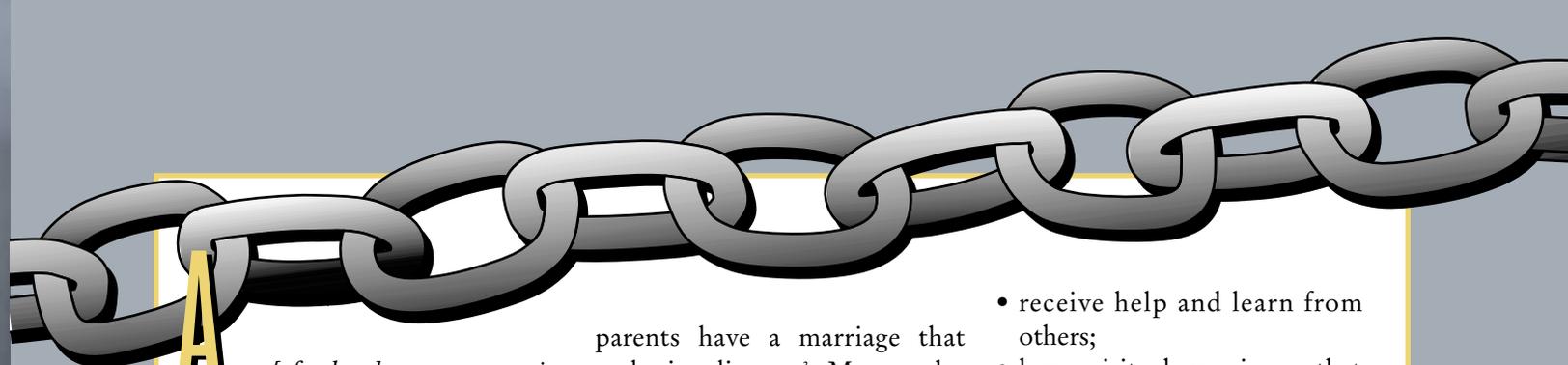


Breaking the Chain of Negative Family Influences

Roberta L. I. Magarrell and Dean E. Barley

*This article is taken from
Helping and Healing Our Families
published by the BYU School of
Family Life and Deseret Book*



Acts [of others] may cause pain, anguish, even physical harm, but they cannot destroy your eternal possibilities in this brief but crucial life on earth. . . . Your attitude can control the change for good in your life. It allows you to have the help the Lord intends you to receive. No one can take away your ultimate opportunities when you understand and live eternal law.¹

—Elder Richard G. Scott

What a blessing it is to be raised in a strong, healthy family where the marital relationship is one of complete fidelity and mutual support, where parents provide for their children's physical and spiritual needs, and where the children are taught to love and serve each other, to keep the commandments, and to be law-abiding citizens.² However, many are not blessed with such a home and may struggle with the cumulative effects of negative family influences, including addictions, abuse, violence, mental illness, unstable relationships with caregivers, enmeshment or estrangement, poverty, and crime. There also may be more subtle negative influences such as materialism, competitiveness, apostasy, or psychological control.

Fortunately, the transmission of negative family patterns from one generation to the next does not always occur. Not everyone who has been abused becomes an abusive parent, nor does everyone with divorced

parents have a marriage that ends in divorce.³ Many who come from stressful, destructive, or dysfunctional homes are able to end the chain of detrimental family influences in their own lives and in the lives of their children. For example, in the scriptures we read of how Abraham chose a path different from that of his father (see Abraham 1:4-5). People who overcome negative family influences can be called "transitional persons,"⁴ meaning that they make positive transitions in their own lives and in their family lines. Converts to the Church often choose to leave behind unwanted family traditions and patterns and become transitional characters for the generations that follow. How does this occur? What enables one to rise above potentially destructive family experiences?

