

When Work **HURTS**

Building Resilience When

**YOU'RE BEAT UP
OR BURNT OUT**

MERYL HERR



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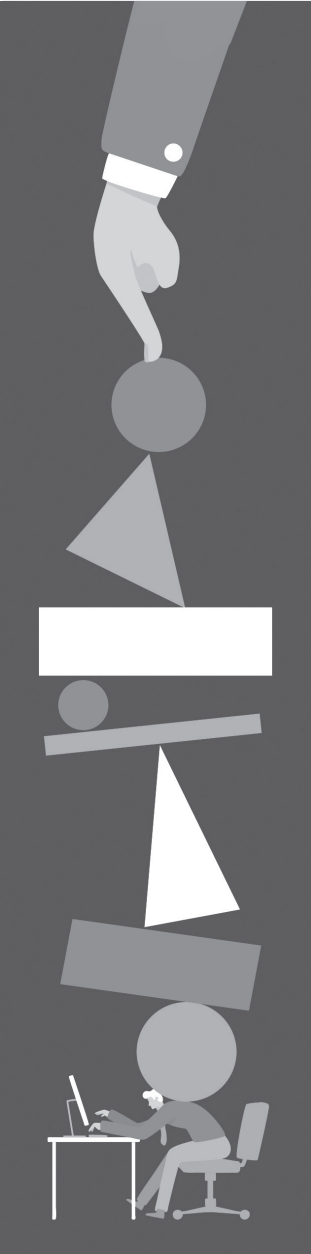
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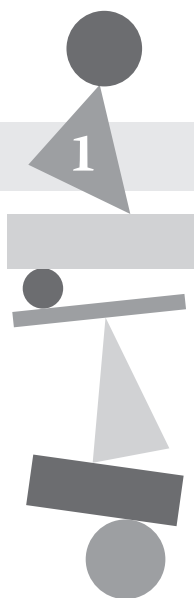
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When the Walls Fall Down

AFTER TEN YEARS IN educational and nonprofit leadership in her community of Athens, Georgia, Lora had a vision for what could help children flourish—schools that were student-centered and creative. The events of 2020 helped her refine that vision. As racial tensions rose in the United States and she began receiving invitations to speak on race-related issues, Lora started to reflect on her educational journey as a Black child who attended a predominately White private school. She lamented not having Black cultural spaces to explore that part of her identity while growing up. That’s what Athens needed—a school that would focus on the thriving of the community’s Black youth. The idea came like a torrent, she told me. The call to start Joy Village School was unmistakable.

Joy Village School welcomed twenty-five students in the fall of 2022. Drawing on the West African tradition of Harambe, students began their days with chants, cheers, and affirmations before attending to their core subjects of math, language arts, and Black history. After a focused reading time, they participated in enrichment activities such as drumming, chess, coding, cooking, basketball, and step. Everything seemed to be flourishing, except Lora was crumbling on the inside.



Running a school required leasing a building and paying staff—two huge expenses. Lora took out personal loans to help cover the costs, and she began to focus thirty to forty hours per week on fundraising on top of her teaching and administrative responsibilities. She took any opportunity she had to talk to people about the school and ask for a donation. She made pleas via social media, telling the world, “We’re having such a joyful experience here.” But what Lora felt was the antithesis of joy. She told me,

I set out to create this school and do work that was meaningful to me, but the job I ended up doing was 20 percent of the meaningful, lifegiving work. I spent 80 percent of my time fundraising and writing grants—thirty grants that year, and I was out at community events all the time meeting people and trying to raise money.

She admitted, “I was maintaining a façade of togetherness when on the inside I was drowning a lot of the time.”

Lora was exhausted. She was working seventy to eighty hours per week. At one point she contracted Covid-19 and shingles, but she didn’t take time off. She had to keep the school afloat. Still, she put a happy face on even though she and her school were crumbling. Lora was drowning in debt and eventually had to declare personal bankruptcy. When the school finally closed at the end of its first year, it felt like a mercy while at the same time sending Lora spiraling deep into a midlife crisis. Lora’s dream died, and with the closing of Joy Village School came a flood of grief.

