

Making Space for Those Struggling with Unwanted Singleness

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We all have an inclination to turn something good into an ultimate thing. Sometimes, churches, often unintentionally, convey the message that marriage, families, motherhood, and fatherhood are necessary stages in life to achieve an acceptable and worthy identity. When we do, we can hurt single people in our community. While they are good, we need to recognize that these things are not ultimate things. With his accomplished work on the cross, Jesus gave us the right to become children of God, transforming the meaning and construction of families. As members of his family, we receive an unshakeable identity and worth that is not dependent on our relationship status.

However, this identity is hard to internalize. Many people we serve are trying to manage unwanted singlehood, struggling with anxiety, depression, and loneliness. They desire intimate attachment with a significant other, yet that deep longing has not been met. Some may blame God and feel anger toward Him for allowing them to be in this situation of continuous longing and disappointment. It is important for the church to remember people who live with unwanted singlehood and walk alongside them as they navigate their sense of loss. Here are a few tips to best serve and welcome brothers and sisters in Christ who are wrestling with unwanted singleness.

1. Honor single people within your community

Build your ministry culture in ways singles would feel at home. In the context of loving church culture, treat them as part of your family, like aunts and uncles. Let them have a standing invitation to your home, some holiday meals, and annual traditions. These family-type relationships are especially important in a city where many people do not go home often. Many times at church, we celebrate the milestones of couples and families with baby showers, bridal showers, and weddings, which are all beautiful things. Consider creative ways to mark single milestones, as well, such as housewarming registries for singles, birthday card ministries, and milestone celebrations thrown by people other than the single person.

The model Jesus gave for church community is not only romantic relationships but shared kingdom work in close connection and community (Mark 6, 1 Timothy 5). Talk about cultivating spiritual friendships and create ways for people to journey together as spiritual friends. Friendships and ministry partnerships are not a substitute for a spouse but they do allow for deep connection and discipleship as valuable members of God's family.

2. Build a ministry culture with singles' input

Consider surveying people in your ministry or hosting a talk or workshop on singleness. Get to know who the singles are in your care and ask about their unique experiences, what they need and want, what is working, and what needs to change. Follow through with making practical changes

based on what you learn. Invest in an active singles ministry that fits your unique community. Consider using a resource such as <https://www.singlefriendlychurch.com/> to help make your church or ministry more inviting and welcoming for single people.

3. Appreciate the difficulty of their ambiguous loss

Unwanted singlehood can be considered an ambiguous loss because it is an unclear loss. Since there is no clear information about the anticipated loved one or spouse, it is difficult to know if it is better to hold on to hope for this anticipated person, thereby living with continuous pain, or to seek closure by grieving and accepting permanent singlehood. For many, their anticipated loved one or spouse is psychologically present but physically absent, leading to ambivalence, and making grieving even harder. The single person may have an almost complete idea in their minds of their anticipated spouse and imagine doing life with this person, but this person has not materialized. Feeling stuck can also be quite painful because they feel that others are moving forward while they are standing still in a holding pattern.

4. Be a witness to their ambiguous loss and grief

Help singles explicitly name the loss connected with their unwanted singleness. Though they feel the pain acutely, the reality of the loss may seem unclear, ambiguous, and invisible. Singles may ask, "How can I grieve the loss of something I have never had?" or "How do I mourn for something I am not yet sure I am going to lose like getting married or having children?" Let them know that grieving the ongoing pain and current loss of an unfulfilled longing is important and welcome. Help bring the ambiguous loss to conscious awareness. Whether it is through acknowledgement in sermons, special gatherings, or a part of small group culture, create space to name the loss and hear their struggles.

Avoid pitying or glamorizing singleness. Instead, as you ask good questions, listen, and normalize both the struggles and joys of being single. At the same time, focus on each person's unique experience of singlehood. Naming the ambivalence helps to decrease anxiety, blame, sadness, guilt, and helps build resilience.

5. Help them hold more than one reality at a time

Unwanted singleness carries the heavy weight of suffering long. Help decrease their distress and lack of clarity by talking through their experiences that seem contradictory.

As you ask questions and talk with singles, help them think in terms of **BOTH AND**:

- I can long for companionship **AND** spend time with married couples and their kids who I really enjoy.
- I choose to continue to hope God will provide me with a spouse **AND** I can tell him how much it hurts that it is not a reality yet.
- I can attend this wedding or baby shower and be happy for my friend **AND** I can cry when I grieve not having my own spouse or children.
- I can enjoy going on trips alone or with friends **AND** I can grieve and feel sad about not having my own spouse and children to go on trips with.

- I can enjoy the autonomy of being able to make my own decisions **AND** I can long for a spouse so we could make decisions together.

6. Recognize the struggle with the dating world and their faith

Acknowledging and grieving over how hard it is as a Christian to be dating in a limited pool of other Christians is important. So many people are finding dating to be a frustrating, exhausting, and disappointing experience. As caregivers, it is important to first seek to understand and ask questions, genuinely caring about their hurts and struggles, then reflect back what you hear with empathy and compassion.

Singles may be hesitant to open up to church or small group leaders when faced with the option of dating non-Christians for fear of their reaction. They may also compartmentalize their life or just stop coming to church because they feel ashamed or judged. To help prevent this inclination, let them know that they are welcome and encourage them to invite God into their dating struggles. Discern if the timing is right for the person to receive what you may want to share about the safeguards the Bible lays out about being in relationship with non-believers, and be humble, compassionate, and non-judgmental in how you share this.

7. Help them see themselves as God sees by the way you interact with them

Be aware that people's singlehood may trigger repeated patterns of hurt, of feeling rejected, overlooked, or disregarded. Their view of self may also be affected, seeing themselves as less than, unworthy, or broken. When listening, be winsome, wise, and gentle. Help them remember who they are in Christ, while acknowledging their genuine experiences of grief and hurt. Encourage singles who are lamenting to invite Christ into their grief and experience his comfort. Help them internalize and experience God's deep love for them in a tangible way. This happens in the way you are compassionate to their experiences, the way you genuinely love, accept, and value who they are, and in how you help them feel a sense of belonging.

As caregivers, we want to walk with singles in their grief, sadness, and anger, and other emotions they have over this ambiguous loss of unwanted singlehood. From a place of gentle curiosity, we can find out what is helpful. As the body of Christ, it is important for the church to see single people as valuable members of God's family and walk alongside them, embodying his compassion. We can give them experiences that affirm who they are and their worth.

Resources:

Redeemer Counseling Toolkit on Grief: [Helping Clients Wrestle with God in Their Pain](#)

Jackson, Jeffrey B. *[The Ambiguous Loss of Singlehood: Conceptualizing and Treating Singlehood Ambiguous Loss Among Never-Married Adults](#)*. Contemporary Family Therapy (2018) 40:210-222