

By Dr. Robert Huizenga

[www.break-free-from-the-affair.com](http://www.break-free-from-the-affair.com)

The Holidays are coming. Oh Joy! Oh Bliss! Oh Happiness!

If in the midst of marital conflict, be it separation, divorce, infidelity, intense conflict or tension laden avoidance, you most likely will utter these words sarcastically. "Yeah, right. Can't wait!"

And you feel badly about your sarcasm and inability to enjoy, especially if the Holidays mean time with children, family and other loved ones.

You dread pretending. You dread watching others enjoying themselves. You dread not "being there emotionally" for your children. You dread the fact you cannot enjoy the time. You fear you might "break." You dread the questions, the looks, others knowing or not knowing. What do you say? How do you respond?

You experience your world, your hopes and your dreams evaporating with the conflict, pain and uncertainty.

Unconsciously you utter, "God, help me get through this."

You feel sad. You feel broken. Your feelings are on the edge of your fingers and pound in your heart and gut. Your thoughts circle the same points of pain, over and over again. You can't shake your catastrophic thoughts. You can't escape your pain. Tears, anger, sadness, rage and fear are only a breath away.

Yes, you remember past Holidays of joy and happiness. But this is not one.

In the midst of your pain and uncertainty, I want to offer some tools and concepts that will help you endure, cope and perhaps even, create moments of hope and semi-joy for you.

Pick and choose from one or more of these suggestions:

## **1. Examine your self**

How bad is it?

It's often helpful to have an idea of the extent of your pain. Once you know, you can monitor your pain as it ebbs and flows. This gives you, amazingly enough, a level of control over the pain and often a sense of relief - without the need to "do" anything.

Here's a process that many professional therapists have integrated into their evaluation process.

What's it like when you feel badly?

Every so often you return to a particular, familiar negative way of thinking and feelings that is the pain. Have you ever said to yourself, "Oh, here it is again. I've felt this way before. This is nothing new. Same old pit in the stomach (or wherever), same old thoughts that I can't shake."

Are you there now? Marital conflict will serve as a trigger for that feeling and those thoughts. Sound familiar?

Let's be more specific. Where do you feel it in your body? Feelings are physiologically based, so if you pay attention to your body, you will be able to locate where that pain or tension is located. Pit in the stomach? Tight chest? Throbbing head? Stiff muscles? Sore back? Tight facial muscles? etc?

And, when you feel that pain or discomfort in your body, what negative thoughts are prevalent in your mind? What are you thinking? What negative thought keeps recycling to increase your pain and tension? What is the theme of your thoughts? Are your thoughts focused on your rage and what you want to say/do to him/her? Do you catastrophize about your future and what will happen to you? Of course, there are a myriad of other thoughts that can demand your energy and focus...and trigger your pain.

Now Let's take the next step.

Here are three vital factors for getting to the bottom of your pain.

1. How intense is it? Measure this pain on a scale of 1-10, 10 being as bad as it can get. How would you rate it now? Yesterday? The day before? Rate it on the 1-10 scale when it emerges.
2. How frequent is it? Does this pain visit you every week, every day, every hour? What are the triggers? What are the most powerful triggers? Does it ebb and flow or is it, at this point for you, in the midst of your marital conflict, a most prevalent feeling?
3. Can you find ways to move through and beyond it? Have you discovered actions or thoughts that will help you minimize, diminish and get rid of the pain?

Evaluate your pain now in terms of its intensity, frequency and your ability to move through it.

## **2. There's no shame in getting help.**

If you gave yourself an 9 or 10 on intensity and it seems as if it never goes away and if you have found now way to move through it (can barely function, can't get out of bed, can't eat, can't sleep, think of harming yourself, etc.) please consider external help during the Holiday Season.

You may want to contact your medical doctor for medication to see you through the Holiday Season. You may call a therapist and say, "I'm having a difficult coping, I want to see you a couple times a week during the Holidays, so I can manage to hold myself together."

There is nothing wrong with temporarily leaning on something that will offer relief and give you a better chance of finding some joy in the season.

### **3. Accept and maximize how you cope**

There are different ways of coping with the encountered pain and fear of life. Allow me to offer 3 general and different ways people cope with emotional trauma.