The pain we experience in our work can vary in severity and scope. Researchers believe the brain processes socio-emotional pain the same way it processes pain from a physical injury.¹ Like the pain we feel in our body, the emotional pain we experience from work can be chronic or acute. It can be tolerable or debilitating. It can dissipate or accumulate. Regardless, it hurts and cries out for our attention.

WHEN WORK DISAPPOINTS

Disappointment at work is an everyday experience for most of us. It happens when work fails to live up to our hopes or expectations. We don't finish everything on our to-do list. Only one person attends the online event we planned. Customers prefer our competitor's product to ours. Our boss tells us that our report needs another round of revisions. We overcook the chicken—again.

It's all frustrating. But for the most part, we can deal with that level of disappointment. We reexamine our priorities and brush up our time management strategies. We receive the one attendee with hospitality and gratitude and think about how we might better promote the next event. We do some market analysis to reassess our customers' needs. We dig in and fix the report. We finally buy a new oven.

But sometimes the disappointments are more profound. I think of a 2019 Indeed commercial that depicts a group of professionals standing in a conference room.² At the front of the room, we see Claire, gleaming in expectation as her boss prepares to announce the name of the company's newest vice president. As soon as the “m” sound rolls off her boss's tongue, Claire's face begins to fall. The promotion went to her colleague Michael. We get the sense that she had been passed over before. She's crushed.

In 2022, news outlets began talking about the “Great Resignation” because people in the United States were quitting their jobs in record numbers.³ They quit their jobs during the Great Resignation because work had become a Great Disappointment. The Pew Research Center found that people who quit their jobs during that period tended to do so because of low pay, no opportunities for advancement, and feeling disrespected at work.⁴ Patrick quit a job for all three of those reasons.

He was working as an adjunct professor for a small college. From the outset, the pay was terrible. Patrick had dreamed of becoming

a professor for years and thought he could tolerate the low pay for a season in exchange for an opportunity to get his foot in the door. At one point, he did the math and figured he could have been making about the same amount working retail. That was rather infuriating since the teaching job required a doctorate; still, he was willing to accept it for a while.

But soon, the possibilities for advancement went from slim to nil. He felt like some people in the university didn't respect him. Others made him feel like he had nothing to contribute to the school beyond the few tasks they had asked him to do. Patrick's disappointment became so profound that it festered into resentment and bitterness. Like a poison, it started seeping into his relationships and his work. Even his students began to pick up on his cynicism. He knew he should quit but needed the money and wanted to hold out hope that it would get better. But it didn't. Things got worse. And he left. To Patrick, it felt like a bad breakup, like waking up to the realization of unrequited love. And it hurt.

WHEN WORK DISILLUSIONS US

Disappointment leads to pain; but the *disillusionment* we experience at work can also hurt us. Disillusionment comes when work challenges some of our deeply held assumptions.

My husband and I got married in 2005 while we were both in seminary, but we knew that we couldn't afford for both of us to be in school at the same time. So we agreed that one would work full-time while the other finished their degree, and then we would switch. That's how I came to teach middle school math. Two months after we got married, I landed the job at a local Christian school.

I was so excited about the job because I loved teaching math, and I was eager to help my students understand how math fit into God's big story. I decorated my classroom, designed some fun learning activities, and developed relationships with the other teachers. I knew the job would be difficult—four different math classes and

three electives to prep and almost no support from our special education staff. But no one prepared for me for the biggest challenge I would face: the parents.

I would get an earful from parents when their students had to sit the bench at a basketball game because they weren't passing pre-algebra. It didn't matter that I offered to help their students before school, after school, and during study hall. It didn't matter that I had extra credit work available for all students. To these parents, the fact that their kids weren't passing was my fault and mine alone.

Another parent was so hostile toward me that the principal would no longer let her communicate with me on the phone or in person without an administrator present. It turned out that this mom had a rather tumultuous home life and opted to take it out on me. I decided I would take her verbal abuse again in a heartbeat if it kept her from unleashing her anger on her son, who was my student.

And then there were the parents of eighth graders who pressured me to recommend their children for the best math classes at their new high schools, even when I knew the student had little chance of success. If I declined, I was "ruining their lives." That math placement would affect their ability to get into Harvard. I secretly wished I could tell one mom, "Ma'am, right now your daughter appears to be more interested in boys and basketball than equations and inequalities. Maybe let's work together to help her learn to solve for x so that she passes my class and doesn't have to repeat pre-algebra as a freshman."

