

Living Successfully with Screwed-Up People

Elizabeth B. Brown



a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

© 1999 by Elizabeth B. Brown

Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P. O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.revellbooks.com

New paperback edition published 2010

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Brown, Elizabeth B.

Living successfully with screwed-up people / Elizabeth B. Brown.

p. cm.

Originally published: Grand Rapids, Mich. : F.H. Revell, c1999. With new
introd.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-8007-3288-2 (pbk.)

1. Interpersonal relations—Religious aspects—Christianity. I. Title.

BV4597.52.B76 2009

248.4—dc22

2009036470

09 10 11 12 13 14 15 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

In keeping with biblical principles of creation stewardship, Baker Publishing Group advocates the responsible use of our natural resources. As a member of the Green Press Initiative, our company uses recycled paper when possible. The text paper of this book is comprised of 30% post-consumer waste.



Living Successfully with Screwed-Up People,
Revell Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2010. Used by permission.

Contents

Introduction to the 2010 Edition 9

1. Put On Your Glasses 13
2. When the Pressure Is On 26
3. Who Is Screwed Up? 37
4. Get Off the Fence 48
5. Pull Out the Splinters 62
6. Heal the Hidden Wound 69
7. Can Ailing Relationships Make You Sick? 83
8. Handling Frazzled Emotions 92
9. Let the Past Go 106
10. Buttons and Triggers 118
11. Make Anger Your Ally 126
12. Fight Fair with Unfair People 136
13. How Can I Ever Forgive? 155
14. How Many Times Do I Say “Sorry”? 165
15. Touch with Words 177
16. Is “Different” Screwed Up? 193
17. When You Want to Help 203
18. See the Possibilities 219
19. Dancing with Porcupines 234

Notes 243

Introduction to the 2010 Edition

Are you searching for lifelines to keep you balanced in a relationship with a person who is driving you crazy? In this relationship, would you describe yourself as too often simmering, angry, hurt, or exploding? Is there little consideration for your feelings, your needs? Do you steel yourself against something awful happening—the unfair, without-any-justice-thing that time after time knocks you over? Do you struggle to control your response when a shoe drops, a remark slams, blame points, or criticism flies? Then you need this book!

We know that chaos sits on the throne in difficult relationships. Confusion reigns. Remember the times you may have asked yourself: *Should I get out? Should I quit my job, leave my home, stay away at holidays?* Perhaps the maybes ran pell-mell in your thoughts: *Maybe if I had not said that, maybe I am guilty, maybe there is no hope.* You felt discouraged when the inside whys began: *Why am I left out? Why am I put down, unaccepted, disrespected, unloved, unappreciated?* You ask despondently: *Why do I let myself be hurt?* The answer is simple: YOU CARE.

You care because you are not a quitter. You care because this is a family member, or friend, or coworker. You care because you know in the long run if you can survive the relationship, it is best for the big picture. You care because of commitment, because of children, because they are your offspring, because you are a decent person who believes in getting along and not deserting the ship or skipping out when things get tough.

Sharon cared, but she wanted *change*. She was burdened by the attitude of a family member with whom she couldn't get along but did not want to disconnect. As she listened to people talk about their loss in the grief seminar I was leading, she determined her grief was different: *If your spouse dies, your house burns down, your child commits suicide, you have to move on. You can't do anything about your situation. But my mother needs to be overhauled. She wants to control everything I do. She doesn't like my friends, hates my husband, thinks I feed the kids junk. She is just a pain in my life. She could change—and she should—then I could be happy.* Her comment was the impetus for this book.

This young woman thought her situation was unique. Surely, she should have recognized that the two hundred people in the seminar were there because they, too, were struggling, wanting what they did not have and wishing things could be different. They did not have to move on just because their loss was permanent. In fact, in divorce, which today is a common loss, one of the divorcees is usually struggling with anger and hurts ten years after D-day. The statistics are as damning for those who lose a child or spouse. Loss of anything—especially loss of expectations and dreams in our relationships—requires new vision, goals, and courage.

A doctor telephoned me from an airport where he had been stranded during a storm. Bored, he went to the book-

store searching for a good read. He was drawn by the original cover of *Living Successfully with Screwed-up People*—a man being turned like a screw. “That was exactly what I felt,” he said. “I have been trying so hard to stay in my second marriage. For four years I have been to counselors, asked for help, and was about to call it quits. All those years of seeking help did not put it together for me like your book did in the three hours it took me to read it. I was blaming everything on my wife—and, believe me, she deserves the blame, but I am part of the picture. Thanks for some major lifelines and lots of hope. Bottom line: I’m not going to end up a screwed-up person also.”