1. Some withdraw and avoid. They do not want to face the feelings and thoughts. They do not want to face others. And so, they retreat and withdraw. They find a cave and crawl into it.
2. Some work hard at socializing and gathering people around them. They want the interaction and input from others. The interaction and tendency to focus on the other provides an escape from the inner pain and fear.
3. Others throw themselves into challenges and activities (work, play, exercise, etc.) They burn up the adrenaline and feel as if they are accomplishing something at the same time.

We learn and adopt these patterns very early in life. And in some situations a pattern seems to work and serve us well. Knowing your pattern helps you establish a strategy during the Holiday Season.

If you tend to withdraw, find yourself a stack of self-help books and begin reading. Use the internet to do research on marital conflict. Take time to meditate, think and write. Go inside yourself (you know how to do this very well) to find the answers. (Yes, they are there!) Explore your inner world and listen to your wisdom.

If you enjoy socializing, contact close friends, share your needs and negotiate with them to be there for you through the Holiday Season. Let them know what you need. Talk. Talk. Talk. And in the talking you will discover the answers and your pain will be mitigated. Don't be afraid to lean on others, but let them know what you are looking for. Find a good therapist or coach to be a helpful sounding board and confidence booster. Self help groups might be a source of comfort and strength.

If you are a doer, engage in an intentional problem solving modality. Define your problem, throw out the solutions, choose a solution and DO it. Then go back and evaluate how well it worked. List 2-3 activities that will help lessen your pain and wandering thoughts. Choose something that is particularly challenging since you most likely value challenge. Keep your blood stirred.

## **4. Breathe and notice**

Notice now your breathing. Is it shallow? Do you take short breaths? Do you sigh frequently? Are your breaths deep, from the diaphragm?

This is a simple but powerful exercise to lower your number on the tension scale. You might want to know that research finds this to be a key in stress reduction.

Just notice. That's right. Just notice what you think and feel. (A primary purpose of the 1-10 scale is to get you just to notice.) Much of psychology focuses on our capacity to stand back and notice what we feel and think. It's called an observing ego. It's healthy.

When you do not notice, you tend to be "in" the pain. You are the pain. You are the fear. It becomes very difficult, if not impossible, to alleviate the pain and fear.

If you want to take this to another level, be aware of your inner dialogue - one part "talking" to another. The usual scenario: one part of you is angry with another part of you for what that part thinks is foolish, weak or helpless. Round and round you go. It takes much energy to fight your self. Use that energy to address the issues before you.

## **5. Rubber band**

When you notice one negative thought piling on top of another use a strategy to interrupt those thoughts. Some use a rubber band around their wrist. When they notice the intensity and frequency of the thoughts rising, they pull the rubber band and allow it to snap against the wrist. As you do that you might want to have ready a counter thought. For example, snap your wrist and say to yourself, "That's enough for now. I have many concerns, I know. But I will address those at a later time. For the next few minutes I want to be with my children (or whatever you are doing.)"

## **6. Recalibrate your thinking.**

Transforming or reframing your negative thoughts may powerfully alleviate some of your suffering.

For example, you may idealize the past. You think back and remember all the wonderful times of your marriage and lament the fact they no longer happen. You grieve for those days.

You may want to entertain a counter thought, i.e. "Not all of the good ole days were that good." Balance your thinking. Attach it to reality.

## **7. Use timer**

When you notice the 8, 9 or 10, set a timer for 2 minutes. During those 2 minutes write down every thought in your mind. No censorship. Write down every feeling, where it's located and what it is like. Write furiously.

When the timer goes off, say to yourself, "OK, I'm done for now. I know there are important issues that demand my attention. And, I want to get to the bottom of them. But, for now I must (fill in the blank.) Thank that part that has the concerns and inform it that when it appears again you will pay attention to it. You will come back to it in the future.

Use this exercise whenever the pain and thoughts spike.

## **8. Use the bathroom**

You are surrounded by friends and family and you feel awful. You are trying hard, but you are managing. Then someone says something or something happens that is a powerful trigger for your negative thoughts and feelings. You want to burst into tears, rage, scream or in some way explode. But, another part of you believes it not appropriate and will not be received well.