Over time, the parents' persistent enmity wore me down. I had no idea that people who paid money to send their children to a Christian school could be so mean. The way they treated me jilted me out of my naiveté. Note to my twenty-five-year-old self: not everyone in a Christian school community will act Christlike.

Disillusionment at work is no respecter of persons. Catherine was a young mom who had taken a new job to support herself and

her kids. She was quite good at her job, and her boss noticed. He gave her more responsibility. And then he gave her something she didn't want—sexual harassment. He hit on her. In an instant, any illusions Catherine had about her boss's professionalism shattered. She quit immediately. But the hurt persisted. She had liked her work. She had needed the income the job provided. And her boss's transgression siphoned away any sense of joy and delight she felt in it.

WHEN WORK DEVASTATES US

Devastate: “to reduce to chaos, disorder, or helplessness: overwhelm.”⁵ The word that particularly captures my attention there is “reduce.” Work can make us feel small. It can bring us to our knees, to the floor. Has work ever made you feel this way before? That's what happened to Rachel.

I interviewed her two weeks after she was laid off. Rachel worked for a large, regional bank in the United States. Throughout her twenty-year tenure with the bank, Rachel had several roles in both local branches and regional management. In the fall of 2023, the company mentioned that it would be making some budget cuts. Hers wasn't the only bank making cuts: several multinational and global banks laid off thousands of employees that year.⁶ The first round of layoffs happened in November. She survived those but knew that more could be coming in the new year. Realistic in her outlook, she knew she could be laid off. Still, she didn't let that deter her from focusing on her job.

At 8:30 a.m. on a Wednesday, Rachel received an email from her manager asking to join her for a check-in via video chat at 9:00 a.m. The request felt odd and out of character. She texted her husband, “I think I'm about to lose my job.” When her boss began the conversation with small talk, Rachel knew. Her boss told her that her work was done at that moment. Rachel told me, “My whole world just crashed.”

Job loss is incredibly painful, and it's an all-too-common occurrence today. It's also far from the only form of devastation we can experience in work. Even when our position isn't on the chopping block, there are thousands of different ways we can have our hearts broken on the job. I think about those whose bosses never encourage and only ever tear them down. Or those whose colleagues take the credit for their ideas. And then there are those who witness violence, physical harm, and even death in the workplace. It's too much. Come, Lord Jesus.

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When work wounds us, sometimes it leaves little cracks—cracks small enough that we can mend with patience, time, and care. Other times work smashes us to pieces. When that happens, we can stay on the tear-stained carpet for a while. But even though it feels safer on the floor, where there's no way we can fall any further, we can't live there. Eventually we need to get up and survey the damage.

The Bible offers some insight on how to stand up and examine all the broken pieces in and around us after work demolishes us. There's a place in the Bible where we see God's people leveled, their city reduced to rubble. And there's a man who finds himself left to take in all the destruction. Maybe if we study his response, we can glean some wisdom for what to do when work tears us apart.

A BEAUTIFUL CITY, BROKEN

Jerusalem was a remarkable city. But it wasn't always that way. Before it became the geographical and spiritual center of Israel's life, Jerusalem was a Jebusite fortress in the hill country of Judah, the southernmost of the twelve tribes of Israel. The Jebusites were one

of the Canaanite tribes that God's people were supposed to drive out of the Promised Land but didn't. *The Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* describes Jebusite Jerusalem this way: "Occupied by the Jebusites, it was a pocket of neutral territory between the northern and southern sections of David's united kingdom and politically acceptable to both."⁷ Scholars believe Jebusite Jerusalem was home to about one thousand people.⁸

Shortly after David became king, he and his men marched on Jerusalem and conquered it. The Bible tells us, "David then took up residence in the fortress and called it the City of David. He built up the area around it, from the terraces inward" (2 Samuel 5:9). David unified the tribes into one nation, and Jerusalem became its political and religious center.

David wanted to continue building. He wanted to build a temple to house the ark of God's covenant that he and his men had reclaimed from the Philistines. But God told him that the task of building the temple would fall to someone else. That someone else was David's son Solomon. Solomon oversaw much of Jerusalem's development. It's believed that Jerusalem's population grew to between four and five thousand during his reign.⁹ God chose Solomon to build the temple. It was a massive undertaking that took seven years to complete (1 Kings 6:38).

