

Teacher Enrichment

PERSONAL WORTHINESS TO EXERCISE THE PRIESTHOOD



President Gordon B. Hinckley, Excerpted from Conference Report, Apr. 2002, 64–65; or Ensign, May 2002, 53–54

The wife you choose will be your equal. Paul declared, “Neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 11:11).

In the marriage companionship there is neither inferiority nor superiority. The woman does not walk ahead of the man; neither does the man walk ahead of the woman. They walk side by side as a son and daughter of God on an eternal journey.

She is not your servant, your chattel, nor anything of the kind.

How tragic and utterly disgusting a phenomenon is wife abuse. Any man in this Church who abuses his wife, who demeans her, who insults her, who exercises unrighteous dominion over her is unworthy to hold the priesthood. Though he may have been ordained, the heavens will withdraw, the Spirit of the Lord will be grieved, and it will be amen to the authority of the priesthood of that man.

Any man who engages in this practice is unworthy to hold a temple recommend.

I regret to say that I see too much of this ugly phenomenon. There are men who cuff their wives

about, both verbally and physically. What a tragedy when a man demeans the mother of his children.

It is true that there are a few women who abuse their husbands. But I am not speaking to them tonight. I am speaking to the men of this Church, men upon whom the Almighty has bestowed His holy priesthood.

My brethren, if there be any within the sound of my voice who are guilty of such behavior, I call upon you to repent. Get on your knees and ask the Lord to forgive you. Pray to Him for the power to control your tongue and your heavy hand. Ask for the forgiveness of your wife and your children. President McKay was wont to say, “No other success can compensate for failure in the home” (quoting from J. E. McCulloch, *Home: The Savior of Civilization* [1924], 42; in Conference Report, Apr. 1935, 116). And President Lee said, “The most important part of the Lord’s work that you will do, is the work that you do within the walls of your own home” (Harold B. Lee, *Doing the Right Things for the Right Reasons*, Brigham Young University Speeches of the Year [19 Apr. 1961], 5).

I am confident that when we stand before the bar of God, there will be little mention of how much wealth we accumulated in life or of any honors which we may have achieved. But there will be searching questions about our domestic relations. And I am convinced that only those who have walked through life with love and respect and appreciation for their companions and children will receive from our eternal judge the words, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant: . . . enter thou into the joy of thy lord” (Matthew 25:21).

THE INVISIBLE HEARTBREAKER

Judy C. Olsen, Ensign, June 1996, 22–29

Couple number one: “You know,” said David to his wife when she asked about their car’s crumpled fender, “your *problem* is you like to make a big deal out of nothing.”

Couple number two: “Why did you plan our date for Saturday?” asked Caroline. “That was a stupid thing to do. You know our date night is Friday.”

What do these couples have in common? One of the spouses in each situation is engaging in a form of abuse. Even though no yelling or physical violence occurred, these verbal jabs are typical of a widespread web of behaviors known as *emotional abuse*. Such behavior may well be the most common but least recognized of all forms of abuse because it has a certain acceptance within our society. In this seemingly invisible category of abusive behavior, men and women are about equally at fault, and the effects of such abuse on family members can be *just as severe* as other, more openly acknowledged kinds of abuse. Many hearts have been broken and lives severely damaged from living with the effects of ongoing emotional abuse. And if left uncorrected, it may also become the basis for other types of abusive behavior within a home and marriage.

President Gordon B. Hinckley, then Second Counselor in the First Presidency, spoke to married couples at a 29 January 1984 fireside broadcast from Temple Square. His counsel, as paraphrased in coverage of the event, was that “to make marriage all it can be, the couple must form a partnership based on the values of the gospel of Christ.” For a marriage to succeed, President Hinckley continued, “each married person should develop respect for his or her partner” as a cornerstone of the marital relationship (*Ensign*, Apr. 1984, 75).

