Bob: Do you have friends, who are in a second or a third marriage, forming a blended family? Michele Cushatt says there is a phrase we ought to avoid when we talk with them or about them.

Michele: Don’t use the phrase, “broken family” anymore; it’s such a loaded phrase. I mean, if you want to privately, I guess I can’t control what you do; but when you hang out with somebody, who has a very complex family like this, let’s just get rid of that; because you know what?—Jesus came for the broken, and that’s every one of us.

Bob: This is FamilyLife Today for Monday, March 9th. Our hosts are Dave and Ann Wilson; I’m Bob Lepine. You’ll find us online at FamilyLifeToday.com. There are some pretty common pain points that are a part of a blended family. We’ll hear about those today from Michele Cushatt. Stay with us.

And welcome to FamilyLife Today. Thanks for joining us on the Monday edition. You were a gymnast, growing up; right?

Ann: Yes.

Dave: I thought you were talking to me, Bob. [Laughter] No; I wasn’t.

Bob: I know better.

Ann: I’ve seen that; that is not a good sight.

Dave: She has seen my cartwheel.

Bob: One of the things—when gymnasts are being judged for their routine or whatever it is they are doing, the judges take into account the degree of difficulty in what they are doing. The simpler the routine—you can’t get a 10 if you do a really simple routine; right?

Ann: Look at you.

Dave: Yes.
Ann: You’re even an expert at gymnastics.

Dave: He might be an Olympic judge—

Ann: This is true.

Dave: —or something in his private life.

Bob: The reason that I’m thinking about this is because, in marriage, there are degree of difficulty issues in marriage as well.

Dave: Wow! That was a jump.

Ann: That's a good transition; I like it.

Dave: See, what I did there—jump.

Bob: That is a jump.

Dave: That was a vault.

Bob: Couples in a first marriage are going to experience challenges and difficulties. Couples in a blended marriage/a second marriage have a new level of degree of difficulty that’s been brought in. That’s going to make the routine harder, but you can score more points if you—

Ann: Oh, that’s good; that’s true.

Bob: —can do it.

Dave: If you can do it. [Laughter]

Ann: That’s absolutely right.

Bob: We’re going to hear a message today that comes from the Summit on Stepfamily Ministries that FamilyLife® hosted back a few months ago. Ron Deal gives leadership to this. One of the speakers at the summit is an author and a platform speaker. She and her husband are in a blended family, and they have also adopted kids.

As you listen to Michele, she is going to talk about the most common pain points that couples in a blended family experience. You also need to know that she is a three-time head-and-neck cancer survivor. On top of the challenges you would face in a marriage or in a blended relationship, she’s had those challenges. And you’ll hear, as she speaks, that she is a cancer survivor; you can hear it in her voice. Here is Michele.
Michele: We need to understand what the primary pain points are for blended families so we can help. If we don’t understand pain, then we can’t connect with the people.

The first primary pain point is simply emotions. This does not surprise you; but we need to understand a little bit the complexity of the emotions that take place in a blended family because a blended family is a trauma circumstance. Regardless of how you ended up in a blended family, they’ve experienced some kind of trauma. Whether it was a death, a divorce—some kind of like Ron talked about: the raging waters/the white waters—it is a traumatic experience.

We need to understand how the body and brain responds to trauma and why it elicits the emotions that it does. The truth is people who have endured loss, trauma, and pain don’t behave well. It’s not just bad behavior; loss, and trauma, and pain changes the brain.

I’ve read all kinds of books. I am not a psychologist/a psychiatrist; but I’m a mom, who was in the trenches of trauma every day, and who has experienced it herself. I’ve done tons of research on trauma and what happens to the brain. One of my favorite books on trauma is a book called *The Body Keeps the Score* by Dr. Bessel van der Kolk. It’s very clinical; it’s a thick, hard read.

Let me tell you—if you want to develop a sense of empathy for people, who have gone through complex trauma of all different kinds, spend just a little time in that book. I’m going to read one quote. It’s going to sound very clinical, but I want you to hang with me. This is what he says in that book: “Research has revealed that trauma produces actual physiological changes; including a recalibration of the brain’s alarm system, an increase in stress hormone activity, and alterations in the system that filters relevant information from irrelevant.”

I want you to hear that: the brain alarm system has gone haywire; stress hormones go way up; and the system that filters important or relevant information from irrelevant is kind of all catawampus, so you’re not able to filter what kind of information matters. All of that is a problem, by the way. That makes it very hard to function with complex humans when those systems go down.

