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I am humbled by and indebted to the men and women who have entrusted me with their personal stories. With names being changed, I

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have included a few of those stories to help the reader see how to apply the *Help Me Help Others* concepts in the context of a caring relationship.

At the risk of excluding some key people, there are a few who deserve special recognition. Thank you to Kristine Steakley, Glenn Stanton, and Loretta Goddard for reading earlier drafts and providing helpful and encouraging feedback. Many thanks are due to the team at Redemption Press for their support and professionalism. My dear friends and accountability partners, David Olshine and Hule Goddard were with me from the beginning of this project and have tirelessly prayed with me through its completion. Thank you David and Alice, Daphne and Steve, and John for the physical, emotional, and spiritual support you provided during my bone marrow transplant and in my ongoing battle with MDS.

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INTRODUCTION

—HELP IS ON THE WAY



“**T**he Sovereign LORD has given me a well-instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being instructed” (Isaiah 50:4). I have found few things in life more fulfilling than providing words of encouragement and hope to those who are weary. Isaiah understood that the source of these life-changing words must always be the Sovereign Lord. This verse provides an important reminder that listening to God must precede talking to others.

In an information-saturated world, a simple call or click creates access to vast amounts of relationship advice. There is one drawback. How do we know which advice we can trust? “There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death” (Proverbs 14:12). Have you ever considered the cost of bad advice? A young adult is encouraged by friends to pursue a relationship that should have been avoided. A married couple with a history of conflict is advised to throw in the towel when, with the proper help, they could have developed an amazing partnership. Well-intentioned presenters at a marriage conference offer simplistic solutions to complex problems, thus setting couples up for a post-weekend crash, feelings of despondency, and the conclusion that their relationship is beyond repair. Even trained professionals are at risk

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for causing significant harm when they offer advice after hearing only one side of the story. Maybe this is what James, the leader of the early church, had in mind when he wrote, “Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly” (James 3:1). A modern-day paraphrase might read, “If you are going to offer people advice about how to live, expect to be held accountable for whether it helped.”

People come to us in pain, they want relief, and we want to help. How do we decide what kind of help to offer? I am wary of caregivers who offer a one-size-fits-all approach. They suggest that problems can be cured by following their prescribed “to-do” list. A much more respectful approach is to embrace people in their pain and to begin identifying its source. Is it self-inflicted, a result of harm done by others, or an invitation for deeper growth? It is important to consider the third possibility because one of the most damaging beliefs in Christian counseling is to assume that if someone is in pain, they must be out of favor with God. Both the Bible and church history provide numerous examples of God using mild discomfort all the way to severe distress as a precursor for deep personal and spiritual growth. Unfortunately, often due to misguided teachings, people don’t allow pain to guide them to deeper truths about themselves or to receive God’s comfort because they falsely believe that he should never have allowed them to suffer.

This book was written for compassionate individuals who want to become better equipped to help people who are struggling in their relationships. The practical tools you are about to receive were developed and refined over thirty-five years and many thousands of hours spent listening and responding to people facing relationship challenges. I am grateful for their willingness to include me in their healing process. I am also deeply indebted to my marital lab partner for our thirty-seven year ongoing dialogue. As a patient listener, provider of feedback, and pursuer of God’s love and truth, Sue has enriched my life in ways that words cannot capture.

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A final word of caution is warranted for those who are looking for quick-fix formulas; this book will not be very satisfying. If, on the other hand, you are interested in learning how to help individuals explore the deeper issues of their heart and how to embrace God's design for relationships, you will find some valuable resources.

You will notice that each major relationship concept is presented with a diagram. The diagrams provide a concrete way to discuss and apply the relationship principles. My hope is that they are profound in both their relevance and simplicity. Feedback from clients and students suggests that the concepts presented in the diagrams are not limited by age, gender, education, or culture. I trust that with the Holy Spirit's guidance you will know the deep satisfaction of using these diagrams and concepts to help hurting people put into words what was previously a jumbled mix of thoughts and emotions. In fact, the concepts used in this book have a language of their own. Terms such as Plugs, Inner Room, Living Sacrifice, Critical Pause, and Forgiveness Marker will provide you and the people you help with a common language for describing the healing, restorative process you share. May you be filled with mercy and grace as you move forward in your eternally-significant endeavor to connect with those who need your help.

