

Health, betrayal, and forgiveness



by *Chris McCarthy*

Do I remember being eleven? Sharing a confidence with a friend, the comfort of having a friend to trust when I didn't really want to go to my family to share a problem. Then the insecurity of seeing my friend whisper in another girl's ear and worrying until recess, when I saw one or two girls giggling when they looked my way. Or trying out new "social skills," giving my opinion about another girl's haircut, only to have my opinion get back to the other girl and seeing the hurt look or anger when she looked my way. If I was feeling insecure, I would get butterflies in my belly, a tightness in my chest, and a hotness in my face from trying to smile without letting tears show. If I was feeling more confident and in the right, my back would tense, my jaw would clench, and there would be bubbles in my gut. The guilt from letting down a friend could bring a headache, nausea, and bad thoughts at bedtime. If we were lucky, one of us would break the silence and the relief and resumption of good relations would relieve all these physical symptoms. I learned early in life that betrayal is physically painful and forgiveness makes the pain go away.

A good friend since high school shared with me in her late 30's her story of forgiveness. I had known she had felt emotionally abused by her father, although I had not known how deeply she was affected since she was always so cheerful with all of her friends. She had struggled with depression, insecurity, and overeating for many years. In her 30's she started going through counseling that focused on forgiveness and acceptance. She described the physical pain of her emotions the way she would describe a cancer, as a knotted mass of string with strands reaching out, intertwining and entangling throughout her body. It had become a part of her identity. As she dealt with her long-standing grief and forgave her parent, she started to heal, but she told how each of those far-flung strands had to be ripped out, so she could become well. She described it so vividly, it

made me wince to hear it. She had loved her father through it all, but rejoiced at her new ability to remove her anger from their relationship. It wouldn't change her dad or her memories of their past. She explained it wasn't about him; it was about her. She began to feel well in body and in spirit.

After fifteen years of family practice, I know that the privacy of an exam room can be a perfect place to share grief. Certain patterns of physical complaints should lead me to ask questions. What has happened in a patient's life to cause this kind of physical discomfort? Sometimes there is relief that something painful can be brought out, and sometimes there is denial. Perhaps, a person isn't ready to face an issue yet. Betrayal is grief at the loss of trust, and love just makes it hurt more. I'm old enough to understand the physical pain of grief and that what hurt me at age eleven with casual relationships hurts more when the grief lasts for months or years. Chronic back pain, headaches, sensitive stomachs, a knife-stabbing pain between the shoulder blades, insomnia, tingling in the hands, a tightness in the chest, plus more obvious symptoms of anxiety, depression, mood swings, and the inability to form healthy long-term relationships can all be symptoms of broken relationships. But in medical school we are not taught to talk with patients about forgiveness!

The best part of my job is what I learn from the patients I see. Emma is my new hero! Joseph and Emma (names changed) came to see me for the first time this year. During their first visit, Joseph kept asking for blood tests to be done so they could marry. Emma was gentle and careful in what she said. Finally, she and I found an excuse to slip out of the room so she could talk to me privately. Years ago they had been married and had four children. When the children were small, Joseph left Emma for another woman whom he lived with until recently. Emma had gone on to raise the children without help. This year, when Joseph started to show signs of dementia, the other woman disappeared, and Joseph turned up at Emma's house. She was not interested in romance, but she took him in and cared for him, dealing with all the problems that go along with Alzheimer's.

Some of us would hate this man. Maybe Emma had passed through the pain of anger and grief. She is loving and kind in a matter-of-fact way. I like to think this is how Jesus forgives us, in a matter-of-fact way. Emma is the embodiment of grace. Lord, let me be like Emma. 📖

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