

# WHEN MOTHER'S DAY IS DIFFICULT

BY HOLLEY GERTH

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On May 10th, we'll celebrate Mother's Day once again. For many, it's a time of appreciation and joy. For others, it can be one of the most difficult days of the year. This is often true for women facing infertility, families who have recently experienced the loss of a mother, and many other painful situations.

I've learned what it's like for Mother's Day to be difficult through my work as a writer for Day Spring. Each year we receive letters about our "Difficult Mother's Day" cards. One woman expressed her appreciation and then said, "I spent seven very painful Mother's Days longing for motherhood while dealing with infertility and the losses of eight children through miscarriage and failed adoptions. I've also seen my own mother's grief and struggle through Mother's Day after the death of her mother. And I have many friends in less-than-ideal situations with their children."

I've learned what it's like for Mother's Day to be difficult through my experience as a graduate student in the counseling program at John Brown University. As the final step to completing my degree, I'm doing an internship through the women's ministry and counseling center of my church, which has almost 10,000 members. I've walked the journey of grief with many and I've found that experiencing sadness on special occasions is common. These days often serve as reminders of what we have lost or do not yet have.

Finally, and most importantly, I've learned what it's like for Mother's Day to be difficult through my personal struggle with infertility. So as Mother's Day comes this year, I'd like to share a few thoughts with you. These are taken from my own journey as well as my training at DaySpring and in the Counseling program.

## **Embrace Your Emotions**

First, if Mother's Day is difficult for you then give yourself permission to grieve. When holidays come, we often put expectations on ourselves to feel a certain way. We may think, "This is a special occasion. I have to put on a happy face and make the best of it." But it's okay to feel sad and even cry. As the authors of *The Empty Chair: Handling Grief on Holidays and Special Occasions* say simply and powerfully, "We grieve because we loved." It's also helpful to realize that emotions are not good or bad. They are just messengers that tell us about what's going on in our lives. Sadness tells us, "You've lost something or someone important to you." It's not a sin to feel sad. Jesus often experienced sadness and the Bible says he was "a man of sorrows, and familiar with grief" (ISAIAH 53:3 NIV).

Sometimes we need to help others understand our sadness. People who are trying to comfort us may say things like, "At least your loved one is in a better place now." Words like these can make us feel guilty for being sad. People who say these things are often really trying to tell us, "I care about you. I want you to feel better. So I'm going to say anything and everything I can

think of that might help." Sometimes we need to gently share with those around us that what we really need is for them to just be there and listen.

In Psalm 13 King David pours out his heart to the Lord and asks, "How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart?" He ends by saying, "I will sing to the Lord, for he has been good to me." Does that mean we need to go from feeling broken to blessed in just a few lines? No, absolutely not. But it does show us something important about emotions. They are meant to be detours rather than destinations. If you continually feel sad over an extended period of time, or it seems as if there is no hope, then you may want to consider getting help.

### **Seek Support**

Sometimes we need to be alone to experience our emotions, but usually it is wise to seek support. From the very beginning of creation, God said it wasn't good for man to be alone. This is especially true when we are grieving. Jesus modeled this when he was in the Garden of Gethsemane. He brought several of his disciples with him and said, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me" (MATTHEW 26:38 NIV). Support can take many different forms. Hopefully, you have close friends and family members who can walk through this time with you. It's important not to assume they know you need their comfort. Unless they have experienced a similar loss, they don't know what it's like. So don't be afraid to call them or tell them what you need. You won't be imposing. They probably want to help but don't know what to do. Even family members and close friends can grow weary at times, so it's helpful to have other sources of support. Counselors can be a great source of support because they're trained to work with loss. Support groups can also provide comfort. You can learn from those who are further down the road and offer help to those just beginning their journeys. Of course, our strongest supporter will always be God. This may not feel as if it is true, especially during a time of loss in our lives. Right now you may be angry at God, disappointed in him, or feel as if you don't have any faith left at all. That's normal and many godly people throughout history have experienced similar feelings. God understands that you are hurt. It's okay to bring all of those emotions to him. Normal grief and mourning can turn into serious depression. One of the symptoms of depression is withdrawing and isolating ourselves from others. If you find you are cutting off relationships, have no desire to be with other people, and are spending much more time alone than usual, it may be a sign that you're experiencing depression.