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Jesus announced the start of his redemptive work on earth by saying, “The time has come ...” (Mark 1:15). For centuries there had been talk about this day and now it had arrived. From this point forward, everyone who heard about the Messiah Jesus would have to make a choice: to believe in him or to reject him.

With his next words, “The kingdom of God has come near,” Jesus announced that God’s reign would now be established in the hearts of those who believed in him (see Mark 1:15). We no longer have to remain in the grip and under the reign of a sin nature. We can be set free to live as God intended. The life God intended begins each day with an invitation to be loved, to live by the truths found in the Bible, to invest in things of eternal significance, and to maintain a focus on others and especially on those who are suffering. The main purpose of this book is to help you help others live this kind of life.

Jesus concluded his inaugural announcement with the words, “... Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15). Jesus made it clear from the start that he was not an add-on to life, but the starting point for a life of total surrender.

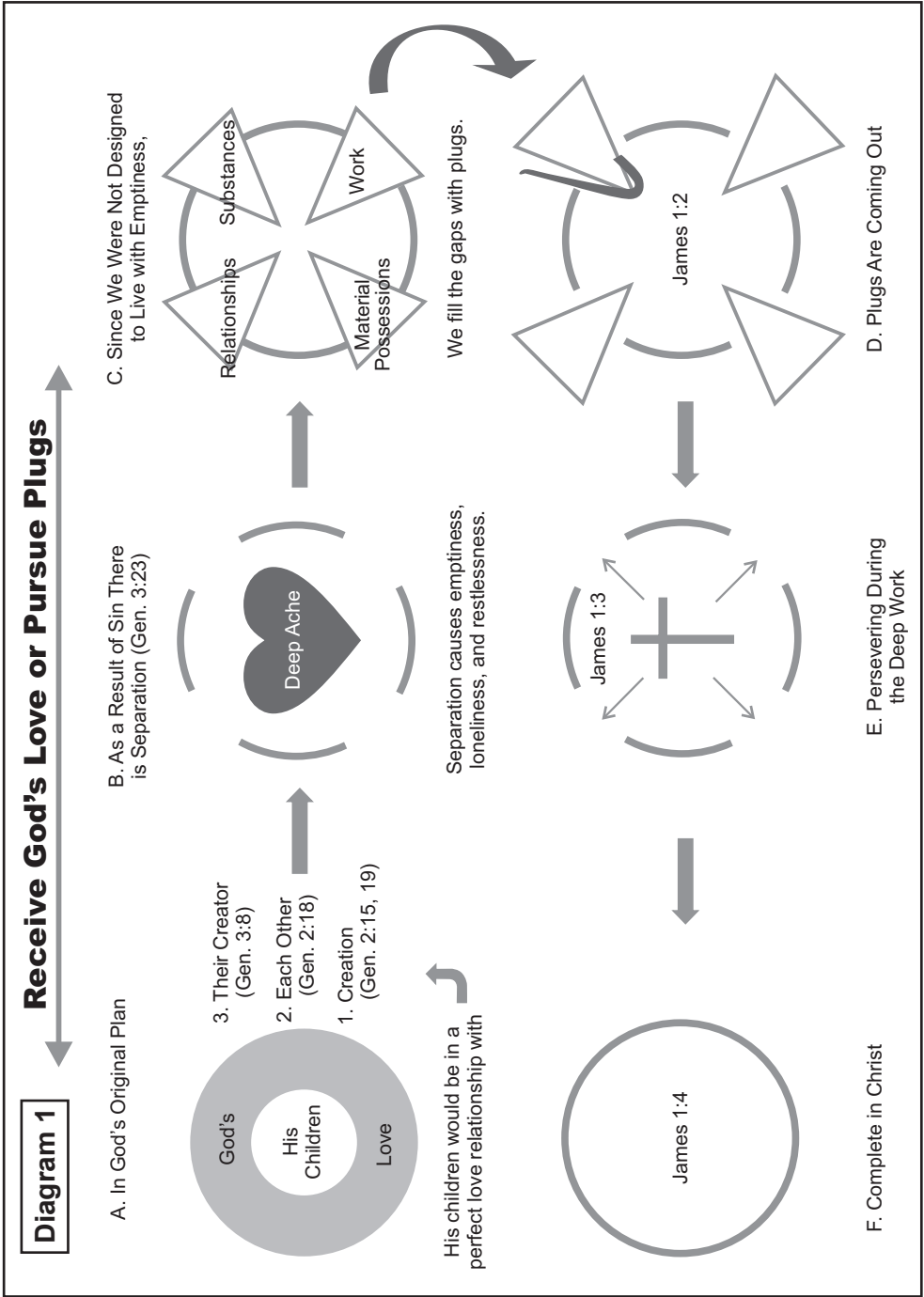
The good news of God’s redemptive plan needed to be shared and explained, so after his announcement, “Jesus went throughout Galilee,