“We now know that trauma compromises the brain area that communicates the physical embodied feeling of being alive. These changes explain why traumatized individuals become,”—listen to this—“hyper-vigilant to threats.” If you’ve ever counseled with somebody in those situations, they are hyper—everything feels like it’s personal; everything feels like a personal attack. “They are hyper-vigilant to anything that feels like a threat at the expense of spontaneously engaging in their day-to-day lives.” In other words, they are on alert all the time. “They also help us understand why
traumatized people so often keep repeating the same problems and have such trouble learning from experience. We now know that the behaviors are not the result of moral failings, or signs of a lack of willpower, or bad character; they are caused by actual changes in the brain.”

So many times we so focus on core behavior, we forget we’re dealing with wounded people. We are so worried about correcting what they are doing wrong that we forget to sit with them and mourn.

When people go through trauma—and there are lots of different levels— but divorce—let me tell you: divorce destroyed me. It took all these other years, and all these consecutive traumas and losses, for me to finally validate the trauma of my divorce. It’s been 22 years since my divorce, and it’s taken other things for me to finally go back and realize that that was significant. We have such a bad habit—especially in the church, at times—of expecting people to put on an unflappable, perfect faith and behave well when they come to church.

We need to understand that emotions are a significant pain point. Some of the emotions—okay?—some of those emotions are literally a physiological response to very hard circumstances. Hyper-vigilance—you’ll see that. Hyper-vigilance, reactivity—anybody ever seen reactivity in blended families? Children and adults repeating dysfunctional patterns—did you hear that in that quote by Dr. Van der Kolk? Repeating dysfunctional patterns; and either isolation and withdrawal or codependency and clingy behavior—it’s one of those two. There are attachment styles—I won’t get into that—but when we are stressed and triggered, we default to either kind of our uncomfortable attachment styles; so either that isolation, detachment, withdrawal or excessive clingy, codependent kind of behavior. I know you’ve seen this.

Okay; “So how do we help?” “We’ve identified the emotions. How do we help?” First of all, the most important thing is to create emotional safety. You have to make them feel safe; the trauma brain needs to feel safe. Basically, the trauma brain—when people go through hard things, it’s a smoke detector going off—it’s going“ Beep, beep, beep, beep, beep.”

Now, if you’re in your house, and your smoke detector is going off, you can keep doing your regular activities and get your chores done. How effective is it?—I mean, what happens the longer the smoke detector goes off? What do you feel happening to you? [Gasp] “I’m going to scream!” That smoke detector—you want to throw something at the ceiling if you could find it, but we never can find the smoke detector that is actually going off; right? [Laughter]

The brain is operating like a smoke detector. The trauma brain is going off; it’s sensing danger. The way that we help the brain calm down is creating emotional safety. That begins with, first of all, looking beyond the loudest emotion. Train yourself to see beyond the behavior and the loudest emotion. Don’t take it personally. When you see
somebody behaving badly, [you should be] going: “They don’t feel/they are afraid; they
don’t feel safe. Something in their body—the alarm’s going off. I need to create safety.”
Sometimes, it’s just simply saying: “I see you. I see how hard this is for you.” Sit with
them in it.

The other piece, and Ron mentioned this earlier, is you need to the—you may need a
referral yourself. Other people’s trauma triggers our own. You need to do your own hard
work; you and I need to do our own hard work of investing in our own emotional
wholeness and health. When we are grounded—when we have done the work of being
self-aware and identify our own triggers/our own things—we can hold space for people
with really loud emotions.

Alright; pain point number one is emotions. Pain point number two: parenting. We’ve
talked about this a lot. Blended families—parenting is hard no matter what—but
parenting in a blended family situation is so difficult/so incredibly difficult. I now have
three kids from trauma, who I’ve adopted into our family. They’ve been with us eight
years. When things get hard, you know what they say?—“You’re not my mom.” “I’ve
rescued you from poverty and chaos, and that’s what you say to me!” [Laughter] It’s
every day.

Parenting is hard; it’s complex, so what do we do? When you have these blended
families, you have the complex emotions. Then you have the birth order disruption.
You’ve got parental loyalties that come into play. You have the introduction of new
relationships. In the middle of all of that, you have people, who have already been
abandoned at some point in time; so you have this ongoing fear of abandonment, a
sense of aloneness, a fear of being forgotten, and—this was my boys’ biggest
difficulty/actually, all my kids’ difficulty—they feel different from everybody else. Just in
case you don’t remember what middle school was like—being different is about the
worst thing in the entire world.

On top of the differences, there is constant—and I mean constant—guilt and shame.
We have this realization that: “I am different than everybody else,”—and by the way, I’ve
felt different too; because I now was a divorced woman in church, not the married
woman in church. I’m different from everyone else, and I’m pretty sure it’s my fault. That
is true for adults and children alike. Do you know how living with that reality/that
underlying sense—talk about shame. Our blended family friends are carrying around a
bag of shame so heavy every single day; it’s a wonder they make it to church at all.