### **Do Something Special**

While doing something special when you are sad may feel a bit overwhelming, it's important because it will help you be proactive rather than reactive in addressing your loss. Many people think that it's better to avoid or bury their grief. But the opposite is actually true. Healing only comes when we acknowledge and embrace our losses. As Dr. Gary Oliver says, "If you bury an emotion, it's always buried alive." The kind of action you take depends on your personality and the nature of your loss. For example, if you lost your mother then you might write her a letter. If you lost an unborn child, you might donate to a crisis pregnancy center in his or her honor. You and your spouse might look at photos of the sister you lost to breast cancer or visit a place

where you used to go together. You may think, "But that will make me sad!" That's okay. Experiencing grief is part of healing.

Grief and Trauma Counselor H. Norman Wright even recommends a "programmed cry" in which you set aside a specific time to grieve and place yourself in an environment where you are able to do so. He says in *Recovering from Losses in Life*, "Some of us have never learned to cry. We are afraid to really let go with our tears. We live with fears and reservations about crying. We cry on the inside but never on the outside." Each time you allow yourself to grieve through tears, it will become a little bit easier to do so. You can also simply do something nice for yourself. If you enjoy going to restaurants, then have a special meal with a friend or spouse. If you like taking long walks or bubble baths, make time in the day for that activity. Part of getting through grief is taking care of you. As long as it isn't something harmful or numbing, doing something special for yourself can help you through a difficult day.

### **Hold Onto Hope**

At one point in my journey it seemed as if I couldn't take another step. In addition to infertility, I was facing several other losses. I felt as if I were in a dark cave. But then I sensed the Lord gently and lovingly speak to my heart, "You may be in a cave, but you still have a choice. You can sit in despair or you can diamond-mine your difficulties." I decided I was not leaving that time in my life empty-handed. I was taking every hidden blessing I could find. Of course, I still had difficult days. But choosing hope made a difference. As a reminder, I now wear two rings. The one on the fourth finger of my left hand represents my commitment to my husband. The one on the fourth finger of my right hand is a simple silver band inscribed with the word "hope" and it represents the commitment I have made to God and myself to hold onto hope no matter what happens. The story of an inspiring woman named Terrie also reminds me to hold onto hope. She endured the loss of four pregnancies and waited seventeen years before adopting a little girl. She told me, "I think one of the most important parts of this journey is learning to trust God. I don't mean the flippant kind of trust. It's easy for people to say, 'You just need to trust God.' It's much harder when you're in the middle of all this pain. But he is trustworthy. Through it all, God has given us an amazing story. I wouldn't have chosen this road, but he has been with us. I can look back and truly say every step was worth it." I don't know how my journey will end and you probably don't know how yours will either. I also don't know how many of you will be silently grieving your losses as we sit in church together on May 10th. But I do know that God sees each one of us. He knows how many hairs are on our heads and how many cares our in our hearts. Whatever you're going through this Mother's Day, you're not facing it alone. As King David, a man who experienced many losses in his life, expressed in Psalm 34:18 NIV, "The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit." May God surround you with love, fill you with hope, and give you strength for each moment—especially this Mother's Day.

Holley Gerth is an award-winning writer and editorial director for DaySpring. Her new devotional book, *Rain on Me: Devotions of Hope and Encouragement for Difficult Times* (Summerside Press), is now available online and in book stores. Holley is also a counseling intern for the women's ministry and care center of a mega church with close to 10,000 members. She has been married to her collegesweetheart, Mark, for almost nine years. Holley is not a morning person and once put chocolate on her alarm clock to bribe herself but ate it and went back to bed. You're invited to find encouragement any time of day on her blog, *Heart to Heart with Holley* (<http://holley.Dayspring.com>)