

Reducing Inflammation

By John Blackwell, Ph.D.

I had never been in such pain. It was as though my shoulder was frozen. I couldn't move my arm, and I couldn't sleep. My physician told me that she thought I had arthritis. She did, however, send me to a physical therapist. His diagnosis was different. He said that I had adhesive capsulitis. He also said, "Not to worry! I'm going to give you some exercises that are going to restore mobility. You'll be as good as new."

Thankfully, he was right. The therapy lasted three weeks. I was back to normal.

A year later, the same problem returned. This time, I was ready. I remembered the exercises that the physical therapist gave me, and I set to work to correct the problem. But something was different this time. The exercises helped, but I didn't make the kind of progress I had made a year ago.

I was telling a friend of mine, and he said, "Are you taking ibuprofen?"

I said, "No. Should I be?"

He replied, "Yes. I have shoulder problems. My guess is that the exercises will work a lot better if you also take something to reduce the inflammation. That will give the therapy a chance to work."

I then realized that when I was doing my exercises a year ago, I was also taking the ibuprofen that my physician prescribed. Once I added this medication to my exercises, the exercises started working a lot better. Once again, I was on the road to recovery."

This got me to thinking about how we can reduce inflammation in our relationships. We can get the techniques and exercises right: we can change behavior to improve the ways in which we interact. But if we don't reduce the inflammation, we may not see much progress.

What kind of inflammation am I talking about? I'm talking about resentment. I'm talking about grudge carrying. I'm talking about withholding forgiveness. I'm talking about reminding our loved ones of the mistakes they have made and the sins they have committed.

Being human, we will make mistakes from time to time. Being human, we will also commit our unfair share of sins. We will step on each other. We won't always get it right.

When we are parents or teachers or pastors or professors, we have responsibility for correcting the faults of others—even as we continue to take responsibility for our own conduct. Imagine this scenario: one of our children makes a mistake or does something wrong. I respond with appropriate correction. I tell my child what he or she did wrong. I then tell my child the right way to handle things the next time.

Where do I go from there? One scenario is to forgive my child for what he or she has done wrong, to put it in the past, and to move on. I may even say to my child, "I know you will be better next time. I trust you. I have confidence in you. You can do it. I know you can!" In other words, I can follow up my disciplinary talk with forgiveness and encouragement.

Another scenario would have me holding my child's wrongdoing over his or her head. This would involve withholding forgiveness and reminding my child of his or her wrong doing. I might even add, "Now you have to prove your love." And when the

child blows it again, I might then say, “See! I knew you’d mess up. I’m learning to expect the worst from you.”

What’s the problem with this second scenario? I have done nothing to reduce the inflammation in our relationship. If I withhold forgiveness, if I refuse to give, I am keeping the wound open. My child will feel raw and defensive. Why? Because I am keeping my child in pain instead of first teaching and then soothing the pain with confidence.

There’s another problem with this scenario. If I withhold forgiveness and carry a grudge, if I keep our home in a state of chronic inflammation, I am teaching my child to do the same. When I am resentful, I am teaching others to be resentful. When I carry a grudge, I am teaching others to carry grudges as well. How am I doing this? By the example I set.

In this same vein, when I carry grudges and resentment, I isolate myself from others. Few people enjoy being around people who are resentful all of the time. Those who carry grudges aren’t pleasant company. What if, instead, we were to reduce the inflammation in our relationships? What if we were to reduce the intensity? What if we were to create a more relaxed climate—one in which our humanity could slowly, but surely, unfold and grow strong? What if our homes became soothing—a healing balm?