“How do we help?” To begin, we commit to inclusivity—commit to inclusivity. This is
what I mean. We were having some really hard time with teenagers at the time, and I
sat down with one of my best friends. I just needed to know I wasn’t alone. I sat down
with one of my best friends—dear, dear friend—and I shared with her what was going
on. This was her response: “Well, you know, they come from a broken family. It’s to be
expected.” She didn’t mean anything by it; but in that moment, what I learned is: “I’m
doomed to failure,” and “I better not ask for help; because if I do, I will be told this is basically my fault; and it’s not going to get any better.”

Do you want to know how many times I’ve heard the word, “broken family,” over the last 20 years? The reality is technically speaking. I understand what they are saying; but the reality is: “Okay; I’m being really technical: “Every one of us is part of a broken family, because we are part of sinful creation—every single one of us. If you’re okay with me—like how about I introduce you at an event: ‘This is my friend, Tom. He’s a sinner”? [Laughter] Okay; it may be the facts, but we don’t usually like to lead with that. When people introduce [me]: “This is Michele; she’s from a broken family,”—why do we think that’s okay?

One of the best things you can do, when it comes to parenting, is erase even that phrase from your vocabulary. Don’t use the phrase, “broken family,” anymore; it’s such a loaded phrase. I mean, if you want to privately, I guess I can’t control what you do; but when you hang out with somebody, who has a very complex family like this, let’s just get rid of that; because you know what? Jesus came for the broken, and that’s every one of us.

Okay; third pain point: marriage. It’s not a big leap from pain point one, emotions; pain point two, parenting; to marriage—okay?—it’s just hard. Many other people have talked about this already; I won’t spend a lot of time here; but when you have emotional volatility, and complex parenting schedules, and kids coming and going on Mondays and Wednesdays and every other weekend and summers—I mean, the last thing you are going to have energy for is your marriage.

When you have kids from trauma, they demand a lot of attention; they tend to be really loud. Like our—we have six of them; thank You, Jesus, for giving me extra practice. [Laughter] The marriage is very hard to have anything—have any kind of priority/energy to invest in the marriage. Then you have that fear, guilt, shame as well that causes isolation or clingy behavior. It just messes with all of that.

So: “What do we do? How do we help?”—right? First of all, you need to, as we’ve talked about, provide compassionate resources. We don’t just throw resources at people. Compassion means immersion—compassionate resources. Remember: these are people, not statistics. Don’t assume—you want to know how many times somebody has told me, “You know, second marriages—like two-thirds of second marriages end in divorce”? I wanted to say: “I’m not a statistic. I’m a person. Your statistics aren’t helping me.” When we come up and we quote statistics about the failure of second marriages and third marriages—or however you want to say it—or blended families and all of this, we aren’t helping. Let’s be a voice of hope, not of doom; so provide compassionate resources.
Ask for and listen to their stories. Do you know how healing it is to be able to tell your story? They won’t say it right; they’ll probably be critical, and negative, or bitter, or whatever—ask for and listen.

Intentionally and regularly provide specific resources and events for blended families; but especially—this is kind of different than some of the things here—I want you to provide opportunities, where they can simply laugh, connect, enjoy each other and other people. Many times, they go to conferences to learn how to do it better; but let me tell you—these families don’t have many opportunities to just laugh their heads off. Create opportunities for them to have fun. Being in a blended family with all these complex things, we don’t get to always laugh very often.

Pain point number four: special days. Special days—this is what I mean: we have Christmas, Thanksgiving—loaded holidays. Holidays are loaded; and regardless of how you ended up in your blended family—[whether] it is death, or adoption, or divorce, or whatever—regardless of how you ended up there, we have Christmas and Thanksgiving; those are loaded.

But don’t forget days like birthdays; spring break; fall break; summer break; Memorial Day; Labor Day; Easter; Valentine’s Day, when they are doing boxes; Halloween, when they are doing costumes; Mother’s Day; Father’s Day; first day of school; last day of school; sporting events; homecoming; prom; there are teacher conferences; graduation; weddings; grandbabies. What’s so interesting is—so much of the church calendar is centered around special days. It makes it very hard, as someone from a blended family, to go to church on special days; because it’s like navigating landmines. Even if I’m in a good space, my children may not be.

What I’d like to do is give you some questions to ask, even around these special days, to help you be a bit of an investigator. I’m not going to tell you what programs to do—that’s not what this is about—it’s about having conversations with the local people and asking them questions like this: “What is the hardest thing in your life right now?” “What is breaking your heart the most today?” “What do you need more than anything?” “If there is one thing that you need, what do you need more than anything?” “How can we love you well?” “You’re so valuable to us; how can we love you well right here?” “What would make you feel less alone?” I would imagine, with everything you’ve gone through, that you feel alone; and that’s a horrible feeling. What can we do? What would help you feel less alone?”