Regardless of the particular negative patterns one is working to overcome, the majority of transitional people do the following as an ongoing process throughout the various stages of their lives:

- question their circumstances;
- become aware of changes that need to be made;
- desire to make things different;
- arrive at an enlightened understanding that allows for new possibilities for themselves and their families;
- devise specific strategies and action plans;
- believe that their own efforts can make a difference;
- act on their plans;

- receive help and learn from others;
- have spiritual experiences that move them forward in the desired direction;
- learn to forgive;
- express a sense of mission that motivates them to help others; and
- learn from any backsliding or relapses.

This challenging process requires persistence, a willingness to look at oneself and others through God's eyes, and the ability to ask for and receive help when necessary. Transitional persons may continue in the change process across their life spans. The transitional process as described in the steps just named can be helpful in dealing with difficulties of varying degrees of severity that may be encountered in nuclear and extended family relationships. The following experiences illustrate the process.

Margaret grew up terrified of her father. He would verbally and physically abuse her mother, her older sister, and Margaret. The worst part was not knowing what would trigger his outbursts. Margaret's parents divorced when she was 7 years old, but her sister, Nell, continued to beat Margaret almost daily and to call her negative names of every kind. Margaret's mother was working and could not afford child care; she was also chronically exhausted and depressed. By the time Margaret was 9, she had accepted that she

was worthless and deserved the treatment she received, and she felt constant anxiety during court-ordered visits with her father.

At age 14, Margaret grew taller than Nell and the beatings stopped. Their father moved to another state. Margaret began to read the Bible her maternal grandparents had given her. She wanted to please God by being baptized (John 3:1-7; 14:15). She investigated every church, philosophy, and organization she could find. At last, she obtained a copy of the Book of Mormon from the library, read it, and prayed about it. By now she was 17, and with her mother's permission, she was baptized. A year later she went to BYU and met the young man she would marry. He was kind and soft-spoken, and Margaret began to realize that her sharp words could harm others. She had already resolved never to physically abuse her children, and she added to that a resolve to speak to them without sarcasm, criticism, and other damaging verbal tactics.

Margaret is a transitional person. She began by question-

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ing her circumstances: "How can I escape this? How can I create something different? How do I reject a family lifestyle that is harming me and create a better lifestyle for myself and my future family?"

Transitional people become aware of the unwanted consequences for themselves and their loved ones and they form a desire to make things different. They gain an enlightened understanding that opens up new possibilities for their lives and provides a fresh view of themselves and their families.

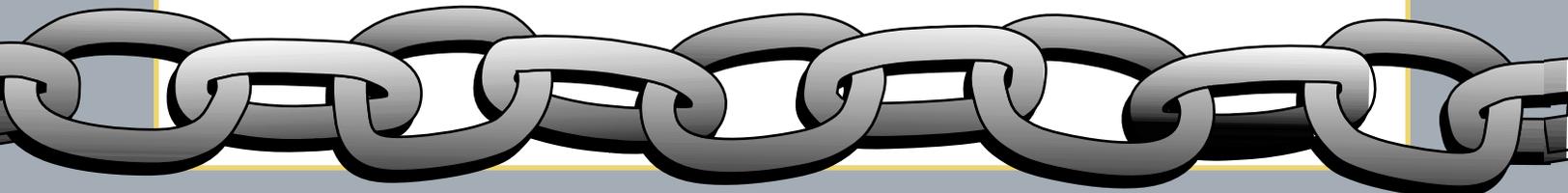
With this new understanding, transitional people often develop specific strategies and action plans to protect themselves or to lead their lives in different directions. This often requires conscious, sustained

effort to change hurtful family patterns of interaction, especially if family members are opposed to such changes.

Deborah's parents disciplined her with what she later called "mind games." If she did something to displease them, they would stop speaking to her, would ignore her, and would refuse to respond to her

attempts to discuss the problem or to apologize. Finally, right before bedtime, her parents would tell her they had acted with her best interests at heart, that they loved her, and that she should feel guilt for their pain because she had forced them to behave in a way that made them feel terrible. Deborah would often become physically ill or be unable to sleep after these "disciplinary sessions." She began holding back emotionally, and finally stopped listening to or caring about her parents' attempts to control her through their twisted form of "love."

