

For Parents and Others Who Care

You may be a parent, mentor, pastor, or friend of someone having difficulties with a life-controlling issue and are uncertain of how to best offer support. So many times, we see our loved one dealing with their hurts and the shame of what they are walking through while feeling very alone in their pain. It is important to understand that destructive behaviors are often an outward expression of an inward hurt, which can stem from a variety of root issues. Also, we want to remind you that it is not your role to be Savior or Holy Spirit in your loved one's life. You are to bring truth, love, and support. Hopefully, as you read this, you will find ways to support your loved one.

Effective communication, building a healthy relationship with your loved one, and knowing your role as a support person in their life are vital. The effects of life-controlling issues can be intrinsically linked to the support system. This means that even though your child/friend/loved one is the one suffering, those around them are also affected in negative ways. Families tend to be greatly affected, but any type of support can assist in fostering healing and help to those who are hurting.

Note: If you are reading this because your son or daughter needs help or support, we want you to know that it is crucial for the entire family to seek help together. Avoiding your child, or detaching from their issue, is an ineffective approach—ignoring the facts will not make them disappear. It is important to keep in mind that confronting the roots of what your child is struggling with as a family is what will help bring about resolution. As a caring parent, your first step must be to pray and seek God for wisdom in supporting your son or daughter. While many circumstances are out of your control, prayer and guidance are within your control. Supportive confrontation, without judgment, is the best way to foster positive change in your child's life; he/she needs to know that you love them regardless of their behavior.

The Bible says that love never fails (1 Corinthians 13:8). When your approach and concern for your son or daughter comes from the unconditional love and leading of the Holy Spirit, you will begin to see results that are long lasting. Approach your child with compassion and open communication, and let God lead you throughout the process of healing.

Build a Strong Relationship

Your relationship with your child/friend/loved one is such an important aspect of them finding healing and freedom—it can help them realize who God created them to be. By providing a foundation of love and open communication, you help your loved one develop confidence and an understanding of how to have healthy relationships with others.

It is very important to communicate your love and/or care by identifying and relaying hope. You can do this by recognizing your child/friend/loved one's strengths and talents and take time to encourage them in those areas. Provide verbal encouragement along with helping facilitate their seeking spiritual growth in God. When the focus is on a person's strengths, positive attitudes and behaviors will result and will be a foundational support for the healing God has for them.

Be aware that messages about weaknesses and inadequacies could be continually running through your child/friend/loved one's mind like a broken record. He/she may think or feel that they do not measure up to other's expectations. You may have never spoken negative words to them, but the enemy is focused on keeping your loved one trapped, and he uses negative thoughts or beliefs to accomplish this. These thoughts and beliefs may have varied sources, but the results have led to unhealthy behaviors.

An important aspect of building a strong relationship is conflict resolution. You will need to approach conflict with the understanding that the fight is not with your child/friend/loved one but with the spiritual attack behind what he/she is struggling with. Peaceful resolution involves honest, supportive confrontation. Sometimes we are tempted to play

peacekeeper, but when everyone avoids confrontation this prevents the issue from ever being addressed and eventually resolved. Avoiding issues will not bring peace; facing issues head-on with a peaceful disposition is what brings about lasting peace.

Pray before confronting any issue, choosing to forgive those involved, and then proceed with a calm attitude. Through prayer, forgiveness, and thoughtful consideration, you increase the chance for a positive result. If you recognize your loved one is struggling with a destructive behavior, it is important to confront them from a place of love and concern for their well-being. Confrontation can be a beautiful expression of love if approached in the correct manner. Supportively confronting your loved one about their behavior relays the message that you care enough to help them.

Practical Ways to Build Your Relationship

- Love unconditionally.
- Spend quality time with your child/friend/loved one. Connect with him/her by finding ways to interact and engage with them.
- Attend church, Bible study, and/or life groups together.
- Treat your child/friend/loved one with respect. Talk about his/her strengths.
- Be a good listener; don't always give feedback. Consistency yields security. Be consistent in your expectations and your parameters.
- Emphasize enjoyment of activities rather than performance.
- Encourage your child/friend/loved one to take control of important aspects of his/her life and to make their own decisions when appropriate. Don't be afraid to provide appropriate limits; being too restrictive or too permissive can both have a negative effect.
- Show your child/friend/loved one how to successfully resolve conflict.
- Be aware of media messages regarding your loved one's struggles and be open to healthy discussions about these.

Communicate Effectively

Creating and maintaining open communication with your child or loved one is essential for a healthy relationship. Communication is not simply about talking to someone or showing interest; communication is about connecting with another human being in a way that creates an avenue for honesty and change.

