

Road to Emmaus

Biblical Counseling Center

Counseling People with a Medical Illness

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November 2019

Introduction

Physical illness and the pain and suffering that often come with it are problems that all of us will eventually face. In counseling, we will be called upon to help people in the middle of their struggle. Our Lord cared deeply about the pain and problems that people faced and we should reflect that care in counseling. Our goal should be to offer comfort, encouragement, hope, and a plan to help the counselee deal with their trial in a way that honors God.

I. Preparing to help those with a medical illness.

A. Those with physical illness and their loved ones struggle with many problems. John 11

1. They may be facing physical pain, loss of function, ability, or the loss of life. (vv.1-3)
2. They may lose income or jobs. (v.14)
3. Their illness may strain relationships with spouse, children, loved ones, and friends. (vv.20, 32)
4. The illness may bring emotional distress. (vv.32-35)
5. The losses and the suffering are real and very important to them. (vv.38-40)
6. They will need someone who can show them the love of Christ in a patient quiet way. (vv.22-26)
7. They need to know that God has a plan and that He is in control of it. (vv.4, 23, 39)

B. Some fundamental concepts to keep in mind.

1. While you do not need a physician's knowledge of the condition to help the counselee, you do need to be willing to listen long and carefully with a caring attitude. Always give them the first 30 minutes.
2. The best source for information about the problem is the counselee.
3. Your interest is more in knowing what the counselee thinks he or she has and how they believe the illness will change their life.

C. The Counselor's response to the illness.

1. The counselor's strength is in dealing with the illness from a biblical perspective rather than a medical perspective.
 - a. Accept the diagnosis and symptoms as a given.
 - b. Do not try to prove or disprove the diagnosis.
 - c. Do not recommend other possible diagnoses or methods of diagnoses.
2. If there is no cure or relief, do not attempt to find or recommend an alternative.
3. Your goal is to turn the attention from the pain and discomfort of the illness to what God is doing through it.

II. Principles to encourage and instruct those with a medical illness.

A. Understand your counselee's . . .

1. Medical condition
 - a. Basic facts about the condition.
 - b. How it was diagnosed.
 - c. The natural history of the condition.
 - d. The effect of the condition on the counselee's lifestyle.
 - e. The counselee's thinking and attitude about the condition.
 - f. The response of relatives and friends of the counselee.
 - g. The effect of medication.

h. How is the illness being treated/ managed?

1) Is the treatment effective?

2) potential complications from use of the medications.

2. Spiritual condition.

a. What is the counselee's personal relationship with the Lord?

b. How does the person fit God into all this?

c. What is his understanding of the authority of the Word?

B. Identify your counselee's problems.

1. Presenting issues.

2. Identify underlying heart issues.

C. Give much biblical hope.

1. The hope is that there can be victory when pain and suffering cannot be relieved.

2. Teach the promises of God regarding His character and His good plans for His children.

3. Cast a vision of what God can do through His Word and His Spirit in His people's lives.

4. Illustrate how victory is possible in the midst of human frailty and difficult circumstances.

5. Don't be manipulated by the counselee's behavior.

6. Use biblical terminology to describe problems.

7. Don't maximize or minimize the person's symptoms.

D. Build involvement.

1. Developing a meaningful relationship with another person in order to minister God's Word in his or her life.

2. Emphasize God's grace in your life and theirs.

3. Look for ways to identify with their story.

4. Encourage them when they take steps of growth.

E. Process the data and evaluate the problem biblically.

1. Distinguish between occasions of suffering and occasions of sinning.
2. Always follow appropriate medical care and treatment.
3. As the counseling process progresses, help the counselee evaluate their struggle from the biblical reasons for sickness.
 - a. God's glory. John 9:1-3
 - b. Benefit to the counselee. 2 Cor. 12:10
 - c. Sin
4. Use the counselee's story as an opportunity to address issues of the outer and inner man.

F. Apply appropriate biblical principles.

1. Think biblically about all aspects of the illness. 2 Cor. 10:5, Phil. 4:8
 - a. God cares about the suffering of His children and has a plan for it. John 9
 - b. Illness and suffering are to be expected in this life. 2 Tim. 3:12, 1 Pet. 2:20, 4:13, 5:10
 - c. The illness and symptoms are under the control of a sovereign God. Prov. 21:1; Dan. 2:21; 1 Chr. 29:12, 1 Cor. 10:13
 - d. God will not exceed a believer's ability to handle the unpleasantness of the illness. 1 Cor. 10:13; Phil. 4:13
 - e. God intends for the believer to have victory in the midst of the agony of the illness. 1 Cor. 15:57; Rom. 8:35-37
2. Compassion for the reality of suffering.
3. Definition of victory.
 - a. Victory is being controlled by biblical principles rather than the agony of the illness.
 - b. Not controlled by the constant pursuit of relief from pain and suffering.
 - c. Controlled by what God is doing as a result of the condition.
 - d. Focuses on God's purposes for the discomfort more than the discomfort.
 - e. Provides a response when relief does not come.

4. Sufficiency of God's grace. 2 Cor. 12:9-10; 2 Cor. 9:8
5. Instill an understanding of God's Word into the counselee's heart so as to stimulate faith and obedience during illness.
6. Use compelling personal testimonies to teach truth.

G. Homework should focus on biblical principles the counselee needs to apply rather than health issues.

1. We should encourage the counselee to follow basic principles of good health.
2. However, the main emphasis of your homework is application of biblical principles to the counselee's response to the illness and symptoms.

III. Victory for the individuals suffering with a medical illness.

A. May actually be alleviation of the pain and suffering. Eph. 5:20

B. Biblical truth exemplified.

1. Endurance to finish strong. 2 Cor. 12:8-10
2. God's peace that controls the way you think and feel. Phil. 4:7
3. God's glory expressed in your life. 1 Cor. 10:31
4. Faith that God is in control and what He allows is for your good. Deut. 8:16

C. A deepening of the counselee's relationship with God.

1. We do not grieve as those who have no hope. 1 Thess. 4:13
→ heaven
2. In Phil. 1:23-25 Paul struggled with his desire to go to heaven or to stay here and minister.
3. One of the very important ministries to dying people is to keep them informed of what will happen as they die.
4. Other than sudden death or if the Lord delays His return every person will die as a result of some illness.
5. Keep in mind the ultimate end of this illness is to be the vehicle that God will use to bring a believer to Himself in Heaven.