Her best friend's family helped her see a healthier pattern of discipline and realize that her parents' behavior was abnormal and unhealthy. Over the years, she began to create a healthy philosophy of life



around which she organized her thoughts and actions. She determined that she would set standards different from those of her parents for acceptable behavior. She would make good choices and exercise self-control, rather than be controlled by her parents' withdrawal of attention and love.⁵

Transitional people conclude that they need not remain a victim of circumstances, but can deliberately make a difference in their own lives and the lives of their loved ones. Transitional characters believe in their autonomy and feel empowered to change their own lives in significant ways, even in the face of extreme hardship, and they act on their plans. This action entails choosing a destination and doing what needs to be done to get there. This frequently includes more earnestly turning to the Lord in fervent prayer, seeking to follow spiritual promptings, increasing positive time with family members, learning to substitute healthier alternative behaviors, making new friends, joining a self-help group, or talking with a close friend or relative. As their actions begin to produce desired results, transitional people are encouraged to continue their efforts. To accomplish this, transitional figures may need to overcome their own fears or learn new skills. This often requires turning to others for support and an example.

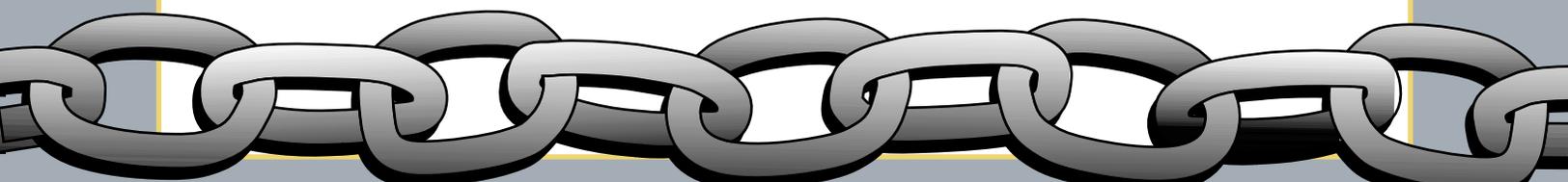
Barbara's single mother was heavily into drugs, and she suffered much from neglect during the times when her mother was oblivious to her needs. She stated that her movement forward was gradual in some areas and very fast in others. There were lots of people in the right place at the right time. One of these people was a sister to whom she could talk openly in her later teens about some areas in her life. That sister had a positive outlook on life and was transitioning forward herself. Watching her sister do this helped Barbara to see that she could face difficult issues. Her sister validated her, accepted her, loved her, and did not judge her. Another helpful person was a grandmother who loved her, was very accepting of her, and showed confidence in her. Her Young Women leaders also provided listening ears and good examples.

In spite of a poor parental example, Barbara was able to use the support and examples of other people around her and did not allow herself to become paralyzed by her past. Transitional people are often assisted by helpful people (friends, immediate or extended family members, ecclesiastical leaders, teachers, mentors) who can offer encouragement, support, and a concrete example of new skills helpful in making necessary changes. Transitional characters may also

receive help through reading good books and by participating in seminars, workshops, or support groups. Many people who have been through extremely negative family experiences and who continue to struggle with difficulties benefit from professional help. They explore the appropriate use of available resources (such as therapists or medications). In addition to aid from others, transitional people frequently report spiritual experiences that move them forward.