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teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people” (Matt. 4:23). Then, as now, hurting people were struggling to make life work. Jesus responded to their needs by presenting life-changing truths and offering powerful expressions of compassion. In one of his last conversations with his disciples before returning to heaven Jesus said, “... As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (John 20:21). For those who care to notice, hurting people are still searching for life-changing truths and are waiting for powerful expressions of compassion. Like those disciples of long ago, Jesus is calling us, his modern day disciples, to replicate his example.

There is something unsettling about being asked to emulate someone who in his time of greatest need was abandoned by his friends and then crucified! To truly emulate him, we will need to see people the way Jesus sees them. This will require the ability to see what is not seen. Perhaps this is why Jesus ended so many of his talks with a reminder that the true meaning of his teachings could only be grasped by those who had spiritual eyes and ears. It is as if Jesus wanted his followers to realize that what they saw only represented a small fraction of what was taking place in the world around them. There is a spiritual realm and created order of which this world only gives us a faint glimpse.

Jesus made it clear that the primary implication of living with two co-existing worlds—one material and one spiritual—is that we must choose between them. “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other” (Matt. 6:24). The kingdom of the world and the kingdom of God are in direct competition. James, a leader of the early church, described the competition this way, “You adulterous people, don’t you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God” (James 4:4). The lines are drawn and choices are required. The competition is fierce because of what is at stake. Will we pursue what this world has to offer as our ultimate goal or will we hunger to see God’s kingdom ways done “... on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10)?



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One of the best services we can provide others is to help them clearly see what the different kingdoms offer and to be available with outstretched arms if and when their choices do harm. If we identify ourselves as Christ followers, then our approach to helping people will be similar to his. Specifically, we will present the kingdom truths found in the word of God to hurting people, in the context of a loving relationship, under the full influence of the Holy Spirit.

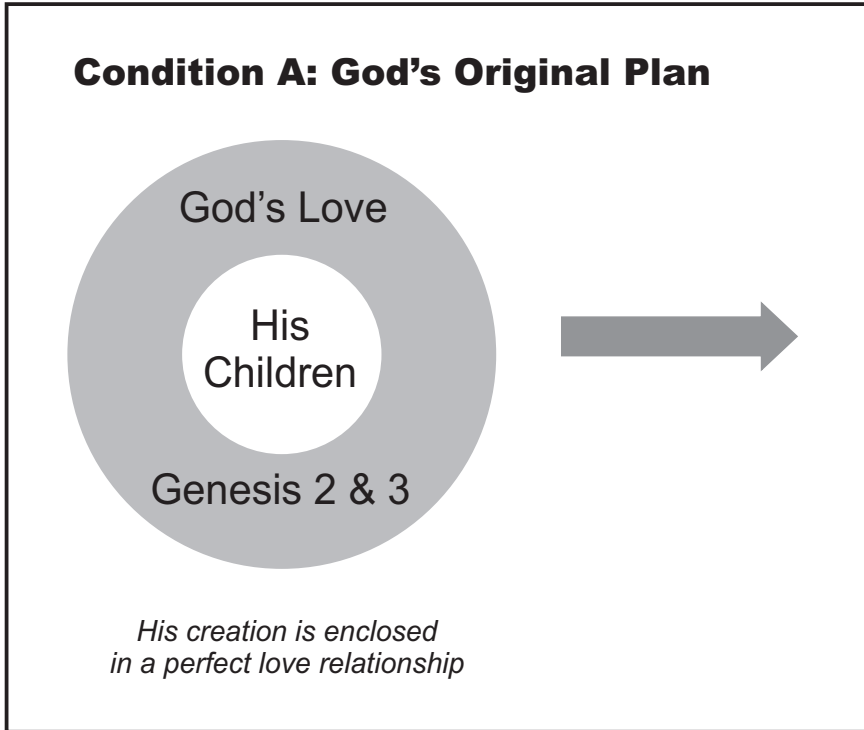
Diagram # 1 is the first of several diagrams provided in this book to help you help others in a manner consistent with Jesus' model. It is a great place to start your counseling because it begins with God's original design for his creation, explains what happens when we live outside the design, and provides a hopeful look at how God restores us. This diagram also offers a big-picture perspective of what will take place in counseling, which can be very reassuring to those who need to see a plan of action and for those who are leery of the counseling process. As you guide individuals through the six conditions shown in the diagram, they will begin to:

- Grasp God's desire for a personal relationship (Condition A).
- Realize what sin does to cause separation (Condition B).
- Identify current solutions and evaluate how well they are working (Condition C).
- Explore how God lovingly intervenes (Condition D).
- Accept that the most important work will require a change of heart (Condition E).
- Grow into a place of completeness in Christ (Condition F).

Each condition provides an opportunity for dialogue with individuals about what is not working in their lives, a realization of why it is not working, and a specific plan for what can be done to change. The pace for going through the conditions will vary from person to person. I suggest doing a big picture overview of Diagram

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1, and then going back and spending as much time as needed on the specific conditions.



The best way to understand the heart of the Creator is to examine his creation. At the very foundation of God's creation is the idea of relationship. In the first three chapters of Genesis we gain a glimpse of Father, Son, and Spirit expressing intimacy through a design that included a perfect love relationship:

1. with Creation, which provided Adam with a sense of purpose and freedom as caretaker of the garden and the one who named the animals (Genesis 2:15, 19-20)
2. between Man and Woman, which provided Adam and Eve with emotional connection and enjoyment of each other (Genesis 2:18; 20b-23)

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3. with the Creator, which provided Adam and Eve with the opportunity to walk and talk with God “in the cool of the day” about the intricacies of his design (Genesis 3:8)

Mike was a likeable guy who was spiritually and emotionally bankrupt. His journey of faith began in a church he described as friendly toward kids. Some of his best childhood memories came from the summer camps and special programs he attended while at this church. After his parents divorced, however, Mike moved with his mother and two younger siblings across town and began attending what he called an angry church. The junior high school years were the worst of his life. During these years his image of God was shaped by an earthly father who abandoned him and by a heavenly father who, his church told him, was constantly disappointed with him. Mike’s college years were marked by a time of searching that fluctuated between weekend fraternity parties and conversations with the leader of a Christian organization on campus.

When Mike came to see me for counseling there was little in his life that reflected the Creator’s original plan for perfect love relationships. In the five years since college he had tried three different jobs and felt as clueless as ever about his purpose in life. He was in his second serious relationship with several false starts mixed in. God seemed as distant as ever. Out of a sense of desperation Mike was motivated to search for some answers. Deep down he sensed that his unresolved issues with God were at the core of what was missing.

Mike’s life provides an example of the human dilemma. He knew his life was missing something, but he could not find a remedy because he did not yet understand the cause of the problem.

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Pause to Consider

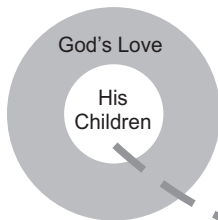
What did Mike need from our first few meetings? It may seem obvious, but the first step in helping Mike was to become interested in his story. By carefully listening to his story and enjoying him as the storyteller, I was able to establish a connection with Mike. In an atmosphere where he felt heard, accepted, and even enjoyed, Mike found himself talking about things he had never shared with anyone.

My challenge was to determine how much of his story I needed to hear. Too much and we could get bogged down. Too little and Mike may not feel like I understood. A helpful guideline to follow is to get as much of the story as is needed to begin seeing some reoccurring themes or patterns. At most of the critical junctures in Mike's story, a "disappointment" theme stood out. By following the disappointment theme as we worked through Diagram 1, Mike was able to recognize the source of his disappointment and why his attempts to make it go away (plugs) were unsuccessful.

