this in more detail in [my article](#) on why marriages fail.^{5} It is an attempt to take something that is said or done and make it insignificant. Often the partner becomes confused and believes she hasn't effectively explained to her mate how important certain things are to her.

Undermining is also verbal abuse. The abuser not only withholds emotional support, but also erodes confidence and determination. The abuser often will squelch an idea or suggestion just by a single comment.

Threatening is a classic form of verbal abuse. He manipulates

his partner by bringing up her biggest fears. This may include threatening to leave or threatening to get a divorce. In some cases, the threat may be to escalate the abuse.

Name-calling can also be verbal abuse. Continually calling someone “stupid” because she isn’t as intelligent as you or calling her a “klutz” because she is not as coordinated can have a devastating effect on the partner’s self esteem.

Verbal abuse may also involve *forgetting*. This may involve both overt and covert manipulation. Everyone forgets things from time to time, but the verbal abuser consistently does so. After the partner collects himself, subsequent to being yelled at, he may confront his mate only to find that she has “forgotten” about the incident. Some abusers consistently forget about the promises they have made which are most important to their partners.

Ordering is another classic form of verbal abuse. It denies the equality and autonomy of the partner. When an abuser gives orders instead of asking, he treats her like a slave or subordinate.

Denial is the last category of verbal abuse. Although all forms of verbal abuse have serious consequences, denial can be very insidious because it denies the reality of the partner. In fact, a verbal abuser could read over this list of categories and insist that he is not abusive.

That is why it is so important for the partner to recognize these characteristics and categories since the abuser is usually in denial. Thus, the responsibility for recognizing verbal abuse and doing something about it often rests with the partner.

We have described various characteristics of verbal abuse and have even discussed the various categories of verbal abuse. Finally, I would like to provide a biblical perspective.

A Biblical Perspective of Verbal Abuse

The Bible clearly warns us about the dangers of an angry person. Proverbs 22:24 says, "Do not associate with a man given to anger; or go with a hot-tempered man." And Proverbs 29:22 says, "An angry man stirs up strife, and a hot-tempered man abounds in transgression."

It is not God's will for you (or your friend) to be in a verbally abusive relationship. Those angry and critical words will destroy your confidence and self-esteem. Being submissive in a marriage relationship (Ephesians 5:22) does not mean allowing yourself to be verbally beaten by your partner. 1 Peter 3:1 does teach that wives, by being submissive to their husbands, *may* win them to Christ by their behavior. But it does *not* teach that they must allow themselves to be verbally or physically abused.

Here are some key biblical principles. First, know that God loves you. The Bible teaches, "The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit" (Psalm 34:18).

Second, deal with your feelings of guilt. You may be feeling that the problems in your marriage are your fault. "If only I would do better, he wouldn't be so angry with me." The Bible teaches in Psalm 51:6 that "Surely You desire truth in the inner parts; You teach me wisdom in the inmost place." Even though you may have feelings of guilt, you may not be the guilty party. I would recommend you read [my article](#) on the subject of false guilt.[\[6\]](#)

A related issue is shame. You may feel that something is wrong with you. You may feel that you are a bad person. But God declares you His cherished creation. Psalms 139:14 says, "I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well."

A key element in this area of verbal abuse will no doubt be confrontation of the abuser. It's important for you to realize that confrontation is a biblical principle. Jesus taught about this in Matthew 18:15-20. I would recommend that you seek help from a pastor or counselor. But I would also recommend that you gather godly men and women together who can lovingly confront the person who is verbally abusing you. Their goal should be to break through their denial and lovingly restore them with a spirit of gentleness (Galatians 6:1).

But whether you confront the abuser or not, I do recommend that you seek out others who can encourage you and support you. If the abuser is willing to confront his sin and get help, that is good. But even if he will not, your hope is in the Lord and in those who should surround you and encourage you.

