

COVER STORY

# Avoiding Compassion Fatigue

by Lynne Miller

“Can you come over and pray with Mom? She’s really bad.” pleaded the strained voice of my eighteen-year-old nephew, Jason. Several months earlier, my younger sister, Rachel, caved under the burden of poor health and personal crises. Despair eventually overcame her and threw her into the abyss of depression.

My body tensing, I took off for Rachel’s place.

When Rachel first hit bottom, I ramped up my time with her — watching TV, mall crawling and just spending time together. With my faith and prayers also ramped up, I expected that within a year Rachel would emerge from the abyss, healed and whole.

But this night made me wonder about a breakthrough. I found my sister sobbing and frightened — a long way from healing and wholeness.

## Questioning God

This was not the sister I had known for over forty years. How could this loving single mother and committed Christian be so hopeless? Wouldn’t she feel the presence of God anymore?

I wondered about God myself. Why did He seem so deaf to my prayers and blind to Rachel’s pain? Didn’t He promise a hope and a future for Rachel (*Jeremiah 29:11*)? Could He really make something like depression beautiful in His time (*Ecclesiastes 3:11*)? So far, nothing about the abyss was beautiful. And hope



and a future seemed well beyond the reach of God.

## Cries for help

After I prayed with Rachel, peace temporarily came over her. But I was wasted. While I lay in bed at home later, my thoughts raced: Can I trust Rachel to be alone? Will she kill herself? Will she call if she needs me? Sleep finally came that night; rest did not.

Rachel, it turned out, wasn’t the only one suffering. I was grieving for a sister I hardly recognized, but few knew the depth of my

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agony. Some days I spent hours crying. Everyday I awoke early and struggled to concentrate at work. One day a friend who knew about Rachel's depression innocently asked, "How's your sister?"

Resentment fluttered inside, and an unspoken question rose in my throat: What about me?

Looking back, I realize such reactions were cries for help — and normal for a family member coping with a loved one's depression. I eventually discovered that if I was going to survive the walk with Rachel through her abyss, I would have to take better care of myself.

### Understanding Depression

I began counseling sessions with a Christian therapist to find help with my

own struggles and to better understand Rachel's agony. I learned my struggle wasn't unusual. Mental health professionals even have labels for it — secondary trauma or compassion fatigue. It comes from prolonged efforts to help other suffering people or from working with victims of traumatic events. Professionals like counselors, physicians, and pastors can all suffer from compassion fatigue. So can any of us who invest great emotional and physical energy helping others. Parents with handicapped or seriously ill children, spouses of a loved one with a terminal illness, and adults caring for aging parents can all become weighed down with stress. Sleeplessness, intrusive thoughts, emotional and physical exhaustion, difficulty concentrating, depression, anger and anxiety can overtake any of us who are helping others for lengthy periods.

In counseling, I learned more about Rachel's depression. While we all have moods that linger for a time and then leave, Rachel's depressed mood lingered stubbornly. Its longevity categorized it as major depression, which can be caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain, traumatic life events, or a combination of both.

An online video showed me areas of the brain affected by depression. A list of symptoms matched nearly every behavior change I'd seen in Rachel: erratic moods, loss of appetite and sleep, lack of energy, isolation, confusion, apathy.

Each bit of information painted a picture of Rachel that made sense to me. I stopped regarding depression as a freak occurrence

and viewed it more like any other health condition. In time, I considered Rachel's therapy and antidepressants as God's provision — His way of giving my sister a hope and a future.

### Changing pace

Just as my initial understanding of Rachel's depression had been flawed, so were my attempts to help her. In straining to protect her from harming herself, I had nearly burned out.

No wonder. Dealing with depression, I learned, is a marathon, not a sprint. We could well be looking at years, not months, in this dark place. I would have to change my pace to make it through. Otherwise I could crash and burn. If I did I wouldn't be any good to Rachel, myself, or the rest of my family.