Respectful treatment, especially in marriage, is essential to happiness and vital to our Latter-day Saint view of celestial partnerships, where “neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord” (1 Cor. 11:11). Worldly traditions, however, are not generally supportive of respectful and loving treatment for all mankind. Yet the Savior’s

teachings invite us to a higher standard: gentleness, meekness, love unfeigned, and kindness (see D&C 121:41–42). These qualities ought to form the foundation for our earthly relationships, which are to be patterned after the example he set.

On the other hand, emotional abuse prevents couples from living up to Christ’s higher standard. It seeks to perpetuate false traditions and inappropriate behavior such as “exercis[ing] control or dominion or compulsion upon the souls of the children of men” (D&C 121:37) in subtle and seemingly socially acceptable ways. As the world hangs on to such standards, Latter-day Saints increasingly face the challenge to “come ye out from the wicked, and be ye separate” (Alma 5:57). Indeed, Saints who continue to mold their hearts to be Christlike will find an ever-widening gulf between the light, joy, and peace found in their homes and the darkened home environments of those who are unkind, harsh, and cruel.

To help Latter-day Saints better understand how these subtle and invisible forces may be affecting their homes and marriages, the following discussion will (1) explain behaviors that are considered to be emotionally abusive, (2) provide a yardstick by which couples can gauge the seriousness of the problem in their own lives, and (3) offer Christ-centered solutions that couples or individuals may begin to implement immediately and that will lead to healthier, happier marriage partnerships.

Defining Emotional Abuse

In a 1995 booklet published by the Church, *Responding to Abuse: Helps for Ecclesiastical Leaders*, we are told that emotional abuse of a spouse includes the following broad categories of problem behavior:

Name calling. Words such as *idiot* or *jerk*, sarcastic or exaggerated use of terms of endearment, unflattering nicknames, and insulting labels constitute name-calling. President Howard W. Hunter counseled that a husband “should always speak to his wife lovingly and kindly, treating her with the utmost respect,” for “marriage is like a tender flower . . . and must be nourished constantly with expressions of love and affection” (*Ensign*, Nov. 1994, 51). Wives, too,

must do the same to their husbands. Sarcastic comments, the staple of TV sitcoms, are also considered to be verbally abusive and have no place in Latter-day Saint marriages.

Demeaning statements. President Hunter also said, “Any man who abuses or demeans his wife physically or spiritually is guilty of grievous sin and in need of sincere and serious repentance” (p. 51). Ways that both men and women might engage in demeaning behavior toward their spouses include the following:

- *Trivialization.* To intentionally overlook the substantial effort put into a project, whether it’s preparing a dinner for company or repairing the family car, is a way of trivializing the time, effort, and talent needed to accomplish what could very well be a necessary and selfless act of service. Demeaning a spouse in this way can be done even in an apparently thoughtful tone of voice. For example, after a husband had spent considerable time doing tax returns, his wife commented, “Taxes are really not as complicated as most people make them out to be. I’m surprised it took you so long.”
- *Put-down humor.* A partner with a quick wit can come up with many ways to embarrass and humiliate his or her spouse, who may then be accused, in an effort to deflect responsibility for any insult taken, of not having a sense of humor. “Jack’s on a diet,” said his wife. “His third this week.”
- *Faultfinding.* Criticism chips away at a person’s sense of worth. It is not done out of a genuine regard to help someone be a better person, as some claim. “You know, honey, if you’d learn to chop the vegetables a little finer, you could probably make a decent salad.”

Intimidation. A partner may use threats to intimidate the spouse in order to get his or her own way: “The day you hang that painting in the bedroom is the day I move out of it!” Venting anger in harsh words, shouting, stomping around the house, and throwing or breaking things are abusive. Less-noisy forms of signaling discontent, ill will, or censure—from snapping at others to displaying angry looks and other signs of belligerence—can also be intimidating and thus constitute abuse.