First, Solomon chose Mount Zion as the site for the temple. For the Israelites, the temple would come to symbolize the place where heaven and earth met, and it was the place where God dwelled among his people. Second, Solomon spared no expense on its construction. He paid the King of Tyre for the best lumber from Lebanon. Solomon used the cedar, cypress, and high-quality stone to construct and decorate the temple. The inside of the temple had intricate carvings (1 Kings 6:18). The inner sanctuary and its altar were covered in pure gold (1 Kings 6:20-22). The furnishings were just as ornate (1 Kings 7:13-51). The temple was lavish. And its extravagance pointed to the holiness of God. One scholar described the temple this way,

“Solomon’s temple was the embodiment of Israel’s religious and national identity. Its setting and design manifested Yahweh’s presence, while its splendor provided tangible evidence of his favor.”¹⁰

After the work had been completed, God consecrated the temple and promised to establish Solomon’s throne if he would follow the Lord “faithfully with integrity of heart and uprightness” (1 Kings 9:4). But the Lord added a condition. If Solomon and his people chose not to follow God, he would reject his people and the temple would “become a heap of rubble” (1 Kings 9:8).

Fast forward about 360 years. David’s kingdom has been split in two—Israel to the north and Judah to the south. Israel has been raided by the Assyrians and many of its inhabitants have been taken into captivity. And now Jerusalem, the capital of Judah—including the temple, which was the center of Israel’s religious life and the symbol of God’s presence among them—is indeed a heap of rubble.

Sadly in our modern times we don’t have to look far to see cities reduced to ruin and rubble. When Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, entire cities were demolished, their buildings blown to smithereens. Many residents of Kyiv gathered a few precious belongings and took shelter in subway tunnels while bombs rained down overhead, pulverizing their homes. In 2024, Israeli forces targeting Hamas terrorists obliterated much of neighboring Gaza, displacing millions of people. News reports showed charred apartment buildings, crippled hospitals, and people desperate for food, clean water, and medical care. These scenes can help us imagine just how horrible the destruction of Jerusalem must have been.

The prophet Jeremiah, who lived in Judah and prophesied to God’s people, looked out over the city and cried,

What can I say for you, to what compare you,
O daughter of Jerusalem?

What can I liken to you, that I may comfort you,
O virgin daughter of Zion?



For your ruin is vast as the sea;
 who can heal you? (Lamentations 2:13 ESV)

Your ruin is vast as the sea. What once was radiant is now ruin. What once shone like the sun smolders. A city, God's Holy City, the City of David, once filled with God's people, had been cast down and trampled under the feet of the nations.

God had warned his people through the words of his prophets. "Return to me," he told them time and again. "I see you attempting to look religious while your heart is far from me. I am God and there is no other. I am the God of your fathers—of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I am the one who delivered you from Egypt and established you in this land. I am the one who chose you to be my treasured possession, my light to the nations. But you refuse to worship me" (see Deuteronomy 8; Jeremiah 16–17; 25; and Ezekiel 4; 7–11).

And so ruin came. Her name was Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, laid siege to Jerusalem. His army surrounded the city—creating fear and famine within her. Eventually, the wall was breached. Judah's fighting men fled, and Zedekiah the king was captured. But the worst was still to come. Babylon had taken Judah's king, but now they would seek to take her very heart and soul. The commander of Nebuchadnezzar's imperial guard, Nebuzaradan, came to Jerusalem to take up the task of utter destruction. Jeremiah described it this way: "He set fire to the temple of the LORD, the royal palace and all the houses of Jerusalem. Every important building he burned down. The whole Babylonian army, under the commander of the imperial guard, broke down all the walls around Jerusalem" (Jeremiah 52:13-14). Many of the remaining people were carried off into exile in Babylon.