Condition B: Sin Separates

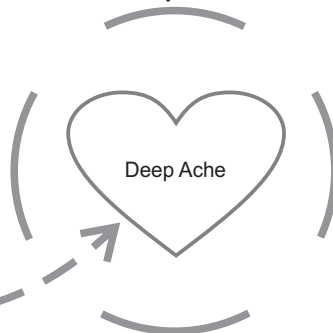
Condition A:

God's Original Design



*His creation is enclosed
in a perfect love relationship*

Condition B: *Sin Separates*

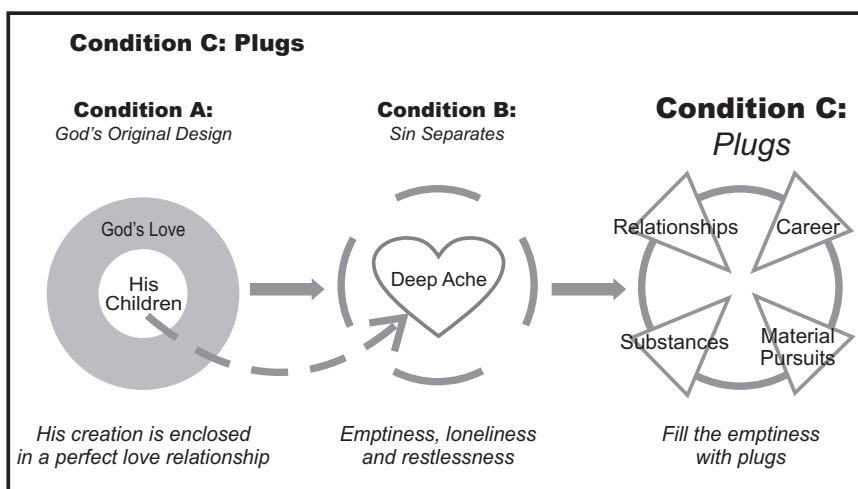


*Emptiness, loneliness
and restlessness*

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God created us in perfect love, and then, out of that same love, gave us the choice to receive the offer of relationship on God's terms or to question whether he could be trusted. When Adam and Eve chose not to trust God's love, sin entered their lives and did what it does best: created a separation between them and God. Since then everything in God's creation has felt the effect of living in a way it was not created to live. Paul describes this condition with these words: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time" (Rom. 8:22).

I explained this to Mike by taking the inner circle (His Children) of Condition A and moving it to Condition B. Separated from God's original design of a perfect love relationship, His children become broken and empty. With a look of frustration Mike said, "I'm not sure whether I'm more frustrated at God for creating his plan this way, or for what sin has done to steal it from me." Other words used by clients to describe Condition B include loneliness, restlessness, emptiness, darkness, and despair. Mike and I summarized it as a deep ache in the heart.



Because Condition B is such a miserable place to exist, we often devote all of our energy toward finding relief. Relief can come from a

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variety of sources, described as the “plugs” of Condition C. The purpose of a plug is to fill up the holes in Condition B with pleasures, distractions, or pursuits. As a way of avoiding the real issue, our separation from God’s love, we pursue plugs to take our mind off the inner emptiness and fill the emptiness with a temporary fix. The solution is only temporary because external solutions will never satisfy our inner needs. Solomon expressed this when he said, God “set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end” (Eccl. 3:11). With eternity set in our hearts, only that which has eternal significance—namely, what is done under God’s power, with his blessing, and for his glory—will provide lasting fulfillment.

Plugs may not be bad things in and of themselves. Their merit is determined by one’s purpose for using them. As Mike and I explored the concept of plugs, he suddenly understood why he spent so much time and energy in the pursuit of female companionship, his “plug of choice.” The high he experienced at the start of a new relationship was an effective temporary solution for the deep ache in his heart. All too soon, however, the realities of what was required for a deep and lasting relationship kicked in. As the infatuation faded, Mike began searching for the high of a new relationship. Mike’s desire for companionship was not a bad thing. Mike desired companionship because that is how God wired us. Now, however, he realized that by operating outside of God’s plan for relationships, he was simply using women to fill an emptiness that could only be met by his Creator.

Mike expected his potential partners to accomplish what is humanly impossible, and therefore, set his relationships up for guaranteed failure. Others choose equally ineffective plugs, such as when individuals who are so desperate for relief from loneliness allow themselves to be physically or emotionally abused. They know what is happening is wrong, but choose not to break free from the destructive relationship. If they could put words to their inner pain, they might tell us that “a bad plug is better than no plug.”