Isolation. Some partners seek to limit their spouse’s interaction either with them or with the outside world. Subtle manifestations of this include—

- *Withholding:* The partner fails to give needed information to the spouse, refuses to participate in mutual problem solving, holds back on displays of affection, or may be unwilling to spend time or converse with the spouse.
- *Preventing closeness:* Some partners seek to distance their spouses by perpetuating feelings of ill will or estrangement. If time spent together fosters the beginning of shared closeness, the partner may say or do something hurtful to create distance again.

One family took the children for a cookout. The day was delightful, and everyone had a good time. Finally it was time to go, and they began the short drive home. “Let’s stop for ice cream cones,” suggested the mother. Suddenly the father began shouting that he didn’t have time to waste like “some people he knew.” The outing had cost him enough already, he fumed, and he still had important things to do. Stunned, the family sat in fear and silence all the way home. The wife felt her feelings of shared fun evaporate into cold loneliness. She realized this had happened before.

Closeness is also prevented if one spouse refuses to participate in the sharing of emotions of pain or joy, whether it’s to offer comfort at the loss of a pet or to celebrate receiving a raise.

Setting inappropriate rules: Isolating and controlling a spouse can take the form of creating an often unspoken set of rules for him or her. The rules may be subtle, like setting time limits on telephone calls, disallowing certain people at the house, and limiting or forbidding the spouse to have money or to go places alone. Not-so-subtle rules may include things such as no phone calls, no visitors, or no Church callings. The partner tries to justify the rules, saying they make good sense, but the victimized spouse falls into an increasingly cold and lonely world.

Manipulation. Some methods used to manipulate others include acting pitiable, creating guilty feelings in others, or blaming others for problems.

One woman writes, “[My husband] does not come to family home evening because we do not meet his expectations and he claims the kids won’t sit still and listen.” This husband has neatly blamed his children for his own lack of involvement with them.

Another manipulative tactic is to disagree with or counter, for purely selfish reasons, the spouse’s decisions. The offending partner seeks to implement his own ideas not because they are better, but because they allow him to continue to feel in control or smarter than his spouse. Such controlling behaviors are often couched as concern, such as the wife who critically examined her husband’s apparel each time they left the house, suggested he wear a different tie or shirt for the occasion, then waited impatiently while he changed—even though by reasonable standards his choice of dress was appropriate.

Gauging the Seriousness of the Problem

If what you’ve read makes you feel uncomfortable, you may wish to simply ask your spouse to read this article and ask if he or she believes there is a problem in your marriage regarding these kinds of behaviors. *The degree of pain or unhappiness experienced by the spouse, as well as your own feelings of unease, determines the severity of the problem.* If the kind of emotional interaction in the marriage is satisfactory to both partners, and if love and joy are experienced by both, there is little cause for concern since occasional pardonable mistakes do not qualify as serious emotional abuse. However, if one person believes there is a problem, even if the partner disagrees, there *is* a problem. Those who abuse are often satisfied with the way things are and are insensitive and not motivated to make needed changes.

The following discussion points out the stages that victims of abuse may go through as they try to cope with what is happening to them. This information will help couples determine the extent of a problem.

As isolated incidents begin to form a pattern, tension builds up from accumulated hurts that have not been fully resolved. Feelings of fear, wariness, nervousness, or anxiety may be present. In time, the hurting spouse may actually become accustomed to being treated badly and fail

to realize that inappropriate behavior is occurring. Such persons may assume they are “too sensitive” or in some way deserve what they get. Nevertheless, in an effort to lessen the pain and establish a better relationship, they may increase efforts to be kind, pay compliments, or perform more acts of service in order to please their partners and “earn” a compliment or kindness in return. Such gestures are often taken for granted or ignored by the abusive partners, leaving the spouses to wonder if they will ever measure up or be “good enough” to be loved, no matter how much effort is put forth.