My insight into difficult relationships changed radically following a seven-year-old daughter’s death. LeeAnne was jovial, bouncing, dancing, and hugging on Friday—and dead on Monday from a Reye’s type virus. She had developed Type 1 diabetes (also called juvenile diabetes) at age two. Diabetes in a child is tough, and though it had nothing to do with her death, the disease had abused her with radical swings in her blood sugar levels. Her friends didn’t criticize when her mood swung from giggly to morose as her blood sugar plunged. They would come to her teacher—or us—and say, “LeeAnne needs something to eat so she can feel good.”

I was grateful that their caring made it possible for LeeAnne to treat her diabetes as a challenge, not a handicap. As I studied the many ways others’ actions had stabilized her life, I was overcome by a vision of a very difficult person in my life. Though I loved this family member, her actions caused tremendous chaos and turmoil. I envisioned this person as a child like my little daughter—a jovial, bouncing, dancing, and hugging child—who was handicapped. Though I thought her role was to nurture and support me, the reality was that God needed *me* to love *her* so that, though she

might always be *challenged*, she had the possibility of not being *handicapped*.

Sometimes just getting a new vision can change how you cope. The insight changed my life—and filled me with gratitude and caring for the very challenging person whose same actions drove me crazy before. Still, I needed lifelines and handles. I needed things to tell myself when I was coping with off-the-wall events. It is not adequate to think that just because we love all will be well. Believing that this too shall pass may be comforting, but emotions still beg for attention when hurtful behavior pushes our buttons. We will discuss the many issues that swirl around *Living Successfully with Screwed-up People*, such as how to keep out of harm's way if someone is stepping on your foot, when enough is enough, and how to forgive without becoming trampled.

Be assured that it is possible to live, work, and coexist with a difficult person. Together, let's seek the keys to living with purpose and joy, regardless of the challenging people in our lives.

1

Put On Your Glasses

Vision is the starting point of victory.

At a soccer game I stood next to a young man who asked me a question that disturbs many of us: Why do I have the most difficult relationship problems with the people I love?

David did not know I was writing a book on relationships or that I address the question he asked in seminars across the country. He just needed an ear, and I was standing next to him, watching fifteen-year-olds play ball, when his query popped out. I asked him what he thought the answer is.

“I don’t know,” he said. “It just seems the very people we care most about are the ones that give us the most grief.”

He was right: Friends and family can be pains—in the heart. Too often close relationships are better at causing demolition than building. Perhaps that is why suicides increase tenfold during the holidays. Having traveled over the hills and

through the valleys to grandmother's house, many of us leave wondering why we went to such efforts to be put through the wringer by someone in our own family. Times together, which should refresh, energize, and heal old wounds, often exacerbate the pain and cause new lesions. The sad truth is that families fight, husbands and wives attack, neighbors feud, friends and coworkers criticize, and children rebel.

The young man at the soccer game was experiencing an undeniable crisis as his expectations butted heads with reality. He believed, as most of us do, that his friends and family should support, encourage, and appreciate him; instead, two of the people he was closest to caused him tremendous anguish as they pointed out his shortcomings, the best choices for his life, ways to be a better person, and the reasons his dreams were not possible. Mere acquaintances encouraged him; his own flesh and blood cut him into pieces. The ones who should care, hurt; the ones who had no obligation to care, affirmed. What was wrong?

You may be in the same situation. Strangers aren't your problem. The person who is driving you nuts is someone you love or someone whose encouragement and appreciation you need. You are shattered by close friends, family, or people you work with every day.

This is how I answered David: "I know you are confused and discouraged, but you are at the most exciting point of understanding relationships! Put on your glasses! You need improved vision to discover the freedom and joy you only imagined were possible within your difficult relationships."

New Vision

I knew David would better understand the concept of putting on his glasses if I shared with him the story of a young

woman who expected me to give her a quick fix for her predicament. Sarah too was at a low point in a relationship. “I came to your seminar because I need help,” she explained. “You keep saying I must see what I have instead of focusing on what I don’t have in a difficult relationship, but your example of a person who moves on after a major life catastrophe isn’t valid for me. People who go through a tragedy that involves great loss have no choice but to accept what has happened and move on. After all, if your house burns up, your health is gone, or someone you love dies, what can you do?”