Notes

1. Patricia Evans, *The Verbally Abusive Relationship* (Holbrook, MA: Adams Media Corporation, 1996).
2. Patricia Evans, *The Verbally Abusive Man: Can He Change?* (Avon, MA: Adams Media, 2006).
3. Evans, *The Verbally Abusive Relationship*, 81-84.
4. Ibid., 85-104.
5. Kerby Anderson, "Why Marriages Fail," Probe, 1998, probe.org/why-marriages-fail/.
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3 Life Hacks That Will Revolutionize Your Relationships

Ever hear of “life hacks”? Little tips and tricks to make your life easier, like running a sticky note between your keyboard keys to collect crumbs and computer lint. Here are three life hacks that will act like relational lubricant.

“When you said/did X, I felt Y. Did you mean to communicate that?”

Instead of assuming we know someone’s motives and thinking, we need to clarify that we understand what they intend. Sometimes things just come out wrong, not at all what is meant, and it’s easily misinterpreted.

“When you gave me permission to take comp time after I worked all weekend, I sensed you were giving it begrudgingly and you weren’t happy about it at all, like I had broken an unwritten rule or expectation. Did I read you right?”

“When I asked you about _____, it seemed that you got really quiet and shut down. It felt like you were shutting me out. Is that accurate, or am I missing something?”

“When I asked you to unload the dishwasher, you rolled your eyes and sighed. It’s the only thing I’ve asked in two days, but it sounded to me like you were upset. As if it were an unfair burden to place on you. Is that what you meant to communicate?”

The other person might respond with, "Yeah, I was upset and felt put-upon, but really I have no right to be. I'm sorry for reacting so badly." Or they might say, "I did? I don't remember tha—oh wait, you know what? I had just heard such-and-so on TV and it disgusted me. My body language was in response to what was going on in the other room. Sorry, I didn't hear you at all."

It's always a good idea to clarify what's going on. And not assume you can read the other person's mind. Only God can do that.

Own the Plank in Your Eye

Whenever there is a conflict, it's the result of clashing perspectives or motives or interpretations. According to Jesus' teaching in Matthew 7:3, the first step to resolving conflict is to take responsibility for our part in it. It's amazing how hostilities can de-escalate when someone steps up to the plate and takes responsibility for their contribution to a problem.

Even if our part is only 5%, we're 100% responsible for that 5%. And even if we're sure we haven't done anything wrong, we can acknowledge the possibility that we may have said or did something that was misinterpreted, and we can own that.

It's natural to expect the other person to then take responsibility for their part in the conflict, but alas, very often that doesn't happen. They will just let you take the blame/credit all by yourself even though you know perfectly well the other person was at fault at well. That's okay. When you live for an Audience of One, it's always right to do the right thing, trusting God to work out the justice part. Guilty parties never get away with it forever.

It's not just a life hack, it's supernatural, divine direction from the One who designed people and intended us to be in relationship. Own your part in a conflict—and watch the tension deflate like letting air out of a balloon.

How to Apologize

The specifics on this life hack came from [one of the best blog posts](#) in the history of the internet. There are four parts:

1) I'm sorry for _____. . .: Be specific. Show the person you're apologizing to that you really understand what they are upset about.

Wrong: *I'm sorry for being mean.*

Right: *I'm sorry for being unkind when I said you were fat and ugly.*

2) This is wrong because _____: This might take some more thinking, but this is one of the most important parts. Until you understand why it was wrong or how it hurt someone's feelings, it's unlikely you will change. This is also important to show the person you hurt that you really understand how they feel. I can't tell you how much of a difference this makes! Sometimes, people want to feel understood more than they want an apology. Sometimes just showing understanding- even without an apology- is enough to make them feel better!

Wrong: *This is wrong because you are hyper-sensitive.*

Right: *This is wrong because I hurt your feelings and made you feel bad about yourself.*

3) In the future, I will _____: Use positive language, and tell me what you WILL do, not what you won't do.