The way we communicate, verbally or nonverbally, affects how our message is relayed and received. People who struggle with life-controlling issues have often experienced communication barriers within their families. These barriers can result from abuse within the home, fear of intimacy, family secrets, unspoken family rules, avoidance, denial related to public image, and unhealthy family communication. Seek guidance from the Holy Spirit to enable you to effectively engage with your child or loved one and to demonstrate the love and honesty necessary for restoration and healing.

Active listening is a major key to effective communication. Being an active listener entails giving the other person your full attention when they are communicating, rather than thinking ahead to what you will say next. When someone is talking but you are focused on what you will say next, you are missing vital information that could help you respond to them in the most appropriate manner. Giving your loved one your undivided attention conveys that you love them, support them, and believe their thoughts and feelings are important. And there may be times when the person you are talking with really does not want, or need, feedback. They may simply want you to listen.

A goal of effective communication is to nurture growth and transparency, while removing walls that block the flow of

honest conversation. Some common communication blockers to be aware of are interrupting, ignoring, sarcasm, name-calling, insulting, judging, blaming, and stating your opinion as fact. Open communication lowers the chance of anxious or negative feelings being expressed or repressed in negative ways. For example, preaching at someone while they are hurting will build a wall and prevent them from being honest with you or opening up at all. Consider hearing the person out and allowing them to express their emotions. Encouraging the person you are trying to help to be aware of their feelings and to express them to you openly will empower honesty and vulnerability, and it is beneficial for you to set an example by being open about your own feelings.

Learn How to Provide Support and Safeguard Yourself

Your loved one needs your love and support to overcome the things they are dealing with, but it is also important to address your own needs as a parent or support person. Watching someone you love battle their life-controlling issues can be a very emotionally challenging experience, and no one should walk this road alone. It is important that you have the support of a caring pastor, trusted friends, and/or a licensed counselor to help you during this difficult time. It is vital for you, and the ones you care for, that you have a safe place where you can express your thoughts and concerns and have a chance to work through your own feelings. Allow others to help you as you support the one you love.

The tumultuous emotions you may have supporting someone who is having a difficult time are not uncommon. But with the gamut of emotions you experience, you may become distracted from the truth of God's Word. Encourage yourself with the truth that emotions are fleeting, but the Word of God stands forever (Isaiah 40:8). The Word of God will empower you to stand in the face of adversity and overcome it. Anger, frustration, discouragement are all common emotions. You may feel anger towards the disorder, your child/friend/loved one, yourself, or even at failed treatment attempts, counselors, and institutions. Ephesians 4:26 says, "Be angry and yet do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger" (NASB). Your feeling of anger is not sinful. It is how you proceed in that anger that matters.

You may also encounter fear about the dangers of what your loved one is dealing with and what may happen to him/her if things continue to get worse. Remember that the Word of God says, "God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline" (2 Timothy 1:7, NIV). Ask God to help you step out of fear as He guides your steps during this time.

In addition to anger and fear, anxiety can be a daily struggle as you deal with questions concerning the effects of the life-controlling issues on your loved one's life and future. Philippians 4:6-7 says, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Giving God your anxiety and being honest with Him about your petitions releases that anxiety from your life.

Helplessness is another emotion you may experience if you find yourself overwhelmed by your loved one's pain and the realization that you are unable to stop the cycle. Scripture instructs us, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight" (Proverbs 3:5-6, NIV). Trust means literally choosing to surrender those things that are out of your control, allowing God to lead you during this time.

Unconditional love and support will make a positive difference on your loved one's road to healing and freedom. Seek the Lord for yourself and find refuge in prayer. Resist the temptation to blame yourself for your child/friend/loved one's struggles. Getting stuck in the trap of self-blame will not help your loved one find healing. Understand that there is a difference between taking an objective look at unhealthy patterns and placing blame on yourself/your family. The Word of God teaches us to take responsibility for our mistakes and to receive God's forgiveness (1 John 1:9). It also teaches us that the real battle is not against people but against spiritual darkness (Ephesians 6:12). This is the time to get to the source of the pain and defeat it through Christ.

An Important Reminder

Remember, there is hope. Here at Mercy, we have seen thousands of young women and their families receive healing and freedom. These young women have gone on to live productive lives as teachers, businesswomen, ministers, and mothers, sharing their testimonies of healing and bringing hope to others. God is both willing and able to help your loved one through this journey. He is a God who loves to turn tragedy into triumph. He can take all the pain and suffering your family has experienced and turn it into a story of hope for others.