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## Taking Five Steps Toward Being W.H.O.L.E.

Because I am a visual learner and needed a lot of help during this process of learning to respond and not react when confronted with someone's hurtful words, I created this simple, five-step plan of action—WHOLE. I have a sense it might help you, too. When an emotional earthquake hits or you collide with someone else's raging fault lines, activate WHOLE. The more you use this tool, the more it will become second nature. The goal is to maintain emotional health and wellbeing in order to respond, not react. Rehearsing these five steps establishes the framework for transforming heartrending words into healthy, heartlifting conversations.

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### **“W”: Welcome God in and whisper three words.**

When first confronted with someone's unhealthy behavior, either anger, shock or confusion sets in. Without a doubt, our initial reaction is, *Why is this happening to me?*

Immediately, without hesitation, we practice taking a step back (either literally or mentally), welcome God in and whisper our brave three-word prayer, *God help me*, and then, breathe.

Yes, breathe. Let me explain. In this sense, breathe means, “To pause to rest or regain breath and composure.” The key here really being composure. Composure is that innate “state or sense of being calm and in control of oneself.” This takes practicing something called “emotional regulation.” Biblical language calls this self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). All this really means is knowing how to control strong emotions. When this happens, we “de-personalize” the situation. It feels personal and sincerely is personal, yet by stepping back and intentionally applying emotional regulation, we allow the necessary space to gain the much-needed composure we talked about earlier. We'll talk more about this in the “E” of our W.H.O.L.E. Plan of Action.

After the shock wears off, two very important things—seemingly contrary to one another, so there is tension here—must happen:

(1) Assess: Do I treat this comment like a duck would? Let it roll off my back like water? Proverbs 19:11 supports this response, “A person's wisdom yields patience; it is to one's glory to overlook an offense?”

Or,

(2) Do I address this comment with immediate candor or at a later date, one-on-one, with a witness or mediator (if the confrontation is volatile or heated) present? (Matthew 18:15-20)

I call this process, "Rewind and Reset." Sometimes we need to give the situation or circumstance some space and time. We need time to breathe. It needs time to breathe. Maybe seek wise counsel as to thoroughly assess the situation. When we rewind and reset, we ask the all-important questions: *How could this have been handled better? What is my responsibility in this? What is the next healthy step?*

Giving anyone this kind of power diminishes and devalues our sense of worth and dignity. We are to be respectful, yes, but our ultimate allegiance is to God and our ultimate identity comes from God, not man. When we value ourselves, we value our voice. We don't let anyone devalue us.

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*"As simple as it sounds, nothing impacts your ability to deliver negative information effectively as good breathing. Breathe deeply and calmly to communicate safety. Sharp, shallow breathing communicates fear. If you are already in fight-or-flight when you approach someone with bad news, you signal that there is reason to be upset. The other person will go into fight-or-flight before you even open your mouth. Breathing patterns are contagious; when we breathe well, we help others stay calm. Low, abdominal breathing also gets more oxygen to the logical, thinking part of the brain. You will speak more intelligently and stay rational when you breathe. In addition, how you breathe affects the sound of your voice, your posture and your gestures. Make a conscious effort to breathe well during stressful situations."*

*-www.nonverbalforte.com*

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### **"H": Hold On to Who You Are**

As the shock settles, our defense mechanisms kick into high gear: the fight or flight zone in the Amygdala of our brain fires. You know the feeling: heart starts beating fast, palms sweat, sick feeling in the stomach. Sometimes, instant headache, pupils dilate. It's a natural instinct, but one we have to learn to control or it will control us. Remember that emotional regulation we talked about?

