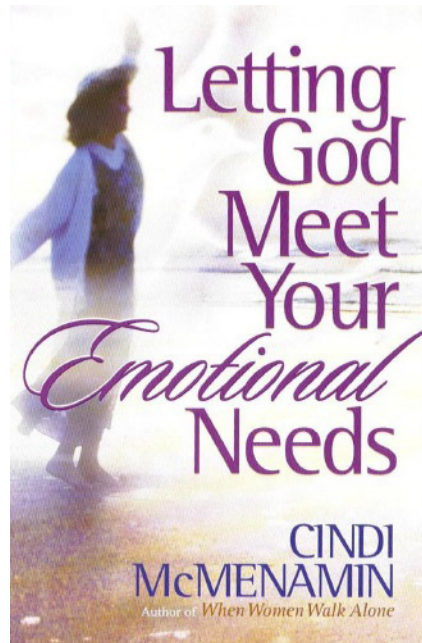


No More Lonely Nights:
CAN'T GET YOUR HUSBAND TO OPEN UP? TRY THIS...

BY CINDI MCMENAMIN



By the look on my husband's face, I could tell it was going to be another one of those silent nights.

Hugh had just walked through the door, mumbled something about being starved, and clanked together a few pots and pans as he dished out his dinner on the stove.

My husband, a pastor who often deals with stressful situations, had brought his pressures home again. Usually, I'd try to pull him out of his troubled mood by making light conversation or attempting to encourage him. But I had dealt with some pressures of my own that day and wanted him to attend to me. I could tell, amid the kitchen noise and exasperated sighs he was making, that this wasn't going to be the night. So I withdrew to my study, sank into a chair, and started to cry.

Why do I have to feel so alone, God? I prayed. I can't live in this silence! Can't he come home once in a while and talk about how he feels? Or better yet, can't he come home and be willing to listen to how I feel? Where are his words of encouragement for me?

Communication – or a lack of it – had been the central issue throughout our ten years of marriage. As a pastor, Hugh knew that communication was essential to any relationship. Yet he found it difficult to be vulnerable with his thoughts and feelings and to articulate what was going through his mind. It was easier, more convenient, and, he admitted, a bad habit to continue to internalize things. But I was tired of trying to pry words out of him, and I didn't want to plead to get his listening ear.

As I sat in my study feeling sorry for myself, I noticed my Bible on the desk. Seeing it

there reminded me that I'd skipped my devotional time with the Lord that morning, which probably contributed to my frustration and fragile emotional state. Now was as good a time as any to make up for what I missed with the Lord. But at that moment, I didn't feel like spending time with God. I wanted someone to spend time with me.

Then a new idea began to convict my heart. Perhaps God wanted to spend time with me! I had been longing for someone to talk with me, and His Word had been there all day. I wanted someone to listen to me, and He had been willing all along. I picked up the Bible and opened it to the Psalms – the place I often go for encouragement. Psalm 62:8 seemed to jump off the page at me.

“Trust in Him at all times . . . Pour out your heart before Him; God is a refuge for us.”

Did I trust God enough to pour out my heart to Him right now?

I began to wonder why I often feel so anxious and can hardly wait to “pour out my heart” to my husband. Yet, I usually have no idea what kind of pressure he's been dealing with, so I can't predict how he'll react. Sometimes my “pouring out” comes across as complaining or demanding, when I really just need someone to listen to me and to understand.

The psalmist described God as a refuge, a safe haven for pouring out concerns and feelings without any chance of being misunderstood. He's a protective port where I can unload my burdens without worrying that my intentions will be misinterpreted or discounted.

I realized then that if God could meet my needs for safe communication, He could probably meet a lot of other emotional needs as well. I began looking through my Bible's concordance, concentrating on needs that I have and how God responds to them. I was amazed at what I discovered:

- He comforts me when I'm hurting (2 Cor. 1:3)
- He makes me feel secure by promising He'll never leave me (Heb. 13:5)
- He understands me because He can read my mind (Psalm 139:2)
- He is always there, even when I try to get away from Him (Psalm 139:7-10)
- He encourages me by assuring me a bright future with Him (Jer. 29:11)
- He cherishes me by thinking only precious thoughts of me (Psalm 139:17)
- He shows His kindness by freely giving me all things (Rom. 8:32)

That night, I listed more than twenty ways the Lord is able to meet my emotional needs. As I looked over that list, I was amazed at the way God had communicated to me, through His Word, exactly what I needed to hear that evening. I knew then that He is the first One I should go to when those needs for communication, understanding, and comfort well up inside of me.

During the next few days, as I began going to the Lord with my host of needs, I realized that emotional fulfillment wasn't something that was going to happen overnight. I couldn't take a short-cut to God's heart. It was going to take some time to establish the kind of intimacy with Him that would meet the deep desires of my heart. I would need to go beyond the surface of glancing at His Word every day and rattling off my requests. I would have to spend time getting to know Him, learning what He likes and dislikes, discovering what He expects of me in the relationship, and learning how to communicate with Him through prayer. In attempting to do all those things, I came up with a daily plan that focused on establishing intimacy with God through

communication, commitment, and trust. It looks like this:

1. Tell God first. When I have exciting news, when my world crashes in on me, when I'm facing something bigger than I expected, He's the One I go to first. Sure, He already knows about it. But by going to Him first with the things that are close to my Heart, I reaffirm to Him and to myself that He is the most important person in my life. Plus I give God the chance to counsel and direct me before talking to my husband about a concern.
2. Take God seriously. I need to know what He expects of me in my relationship with Him and to make His will a priority in my life. I must find out what He loves and cling to it, and be aware of what He hates and avoid it at all costs. Taking Him seriously means I determine in my heart to prioritize my life so that nothing I do takes time away from maintaining my relationship with Him.
3. Trust God fully. Things will happen in my life that I will not understand. Trusting God fully means taking my greatest fears (the death of my child or husband? the loss of my dreams? a diagnosis of cancer?) and placing them at His feet. I acknowledge that Jesus Christ is in control of my life and I will trust Him no matter what pain may come my way to ultimately shape me for His purposes.

My three daily steps are sometimes difficult to live up to. But they're providing an excellent return. I'm finding that when I tell Him first the things that happen in my day, take Him seriously in what He asks of me, and trust Him fully with the circumstances of my life, I experience a peace in Him and a fulfillment that can't be compared to any earthly relationship. And my longings – for communication, understanding, security, and so on – dissolve into a desire to know more fully the One who speaks to me softly and tenderly through His Word.

Contrary to what it may seem, rerouting my needs for communication to God has not let my husband off the hook. It has, instead, made him a better communicator. Now that I have taken my expectations of emotional fulfillment off my husband, and left them with the Lord where they belong, Hugh has begun to come around a little more. Today he no longer sees me as a needy woman clinging to him for communication and hounding him for attention, but as an emotionally stable, confident woman looking to Christ to meet my needs. And I no longer resent Hugh at those times when he's not in the mood to talk. That makes me more lovable in his sight and someone he likes to spend a little more time talking to.

But sometimes he just has to wait to get my listening ear.

My first appointment is with the Lord. And, thank God, He's not the silent type.

This article first appeared in the August/September 1998 issue of *Virtue*. For more on this topic, see Cindi McMenamin's book *Letting God Meet Your Emotional Needs* at www.strengthforthesoul.com.