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Others choose plugs like their career, material pursuits, or substances with similar results. When the effects of using a small amount of the plug are not strong enough to numb the pain, more commitment to or preoccupation with the plug is necessary. A plug dependency can quickly develop. For many people the deep ache is so strong they need a combination of plugs. In his state of spiritual and emotional bankruptcy, Mike said the career plug was not working, the substance plug was effective for a while but no longer, and he did not want to hurt any other women by using them as relationship plugs. He laughed and said, “I have never made enough money to get caught up in the material possessions plug.”

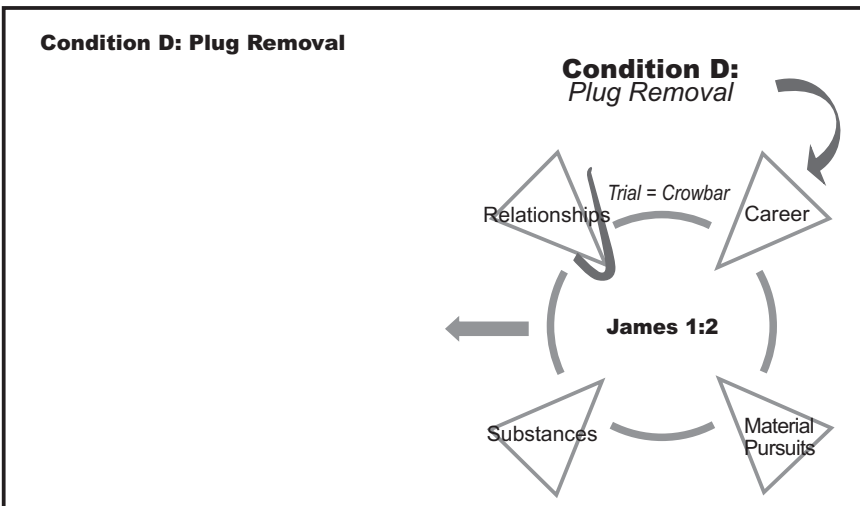
Some plugs are surprising because they seem so wholesome. Is it possible that children can become a plug? There is nothing wrong with wanting to be the best parent possible, but what if that desire is driven by a need to be needed or to find one’s identity in the success or well-being of the children?

Religious involvement provides one of the best plugs available. What could be better than getting praised for doing good deeds while at the same time avoiding one’s inner work? Religious involvement as a plug is so effective because it causes us to feel good about ourselves, often provides positive feedback from those we serve, and most importantly leaves us so exhausted that there is no time or energy to “Be still, and know that [he is] God” (Ps. 46:10).

Remember, these items are not bad in and of themselves. Our misuse of them is what makes them a plug. A plug might be physical fitness, shopping, recreation, entertainment, social media, sports, or food. During the past six months four different couples have come to me for counseling because one of the partners was spending excessive time playing online games. In two of the cases, the gaming spouse had developed a strong emotional bond with an opposite gender playing companion. The virtual world provided a captivating way of plugging the painful reminders of a faltering marriage.

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Whether due to religious involvements, career demands, trying to give our kids the best, or any of the other demands for our time, many people can relate to Mike's words: "It seems like something is missing." Even as we complain about the pace of life, maybe we resist making changes because the anesthesia of busyness is serving a greater purpose, helping us avoid feeling and facing Condition B. How tragic to realize that one has spent an entire life pursuing a temporarily effective plug, while avoiding the most important life questions. Just as painfully tragic is the realization that much of what goes on in the helping professions is nothing more than finding better ways to manage existing plugs or exploring strategies for incorporating new ones.



Mike pursued therapy because his plugs were no longer working. I cannot explain why God chooses to come after us when he does, but in Mike's case the process of plug removal had begun. God shows himself as a jealous lover of his people in the book of Hosea (see Hos. 13:4). When he formed a covenant relationship with his chosen people, God made it clear that he would not tolerate their pursuit and worship of other gods (see Ex. 20:3-5). God desired an intimate, exclusive relationship with his people. He desires the same of his people today. As Mike's plugs began to