“My mother is my grief, and she lives with me, criticizing everything I do. Tragedy survivors have to deal finally with their reality. They can’t change the situation. But I could leave—or better yet, if my mother would lighten up, we could enjoy each other. Do you have help for my problem?”

New vision was my answer. When Merlin the Magician flew with the soon-to-be-king Arthur above the forest in Walt Disney’s *The Sword and the Stone*, Arthur saw the land below him with a new vision. Merlin, wanting his protégé’s aerial view to provide insights about the atrocity of war, questioned Arthur about what he saw. Arthur cried out, “I see everything so clearly. There are no drawn lines and boundaries on the land. People fight over arbitrary lines they draw on a map when all we need to do is move the lines in our minds.”

I asked Sarah if she would fly, so to speak, as did Arthur, over her messed-up relationship. Aerial vision would help her see that there were no arbitrary lines, triggers, or buttons—*unless she allowed them*. No one could control her unless she allowed the control. She needed to understand that it takes partners to develop a screwed-up relationship. With new vision she would see not only the wrong actions on the part of the screwed-up mother who caused chaos in her

Aerial vision clears away illusion: Wrong actions are wrong; wrong responses to wrong actions are equally wrong.

life, but her own responses and actions that were adding to the problem. With aerial vision she would fly above the fray and see that it takes two people to keep conflict and control alive.

Sarah's problem was not so different from that of David or of someone who experiences great

loss. Each situation is laden with unhappiness; each causes longing for what is not there—acceptance and happiness—each person has important choices to make. When we face problems, we are at a critical junction. Our choices will either keep us from being pulled into the muck and mire of a screwed-up relationship or cause us to sink as we fight the whirlpools spinning off the person we find difficult or off the longing for what we are not going to have. We need to see and understand clearly our present predicament to discern what is possible for the future.

Unfortunately, difficult relationships are like swamps. In a swamp your vision is obscured by vines, alligators, snakes, and mosquitoes. Screwed-up relationships are mired in muck and swamped by chaos. So much is going on, you don't know how to find solid ground. About the time you begin to wade out of a period of turmoil, a snake bites or an alligator threatens and you lose your footing. Your struggle for self-preservation so occupies you that you are unable to analyze the source of your problems. You wonder: Am I responsible for all the chaos? Or is the person who drives me crazy truly

messed up and responsible for the havoc?

When your vision is obscured by the swamp, you need to see your relationship with a chal-

The swamp bottom is often the beginning of renewal.

lenging person from a different perspective. Aerial vision allows you to see

- the possibilities
- the improbabilities
- the impossible

With aerial vision you can see that the yardstick by which you measure relationships is far more rigid and unforgiving for those close to you than is the stretchable line you use to judge outsiders. That is why we can find the capriciousness of a stranger or acquaintance entertaining, but the same behavior in a friend or family member is potential fodder for arguments. What is amusing in someone we hold at a distance is an idiosyncrasy that we want to expel from the person we care about, work with, or live beside. The closer we are to someone, the more we expect from him. We are disappointed, confused, angry, hurt, encouraged, happy, or ecstatic in our relationships according to how close our expectations meet reality. Realistic vision frees us to relate to those close to us with the same objectivity we are able to use with those who touch our life but are not intertwined with our needs.

This reminded David of a difficult person he works with. He said, laughingly, “There’s a man in my office who drives everyone crazy with his ranting and raving. He is always going bonkers about some issue, crisis, or potential earthquake. I just laugh. I really like the guy.”

“Would you want to live with him?” I asked.

“No way! No more than that woman at your seminar liked living with her nagging mother. His son works at our company too and is always embarrassed or picking up the

pieces after his dad has blown someone out of the water with his negative comments.”

A light turned on in David’s thoughts. “I consider this guy funny, even though he is a pain in the rear to a lot of people at work, yet I go bonkers over some of the things that the two people close to me do that aren’t nearly as bad. Am I using a different yardstick to measure the people close to me?”

Healthy Relationships

When we understand why we enjoy one off-the-wall person but feel threatened by another, we will have turned a key that will help us, like David, relate without chaos in all our relationships. Respecting differences is crucial to getting along with people. You could share stories of people you cherish, even admire, who think, act, react, and choose differently than you. Perhaps you seek advice from those who offer different slants. You laugh with people who are out to lunch and don’t have all their oars in the water. Like meals, people and relationships would be boring if they were all the same.