Andrew and Francie had each grown up in wealthy homes where they were provided everything a child and then teen could want. Each received a car for his or her 16th birthday. They met at college (tuition paid by their parents) and their similar backgrounds contributed to their attraction. After their temple wedding, they and their families and friends enjoyed two lavish wedding receptions at their parents' homes. When they returned from a honeymoon in Hawaii, they lived in the condo that Andrew's parents had purchased for them to help them get started. Francie and Andrew enjoyed shopping for new furniture and helping the decorator with designs for the condo. Almost before they knew it, they had three children, Andrew had a well-paying job, and they owned a beautiful home.

Andrew and Francie went to see a financial planner after their



third child was born. They came away from their meeting believing that it had been helpful for planning the future, but troubled as they considered whether they were too focused on material pursuits. The couple kept returning to something their oldest child had said when the news of the tragic earthquake and tsunami in the Indian Ocean became known. “Dumb people,” they were surprised to hear their son say. “Why didn’t they just get on the yacht and get away?” Andrew’s yacht, a favorite for family vacations, was at a marina near their home. Francie and Andrew didn’t know whether to be unhappier that their son thought everyone had access to a yacht or that he had referred to the suffering victims of the natural disaster as “dumb” because they didn’t know how to get away—especially when they had no warning.

Andrew and Francie decided that their children might benefit from less parental generosity and more opportunities to see how the family’s time and money could benefit others. During a temple session the next day, their covenants seemed more individual and meaningful than ever. They prayed together about what they could do, made plans, and called the family together. They discussed tithes and

offerings with the children, went through closets and storage spaces looking for items to donate, talked more about the tsunami during family home evening, and made a large donation to the Red Cross for tsunami relief. They also pledged to serve meals at the local homeless shelter one night a week. They considered ways to involve the children better in daily chores and to help them contribute to their own college savings accounts, and they looked for opportunities to spend more time as a family.

Quite often the result of spiritual experiences is a “transitional leap” commonly evidenced by deeper, more significant changes in behaviors and the way one views the world. These experiences make it easier to let go of the past and to look more to the present and the future. Frequently the transi-

tional person begins to dismiss a false sense of responsibility for family problems or can better see his or her part in the family pattern. A new sense of identity and an increased feeling of self-worth can emerge. Transitional people may feel more at peace with themselves, those around them, and with God. They often conclude that God lives and loves them, which can help them to forgive their offenders, where that is needed.

Doug experienced family violence at the hand of his alcoholic father. Doug said that he loves his dad and knows that his father had many negative family experiences growing up. He stated, “I came to a point where I knew I had to forgive what he did to me if I wanted my sins forgiven. I’m sure it was little bit by little bit. I started to see things differently. During high school and [my] mission, I forgave my dad out of duty, because it was right to do that, and I felt a lot of peace at that. Since, I’ve attended college. I’ve learned a lot more about why he is the way he is and

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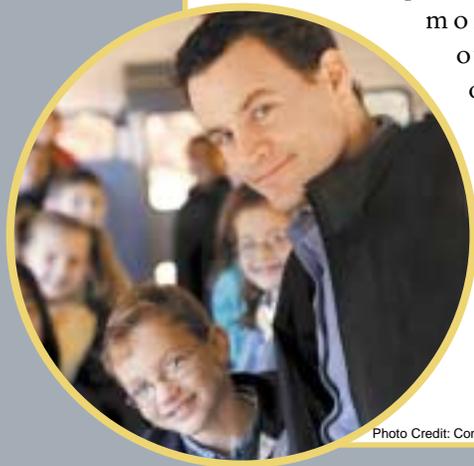


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pity. The reason I was able to forgive was because I learned how to pray for understanding of how important someone is to Heavenly Father, including my dad. So, I came to understand that I could love my dad. I could have charity for him. Over time, it was one of the most beautiful miracles I've had in my life. Then finally I was able to love myself, too."

Often transitional people work through a process of forgiving that can allow them to move forward with their lives without harboring resentment. This does not necessarily mean reconciliation with an abuser or harmful family member, but it can mean no longer living as a victim or holding family members to blame for one's own decisions. Often, transitional people are aided in the process of forgiveness by their own religious convictions and through more closely understanding the offender in the context of the offender's own history (empathy). Along with spiritual experiences, many people leaving behind negative family influences feel a sense of mission to help others.