When Rachel cried on the phone, I learned to empathize but not to panic or to become overly involved. Though I still spent time with her, I resisted rushing to her side every time she called. I prayed God would watch over her instead. With my counselor, I shared my conflicted feelings between wanting to help but knowing I was trying to do too much. Just as people going through difficult times need someone to help bear their burdens, so do we caregivers. My counselor did this for me and that lightened my own load.

I also learned to cast my burdens about Rachel onto the One whose care for His

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## Agree with Your Adversary Quickly

By Dick Innes

“Agree with your adversary quickly” (*Matthew 5:25*).

hurting child outdid anything I could do for her (*1 Peter 5:7*). I journalled, dumping feelings only God knew onto pages only I would read. Words like fear and worry appeared before me as well as the irrational thoughts that had given them life. In time, I saw that my mind had raced ahead of God, creating its own scenarios instead of trusting in Him (*Proverbs 3:5*).

I soaked in scriptures about God’s faithfulness, strength and compassion. Long walks in the evenings settled my spirit, and dazzling sunsets gathered me closer to the Creator. Those end-of-day moments found me releasing Rachel to God, then gaining His unique peace (*John 14:27*) and rest for my soul (*Matthew 11:28-30*).

### God in the dark

It’s been two years since I started taking better care of myself while also supporting my sister. The deep grooves of grief in my heart have been smoothed out by the One whose presence in the abyss matches me step for step. I continue to lean and learn.

So does Rachel. She’s found the right balance of therapy and medication. And she’s found a wholeness different from what I envisioned at the start. It’s spiritual, forged by her desperate dependence on God. A women’s Bible study at church draws Rachel into the Word, and friendships with sisters in Christ coax her out of her shell. Prayer is her daily place of refuge. And she has come to a much deeper understanding of herself and her struggles through counseling.

I cheer Rachel on as I walk by her side, but I am no longer pulled into her deep despair. And I praise God that the signs of our mending are His way of making a dark place beautiful — in His time and in His ways. It’s not all up to me! †

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I have read how, on one occasion, the English evangelist George Whitefield (1714-1770) received a very critical letter accusing him of doing something wrong. His reply was brief and to the point: “I thank you heartily for your letter. As for what you and my other enemies are saying against me, I know worse about myself than you will ever say about me. With love in Christ, George Whitefield.”

Whitefield didn’t defend himself, probably because he wasn’t guilty of what he was being accused of doing. Very often the guiltier we are, the more defensive we become. Or we can become very defensive if we are more concerned about our image than we are about pleasing God, or if we are very insecure and have a need to appear “perfect” in our own eyes and those of others. In so doing the only person we fool is ourself!

I’ve been accused of some negative things on occasion and my immediate response has often been, “Yes, sometimes I am.” On those occasions I had no need to get defensive because I didn’t feel threatened or guilty. Even if I had been guilty, it would have been more constructive to admit my guilt and do all I could to put things right. Other times my first impulse was to defend myself or return the accusation. But if I examined myself I realized the best thing to do was keep quiet or agree with my accuser.

I think agreeing with our adversary means that in all conflict situations it is much more constructive to find a point of agreement than arguing or stressing our differences.

Suggested prayer: “Dear God, please help me when I am being accused or criticized, not to be defensive, but to find a point of agreement, and also to admit when I am in the wrong and do what I can to put things right. Thank you for hearing and answering my prayer. Gratefully, in Jesus’ name. Amen.” †

Dick Innes is the Founder and Director of Acts International and staff member of the Narramore Christian Foundation. You can access Dick’s Daily Encounter on the web at [www.actsweb.org/daily\\_encounter.php](http://www.actsweb.org/daily_encounter.php)



“I can accept criticism, except when it’s directed at me.”



# When it's Difficult to Love

by Dr. Clyde M. Narramore and  
Dr. Bruce Narramore

## Everyone Talks About Love

**M**ovies, television programs, poetry and musical lyrics emphasize it. Christians sing about it. And the Bible is filled with love verses. "Love one another as I have loved you" (*John 13:34*) and "By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, that you love one another" (*John 13:35*).