David laughed at his coworker’s idiosyncrasies. He did not feel responsible for his coworker’s choices nor threatened by his actions or advice. He didn’t need the man’s approval or affirmation. He was able to separate himself from his coworker’s conduct, and as a result he could enjoy, rather than spin off from, his behavior. His objectivity was joined with caring, which helped him rein in his tendency to correct. This objectivity allowed him to view the coworker as responsible for his own actions. Objectivity in healthy relationships encourages each person to be responsible for his own choices and actions and the consequences of them.

The Foundation Blocks of Healthy Relationships

1. Respect
2. Accepting personal responsibility for one's behavior
3. Allowing others to bear the consequences of their behavior
4. Caring without enabling

Finding the Way Out of the Swamp

You, like David and Sarah, can learn ways to appreciate—even enjoy—the person whose challenging behavior and idiosyncrasies currently drive you nuts. *Living Successfully with Screwed-Up People* is a how-to of ways to stay afloat, set limits, and build a safety net to pull you out of the negative patterns in which you are ensconced.

When you are caught in the spin-offs of ailing relationships, you need a new perspective. When you feel like you're sinking because of the breakdowns in communication that thrive in unhealthy relationships, grab hold of the lifelines. This book will show you how. It will give you a gauge by which you discern:

- key indicators of a healthy relationship
- signs of malfunctioning
- techniques to judge who is responsible for what part of the malfunctioning
- healthy ways to cope and change

For easy reference, the lifelines I identify are summarized at the end of each chapter.

Turning a toxic relationship into a healthy one requires hard work and a new vision. You can't change your situation if you fail to see the problems and the options. Aerial vision brings the needed insight. It separates you from the

relationship chaos so your insights can free you from the stranglehold of difficult relationships.

You may want to try the following exercise that I recommend to people struggling in a skewed relationship. These six questions will jump-start your efforts to unscrew difficult relationship problems. As you read through *Living Successfully with Screwed-Up People*, write your notes or insights in a notebook. Put in it your answers to these questions.

1. What emotional tornadoes does the difficult person in your life spin off?
2. How do you react to the screwed-up person in your life?
3. How does your difficult person react to your reactions?
4. If the other person is the problem, are you growing unhealthy actions and reactions in response to him or her?
5. Are you the screwed-up person driving others to reactive behavior?
6. How do others react to your actions and responses?

Refer back to your answers as you read through this book. Jot down the insights you gain that will help you deal with the difficult person in your life. The goal is freedom, and freedom from any form of captivity requires commitment and hard work.

Being Willing to Change

Relationships that are screwed up cause a lot of pain. You need lifelines to pull out of the whirlpools of harmful and hurtful patterns that develop in unhealthy relationships. If

you are just beginning to twist, now is the time to reverse your patterns. It will take far less work now than if you wait until later.

Relationship low points can be hope points.

But if you are already at the bottom in your relationship, lost in a quagmire, take heart, you can reverse the patterns. Often it takes hitting bottom to shatter the illusions and fantasy around a challenged relationship. The bottom can be the beginning of renewal. When you are down, feeling there is no more use, the only way to go is up to a world of possibilities—if you determine to continue with the relationship. Low points can be hope points.

The question for you, as for David and Sarah, is, Do you really want to bring about positive change in your negative relationships? If so, *you* must be willing to change *first*. *Unless you change first, it is unlikely your relationship will do anything but sink deeper into distress.*

It takes only one person to change a relationship.

Reactive behavior rarely brings positive change. Change in your screwed-up person is far more likely when he recognizes that there is something different about you. Change causes surprise. Those around ask, “Why are you so different?” That’s a hope point! Your change may be a stimulus for change in others. It is impossible to continue the same type of interaction if one of the parties has metamorphosed his or her actions and responses.

Having Realistic Expectations

Perhaps you are hoping and waiting for that difficult person in your life to start doing things differently. Maybe you believe that if your difficult person changes, he won’t be so

offensive to others, will be more fun to be with, and will like himself more. Maybe you are right. But your expectations may be unrealistic.

Let's just assume that some of your desires for the relationship may be as unreal as the husband who wants his stressed-by-kids-and-a-job wife to be a sex goddess on demand. Without his help, she is a Cinderella in ashes. What he wants and what he has may be two different things, yet the potential is there for his dreams to be fulfilled—at least to some degree. His new vision will have to include the reality that, like the fairy godmother, he is a catalyst in the process that will produce a relationship that meets his needs—a healthy family—and a “goddess.”