Excuse yourself to the bathroom, or some other corner of privacy and use one or more of the techniques we discuss here, to reduce your pain and negative thinking. (Use the 1-10 scale to monitor.)

## **9. Your children**

If you take your role as a parent seriously you are concerned about the welfare of your children during a martial crisis. Children know, don't they? They feel it. The conflict soaks into their body and they carry it with them.

And, we as thoughtful parents, have a difficult time when our children suffer. We suffer because we believe they suffer. We often remember our suffering as a child, at some level, and do not want our children to experience the pain.

And so, we frequently want to protect and shield them. And, during the Holiday Season we want our children to have a joyful time and remember it with warmth, even if mom and dad are not having such a wonderful time.

To alleviate this pressure, focus on the coping skills your children are developing. We CAN'T escape conflict and pain. It is ever before us. It begins at birth and continues until we die. The contrast of life - the good, the bad - the joy, the sorrow - the successes, the failures - is ever before us.

We learn, we grow, we evolve (hopefully) as a result of those contrasts. That's what your children are doing. Building a feathered nest for them will only cripple them later in life.

Reflect on how each child copes. Take some time to list 5-10 strengths for each child. Spend some time during the Holiday Season encouraging those strengths and skills.

## **10. Use a mantra**

If you've been to my website you know I have a mantra that I teach. Some find they take these words with them and they provide a refuge of relief and hope.

The mantra: "This too shall pass."

Readers report using this mantra whenever they bump into the negativity, or they use it to start the day, pasting it on their mirror, desk and carrying it in their wallet, purse, etc.

What mantra might you use?

## **11. Get to know you.**

Use the Holiday Season to get in touch with the real you. So much of our pain is often focused externally; what our spouse is doing, not doing; what we are getting or not getting from him/her. So much of our pain is focused on our lack and our personal needs not being met by him/her/them. Much of that we CANNOT control. And so we feel helpless, which augments our pain.

Make a shift. Take some intentional time to know you. Here's a specific exercise.

Make a list of your top 5 personal needs. A full list in the form of the "Needless Program" is available in different parts of my website. Spend a few days during the Holiday Season completing the "Needless Program."

Define your standards. A standard is an action or behavior you hold yourself to because that is the kind of person you are.

Take some time each day to complete this sentence:

I am someone who \_\_\_\_\_.

## **12. Pray/Meditate**

Get beyond yourself and your circumstances. Take some time to pray or meditate, whatever you call that experience in which you intentionally quiet your inner self and reach out to a higher power, God, force or energy... whatever you name it. Seek quiet. Seek spiritual affirmation. Begin to know and experience your part in an ever expanding and purposefully growing universe.

Reflect on your life's purpose. Why are you here? What are you called to do? Are you doing it? How? When? Is something pulling you in a direction which honors your life's purpose? What would this look like in 10 years for you?

After your moments of prayer/meditation/reflection notice the intensity of your pain on the 1-10 scale.

### **13. Give**

This is another strategy to get beyond your preoccupation with areas of your life you cannot control and generates pain.

How can you give? How can your family give? To whom can you give?

Serve at soup kitchen? Visit stricken family? Food pantry? What service organizations in your town could use your help?

Do more than give money. Give your time. Give your energy. Enter into the lives of those who could use a friend or helping hand.

### **14. Focus on a personal challenge**

Give yourself a challenge. What challenges have you put off because of the demands of family or the conflict in the marriage? Have you always thought of running? Exercising? Painting? Sculpting? Starting a business? Redoing a room? Getting a new job? It may be the beginning of a huge project or one small step.

Push yourself. Choose a challenge that will use your strengths and enhance your gifts.

Where to go from here...

At this point, go back over this free report, the 14 tips and choose one area that resonates with you. Implement that suggestion. If it works for you, repeat. If it fails to alleviate some of your pain, choose another exercise.

Please know that these tips are some of the most tested, tried and true exercises you can do to quell the pain.

## Success Stories

Below are stories of those who used various of the above tips and the results of their use. Gather from these stories what might work best for you. Learn from these people who were willing to share part of their journey through marital conflict and pain.