Love is one of the most important marks of a well adjusted person. We are created to love and reach out to others in compassion. But while we all know this, many people find it difficult to love others and to feel loved themselves.

## Barriers to Giving and Receiving Love

Many people love but can't express it. Others seem hardly to experience love at all. Let's begin with those who experience love but have difficulty expressing it. Perhaps the first cause is cultural. Some cultures are known for freely giving and receiving affection. Others value a more controlled or almost stoic like relational style.

When an entire culture is one way, children generally adapt to that style and marriage partners know what to expect by way of expressing love. But what happens when people from very different cultures marry? They each bring different expectations and if a woman from a highly expressive culture marries a man from a relatively non-expressive culture, she may conclude his lack of expressiveness is actually a lack of love. But he doesn't see it that way. He sees himself as faithful, responsible, stable, and kind. He thinks his wife wants him to go overboard with his emotions! In fact, he may think she is "too hysterical" or "too emotional". She should settle down a bit.

Family dynamics are a second source of difficulties giving and receiving love. Some children lack a parental model for giving and receiving affection. Steve, for example, had never heard his father say to his mother, "I love you." Nor did he hear his mother tell his father that she loved him. Steve grew up and married. He loved his wife and told her that a few times, but it was still difficult to freely express his love to her. He assumed that since he married her and was a generally good husband, she should remember that he loved her. Why should he repeatedly have to tell her? His wife, of course, felt very differently. She needed to hear that she was loved and special to her husband. It pained her when she didn't.

Neglect, abuse and other family dynamics during formative years may also prevent a person from experiencing love. Since love is learned by being loved, it is difficult to experience love if you have grown up in a home with an absent parent, an abusive or alco-

holic parent, or parents who were always fighting and unable to freely express their positive emotions. Children who grow up in this kind of home learn not to open up to others. They don't want to be hurt again so they build protective walls around themselves. If they don't let others in, they unconsciously reason, they won't be abused, rejected or hurt. This blocks their capacity to love and be loved.

Sexual abuse may be the most difficult abuse to overcome. When a person has been sexually abused, especially by someone he should be able to trust, it is extremely difficult to trust anyone else again, let alone to love and be loved in a close or vulnerable way. The shame, confusion, guilt, and loss of one's privacy and boundaries leave lasting scars that carry over into all later relationships. Abuse victims struggle to feel good about themselves and safe with others.

## Learning to Give and Receive Love

Let's say you are 30 or 40 or 50 years of age and have difficulty giving or receiving affection. How can you begin to change? First, admit that you have a problem. Then get it out in the open with someone. Start talking about it. That alone begins the healing



"He's pretty good at showing his emotions. A blank stare means he's angry, a vacant stare means he's sad, a distant stare means he's excited..."



process. For victims of abuse, this helps break out of the secrecy and shame that typically accompanies abuse.

Third, explore the reasons for your inability to love and be loved. Is it largely a cultural pattern? Did your mom or dad have trouble freely expressing loving emotions? Were you verbally or physically abused? Or were there other family dynamics or experiences that caused you to shut down emotionally so you wouldn't have to feel the pain of hurtful relationships?

Next, if you feel love but simply have difficulty expressing it, make a commitment to becoming more expressive. Difficulty loving is often part of a larger problem of expressing any emotion. If your feelings were treated insensitively or negatively in your childhood you may have learned to shut them down. That can work fine in certain technical problems and you may have become quite perfectionistic or achievement oriented. But when it comes to being aware of your emotions, it's like a faucet has been closed.

During a small group discussion at a week long seminar Jim admitted that he had never told his daughter he loved her. We asked him to tell us why he thought that was so. As Jim talked about several childhood experiences and relationships that made it difficult for him to express love openly, he realized he really wanted to be different. But he was afraid! He wouldn't even know how to begin and would feel quite awkward. Someone suggested that Jim write a letter to his daughter, and end with a "P.S. I love you!" Jim felt a bit relieved because that would be easier for him than to tell her in person so he said he would do it. Later he wrote to tell me that he was improving and now telling family members he loved them. At first he felt uncomfortable but he was gradually overcoming this serious handicap. And his wife and children were really appreciating his improved communication of his feelings. It may take time but we can break old patterns and develop new ones!