Inga had to adjust her expectations. “My extended family was definitely my problem. They all live busy lives, so periodically to be together we take turns having family dinners. People show up megalate or not at all. Some come and stay a few minutes before leaving to go to something else ‘important,’ but few bother to call before the dinner to tell the hostess of conflicts. Of course, the excuses are semilegitimate—kids have schedule conflicts; they need to help a neighbor; they are so tired; they forgot. We would be more gracious with perfect strangers.”

Inga stewed over the situation. Her posturing and pontificating did no good. Appealing to courtesy didn't bring change. The same patterns continued. I asked her how she handled the problem to keep from spinning off into anger, resentment, and hurt.

“I decided these times were important to me. They provided an opportunity for family closeness and if I complained and nagged, the times together would become sour times, rather than fun, and the opportunity would close. So I shut my mouth and changed my attitude.”

Inga couldn't change people by nagging, but she could make adjustments so that she could relax and enjoy the family that came together. When she was the hostess, she changed from sit-down dinners to buffets so there were no table settings and it didn't matter how many came. She served foods that could be eaten hot or cold and could be refrigerated as leftovers. She chose to be grateful for the time together with whoever came. Their coming was a gift. She thanked the ones who came, and when family members who missed the time together called after the evening with excuses, she enthusiastically said, "We had such a good time, but we sure missed you!"

Each chapter of *Living Successfully with Screwed-Up People* addresses the how-to question. The answers or suggestions, like Inga's, work. They have been meticulously researched and studied. Patterns can be reversed. It is possible to regain control of thoughts and restructure a life that abuse has tumbled into chaos through the years. People can change. *You* can change.

We will talk about expectations—realistic and unrealistic, and the disappointment that can stem from them as we move through this book together. A baseline, a starting point, is necessary to determine *where you are* so you can set realistic goals for *where you want to be*. Use this two-minute test to pinpoint the health of your relationship and the health of your coping techniques.

The Clear Vision Test is a step toward a stronger, renewed, and vital relationship. It is a gauge by which you can determine whether your actions and responses to a difficult person are:

- healthy
- challenged
- screwed up

Clear Vision Test

Study the list below. Rank each statement according to how closely it describes you and your challenging relationship. Then add your points and compare the total with the scale at the end.

- 1 = never feel this
- 2 = sometimes feel this
- 3 = quite often feel this

1. I stew and seethe in silence *before* our times together.
2. I worry about and anticipate difficulties and chaos that will come *after* most of our times together.
3. I feel manipulated, intimidated, and controlled most of the time.
4. I feel unappreciated most of the time.
5. I feel I am always having to defend myself.
6. I feel overwhelming guilt after our being together.
7. I feel like “something is eating me alive.”
8. My conversations with others often spin off the negative actions or reactions I have to this person.
9. I seem unable to control my anger, resentment, or hurt when we are together or after we have been together.
10. I feel like I will never be able to measure up to what is expected.
11. I feel like a loser when I express my ideas, needs, or beliefs.
12. I try to plan out my actions and reactions before we get together.
13. I fantasize about getting even.
14. I fantasize about getting out.
15. I feel I must protect someone other than myself from harm—physical or psychological—caused by the difficult person.

16. I long to help this person change so he or she will be happier.
17. I long to help this person change so I will be happier.
18. I explode at the most unexpected times.
19. I do not feel happy most of the time.
20. I don't like me most of the time.
21. Most of the time I long for our relationship to be different.

If your score is:

- 21: Your relationship is normal and healthy.
- 22–34: Your relationship is skewing.
- 35–63: Your relationship and your reactions to it are unhealthy.

Be encouraged. If the test indicates that there is a problem, you can seek solutions.

If you are tired of fighting, tired of always being put down, tired of feeling like a spare part, hurt, discouraged, blue, and let down, read on. David and Sarah *did* change their relationships—for the better. You can too! Don't be discouraged. Grab the lifelines. *It takes only one person to change a relationship.*

Lifelines

- Aerial vision clears away illusion: Wrong actions are wrong; wrong responses to wrong actions are equally wrong.
- The swamp bottom is often the beginning of renewal.
- Relationship low points can be hope points.
- It takes only one person to change a relationship.