

## What to do when you don't know what to do...

Copyright Mike Marino, Ph.D. - 2009

1. Break it down to the smallest thing you can do and concentrate on that only. Perhaps it's brushing your teeth, shaving or taking a shower. It may take you hours to do just one of those things. Set one very small goal and just focus on that – don't look down the road. When you complete it you'll feel a sense of accomplishment. Don't make a list in your head, it will overwhelm you. One small thing at a time.
2. Wrestle with your thoughts in 2 ways.
  - A. Remind yourself that your current thoughts, feelings and actions are normal for someone who is struggling through separation and divorce. Give yourself a break. It's understandable.
  - B. Remember every day won't be like this. You won't feel this bad sooner than later. Even though it feels unending right now, it is not. This is temporary. You can make it through – millions have.
3. Make attempts to connect with someone. I say attempts because you may have to try several times. Phone is good, in person is much better. In-person forces you to move, either to get out of the house or at least off the couch to answer the door. In AA the people who have the highest success rate, by far, are those who have a good relationship with their sponsor. During your higher functioning times begin to put together an "emergency" contact list. Tell these people you may be calling them if you get in trouble and let them know they can do the same with you. If you don't have the basis for a relationship list like this – make "connection" opportunities a priority during your "good" times. It's important to have as many people as you can on your list – for two reasons. One, the more you have the more likely you'll find someone available when you need them. Two, no one person could or should be the repository for all your problems. They will wear out, just as you would if the roles were reversed. This is what kills many marriages. No one person can be your dumping ground, but everyone needs places to dump.
4. Move. Any way, any how. Walk, swim, ride a bike, march in place, stretch and if at all possible, do it with a friend. Nothing bad can come from this. It has significant mood-altering brain chemistry implications and it will re-enforce accurate thinking. Again, with movement comes a sense of accomplishment and possibility instead of failure and hopelessness.
5. Pray. It sounds so cliché and feels useless to the discouraged mind. Again, break it down to the shortest prayer you can muster. Ask for help. *Help!* Be honest – if you don't believe your prayer is being heard, be honest about that. But, scripture has an interesting take on hopeless prayers. **Matthew 9:7-12** *"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened."*

You may think “I’ve tried that, it didn’t work – I’m still struggling.” It’s almost as if God knew we’d be thinking that so here’s the next line... *“Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? <sup>10</sup>Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? <sup>11</sup>If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!*

OK, that gives you something to think about – if God is real and God is good, wouldn’t He at least help me as much as I’d help one of my kids? Do my kids always see it when I help them or feel they’re being helped when I allow pain into their lives?

Still the lingering question remains – if God sees how bad I’m hurting why doesn’t he just step in and fix it? I would not let my kids suffer like this.

Great thought and question. Why is there suffering? No one really knows for sure. But we do know that there are some good things that only come from suffering. Things like courage, character, wisdom, maturity, perseverance and empathy for other sufferers. In addition to all the rotten stuff, your suffering gives you a unique perspective and capacity to know what pain feels like. So, with that in mind God closes this section of scripture with an action step.

It’s the golden rule... <sup>12</sup>*So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you...* This gets us out of ourselves and into someone else. It takes the focus off our pain and helps create an environment where we build meaningful relationships that are healing and helpful.

### **What not to do...**

1. Bury your head in the computer. You can surf endlessly, engage in fantasy of all kinds and settle for a false “cyber-life”. Yes, sending e-mails, even chatting is a way of connecting and not necessarily a bad thing. But for those suffering with anxiety and depression the computer can become toxic medication and escape. Additionally, it keeps you isolated from actual human contact and re-enforces sedentary behavior, which is harmful for depressed and anxious brain function.
2. Bury your head in the TV. Such choices we have today. Hundreds of channels. Endless surfing can be a harmful distraction. It serves as an unnatural and unfruitful stimulant – only leaving you to want more. It, like the computer is most often done in isolation and while sedentary.
3. Make big decisions. Usually decisions made during this time have two bad outcomes. Either they are impulsive and short-sighted, or they are too grandiose for reality. Examples, buying a gun and killing yourself. That’s a permanent solution for a temporary problem. But people do it all the time. It’s an impulse decision made to stop the pain. Impulsive actions like buying a Ferrari, a new house or lots of new expensive clothing are temporary and ultimately self-defeating. It’s all just medication.

Or, we have grandiose plans to “turn our life around”. We spend a lot of time and energy formulating big plans – strict exercise regime, new diet, new job, more schooling, have more discipline in our spiritual life, etc. With every good intention the list becomes an overwhelming monster and one more evidence of our inability to do anything. We paralyze ourselves by making the task too big.

Look at it like joining a gym. If you’re in great shape, running every day or doing Jane Fonda aerobics at home you won’t have much trouble transitioning to the slightly different exercise routines. But, if you’re out of shape and you join a gym and run really fast and until you’re completely exhausted on the first visit, you’ll be so sore you likely won’t come back. It’s just too hard. Moreover, it wasn’t a good experience. If you’re in the pit and try to sprint to the mountain top, you’re setting yourself up for failure. Don’t do that – set yourself up to succeed by eating the whale in little bites.

4. No timetables. Again, this sets you up to fail, don’t do this to yourself. Rather than I’m going to do X by a certain time – leave it at “I’m going to do X”. Then take on the biggest part of “X” you can manage and move forward. As long as you’re moving forward you are winning. You are in the recovery process.
5. During the dark times, do not trust your judgment. Enlist as much helpful counsel as you can. Look for the sane, safe voices that can speak truth into your life. The healthiest of people can rarely be objective about themselves. At the bottom of your life season you are not objective. Get some outside eyes on your situation to assist you in decision making and planning.

### **One final thing to do and not to do...**

Give up – and never give up!

**Give up** control of everything outside of whatever small action steps you can and should take. And, when you take them don’t try to control the outcome!

**Never give up** embracing hope. Millions have made it through situations much like yours – you will too. Your situation is not as unique as it feels. Better days are ahead – hold on.

God has a plan and purpose for you. In your pain He offers this comfort...

1. Be still and know that I am God.
2. You don’t have to control everything.
3. I am in control.
4. I am doing things behind the scenes that you know nothing about.
5. Watch what happens.
6. It will be good.
7. Stay out of My way.