

PEACE AMADI

WHY DO I
FEEL LIKE
THIS?

Understand
Your Difficult
Emotions and
Find Grace to
Move Through



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THE DANGER OF SPIRITUAL BYPASSING

SOME YEARS AGO, I sat in a pew hoping for a message that would encourage my heart. I was fresh out of a breakup, and as a woman in her thirties, I was starting to experience real doubt that I would ever get my own happy ending. I was also sick and tired of trying to figure dating out. Church, however, was a place I'd always found solace and hope. So I prayed that God would somehow speak to me that morning and crossed my fingers he would.

About three-fourths into the sermon I realized this was *not* going to be the message that encouraged my faith. It was not going to be the message that helped me feel understood. In fact, this was a message I would remember for a long time for how frustrated it made me and so many other women. (Which I found out soon after service.)

See, at this point in the message, the pastor detoured into talking about relationships, and everybody perked up! You could tell he'd struck a chord. He proceeded to talk about the beauty of God's timing, trusting the process, and trusting God at his word. All stuff I'd heard before, but a word doesn't have to be new to be good.

Then came his final exhortation on the topic. Something to the tune of: "So ladies, you need to stop worrying and start working. If you're not married, it's because you're not ready to be. How do I know that? If you were ready, you would be."

I froze. The rest of my row, mostly women, froze also. I could feel us collectively saying, *What did he just say?*

Being a church girl my whole life, I was used to disagreeing with pastors in the pulpit. It happens. In fact, if you told me that you agreed with every single thing your spiritual leader said, I'd be worried that you're not doing enough thinking on your own. I was used to letting things I disagreed with roll off my back and taking from the message only what I felt God really wanted me to hear. I was also used to hard words. Words that pierced through sin in a way you just knew would change you.

But these words weren't hard. They were antagonistic. Because from that position of power and influence came a message that dismissed and invalidated the reality of so many.

It invalidated the challenges of dating in our current culture. A culture where surface, transactional, what-can-I-get-from-you relationships seem to be the norm.

It invalidated the challenges of dating while trying to remain abstinent, which significantly limits your options because many just don't share that value.

It invalidated the real worries of women past their twenties, who confront all kinds of discouraging messages about their ability to find love and start families.

It invalidated the work, and prayers, that grown women have already done in preparation for their marriages, and the weariness and discouragement that comes from years without results. The pastor's words invalidated these realities and more.

What was particularly off-putting, however, were the implications around this idea of readiness. I was a Black professor at a Christian, conservative, predominantly White institution where "ring before spring" was a thing. Every year I witnessed a good number of my senior students get engaged and even married by commencement. I'd get invited to these weddings and happily attend them, and they

were always beautiful. But the implication of the pastor's words were that these young, mostly White women were all "ready" for marriage, but the women over thirty I knew, many of them from diverse backgrounds, weren't.

The pastor's statement didn't work for me. The reason for singleness had to be more complicated than just readiness, and instead of taking the time to speak into any number of these realities (which, granted, was a big task), the pastor met our woes with over-spiritualized, trite, hurtful words. I'd gone to church looking for hope and encouragement. I left church feeling emotionally dismissed, deflated, and misunderstood.

THE ANTIWORK OF SPIRITUAL BYPASSING

Do you have a similar story? Have you ever reached out to a fellow believer during a personal challenge or looked to a spiritual leader for counsel and heard some version of the following?

- Just pray about it.
- Let go and let God.
- Just forgive.
- Be strong in the Lord.
- Just have faith.
- There's a reason for everything.
- Just don't worry about it.
- You have so much to be grateful for.
- If you were supposed to have it, you would have it.

If you have, let me tell you now, you have been spiritually bypassed.¹

Spiritual bypassing is a term coined by psychotherapist and author John Welwood, who used it to describe when we, or other people, use spiritual ideas to belittle our needs, feelings, or personal

challenges or to sidestep deep, necessary emotional work. It's when we dole out Christian platitudes and expect the recipient of these easier-said-than-done words to bounce right back into contentment and happiness. It's the equivalent of slapping a fresh cut with a bandage and hoping that any signs of infection will resolve without additional effort. We, and our emotions, deserve better.

It's not that these words of encouragement don't have truth to them. They do, to a degree. The problem is that these words typically come with some sort of expectation that the person experiencing emotional pain or discomfort can just snap out of it. This expectation can lead to a sort of spiritual gaslighting where the reality and gravity of someone's pain is met with a subtle message that says if you *really* walked with God, or if you *really* had enough faith, you wouldn't be feeling this way. Again, we deserve better.

For the record, it is absolutely God's desire that we hold on to faith during our personal crises and challenges. It is absolutely his desire that we pursue and practice love, joy, peace, patience, and all the other fruits of the Spirit. But we are not robots. There's no switch we can turn on to make us automatically become the loftiest version of ourselves. We are complex and complicated. We deal daily with our imperfection and brokenness. We are a work in progress, and God knows this. There would be no need for him in our lives if that wasn't the case.