Wrong: *In the future, I will not say that.*

Right: *In the future, I will keep unkind words in my head.*

4) Will you forgive me? This is important to try to restore your friendship. Now, there is no rule that the other person has to forgive you. Sometimes, they won't. That's their decision. Hopefully, you will all try to be the kind of friends who will forgive easily, but that's not something you automatically get just because you apologized. But you should at least ask for it.

I love these four steps, and I would add eye contact to the mix.

These four steps to apologizing are powerful because they are biblical.

1. "I'm sorry for" means you are confessing, or agreeing with the other person, that you did something wrong. Biblical prayers of confession are very specific in naming the sins committed, such as idolatry, adultery, and murder. Apologizing to another person needs to be just as specific.

2. "This is wrong because" reveals that you understand of why it's a problem. David prayed for that kind of self-awareness in Ps. 139:23-24, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxious thoughts; And see if there be any hurtful way in me, And lead me in the everlasting way."

3. "In the future, I will" is a commitment to repent and choose a better, more righteous behavior than the one being renounced and forsaken. Zaccheus gave an example of this in

Luke 19:8-“Zaccheus stopped and said to the Lord, ‘Behold, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much.’”

4. “Will you forgive me?” is a humbling, difficult question to ask. Putting ourselves in the “one-down position” of asking for forgiveness risks exposure and shame-after all, the other person may say no-but forgiveness was extraordinarily important to Jesus. “For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.” (Matt. 6:14-15)

Apologizing the right way is probably the most powerful way to restore a strained or broken relationship.

God created us for relationships and for community. These three life hacks can go a long way toward make them run more smoothly.

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/3_life_hacks_that_will_revolutionize_your_relationships on April 5, 2016

Interracial Dating

July 21, 2011

Dear Renea,

We are a strong, white, Christian family. Our 22 year old daughter is dating a black boy. He is very nice, kind, well-mannered. However, we just are not in favor of this inter-

racial relationship. We never envisioned one of daughters dating a black boy. We know all the biblical verses pertaining to this. We're just not sure what to say to her. Need some thoughts on this situation. Your thoughts are so welcome. Thanks.

Dear E,

Thank you for writing in with your question.

I'm surprised to hear you mention knowing the scriptures pertaining to interracial relationships because I confess, I am wholly unaware of any verse which addresses the subject. Old Testament passages speak about the importance of Hebrews marrying Hebrews and not pagans who worship false gods and idols, but that has to do with a person's relationship with God rather than his or her nationality. We know this to be the case when we consider heroes of the faith such as Rahab and Ruth, neither of whom were Hebrews, both of whom came to fear (know) the Lord better than many natural Hebrews and were used by God in significant ways, most significantly as women in the lineage of Christ! This is the same vein which runs through the New Testament command not to be unequally yoked in 2 Corinthians 6. Biblical warnings against marrying certain types of people have everything to do with their relationship with the Holy One (and ours) and nothing to do with nationality, ethnicity or race.

That being said, your feelings and your conflict are real and no doubt a significant part of how you were raised. Based on your letter, it seems you and your husband probably grew up in Bible-believing churches and/or homes which taught against interracial marriages. You certainly grew up in a time in our culture when such relationships were anathema. Your situation reminds me of what the Disciples must have experienced upon seeing Jesus conversing with, not only a *woman* one-on-one, but a *Samaritan* woman. That's not how they grew up! That's not how a good Jewish man was to behave, yet here was their Master,

their Teacher, their Messiah breaking all the rules about race-relations (and gender-relations). I'm sure it was a shock. I'm sure it was quite unsettling, perhaps even unacceptable at first. And I appreciate that what I am saying might be just as jarring, just as maddening perhaps, just difficult to accept.