We do one of two things: retaliate or react. In light of this, it is critical that we hold on: to our tongues, our reactions, and our retaliation in order to practice our healthy responses. Our highest goal is to respond, not react. Easy? No. Possible? Yes. Two initial thoughts on this:

1. Don't Feed the Fire of Mean

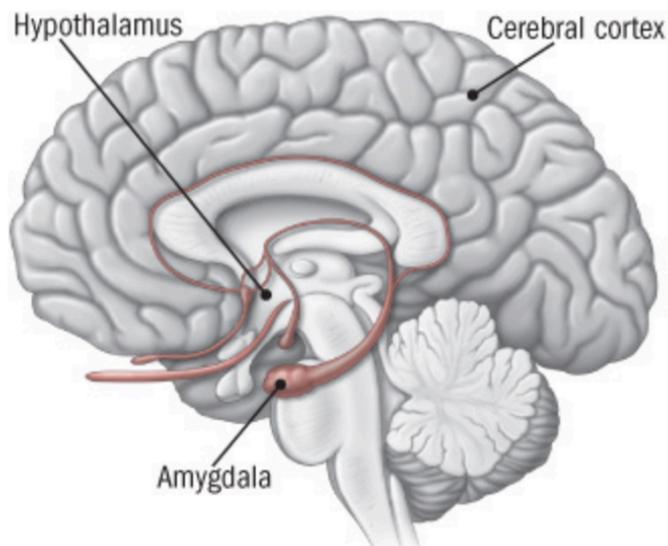
The spirit of unhealthy behavior is like a fire. Feed it and it burns hotter. If you

retaliate unhealthy with unhealthy, i.e., mean with mean, anger with anger, hate with hate, impatience with impatience, jealousy with jealousy etc., it will only get fiercer. Our enemy loves a good fight (Ephesians 6:12).

## Sounding the alarm

The stress response begins in the brain (see illustration). When someone confronts an oncoming car or other danger, the eyes or ears (or both) send the information to the amygdala, an area of the brain that contributes to emotional processing. The amygdala interprets the images and sounds. When it perceives danger, it instantly sends a distress signal to the hypothalamus.

## Command center



When someone experiences a stressful event, the amygdala, an area of the brain that contributes to emotional processing, sends a distress signal to the hypothalamus. This area of the brain functions like a command center, communicating with the rest of the body through the nervous system so that the person has the energy to fight or flee.

-Harvard Health, *Understanding the Stress Response*

### 2. Detach and Decide

The spirit of unhealthy behavior needs water thrown on it. In other words, detach and decide to either stand firm against it or walk away, until the situation either cools down or a witness is available to accompany you to a meeting where an actual healing conversation can occur. Does yelling ever make a situation better?

For example, Mean is normally accompanied by Intimidation—a deadly combination—that makes you feel like a speck of dust, i.e. *Mean + Intimidation = Lethal combination*.

Consider: You are in the desert on a beautiful nature hike. Suddenly, a copperhead strikes and its poison enters our body. This lethal bite would require immediate attention by trained doctors, most likely in an emergency room. An antidote must be administered. Oh, how I wish we had emergency rooms for the bites of people. Instead, we have an Almighty God—an even better place to run. There, at his feet, he administers the antidote of his love.

### **“O”: Overcome Unhealthy with Healthy.**

Overcome is a powerful word. One we hear a great deal about but may not really understand. If and when we grasp its true power, watch out! In the Greek, one translation, *yakol*, means, “To be able to gain or accomplish; able to endure; able to reach; to have ability or strength.” The key here being *able*. Go one step further, *able* means, “Having the power, skill, means, or opportunity to do something.” Can you see me doing my happy dance right now?

We are able to reframe unhealthy interpersonal relationship skills in order to practice healthy ones. We have the God-breathed capacity (see Practice 3, *Overcoming Hurtful Words*, to do this.

From this moment forward, our heartlift journey is framed in two words: *healthy vs unhealthy*. Without a doubt, this reframing will take time and God’s help, but without intentional reframing, I’m not sure heartlifts can truly heal. They will remain locked behind those prison bars of unforgiveness, bitterness, grudges, and division.

### **“L”: Lean in and Listen between the Lines.**

The real challenge here is remembering that the highest form of love is often tough love—love that sets limits and defines boundaries. Always remind yourself, “I have value, worth, and dignity. I will not be spoken to in this tone or manner. When I can talk with this person in a calmer, more collected way, we will talk.” This will take loads of practice and some hard-earned patience, especially when someone is spewing hurtful words. You might need another deep breath of composure and a big heaping of emotional regulation. Ask this one question: Is this comment/action symptomatic of something deeper going on?