Next, a spouse may attempt to get help or understanding from the partner about the growing chasm between them, but is either ignored or told that he or she is imagining things. Such denial creates confusion in the abused spouse, and feelings of loneliness, frustration, despair, or even self-doubt may emerge.

At this point some people seek help from friends or priesthood leaders. However, because emotional abuse usually takes place in private, where there are no witnesses, it is often difficult to find anyone willing to believe that the problem is serious. In fact, the abusive partner can be well liked and considered charming by other people. Says one woman, “People from our ward often tell me how lucky I am to be married to such a nice guy. I am confused by this. It is very painful for me to be with him.”

This lack of a sympathetic witness to the pain often leads to efforts to cope alone. This may result in a number of behaviors attributed to other causes:

- **Fighting back.** Some people fight back by employing the same abusive tactics as their partners. There is much heated argument and recrimination in such homes.
- **Suffering in silence.** Other people respond by stifling their feelings. To keep peace in the home, they see no alternative except to go numb and brave it out. Often they have trouble either laughing or crying, for feelings may have closed down.
- **Diverting feelings.** Still others retreat into depression or ill health. Discouragement from trying to make one’s voice heard and trying to receive justice, coupled with a determination to honor temple marriage covenants, may contribute

to the belief that the situation is hopeless, that one must endure a dysfunctional marriage. The pain may turn into depression or a variety of other problems, sometimes lasting for years, because the underlying cause is not correctly diagnosed. In serious cases, thoughts of suicide may even result.

Once a pattern of emotional abuse has developed, there is a risk that in some cases such hurtful behavior will escalate into physical abuse. The transition often begins with seemingly playful or accidental invasions of the spouse's personal space: standing too close; stepping on toes; not-so-gently shoving, hitting, or slapping for "fun"; and teasing that does not stop when a spouse asks for it to stop. If this, too, is tolerated, *further serious physical abuse may follow*. Men and women continually experiencing these supposedly playful invasions of personal space need to take a firm stand with their partner and *seek help now*. A spouse who *does not tolerate* such treatment will often stop a partner from moving any further down the road toward physical abuse. There is no guarantee that things will get better by waiting, praying for the partner to change, or assuming the partner means it when he or she promises it won't happen again . . . and it happens again. Both partner and spouse may need help.

A Christ-Centered Solution

The Lord Jesus Christ has shown us how to live in peace and happiness with one another. "Come unto me" is his invitation, "all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; . . . and ye shall find rest unto your souls" (Matt. 11:28–29). He has set us an example that, when followed in marriage, will open the door to a more peaceful relationship.

While effective change most rapidly takes place when two people work together to solve the problem, a spouse need not wait to begin to make

changes that can set the course of a marriage aright. Whether a couple works together on the problem or one spouse goes it alone, there are steps that can be taken immediately.

Seeking Change as a Couple

The following steps can help a couple begin the process of change:

- 1. Meet together.** Set a time to discuss the problem where you won't be disturbed. Begin with prayer to invite the Lord to guide each of you in what you say and to help you find solutions. Pray to have an open mind and heart.
- 2. Evaluate the problem.** It may be helpful to begin the discussion with a review of this article. Couples may find initially that they have a hard time pinpointing exactly how and when hurtful behaviors happen. However, once such a discussion has been held, awareness increases and damaging patterns become more visible.
- 3. Decide to do something different.** Once problems have been identified, a couple can work together to help each other replace old habits and patterns of behavior with new ones. One way to do this is to agree on a signal, either verbal or nonverbal, that alerts the partner to an unfolding problem. This takes courage on the part of the offended spouse and patience on the part of the abusive partner. Each will probably need to pray together and separately for the Spirit of truth and understanding.
- 4. Review often.** Initially, couples will probably need to meet together often to discuss the process and refine their methods for dealing with negative behaviors. For many, the process is one of unfolding both the severity of the problem as well as the sweetness of the solution. Ultimately, the yielding of hearts to the principles of the gospel will bring couples true companionship and love.