

SINGLE AND STEADFAST:  
LESSONS IN  
**HOPE**



BY CHRISTINE S. PACKARD  
AND WENDY ULRICH

Though many young adults successfully navigate today's complex dating world, some experience being single with frustration and heartache. As mental health counselors who frequently work with young single adults inside the Church—and as parents of young single adults—we hear numerous stories like these:

Marcie (names have been changed), 31, a successful special-education teacher, owns a home and has a master's degree. She's been dating Dave, 28, for six months. Although they see each other most weekends, Marcie recognizes the familiar signs of a stagnant relationship. She longs for marriage, but Dave seems content with the relationship as it is and acknowledges interest in a couple of other women.

Kevin, 26, enjoys working at his brother's construction company. He is less happy, however, about the difficult endings of his last three dating relationships. Though each relationship appeared to progress for a while, eventually every one of the women said she had other things to accomplish before marrying and wanted only to be friends. Kevin is starting to wonder if he is marriage material.

Janae, 29, was frightened by a physically aggressive young man she dated at age 18. Because she was already lacking confidence, the experience

left her fearful of men. After completing college and a mission, Janae began working for a small accounting firm and moved in with roommates. Watching younger siblings marry and begin their families has been painful for her. Prone to depression, Janae doesn't feel socially skilled. She hasn't had a date in four years.

Jorge, 27, dated regularly during college but never felt the spark that would lead to a deeper relationship. Now in dental school far from home, he attends church in a small branch and has few opportunities to date Latter-day Saint women. Given his

limited options, he has decided to postpone dating and concentrate on his education.

These stories illustrate a growing trend: today more Latter-day Saint young adults are single for longer periods of time. While some single adults are single by choice, many of them would prefer to be married. Some experience singleness as a happy and temporary state, but for others, the passage of time without marriage prospects becomes difficult. Some may try to identify a "reason" that they haven't been able to find a marriage partner, wondering if they are sufficiently attractive, fun, outgoing, or accomplished to interest potential marriage partners. Some deeply doubt potential marriage success given current divorce statistics. Some wonder if God has forgotten them or if they did something to void His love or promises.

Finding satisfaction, meaning, and happiness in life may require singles to first confront their sense of loss and then learn to live more peacefully with "what is," neither ignoring nor overemphasizing the future. They may then begin to reshape their idea of a successful life, develop a flexible support network of family and friends, and learn new life skills. Accepting rather than resisting current singleness allows a focus on what one can learn—not just what one might lose—by being single.

**SEEK OUT HAPPINESS**



*"If you are just marking time waiting for a marriage prospect, stop waiting . . . and start moving.*

*Prepare yourself for life—even a single life—by education, experience, and planning. Don't wait for happiness to be thrust upon you. Seek it out in service and learning. Make a life for yourself. And trust in the Lord. Follow King Benjamin's advice to call 'on the name of the Lord daily, and [stand] steadfastly in the faith of that which is to come' (Mosiah 4:11)."*

**Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, "Dating versus Hanging Out," *Ensign*, June 2006, 14.**





**Prayerfully Assessing Circumstances**

### **Acknowledging Pain— without Dwelling on It**

LDS singles have been taught to look forward to being married and having a family as the most significant feature of adult life. Progression, happiness, temple blessings, and the very path to exaltation all seem dependent on the attainment of a marriage relationship. When years pass and marriage does not occur, some singles may feel an expanding sense of intangible loss. Family members, friends, Church leaders, and singles themselves may worry that feelings of loss are a reflection of insufficient faith or righteousness. They may also be concerned that adjusting beliefs about roles and life status will challenge testimony or reduce future prospects for marriage.

The normal sadness with which people acknowledge feelings of loss can lead to appropriate expressions



**Doing Positive Things with Our Time**

such as praying, journal writing, requesting priesthood blessings, and asking for empathy, validation, and support. When friends or family send messages to singles that they should “try harder,” that they aren’t doing enough to promote dating opportunities, or that they should think about happier things, singles may feel blocked rather than helped in their efforts to move forward to positive goals and interests.

There is a difference between accepting a feeling as legitimate and real and *being defined* by that feeling. Often, real feelings deepen and expand when they are minimized or ignored. When singles experience feelings of loss, if they and those close to them will acknowledge and accept the feelings as simply real, singles can more readily transcend the pain and avoid defining themselves by their marital status or their



**Building a Support Network**

feelings. They can then start to feel more confident, get their emotional bearings, and begin to consider healthy questions and options. For instance, singles might ask themselves, “What exactly am I feeling right now?” rather than imagining what they *might* feel if their singleness persists.

Prayerfully assessing which aspects of being single are particularly difficult at this time can keep the hurt from becoming overpowering. In this process it is important to separate what genuinely hurts at the moment from messages of fear singles may give themselves about the future. For example, when attending her sister’s wedding, a single woman may feel hurt at not having found a husband yet, but she can resist thinking she will *never* have an eternal marriage. It can be difficult to restrain those feelings, but working to do so is helpful.