EXAMINING THE BROKEN PIECES

Jeremiah had the opportunity to go to Babylon with the exiles, but he chose to stay behind in Jerusalem and survey the damage. He looked carefully at all of the broken pieces. And this is how he

responded: “How lonely sits the city” once so “full of people” (see Lamentations 1:1 ESV). Many of us have seen lonely cities in recent memory. We remember the quiet streets and empty buildings during the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic. But Jeremiah’s city wasn’t only lonely; it had been utterly destroyed. Imagine every brick toppled and charred, every stone cast down like a scene in an apocalyptic thriller. “All the splendor has departed from Daughter Zion,” Jeremiah wrote (Lamentations 1:6).

We know what he saw, but how did Jeremiah feel when he looked out at all of the damage? He wrote in Lamentations,

This is why I weep
and my eyes overflow with tears.
No one is near to comfort me,
no one to restore my spirit. (Lamentations 1:16)

My eyes fail from weeping,
I am in torment within;
My heart is poured out on the ground
because my people are destroyed,
because children and infants faint
in the streets of the city. (Lamentations 2:11)

What could Jeremiah do but cry?

EXAMINING OUR BROKEN PIECES

You might be wondering what the destruction of Jerusalem has to do with the disappointment, disillusionment, and devastation we experience in our work. The two scenarios seem worlds apart. Jerusalem’s destruction came because of the people’s sin and refusal to turn back to God. Some issues we experience at work may be our fault, but much of the hurt we experience in the workplace happens because of broken people operating in broken systems. But the two scenarios have something significant in common: immense pain that can wreak havoc on our lives. The destruction

of Jerusalem and the hurt we experience at work cut to the core of our beings.

Work hurt can cause both acute and chronic pain. The acute pain is the type that comes out of nowhere. It levels you because it seems sudden and severe. In an essay for *Harvard Business Review* on managing emotions at work, Vasundhara Sawhney recalled a time when she received an unexpected blow from her boss:

Ten years ago, on what could've been a perfect Friday evening, my boss shamed me in front of my entire team. "Isn't this something we discussed a few months ago? Why wasn't the protocol followed?" he screamed. . . . Angry and humiliated, I excused myself from the meeting and charged toward the elevator. I made the trip five floors down to the parking lot. Then I sat in my car and cried.¹¹

Clearly this interaction with her boss in front of her team was distressful. Her boss's words emotionally wrecked her. The meeting had become unsafe because her boss had inflicted pain, and she needed to get out of there. Her flight response kicked in and got her from that meeting all the way down to her car, where it felt safe to cry.

Work hurt can also cause chronic pain—the pain that lingers. It's dull and persistent. It's the shame that lasts long after being belittled by your supervisor, the unemployment that persists after you've been laid off, and the disrespect that your organization continually communicates through low pay.

One way that chronic pain manifests is burnout. Burnout has been recognized by the World Health Organization as an occupational health issue. Let's take a look at their definition:

Burn-out is a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by three dimensions:

1. feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion;
2. increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and
3. reduced professional efficacy.¹²

Sisters Emily and Amelia Nagoski, in their book *Burnout: The Secret to Unlocking the Stress Cycle*, focus on the emotional exhaustion component of burnout, citing its drastic impact on our health. They connect the emotional exhaustion to not being able to move through some of the negative emotions we experience in the midst of our work: “Sometimes we get stuck because we can’t find our way through,” they write. “The most difficult feelings—rage, grief, despair, helplessness—may be too treacherous to move through alone.”¹³ It’s that stuck-ness that makes the work hurt chronic.

Unfortunately, I know a few people who have experienced burnout as a result of chronic pain, stress, and frustration at work. Just as chronic back pain can make everyday activities feel unthinkable, chronic work pain can be absolutely debilitating. Those working in helping profes-

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sions are particularly prone to burnout and its kin, compassion fatigue. I’ve already mentioned that K-12 teachers top the list in terms of most burned-out professionals. But let’s talk about nurses. The National Council of State Boards of Nursing found that, in the United States, about one hundred thousand nurses left the workforce during the pandemic because of stress, burnout, retirement, or some combination of these.¹⁴ If that’s not grim, check out these numbers: “A quarter to half of nurses reported feeling emotionally drained (50.8%), used up (56.4%), fatigued (49.7%), burned out (45.1%), or at the end of the rope (29.4%) ‘a few times a week’ or ‘every day.’”¹⁵

My guess is that most folks who train to be teachers and nurses do so because they want to help people. That's why I wanted to become a teacher. Teachers want to make a difference in the lives of their students. Nurses want to provide care and ease suffering. Many nurses and teachers feel a sense of calling to their work and derive profound personal meaning from it. Brian, an elementary school teacher, told me that quitting his job felt so painful because his identity was tied up in his work. He was a teacher. He had trained to be a teacher. And if he was no longer a teacher, what was he? That's why it can hurt so badly when the work we love has knocked us down—and even knocked some of us completely out of the profession.