As for the body of Christ, we need to learn to better embrace our pain. We need to give up our need to have all the answers and instead embrace humility and unknowing. We can't truly enter each other's pain without the ability to hold complexities and discomfort. And without these things, we can't create the kind of community that leads to true healing. We should certainly continue to offer loving words of encouragement, but we must respect the purpose of our emotions and understand that real change, growth, and a deepening of faith take time.

WHAT EXACTLY ARE EMOTIONS?

“Everyone knows what an emotion is, until asked to give a definition. Then, it seems, no one knows.” With a touch of humor, researchers Fehr and Russell articulate in their study what emotion theorists have been struggling with for years: emotions are difficult to define!² Yet the more we learn about our emotions, the better we can appreciate what they offer us. Though there are several broad theories of emotion that differ in some significant ways, one idea that emotion theorists can agree on is that emotions are a multidimensional experience. Here are five components of emotion that work to give us a sense of what we feel from day to day:

Cognitive appraisal. Much like appraisers do for houses or cars, we experience our emotions because we assess the situations that we find ourselves in. We evaluate them. We form meaning out of these events and decide how important each event is to us. If we deem something important, we project what we think needs to be done. Then we decide who’s responsible for doing what and form expectations accordingly.

Physiological responses. When we’re experiencing an emotion, we may experience increased heart rate, sweating, blushing, nausea, or a number of other physiological changes. If we were to take a picture of what’s going in our brain, we would see activation in certain areas.

Expressive behavior. The expressions on our face change as we experience different emotions. The tone and the inflection of our voice may change. The way we use touch may shift. Our non-verbals often express our emotions more honestly than our words.

Subjective experience. What emotions feel like to us is our subjective experience of them. Usually this is identified by the words we use to describe them. We’ll take our appraisals, feel out the

changes happening in our body, and describe our emotions with feeling words—*happy, sad, mad, glad, anxious*, etc. Being able to name what your emotions feel like is an important first step in being able to work through them.

Action tendencies. Finally, our emotions motivate us to act in certain ways. Happiness inspires us to show gratitude. Sadness can lead us to want to sleep. Anger on behalf of others can lead us to act in ways that will restore justice and equality. Guilt may motivate us to make amends.

Emotions are judgments. According to cognitive appraisal theorists, emotions can also be understood as judgments. To paraphrase the theory, emotions are judgments about the extent to which a situation has met your goals. Happiness is what we experience when our goals are met. We apply for the job and we get it. We search for love and we find it. We pray for a family member's healing and we witness it. We ask God for a financial breakthrough and a check comes in the mail. You get the picture. In contrast, sadness is an emotion we're likely to feel if our goals aren't satisfied. Anger, frustration, discouragement, and envy are emotions that may emerge as well. Emotions bring clarity about what we truly need and want.

Emotions as energy. It can also be helpful to think about our emotions as a kind of energy—psychological energy, if you will, that flows throughout our body when something triggers it. This idea is what motivates many therapists to ask their clients: "Where do you feel this anger in your body?" "Where do you feel your sadness or anxiety?" Questions like these help us grow more aware of how we carry our emotions—in our stomach, neck, back, or legs—and how often we experience them.

Sometimes we feel an expansion of this energy, like when we experience joy, excitement, or love. This energy causes us to feel light on our feet, free of burden, and filled with all things good. Other times we feel a contraction of this energy, such as when we experience

sadness, fear, or hurt. Consequently, we feel heavy, lethargic, and as though something is weighing us down. That something is negative energy, and when it's moving through our body, it's hard to miss.

Recall what you've learned about energy, perhaps from a past physics course. Energy cannot be created or destroyed; it can only be transferred or transformed. This is the law of the conservation of energy, and we can apply it to our understanding of the way emotions work.

What happens to your anger when you don't have an outlet to release it? What happens in your relationships when you keep swallowing your frustration? Nothing good.

That's because feelings don't evaporate; they accumulate. Unattended to, they grow into something more. What we resist persists. Unexpressed negative feelings get stored in our minds and bodies only to later manifest in rage, resentment, broken relationships, chronic health issues, anxiety-boosting avoidance, passive aggressiveness, and undesired changes in personality. Our feelings will move throughout our body until we do something with them.

Emotions connect us to each other and ourselves. Imagine for a second what life would be without emotions.

Without feelings of attraction, we couldn't be drawn to the people who are supposed to be in our lives. Without love, we would have no reason to commit to each other, knit our lives together, or build families. Without empathy, we couldn't feel for one another, which is exactly what inspires us to help, support, and be there for each other when we need it. Without hurt and anger, we couldn't honor our needs, expectations, or our sense of personal boundaries. Emotions help us cultivate healthy, long-lasting relationships.

Emotions reflect God in us. *I'm so emotional!* How many times have you said this to yourself, perhaps out of frustration or annoyance because it felt like it was something you couldn't change or control? I have thought this many times and have struggled to see it as a good thing.