Doug stated: "I started studying the teachings of Christ and for the first time in my life, I decided to try these things and see if they work. I discovered that the teachings of Christ worked. I discovered that there's power in them. Life's not easy. There's still lots of pain in my

life, but at least I know what I'm supposed to

do. I started focusing more on charity and on the life of Christ and to heal and uplift others, and not to judge. Everyone's walked a different path to get to where they are and I need to be sensitive to that."

This sense of mission is often future-oriented. There is a growing desire to accomplish something for themselves and their posterity. Transitional people often look beyond their own needs: They reach out in love and service to others. They demonstrate a desire to contribute and to share their talents and abilities. This sense of mission to help others can aid the transitional person to stay focused on what is important. It also adds purpose and meaning to past suffering and to present and future action plans. In spite of this, for those seeking to make significant changes, progress is often punctuated with episodic relapses or backsliding.

Carolyn was severely abused sexually and had an extremely traumatic time from early childhood to adulthood. As a youth she set some standards for herself and decided never to have sex before she was married. Then, within two months of making this decision, she was pregnant and having an abortion. After the abortion she saw a counselor and spent two weeks in a hospital. A short time after discharge she helped the counselor to produce a video about her struggles, which was then used to help other struggling young women.

Later she met a young man

who valued her for who she was. She stated, "He gave me back my self-respect. He treated me like I was of worth and that there was more to me than just anatomy. I didn't have anyone else like that." They both went away to different colleges. Her behavior slipped some and during the Christmas season she went into a state of depression, which included a crisis of faith. She then had an experience "that gave me faith in a higher power, that there was really something there."

She made further progress at college but began drifting. She quit in her junior year to take time to focus on herself and work through some things. She made progress through service to others. She then returned to the university and continued her healing through family-related courses. She gained further education and entered the helping field where she has successfully assisted children of abuse in the healing process.

The entire process for the transitional person is usually not one of consistent progression. Often there are starts and stops with occasional backsliding into prior unwanted patterns. As Elder Richard G. Scott observed: "Changing a profoundly embedded pattern of life can be very difficult. . . . Persistent faith in the Savior and obedience will see you through such hardships to greater blessings. The scriptures illustrate how conviction and faith can overcome traditions in conflict with God's plan,

The scriptures illustrate how conviction and faith can overcome traditions in conflict with God's plan, bringing blessings to individuals, and even generations of people."

-Elder Richard G. Scott



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bringing blessings to individuals, and even generations of people."⁶

In summary, those working to overcome a wide range of negative family influences often do the following: question their circumstances, become aware of changes that need to be made, have a desire to make things different, turn to God in fervent prayer, arrive at an enlightened understanding that allows for new possibilities for themselves and their

them forward in the desired direction, learn to forgive, have a sense of mission that motivates them to help others, and learn from any backsliding or relapses. As individuals have the courage to move through the difficult and demanding process of breaking the chain of negative family influences, they can create new patterns that will bless and heal for generations to come. *mf*

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ADDITIONAL READING

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NOTES

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- 2 First Presidency and Council of Twelve Apostles (1995, November), The family: A proclamation to the world, *Ensign*, 25(11), 102.
- 3 R. Magarrell (1994), Becoming a Transitional Character, doctoral dissertation, Brigham Young University, 6-12.
- 4 A. E. Bergin (2002), *Eternal Values and Personal Growth: A Guide on Your Journey to Spiritual, Emotional, and Social Wellness* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies), 229-232.
- 5 For more information about parents' use of control, see B. K. Barber (2002), *Intrusive Parenting: How Psychological Control Affects Children and Adolescents* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association).
- 6 Richard G. Scott (1998, May), Removing barriers to happiness, *Ensign*, 28(5), 86.

