

LEARN FOR LIFE BLOG

PREPARING PEOPLE FOR PAIN

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In *The Scarlet Letter*, Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote, “... There is a provision, alike marvelous and merciful, that the sufferer should never know the intensity of what he endures by its present torture, but chiefly by the pang that rankles after it.” It is a timeless truth. We rarely know how painful a moment is in the moment; we know it after — when we see how differently our lives will run, and the reality sets in. Yet pain, as common as it is, still surprises us when it comes.

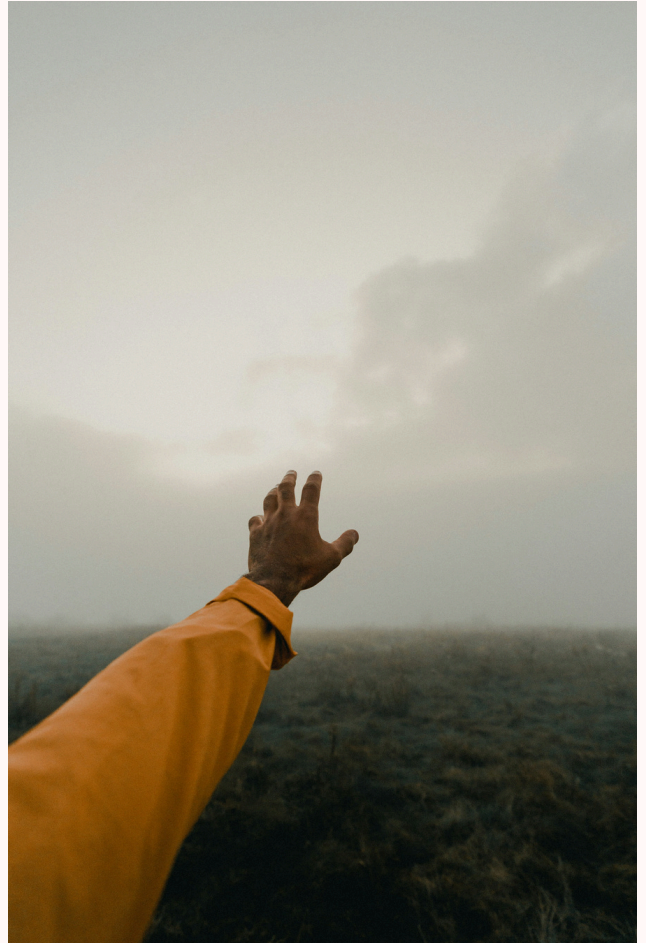
In *Failing Forward*, John Maxwell quotes J. Wallace Hamilton: “The increase of suicides, alcoholics, and even some forms of nervous breakdowns is evidence that many people are training for success when they should be training for failure. Failure is more common than success; poverty is more prevalent than wealth; and disappointment more normal than arrival.”

Yes, I am mixing metaphors — but stay with me. Pain often comes from failure, and failure is one of the most common ways pain finds us.

But it isn’t the only way. We feel pain in our bodies, in our families, on our jobs, in our communities, and more. And we have mechanisms to prepare people for most of it. Gyms strengthen the body. Family values hold the family. We look for healthier bosses or better jobs, mentors in our communities — the list goes on.

But one of the most common denominators in life is pain, and most of us are not prepared for it. Who we love, where we live, what we believe, how we vote — so much of it is tied to a deep desire to avoid pain.

The most painful season of my life — so far — has without question been the loss of my mother. Her passing in March 2025, while expected, was blindsiding. It is a grief that does not go away. The world feels smaller, bigger, and scarier, all at the same time.



The current polarization in the United States, the rising international conflicts and the disruptions they have caused — politically, financially, spiritually, physically — all of it confirms the same thing: pain is a normal part of life. We can embrace its inevitability, or we can assume we are the exceptions to the rule and believe pain will never darken our door... until it does.

So I want to offer three simple steps for Preparing People for Pain. Yes, the title speaks to leaders, pastors, and executives — but in this moment, as every flight attendant says, we have to secure our own mask before we can help others.

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First, do your own Pain Inventory. Ask yourself:

- What are the painful moments in life that are still sensitive — recent and distant?
- What did you learn? About the situation, and about yourself?
- How did it change you, for better and for worse?

Go as deep or as broad as you need to. The goal is a reflection exercise, not a full therapy session. (If you are carrying unprocessed trauma, or these questions stir a strong emotional response, reach out to a professional therapist. We all need a little help sometimes.)

Second, choose a community — church, family, work, a relationship, friends — and ask the same questions of it. It matters how the spaces we live in handle pain. Do they have a ministry of presence — few words, but they show up? Do they make room to be emotionally present? Are emotions, especially grief, avoided at all costs? Do they bury themselves in work as a means of escape? Do they have healthy processes and spaces for grief, lament, and healing? Again — this is to gather information.

Third, name the gaps. In your own moments of pain, and in the community's, what did you need that you did and did not receive — and what did the community need that it did and did not receive?

That's where we start. With the gaps. That's how we begin to prepare people for pain. There is no cookie-cutter, plug-and-play model for it. As generations age, as AI spreads and reshapes our professional and academic landscapes, and as life ebbs forward, beauty and deep joy will visit us — and so will pain and sorrow.

We hope for the one. Let's make sure we are prepared for the other, and that we are helping those we lead to do the same.