Dr. Elke Rechberger defines this as “listening between the lines” or “getting to what isn’t being said.”<sup>i</sup> This form of active listening is foundational to getting to the heart of the matter. “Listening is a magnetic and strange thing, a creative force,” writes psychiatrist Karl Menninger, founder of the famed Menninger Clinic in Topeka, Kansas. “The friends who listen to us are the ones we move toward, and we want to sit in their radius. When we are listened to, it creates us, makes us unfold and expand.”<sup>ii</sup>

Ruth and Janet were friends who could lean in and listen to each other. They knew they were safe in each other's radius. They went away one weekend for some much needed rest and relaxation. While getting dressed for dinner, Ruth became frustrated with her outfit selection.

"I shouldn't have waited until the last minute to pack," she said. "I just threw things into my suitcase, and nothing is working. I can't do anything right." Totally exasperated, she collapsed on the bed.

"Hey," Janet said, sitting next to her. "Wait a minute. We're talking clothes here. What's going on? You look great."

"Ugh. I am so dang inadequate," Ruth cried. "Inadequate."

At that moment, bells went off inside Janet's head. Somewhere between packing and a dinner outfit, Ruth had belittled herself and claimed she couldn't do anything right. As Janet leaned in and listened between the lines of Ruth's words, she knew they needed to talk this one through.

Having women in our lives who lean in and really listen is the beauty of authentic friendship. It provides the breathing room needed to process a situation. And that breathing room leads us right here, right now, as we learn from past mistakes so we can live in lasting freedom.

Ruth and Janet talked late into the night. Little by little, they unveiled some underlying faulty thinking that allowed Ruth to realize the roots of her feeling inadequate. Ruth felt confident that the heartlift would continue to give her insights and wisdom. They drove home brighter and lighter than they had felt on the way to their weekend away.

### **"E": Elevate the Atmosphere.**

"I'm asking you to come up higher—a lot higher, I know." This is something I tell my clients often. When we've been hurt by someone's raging fault lines, the last thing we want to do is "elevate the atmosphere," but with God's help, it's what we must do. Why? The higher road is what moves us through the heartbreak and into the realm of personal maturity. And ultimately, it glorifies God, because we've responded in a way that helps, not hinders, His presence in the lives around us. This movement toward healthy creates that healthy atmosphere we're talking about. People want to be in the same space with us.

Consider the Latin root of elevate: *elevat*, meaning "raised,"<sup>iii</sup> is derived from the verb, *elevare*, e + *levare* (from *levis*, "light") = lighten. We know that feeding the fire of unhealthy behavior is only going to make the situation more difficult, so we must practice taking the higher road. Be the one in the room who is in that very important space Frankl spoke about; be the one who somehow equalizes and lightens the raging fault lines. In that space between stimulus and response, we choose the mature response. We choose to be the one filled with God's breath, not our own. Then we are filled with God's capacity to change the entire situation for the good of everyone involved.

This is not easy. It takes practice. It might require getting professional help. Getting help is a sign of strength, not weakness. It's a sign of wisdom, as Proverbs 18:15 tells us: "Wise men and women are always learning, always listening for fresh insights" (MSG). It's a sign of growth: "Without good direction, people lose their way; the wiser counsel you follow, the better your chances" (Proverbs 11:14 MSG). It's a sign of deepest care: "If you don't know what you're doing, pray to the Father. He loves to help. You'll get His help, and won't be condescended to when you ask for it. Ask boldly, believingly, without a second thought" (James 1:5 MSG).

Now, write this WHOLE power tool on sticky notes, poster boards, and billboards. Anywhere and everywhere you can. Keep it ever before your eyes, especially here in the beginning of our healing. As we move forward on this journey, the WHOLE power tool will become more of a reality.

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