Then say this—oh, man, this is what I want you to say instead of “broken family”—these words: “Guess what? We’re all family. We’re in this together. We are family; we’re in this together.”

Final pain point—and this will be kind of hard to swallow—but it’s really the church. The hardest place for my family to go every week is church. There’s—and I love the church—Jesus’s bride is beautiful; I love the church, but it’s a hard place for our family
to go; because we don’t fit in a box. My kids don’t always function well in Sunday school classes. One day, we went in, and they were handing out snacks—bananas. Because my son was starved when he was a child, he doesn’t take one; by the time we picked him up, he had eaten five bananas in half an hour and was physically sick. We needed to have somebody that was aware of that enough that they set a limit; but there’s a lack of education about how to respond to kids from complex situations like that.

Five pain points: again, emotions, parenting, marriage, special days, and finally the church. How do we help? We create emotional safety. We commit to inclusivity. We provide compassion—compassionate resources. We identify our biases and develop sensitivity, and then we prioritize connection—prioritize connection. Connection is what is going to heal. Programs are not going to heal; people will. We don’t need more programs; we need more people—relationship. The good news is Jesus, Himself, showed us how to do it.

[Studio]

**Bob:** Well, again, we’ve been listening to a message from Michele Cushatt about the common pain points in a blended family. I *really* liked the fact that she, not only was able to identify the pain points; but she is able to provide the encouragement for how to deal with those pain points. The pain is real; the challenges are real, but the help that comes from the Lord is real as well. Blended couples—the degree of difficulty—we talked about this earlier: the degree of difficulty is high, but couples can do this; can’t they?

**Ann:** I think it’s really *good* for the church to be aware of what’s happening in blended families, especially for those who have never gone through this; because she really identifies things that blended families are struggling with; but how we can step in, as a church, and really meet some of those needs.

**Dave:** Yes; and I would add—Bob, you’re right—the degree of difficulty is a whole different thing; because you look at these five pressure points—every marriage and family has these.

**Bob:** Yes.

**Dave:** But this is like times 100.

**Bob:** Right.

**Dave:** I was going to say “…times 10”; but boy oh boy, if you are in a blended situation, it’s the same thing; but it’s *much* more difficult and much more complex.

**Bob:** And we’ve got resources to help couples, who are in blended families. Ron Deal has written a book called *The Smart Stepfamily*; that’s a great help. There’s a video
series that goes along with that that is available. Michele has written a book called *Relentless* that addresses a lot of these themes—the pain and suffering that she has been through in her own life.

Also, we’ve got an event coming up in April—April 25th—in Houston that is going to be live-streamed all around the world. It is our annual *Blended & Blessed* event. Ron Deal gives leadership to that. Gary Chapman will be there, along with Laura Petherbridge and Bill Butterworth—others. This event is going to be unpacking how to understand and apply the idea of the five love languages in a blended family—how that should and should not be applied in a blended family—because there are unique dynamics at play there.

Information about the *Blended & Blessed* event; the other resources that are available; Ron Deal’s podcast, FamilyLife Blended®—all of that is available online at FamilyLifeToday.com. Call if you have any questions: 1-800-FL-TODAY. Again, the website is FamilyLifeToday.com; or the number to call is 1-800-358-6329—1-800.”F” as in family, “L” as in life, and then the word, “TODAY.”

David Robbins, who is the president of FamilyLife®, is here with us. I’m *so glad* we have the opportunity to be able to share stuff like this, not only on *FamilyLife Today*, but now, through the podcast network that we’ve developed over the past year. We’re touching a whole lot more people as a result of this.

**David:** Yes; I’m really grateful, actually, for our partners—people who pray for us regularly; people who financially invest with FamilyLife—because it enables us to do new initiatives like this to reach more homes and to engage more homes with the help that they need. The FamilyLife Podcast Network is one of those new initiatives this past year that features programs like Ron Deal’s, FamilyLife Blended podcast.

I just want to say: “For those of you who help us do these new initiatives, thank you for standing with us and thank you for your passion to speak to the heart of every home.”

**Bob:** Thank you, David.

Be sure to join us back tomorrow. We’re going to introduce you to the man whose story has just been made into a major motion picture that is going to be in theaters this weekend. Jeremy Camp will be here; and we’ll hear the story that led to the movie, *I Still Believe*. That’s tomorrow. I hope you can join us for that.

I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, along with our entire broadcast production team. On behalf of our hosts, Dave and Ann Wilson, I’m Bob Lepine. We will see you back next time for another edition of *FamilyLife Today*.

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