✓ I focused on the children. Even though they are adults, I tried to focus on my pride and admiration for all they have accomplished in life. This made me realize that my marriage was not a sham. Our love for each other created two wonderful children.

✓ Tip 6 worked best for me, however, 5 (without the rubber band) & 7 (I've journaled for 5 yrs, now) all came in handy. I received an invitation from a sister & had a lovely evening with her family. I was nice but just lacked the luster of the traditions I had established for my home & family. I always knew how lucky I was & gave thanks to have a "full house" over the holidays. I never thought I'd find myself in an empty home. I survived it, now on to Christmas.

✓ Rather than get all sentimental at the fact my husband wasn't here, every time my head started in that direction, I reminded myself about some of the horrible lies and things he has said to me recently.

✓ I came to my own home and put lights on the Christmas tree, then met up with a friend late for beers. Your most helpful tip was "how bad does this really hurt." Not bad at all, actually. I kept reminding myself how fortunate I was to have discovered my husband's affair so that I wasn't spending the holidays with someone who didn't love me. I'd rather be alone than continue my life with someone who was lying to me in order to make me believe I had a perfect marriage, when really he was in love with someone else. I kept reminding myself that I deserve better and I'm going to have better.

✓ Most recently, I have begun writing on my computer, and have found this to be most helpful. Instead of having these negative thoughts playing on a loop in my brain, as I cannot share them with anyone, I am able to write them, read them, and come to some resolution regarding them. It serves as an outlet for extricating and externalizing the thoughts from within me, which normally would end up in a less than friendly conversation with him. I am able to crystallize what is otherwise free floating, disassociated pain, anxiety, fear and negativity. This gives me some element of control. The "GOFAR" analysis of my thinking helps some as well, but not as much as the stress log analysis, numbering the pain level, recording the thoughts, the associated triggers, and the level of pain generated by them.

I liked the 2-minute writing suggestion...even before reading the tips....I began keeping a journal not long after discovering my spouse's indiscretion, as I do not wish to share this or my feelings with even my closest friends.

This was the first big holiday that my ex-husband had the kids. I implemented #6. I did a lot of planning, did all new things, and kept reminding myself that he was a real downer during holidays anyway. I had a great holiday. I had so many invitations and felt so loved. Praise the Lord, and thank you for your help.

#6. Re calibrate your thinking. It's been almost 6 months since I discovered my husband's emotional affair. We are in the honeymoon phase now and our marriage is better than ever. Took a lot of work and talking this summer, but our marriage is truly better than it ever was before. I keep reminding myself that we probably never would have had this marriage if we hadn't been through this messy time in our lives. Life is good and I wish I had had this husband from the very beginning. A little guilt seems to go a long way to help motivate someone to change the way they've always done things. : )

number 8 first thanksgiving dinner without my kids spent day with my side of family most of night went well but when conversation lulled and emotions suddenly bottomed out went to bathroom and pulled my self together. Lot of tips helped focused on kids earlier in day and went to 8K fun run with oldest 2 before they left for dinner with wife's family.

I did very well. I prayed, meditated and reflected on everything that happened step by step and did not feel any pain.

I did #14: A Personal Challenge

We have decided to take a 60 day separation to heal ourselves and then come back together able to give our best to the other.

I walked into each room in the house and made a list of all projects I have been wanting to do, but have put off. All the way from reorganizing, to painting. I then prioritized that list. My goal is to knock that list out within the 60 days, and at the end, not only will I be refreshed, but my home will be also. And I will feel a lot better having accomplished something I can be proud of.

Started off poorly, images and heartache recurring. But then recouped and spent time w/ loved ones. Ended the day journaling. I need to find a release of the images!

Focused on the children and making their holiday memorable, and sticking with traditions.

✓ We stayed up all night processing, and I nearly threw him out, but we had his parents, my mother, my aunt and two uncles coming over for Thanksgiving dinner. Because of all the processing, talking and tears, we got about 2 and a half hours of sleep and got a late start on the turkey. Dinner was a couple of hours later than scheduled, but it was good, and we were able to be gracious hosts without emotional tension in the air. Given that our family gatherings are always like Chevy Chase's "Christmas Vacation," I think things went off quite well. We normally enjoy a post mortem discussion and laugh ourselves silly after the holiday gathering of the relatives, and this year it was back to this old pattern of ours, so I think healing is happening even though it's a long, slow process and something of a mixed bag!