Fifth, remember that love isn't simply an emotion. Love involves actions, commitment, concern for others and certain ways of relating to people. The

famous love chapter of the *Bible*, *I Corinthians 13*, tells us that love is patient and kind and doesn't envy or boast. It isn't selfish and doesn't hold grudges or lose its temper easily. And it rejoices in truth. All of these are characteristics that we can all develop. *I Corinthians 13* is a wonderful chapter of the *Bible* to memorize and to settle in our hearts and minds what it is to be a loving person.

Sixth, seek to understand why people in your background were unable to show you love. It is easier to let in God's love and the love of others when you understand the dynamics of people in your childhood who were unable to love you well. Your mother or father probably had some very significant reasons they related to you as they did. They weren't trying to be unkind. They probably came from families with less than their share of happiness, emotional safety and abundant expressions of love.

Next, practice expressing your love and gratitude to God and taking in His love for you. Tell Him how much you love and appreciate Him. Meditate on His wonderful gifts to us, including his incredible creation, and read and memorize love verses like:

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (*John 3:16*).

"Greater love has no one but this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (*John 15:13*).

"Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God" (*I John 4:7*).

"Your love, O Lord, reaches to the heavens, your faithfulness to the skies" (*Psalms 36:5*).

Finally, if you still have a serious difficulty giving and receiving love you may have some emotional barriers that require professional help. Don't be satisfied to continue living the way you are. Seek help from a good Christian counselor who can help you break down your barriers to loving and being loved. God made us to love and be loved. In time you will be able to unlock your heart of love! You will be glad you did and so will those who love you. †

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# Emotional Abuse in Marriage: It's Probably Not About You!

by David Johnson

**T**ori\* gives a furtive glance at the clock as she places the bowl of potatoes on the dining table. Her green eyes widen. Six o'clock. The ancient Seth Thomas clock that belonged to her great-great-grandparents begins its slow marking of the hour. Her heart pounds in time to each strike of the hammer. The whirring of its ancient gears matches her racing thoughts. Her neck flushes and the familiar tightening in her throat returns.

"Adam will be home any minute," she says to no one in particular.

She checks the table to make sure everything is in place just as he wants it. His car pulls in the garage, and for a moment she freezes in place. Suddenly she notices she doesn't have his iced tea by his plate.

She races to the kitchen, her hair streaming in her wake. With a trembling hand she jerks open the cabinet and grabs a glass. In a perfect pirouette she flings open the freezer, throws ice into the glass and kicks the door shut. She pours the tea while hurrying to the dining table.

Then Adam opens the door.

Tori and Adam met on the tennis courts during college. Though his dark features and striking blue eyes had enticed her, she'd thought of him as rather arrogant and his competitive nature had rubbed her the wrong way.

Adam found her stunning features and athletic build irresistible. He charged after her with the tenacity of a hound after its prey.

Adam's persistent pursuit and attention made Tori feel special. She found herself enjoying his high-spirited, fun loving lifestyle. He graduated with an MBA, and she got a teaching certificate. Marriage followed that summer.

The early years were some of the most wonderful Tori had ever experienced. Adam showered her with attention, something she'd never seen growing up with her mom in a single-parent home.

But after five years, his attentiveness began to smother her. He didn't like her going places without him. He called her multiple times every day and was upset if she didn't answer him immediately. She made excuses to her friends for not staying in touch.

After ten years, his temper became more explosive. The smallest thing would set him off. He would scream and yell at her when something wasn't the way he wanted it. His tirades left Tori bewildered, wondering what she'd done to set him off, and she often cried herself to sleep.

Now, twenty years and three kids into the marriage, Tori feels broken and a failure. She bounces reactively to

Adam's moods. Her nerves are frayed on the edges. Hopelessness has pitched a tent in her heart.