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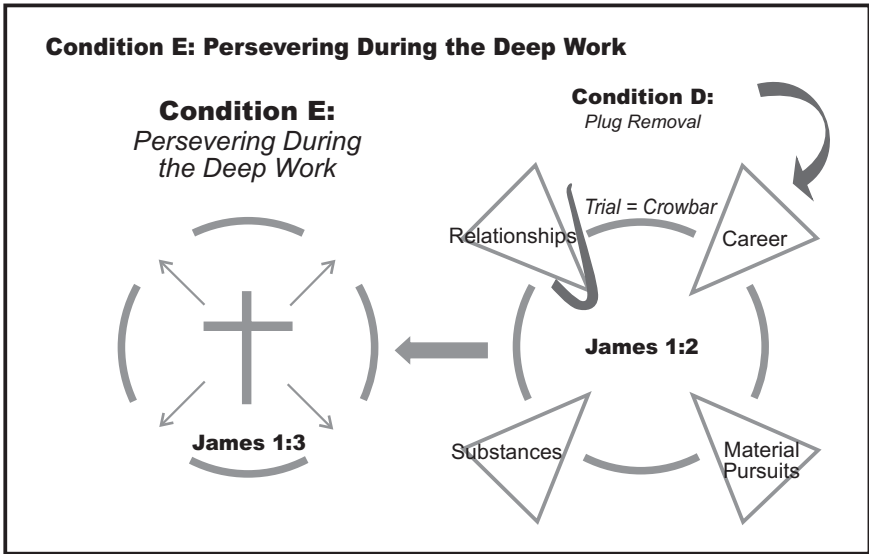
fail, God was in the process of restoring with Mike what a sin-controlled nature had rejected and avoided: an intimate relationship. For this to happen, Mike's plugs had to be removed.

I had a difficult time understanding, let alone applying, the words of the apostle James: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds ..." (James 1:2) until I saw it as a good description of plug removal. Trials have a way of getting our attention, especially those trials beyond our ability to fix. James was writing to early believers whose well-being was threatened by religious persecution. As their spiritual leader, James wanted the early Christians to know that their trials were serving the purpose of producing something positive in them.

The same principle applies in our growth, as trials become the crowbar God uses to pry out our plugs. Mike realized that his relationship trials were God's crowbar to help him see that this plug was not working and needed to be removed. Plug removal is painful! Letting go of our comfort fixes is never easy. That is why we need help doing it. Why, then, does James describe it as "pure joy"? Finding joy in pain sounds masochistic. In this process, however, the joy comes from knowing that a loving God is pursuing us with the good intentions of restoring us to his original plan, enveloping us in a perfect love relationship. We no longer have to make do with unfulfilling substitutes.

At this point in the process, many people find that their unresolved feelings about God's love begin to surface. Some individuals will describe a time when their sin separated them from God and they cried out to him only to hear no response. Others will remember a time when they were between plugs and they considered God as a possible answer only to find that the churches they visited or the people they knew who claimed to be followers of God seemed uninterested or too distracted by their own problems. Some, like Mike, will admit that they still struggle with the image of a constantly disappointed God. Mike added that, even though as an adult he could accept the idea of a loving God, he did not know if he could expect to ever experience or feel that love. To sort out these issues requires some deep work.

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When someone reaches this stage of the process, they realize that their plugs are no longer the solution to what is wrong with their life. God has graciously pried out the ineffective plugs. Now instead of looking for external plugs to make life work better, a change begins to take place from within. Paul used the words “being transformed into [Christ’s] image” to describe a process undertaken by every true follower of Jesus (2 Cor. 3:18).

While every believer experiences this process, the speed and degree of change will vary greatly from person to person. In Mike’s case, his relational growth was stunted by a history of superficial relationships and therefore moved slowly. On the other hand, he suddenly developed a voracious appetite for God’s Word. Mike said, “The Bible lessons and stories I grew up with are now becoming personal. How could something written so long ago be so real today?”

The symbol of the cross with arrows pointing outward in Condition E illustrates that God’s rule and his kingdom ways of operating are now permeating all of the person’s life. Remember the announcement Jesus made at the beginning of his earthly ministry: “The time has come.... The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good

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news!” (Mark 1:15). Whether into the chaotic middle-eastern world of his day, or into the life of a confused twenty-six-year-old named Mike, Jesus’ entrance becomes the pivotal point through which everything else is given meaning. With God taking hold of Mike’s heart, there was much more honesty in his description of his inner struggles. Honesty led to heartfelt confession, which produced a genuine repentance. Mike described this repentance as “losing my desire for what didn’t work.” For the first time in his life he believed the good news of what Jesus did to set him free. Mike realized that he had been sitting in a prison cell, when Jesus had already unlocked the door.