✓ I would say that my Thanksgiving day turned out to be very good. I do have instances of dealing with sudden painful thoughts and feelings (though they are getting less and less). I used a couple of your tips. The breathing technique is very successful for me because I stop and pay attention, I concentrate on deep breathing to calm myself and just feel it, then visualized myself breathing out the pain and negative thought. I did this 3 times in a row on Thanksgiving day and found the 3rd time was easier to do. The other tip I use is to do something physical when I'm having trouble "shaking off" the depressed feeling I get when those painful thoughts get hold of me. I will directly go put on my shoes and go for a brisk walk and say thank you to every beautiful tree, flower, dog/cat that I see along the way. I do whatever I have to do to get 15-20 minutes to take this "walk-break", if it's at night, I seek something beautiful in my home (my pets, flowers, plants, artwork) to look at and be thankful.

Gratitude is helping me get through Everything every day, better than most anything else I have tried.

Thank you for caring about me, about all of us out here in the world.

✓ We're 19 months out, my H has been the remorseful spouse for most of those 19 months. Our Thanksgiving was spent alone, just the two of us, and it was wonderful. We worked on dinner, TOGETHER. He was never an active participant in the kitchen or much of any household stuff prior to the A. So it was a good Thanksgiving. I wasn't without Affair thoughts however. They seem to creep in somewhere along the line on any given day. The great thing is, they no longer consume me. They make me sad, sometimes angry, for what he did, and how careless he was. But letting the thoughts come in and then be released seems to help the most. I don't dwell on them anymore, and try to make myself remain present, in the here and now, not wander to the past. We've come a long way, and this Thanksgiving, I had so much more to be thankful for than last.

✓ I got a rotisserie chicken and made stuffing and a pumpkin pie. In the morning I went running with my dog and then to the monastery to pray. I told myself this shall pass or that it's just another day that people put a label on and they over eat and have a big mess to clean up in the

kitchen .At least I didn't gain weight from eating to much. A lot of people have worse situations than mine. I thanked God for what i do have.

✓ I concentrated on making a great meal and decorated nicely. Our boys are older and they helped me. I asked them for help and they were 100% supportive. They invited friends over so it was fun to have fun young guests; since we have no family in town. When my husband came home he was so proud of the job we had done. He was smiling and happy. I was charming and loving and happy. We gave thanks before we ate and toasted to good times ahead. It was heartfelt from everyone who took a turn to speak. We went on to have a great meal and conversation; listened to music in the background instead of the TV. It was a very fun evening. My husband is coming home early today and we plan on going out to see a movie and have more fun. That is just what we need; more fun and laughter. I was a little stressed during the preparation, but the boys were great and I told myself; "this will pass", I used a time out to prepare myself for my husband's arrival and breathe. But, it was like getting ready for a date. I felt good about myself and my appearance. My husband noticed and was very complimentary. It really went well. One happy fun day is a big start, I pray, of better things to come. :) I am going to think positive instead of obsessing on the past. We started a new tradition and that helped I think.

✓ Better then I expected, I used the talking to my self. I focused more on positives then the negatives. When i started to feel anxious I re directed my focus to my children and to the family that was around me. I allowed myself to cry before I got out of bed, that morning and reflected on the positives before I got into bed that night.

✓ When I felt negative, I took time to consciously breathe. I took a time-out in the bathroom to collect myself. Took a nice bath at the end of the day to relax. Hugged my children often.

✓ "This too shall pass..." Very simple...and the few times I thought about my soon to be ex-wife and cheating spouse and our past 16 years together on Thanksgiving with our sons and family, I simply chanted to myself and presto...stayed in the present with the rest of my guests...

✓ The first tip to evaluate how I feel and determine how "bad" feels. I missed my kids and I had gotten into an argument with my husband (we are separated and I filed for divorce) the day before. I was angry because he has been cheating for 4 years but now says he will do anything to save the marriage. There is no marriage left to save. His refusal to move on is a control tactic to guilt me into staying married. Recognizing that this is no where as bad as 4 years ago when I discovered the affair; or a year later when after trying to reconcile I found out he was back in touch with her; or even when I got an anonymous phone call telling me everyone in his office knew of the affair and he DENIED it! I am in a better place now without him. Missing the life I thought I had has been the hard part but instead of an 8 it is a 4 on the scale.