And so it's okay to need time to wrestle with this radical biblical truth that goes against everything you've been taught just as Christ's first followers were constantly having to do. Since Christ's Loving-Truth sets us free, I beg you to wrestle with it, to try to accept it; but even if you cannot, I appeal now to your love for your daughter, a love that has no doubt grown from parent-child love to also include friend-love now that she is an adult. Support your daughter, love your daughter, respect her (decisions) as the adult she is. Don't let your preferences—reasoned as they may be considering the difficulties that can still come as a part of interracial relationships—drive a wedge between you, driving your daughter away from you. Don't give the Enemy a foothold to break down and breakup your family, your love for one another. I implore you with familial affection in Christ our Lord.

Dear E, may our great God give you grace and bless your family in this scary step of faith we call life.

With love and respect,
Renea

This blog post originally appeared at
reneamac.com/2011/07/21/interracial-dating/

Expectations in Dating: Part One

Mar. 20, 2009

Today we're going to talk about boundaries and expectations. Both of which cause us to be selective.

I have to thank Brad Paisley for a song of his which has provided me with this metaphor: dating is a lot like shopping for new clothes. The line from the song goes like this:

*When you go out shopping, you try on brand new clothes.
To see if something fits or not, there's just one way to know.
Why's it any different when someone asks you out?
You might as well just try me on before you turn me down.*

I appreciate this metaphor. I walk into a store – even ones I frequent – and sometimes I don't know how something is going to fit until I try it on. Other times I can tell simply by looking at a piece that it isn't my style or is too big or too small. There are some stores I don't even have to go into because those clothes aren't for me: they might be too trashy or too preppy or whatever. Also, having friends with me whom I trust is helpful. They're honest with me and will encourage me to try things I might not otherwise; items they know will look good on me when I may be unsure – and they're almost always right! I also depend on them to tell me, “No, Renea. That dress doesn't do you right; that color is not for you. Renea, seriously; put that one back.” 😊

You see where this is going don't you? Okay, so dating, well, living really, is about risk, but it's calculated risk – more or less. To say that it's important to take risks... in any relationship, dating or otherwise, is not to say we should be

uncritical or haphazard. Not being selective about who you'll date is like letting a perfect stranger pick out all your clothes for you; whatever that person brings you, that's what you have to buy, take home, and wear. You wouldn't do that. Why would you be unbiased about who you date?

Okay. So let's talk about dating non-Christians. How many of you think it's probably okay to date unbelievers? You can be honest. Come on. Forget for a minute that you know what the right answers are supposed to be, or that you think you know what I want you to say. 'Cuz let's be real, if you're unconvinced about what the church has to say about dating unbelievers, chances are we're dropping the ball in some way. And hey, we aren't right about everything; that's impossible; maybe we're wrong about this. So if you think we are, let's talk about it.

Worldview. Whole persons. Intimacy. (Sorry, I did this part extemporaneously.)

The author of our book* puts it this way: "If you aim for nothing, you'll hit it. Is that how you want to aim for your husband – with an open, blank slate? Or do you want to dream of someone who is just right for you, who complements your weaknesses, and who fulfills your hopes and desires" (63)?

And the point she's making is the same one Brad and I were making with the shopping illustration. If we don't have certain standards, goals, ideas and expectations for our lives, including our love-lives, we'll be directionless. We'll zig and zag here and there following any story about sex and romance that's compelling in the moment. And that makes us incredibly vulnerable to believing the lies and distorted views the world has about who we are and how we should live, distorted views about who we are sexually and how we should live our romantic lives.

I'd like to take this thought a bit further, if you'll let me.

I'd like to suggest a bigger target. That instead of aiming for a husband who will fulfill the hopes you've pinned upon him, we aim for the Bridegroom of the Church, Jesus, and put our hope in him. As you release your arrow in the direction of the Kingdom, if you happen to snag a husband by the shirt collar, FAN-TASTIC! More to the point, if your arrow becomes intertwined with another going in the same direction, WONDERFUL!

* Gresh, Dannah. *And the Bride Wore White*. Chicago: Moody, 2004.

Stay tuned for [part two](#), and see where we go from here.

This blog post originally appeared at
reneamac.com/2009/03/20/expectations-in-dating-part-one/