With Adam's entrance into the house and the ringing of his keys dropping on the counter, the children scramble into the dining room one at a time. Adam strides purposefully into the room. He scans each child, then Tori standing by his chair. She nervously tucks her hair behind her ear and forces a pleasant smile.

"Don't do that to your hair," Adam snaps. "How many times have I told you it makes you look like a silly school girl?"

Adam's words are like a punch in the stomach. The rest of the evening passes as a blur, just as countless other evenings have. She berates herself over and over. Why didn't I leave my hair alone? Why can't I ever do anything right? Why can't I make Adam treat me like he used to?

Tori is a victim of emotional abuse. She arrives at my counseling office one summer afternoon, slump-shouldered and heavy-hearted, weighed down by emotional baggage and a long history of ever increasing cruelty in her marriage. Her carefully applied makeup cannot hide the premature creases at the edges of her eyes or the furrows on her forehead. As she sits down, a sigh escapes that carries the weight of hundreds of tongue lashings, disapproving scowls, and harsh critiques. I can practically smell the despair.

For the next several weeks Tori vomits the emotional residue that has accumulated for twenty years. As if the lid of an ancient sarcophagus has opened in an Indiana Jones movie, all the disquieted spirits escape.

Again and again she asks the questions that have tormented her during her life with Adam.

"Why does he treat me the way he does?"

"What have I done to make him hate me so?"

"Why am I so stupid and clumsy?"

"Why can't I make him love me?"

"What can I do to change him?"

I listen empathetically during these sessions, patiently waiting for the tsunami of Tori's misery to ebb. Experience has taught me that no one is interested in feedback from their therapist until they feel he has honored their story by an attentive listening.

As Tori begins today's session, she relates another episode of Adam's exploding and railing on her. She quickly shifts to questioning herself and what she did wrong.

I pause for a moment, like a surgeon about to make the initial incision for a delicate surgery. Then I venture a challenge to her self accusations: "Tori, have you ever consid-



ered that how someone treats another person probably says more about them than the other person?"

With a puzzled expression Tori says, "I'm not sure what you mean."

"Think about this. Two people are in a museum gazing at the same painting. One of them says, 'That is the most beautiful painting I have ever seen.' The other one says, 'That painting is junk. I wouldn't put it in my garage!'"

"Listening only to their comments, what do we learn about the painting?"

Tori pauses thoughtfully. "I guess we really don't learn anything about the painting."

"I agree. The only thing we really learn is what the two individuals like and don't like when it comes to paintings. And if a human life is a 'work of art,' then what people say about it may well give more insight into the people who make these judgments than the people they are judging."

Tori is silent. Her wary gaze tells me she is sifting what I have said, trying to discern my point and predict where it might lead her.

"Tori, I thought about this concept a long time before I started sharing it with people. What convinced me of its truth was looking at the crucifixion of Jesus.

"When we look at how those Jews and Roman soldiers treated Jesus, what do we learn about Jesus?"

"Nothing," Tori replies after a pause.

"But we learn a lot about the hearts of those Jews and Roman soldiers," I continued.

"Then when we look at how Jesus responded to those Jews and Roman soldiers, what do we learn about them? Again, nothing. But we learn a lot about the heart of Jesus."

Tori's broken sentences reveal a struggle to shift her way of looking at her relationship with her husband. She repeatedly made comments like "But Adam always said..." or "You mean I couldn't..." or "But I thought if I..." or "Are you saying...?"

"What I'm saying, Tori, is that how Adam treats you probably tells us a lot more about him than you. Of course you're not perfect but this isn't all about you."

Tori eases back in her chair, appearing relaxed for the first time since we met. In a quiet, resigned voice she says, "I can't make him love me like I want to be loved."