I cannot do long car drives alone without a book on the ipod or I get very upset about what my husband has done to me. Audio books are the only way I have found that help me cope.

The breathing, trying to stay in the moment.

I combined several strategies together because I am a person who tends towards isolating myself when I am depressed, so I invited people to make a challenge for myself, and to try and socialize as a strategy even though it is not what I would normally choose. But it became both a project (to come out of myself) and to prepare a beautiful table and environment, even though I felt depressed, sad and rotten. I also decided to do it for my son--he's 8--as he does not deserve a depressed mother, especially on Thanksgiving! These strategies worked fabulously, as I was busy planning and cooking, then I had to be social and actually laughed and enjoyed myself (an effort at first, but became much better). The children loved it and I permitted myself to eat too much, also a problem, but I thought it was the worst of all the evils, better than drinking way too much. I had exercised earlier in the day (another helpful strategy) so I could indulge a bit. I found your strategies very very helpful. Thanks, they helped to save the day!

I prayed before hand and did lots of affirmations on gratitude & appreciation and worked on releasing any negative thoughts of blame or resentments. I worked on EFT tapping to do this. I used the 12 steps..This too shall pass. Just for today. Take it Easy. Live and Let Live. Let Go and Let God. I made it through the day. I saw my ex at his brothers. He was distant and sarcastic as usual, but I did not engage. I left when I wanted. I took back my power. I really prayed for his happiness and mine. I forgive myself as well as him. It takes allot of work. It has been 6 years since I discovered his affair. We have been divorced a year. I am trying to move forward, but I often worry that I will never trust again and I feel damaged and wounded. I still have work to do.


The tip most useful for me was praying. I know God has a purpose for all this and I have to rely on Him to get through this.

#8 Retreated to the bedroom, not the bathroom. She was trying to trigger me, it didn't work.

I just took over my emotions. Every time I have painful thoughts I just say NO get out , just a waste of time, she is not worth your time nor energy.

Make new traditions! I dreaded getting in the car to go to the long time family friends. They know me, they knew him and me over many years. The children I watched grow up now have children of their own. I could laugh and smile and hold little children. After eating there was a time of children sitting at the table making Christmas cards and bracelets with beads and ribbon.

I was impressed. And one and only one family member mentioned his name and we talked briefly and went on to other things. I enjoyed the entire day and only a few thoughts of Thanksgivings of past.

 I remember using the tips you sent last year for the Christmas time. It was very useful. It was good to acknowledge the fact that IT'S NORMAL that I do not particularly enjoy the holidays time. At least not as much as I would have in other conditions. It was good to feel that I'm normal in that way. In general assessing the state I'm in currently is helpful too. I can see how my mood changes. From agony to acceptance, to feeling as a victim, to raging. And it's all OK. I can tell myself that's ok that just means that I am moving along the lines and getting closer to healing. And granted these kinds of emotions are over the top during Christmas Time, so again wasn't surprised to see rise in the down times during that time. Thank you!

The Holidays are manageable in the midst of painful marital conflict. They may not be what you hope they will be, but they do provide a spring board for learning and the discovery of your personal strength and power.

I sincerely hope you find within you (and it is there) your power, your strength, your beauty and that part of you that has a unquenchable desire to find and give love.

This is wishing you the best, and reminding you that “this too shall pass.”

## **Bob**

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Dr. Huizenga started his private practice as a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist and Certified Social Worker in Michigan, USA, in 1981. He's logged thousands of hours of direct client care and served on the State of Michigan's Board for the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy.

He was the first (2003) to write and publish an online e-book on infidelity, “Break Free From the Affair.” The latter years of his practice has focused on research, study and developing powerful and practical treatment modalities for those suffering through the marital crisis of infidelity.

More information on Dr. Huizenga, access to his articles, e-books and coaching services can be found at [www.break-free-from-the-affair.com](http://www.break-free-from-the-affair.com).

## Recommended Resources