**Developing Skills and Talents**

In some cases, singles might make things worse by interpreting what their singleness says about them. For instance, dateless evenings mean only that one is not currently seeing someone. They do not mean one is unlovable, will never have a meaningful life, or must not be very righteous. Singles and their loved ones can acknowledge painful feelings and fears as a genuine experience while moving toward more hopeful and objective thinking.

### **Redefining Success**

In times of confusion, it is helpful to redefine and enlarge beliefs about what constitutes success or progress. Getting married is not the sole definition of success for singles. Success also includes being courageous and faithful in the face of loneliness and uncertainty, though it may not be the success singles most want. Progress is any movement toward peaceful



**Cultivating Relationships**

acceptance of whatever the future may hold. Working on things we can change, whether in personal or professional life, rather than concentrating and obsessing about those we can't, builds self-worth and fosters hope.

Brad never dreamed that he would finish medical school and start his practice as a single man. Not having a wife at this point in his life strongly interfered with his definition of personal success. He had almost given up on himself as a potential husband when he met and married a lovely and talented woman who had also waited a long time for marriage. Both agree that being single for so long was a challenge to their feelings of self-worth. Looking back after marriage, they each realized that success included remaining open to others, doing positive things with their energy and time, and staying connected to the Spirit despite their wait.



**Working toward Goals**

### **Shaping a Flexible Support Network**

Living without a spouse does not mean single adults also have to live without emotional support, care, or help. Developing a flexible support network allows singles to value and cultivate relationships not only with parents and siblings but also with roommates, married and single friends, Church members of all ages, neighbors, and co-workers. Emotional sustenance comes from those who support us, travel with us, pray for us, and know us deeply. These friends feel much like family members because we confide in them, because they stand by us in times of trouble, and because we trust them with our feelings. Building these connections reduces isolation and provides support for working through difficult times.

Helena, 28, says, "My cousin, a neighbor, and I decided to take a trip. We found many common interests as



we discovered new places together.”

But building relationships isn't limited to special occasions or periodic trips. Helena points out that it's important to have constancy too. She adds, “I need someone in my life that I can talk to almost every day—someone who remembers when I have a test or that it's my birthday.”

### Developing Coping Skills for Adult Life

For Latter-day Saint young adults adhering to the Lord's standards, physical intimacy is reserved for marriage. Postponing physical intimacy can be a challenge, but singles can make a conscious choice for chastity as the current expression of their loving nature. They need not let unfulfilled longing become bitterness, escape to pornography, or completely suppress feelings. Instead, they can focus on learning the skills of true friendship and appropriate affection. Coming to know ourselves more fully, learning to listen well, expressing ourselves honestly, working through problems constructively, developing real empathy, and resisting temptation make us not only better prospective marriage partners but also better, happier people now.

In day-to-day living we can also remind ourselves of all that is good in our lives amid that which is difficult. Making time for things we enjoy, maintaining our sense of humor, and cultivating healthy habits of exercise, good nutrition, and adequate sleep promote positive feelings. Additionally, we can replace negative feelings with



active efforts to cope, plan, and work on our concerns, interspersed with more passive times of diversion, fun, and relaxation.

### Seeing What We Might Gain

Scriptural role models can increase our patience and understanding in times of darkness or uncertainty. Church members often rehearse Lehi's vision of the tree of life and its connection to the love of God. Do we remember, however, that Lehi traveled “for the space of many hours” in “a dark and dreary waste” (1 Nephi 8:7–8) before he saw the tree? Adam and Eve waited patiently for divine direction to illuminate the next part of their journey when the Garden of Eden was no longer an option (see Moses 5:4–6). One message of both stories is that God is never unaware, and, in His time and way, He answers prayers.

Our purposes in mortality are to learn through our experiences, whatever they may be, to choose good over evil and to become more like our Father in Heaven. Being single longer than we plan to be can help us accomplish these goals if we allow the Lord to work with us through our trials. As Joseph Smith faced a dark time of

waiting amid uncertainty and grief, he wrote, “Therefore, dearly beloved brethren, let us *cheerfully* do all things *that lie in our power*; and then may we stand still, *with the utmost assurance*, to see the salvation of God, and for His arm to be revealed” (D&C 123:17; emphasis added). His counsel applies to us all. ■

## SHARE YOUR EXPERIENCES

**S**ingle adults: The *Ensign* invites you to share your experiences with and insights about gospel living. You might consider writing about one of the following:

- Developing and maintaining close relationships with family members.
- Gaining from giving meaningful service.
- Overcoming loneliness.
- Finding strength in friendships.
- Living a balanced life.
- Finding fulfillment in a family-oriented Church.
- Finding answers to your challenges through scripture study.
- Coping after a significant relationship has ended.
- The blessings associated with pursuing and continuing education.
- Learning and growing from participating in institute.
- Being sustained by your testimony as you face challenges.
- Learning to be self-reliant and managing your finances.
- Other topics related to gospel living and the circumstances of being a single adult today.

For Writers' Guidelines, please see <http://ensign.lds.org>. Please e-mail your article to [ensign@ldschurch.org](mailto:ensign@ldschurch.org), or send it to *Ensign* Editorial, 50 E. North Temple St., Rm. 2420, Salt Lake City, UT 84150-3220, USA.