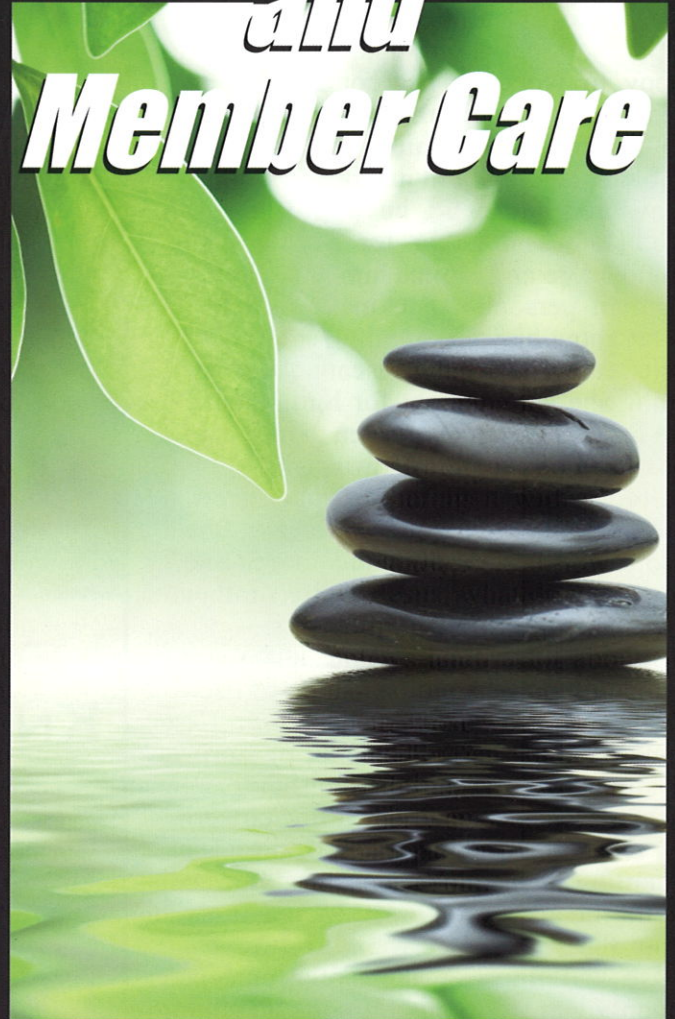
My silence acknowledges the truth she has spoken.

That session marked a significant turning point for Tori. With much hard work over several months, she learned to avoid the mental calisthenics she used to put herself through trying to predict what mood Adam would arrive in and how she should behave. She refrained from letting him draw her into pointless, circular arguing, the kind that used to leave her dizzy and confused. And she learned not to take the blame for his abusiveness. Like many physically or emotionally abused spouses, Tori had been accepting her husband's attacks and accusations because she was afraid to stand up to Adam. She was terrified that he would become even angrier and more abusive. But she realized she couldn't, and shouldn't, take it anymore. She was

EMOTIONAL ABUSE: continued on back page ►

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happy to work on her contribution to their marriage difficulties but Adam resolutely refused. To him, Tori was the problem. If she would just be the woman he wanted her to be, he would be just fine. He was looking for a wife who would adore and idolize him and give up her own personhood to make him feel better about himself.

He really didn't love or care about her at all. She was to exist for him, even if that destroyed her God-given dignity and value as a person in her own right.

Gradually Tori's confidence grew. She reconnected with friends. She stood straighter and smiled more. She began living a proactive life, rather than a reactive one.

Unfortunately, Adam did not react well to her healthy changes. He refused to accompany her to counseling. He wouldn't talk with their pastor or a professional Christian psychotherapist. He'd grown accustomed to her cowering and subservient attitude and to her accepting his rages. Adam's reaction to Tori's changes made it increasingly clear that he didn't want to stop his abuse and improve their relationship. He only wanted to maintain the abusive status quo.

Unfortunately, Tori's marriage did not survive. But Tori maintained a positive outlook on herself and her future. She realized that Adam's rejection of her was not about her. It was about him. †

*\*Names and characters are composites of real people, but modified to protect confidentiality.*

David Johnson received his Master's Degree in Social Work from the University of Tennessee and is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist. He serves as the Treatment Director of Spirit Lake Recovery, in McKenzie, TN, a facility for those recovering their lives from substance abuse and dependency.



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