Sitting with people as they overcome the despair of being separated from God by their sin, the false hope of plugs, and the painful process of plug extraction takes a toll, but the sheer joy of joining the Spirit in the deep work that is the final stage of this process makes it all worthwhile! I sense Paul was experiencing the exhilaration of watching the Ephesians move into a place of persevering in the deep work when he wrote:

I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

(Eph. 3:16-19)

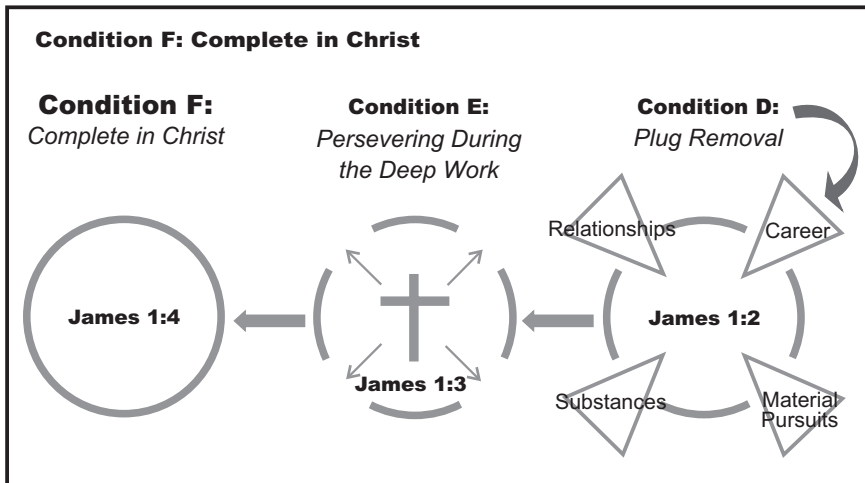
The transformation process is moving along quite nicely, but we are not out of the woods yet. Perseverance is needed as this new faith gets tested (see James 1:3). Perseverance reminds us that although the plugs are out, they are still lurking. Since transformation is the process of becoming aware, letting go, and being filled with the Holy Spirit, we will continue to experience times when the newness of what is happening is challenged by a longing for what is familiar. Even though Mike knew

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his plugs were not the answer, he found the old patterns were hard to break. Torn between the new and the comfortably familiar, Mike could relate to Paul's words, "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.... For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out" (Rom. 7:15, 18b).

Perseverance means trusting the life-changing process even when it feels like it is not working or is taking too long. During these times of soul searching and uncertainty, the most therapeutic thing a helper can do is offer encouragement for the progress already made, perspective that the current struggle has purpose, and assurance that someone who cares is present. In other words, the helper provides the gift of hope and the fellowship of a true restoration companion.

I was privileged to be Mike's restoration companion as he experienced the transformational change of becoming more like Christ. As he persevered through the highs and lows, the stops and starts of Conditions B through E, he began to get a glimpse of what was available in Condition F. What he saw appeared to be the promised land of completeness in Christ, or as James described it, "let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (James 1:4).



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Our goal is to help people live as close to Condition F as possible. We desire to see them operate from a place of completeness in Christ because that is where they reconnect with God's original plan: a perfect love relationship with creation, each other, and their Creator. Moving toward completeness in Christ allows people to engage in relationships out of the overflow of having been loved well. It is a place of fullness, not longing.

The lies of the plugs are exposed as promises that can't be delivered. A radically transformed heart finds its deepest fulfillment in the oneness that comes from Father, Son, and Spirit intimacy. Chapter 2 provides a deeper look into how to receive God's love as the starting point for everything else we do.

Reflection Questions

1. Which condition (B–E) describes where you live? (You may be in more than one.)
2. What words would you use to describe your Condition B? For example, empty, restless, searching, lonely, discouraged, etc.
3. What are your past and present plugs? Which were / are the hardest to give up?
4. Review your pace of life. To what degree are you at risk for living under the anesthesia of busyness?

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5. If you slowed down your pace, what unresolved habits or relationship issues might catch up?

6. Describe your experience of having a plug removed. How did God reveal to you that a particular activity, person, or object was a plug? Were there trials involved?

7. Describe in your words what takes place in the transformational process of Condition E. How much of that have you experienced?