But a few years ago, I had a revelation about my own emotionality. I'd been encouraged to do a study on God's emotions, and on one quiet morning, it occurred to me: *Wow, God is so emotional too!*

Scripture is replete with stories of God feeling and expressing those feelings. We especially see these emotions in the stories of Jesus. To name a few instances, the Bible tells us that:

- Jesus lamented over Israel's rejection (Matthew 27:46).
- Jesus felt anger and indignation at the people in the temple and threw them out (Matthew 21:12).
- Jesus was overcome with feeling and wept for Lazarus (John 11:34-35).
- Jesus felt, but withstood, the strength of temptation (Hebrews 4:15).
- Jesus felt compassion for the crowds of people who seemed spiritually lost (Matthew 9:36) and also for people who were tired and hungry (Matthew 15:32).
- Jesus felt love for a stranger who asked him a question about life (Mark 10:21).
- Jesus felt forsaken (Matthew 27:46).

Scripture is clear. God has a robust emotional life. Of course, he responds to these feelings without sin. He doesn't turn to debauchery to cope with anger or intense sadness. He doesn't harm those who disappoint him. He doesn't give in to the enemy's temptation. But he feels. Just like us.

Genesis 1:26 says: "Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness.'" The emotions we have are a reflection of God in us. We feel because he feels. It's in our spiritual DNA. Unlike God, we sometimes let our emotions lead us into sin and darkness, but our emotions are normal and natural for us just as they are normal and natural for our God.

Emotions draw us back to God. Perhaps my favorite thing about our emotions is how they draw us back to God. Happiness gives us reason to praise him. Hurt, anger, and distress give us reason to seek him. Confusion causes us to seek his counsel. In discouragement and weariness we look for his encouragement and hope. In loneliness, we look for his companionship. In grief and sorrow, we're in desperate need of his comfort. Our emotions are often a catalyst for communion with God.

When we spiritually bypass our emotions, we lose far more than we gain. Even our uncomfortable emotions have much to teach us about ourselves, our world, and our God. These emotions often create pathways for our healing; they work as a guide to what God ultimately wants for us. What a gift.

DEALING, HEALING, AND MOVING THROUGH

Now, let's be honest. The gift of emotions doesn't make dealing with the uncomfortable ones any easier. It doesn't take away from the fact that hurt, anger, envy, anxiety, depression and other unwanted emotions can break us down and take over our lives and relationships.

These emotions always require that we deal with them—that we feel them, release them, and move them along when we can. Other times, they require that we do more than just deal and actually *heal*. Such is the case when you realize that your emotions cut much deeper and may represent unresolved issues, traumas, or spiritual bondages in your life. What your uncomfortable emotions require will vary by person, situation, and story.

When healing is required, I find it's helpful to have a clear understanding of what it looks like. What's the end goal? What can you expect in your healing journey?

In my work I use a six-part framework, born out of my research and experiences, to describe this healing.

Healing is freedom. Like healing of the body, emotional healing is freedom from what caused you pain. As you heal, there will likely be less and less emotional charge when you think or talk about the event that affected you. You may get to a point where you even take pride in your “scars.” Your pain may take on new meaning and the “symptoms” (anger, anxiety, shame, etc.) that once accompanied it will dissipate or altogether disappear.

Healing is personal control and agency. In healing, there is a sense that you are no longer bound by your wounds or trapped by your memories. Your actions are no longer driven by pain or revenge. You move independently and have power to make new choices. You create new realities for your life.

Healing is wholeness. When healing, you start to believe and feel that you are complete within yourself. Nothing feels broken, nothing feels like it’s missing. This is the true definition of shalom, by the way. You are able to find your peace.

Healing is harmony. You are not one person in one situation and another person in a different situation. You are wholly yourself everywhere. There is no part of you that hides or cowers in shame or fear of rejection. You have accepted every part of you. Everything now works together in sync. There is inner harmony.

Healing is wholehearted living. With self-understanding, self-love, and self-compassion, and with newfound freedom, wholeness, agency, and inner harmony, every part of you lives fully. You are present, grateful, and engaged in your life. You leave nothing on the table. There is no fear.

Healing is a process. The nature of healing is cyclical. Imagine climbing up a mountain. It’s impossible to walk straight up. To

get to the top, you must go around and around it again but realize that with each loop, you are getting farther up. Emotional healing works the same way. On the journey, you may feel frustrated that a feeling you thought was gone forever returns. You may feel scared that though your childhood trauma happened so long ago, you're still triggered by things here and there. There will be seasons of peace, interjected by seasons of anxiety. But this is the nature of healing. True healing is a life-long journey. When old stuff comes back up, reject the idea that you're slacking or falling back. You're simply moving up that mountain. You're getting another opportunity to see God do work in you.

Whenever you're ready to deal with or heal from your emotions, whether through this book or some other time, commit to doing the work. Reject the temptation to bypass your emotions or the pressure to let others do that to you. Reject the temptation to avoid, suppress, or pretend that your hurt, trauma, sadness, depression, and grief aren't there. Realize there is only one way to get to the other side of your difficult emotions: moving through.

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