IT'S OKAY TO CRY

When work causes pain—whether acute or chronic—perhaps the first thing we need to know is that it's okay to cry. That's what we can learn from Jeremiah. When the walls fall down, it's okay to take some time to survey the damage—the damage done to our hearts, our careers, our livelihood—and feel absolutely broken. It's okay to grieve. It's okay to say to the Lord,

“It hurt when my teammates spread that rumor about me.”

“It hurt when I lost my job.”

“I feel ashamed when I look at my résumé.”

“I'm worried that I won't be able to get another job.”

“I'm sick and tired of employers not seeing the value I bring to the table.”

“My boss's lack of empathy toward me made me feel alone.”

“I didn't know people could be so hateful.”

Jeremiah's sad words, his lamentations, remind us that it's okay to bring our heartbreak to God. It's okay to bring every disappointment, every instance that disillusion us, every moment that devastates us to him. In fact, God welcomes our pain.¹⁶ The psalmist reminds us, “The LORD is close to the brokenhearted” (Psalm 34:18). God doesn't need for us to resolve our pain, to be all whole and

healed in order to faithfully follow him. God comes near to us in our pain.

And God comforts us. The how and the when are somewhat of a mystery. But in his mercy, God can transform our pain. The apostle Paul calls God “the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort” (2 Corinthians 1:3). Paul goes on to tell us why God comforts us: “so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God” (2 Corinthians 1:4). God comforts us because he loves us *and* so that we can extend compassion to others who are hurting.

When we tell God about our pain through our groans and our cries, we’re asking him to do something about it because we believe he cares for us. We believe that God is the author of a story of redemption in which the ending involves no more tears and no more pain (Revelation 21:4). And we want—we *need*—to experience a taste of that redemption when work hurts.

A LAMENT FOR WHEN WORK KNOCKS US DOWN

When work knocks us down, the temptation can be to quickly begin to pick up the pieces. But the invitation here is for us to survey the damage first and bring our pain to God, to tell God how many ways work has beaten us up, burned us out, and broken our hearts, and to tell God that the walls have fallen down and that we’re sitting in a pile of ruin and rubble. I encourage you to make a list of the ways work has disappointed, disillusioned, and even devastated you. Be gentle and patient with yourself while making this list. The work of remembering could resurface the pain.

Remember what Richard Rohr said, “If we do not transform our pain, we will most assuredly transmit it.” Here’s the first step in the transformation: Bring your pain to God. Acknowledge your pain knowing that God sees it too. You can write in your journal about all of the damage work has caused. Or you can head out to the tennis court and send every ball over the net with the intensity of the

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emotional pain, social pain, and financial pain you've endured, each hit with the racket, a prayer. Talk with a friend about the shame and humiliation you've experienced. Paint a picture that captures the loneliness and estrangement that come from being unemployed.

Punch your pillow when you feel overwhelmed by the loss of income and your fears about being able to pay your rent.

As you do, cry. Groan. Shake your fist in the air. Because this is not the way work is supposed to be. Then ask God to bring you comfort. Ask God to extend his compassion to you. As you bring your pain to God, know that he loves you. God delights in you, and he wants you to flourish. It may still take some time to pick up the pieces—but this is where we start.

WORK HURT CLINIC

Symptoms: Which of the following have you experienced in your work? List specific examples, if possible.

- ▶ Disappointment
- ▶ Disillusionment
- ▶ Devastation

Causes: As you reflect on the disappointment, disillusionment, and devastation in your work, reflect on . . .

- ▶ expectations that weren't met;
- ▶ assumptions that were challenged; and
- ▶ times you felt helpless, overwhelmed, or completely destroyed.

Care:

- ▶ Bring your pain to God in a way that makes sense for you.
- ▶ Ask God to be compassionate toward you.
- ▶ Remember that God loves you.



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