

COUNSELING PEOPLE WITH A MEDICAL ILLNESS
Daniel Dionne, MD, ACBC

I. Intro:

Goal: you do not have to be a medical person to help those suffering with a medical illness. You can be trained so you will know how to keep your wits and glorify God as a Biblical counselor in these situations.

ACBCs of Biblical Counseling Explained

Answers

II. Biblical Principles of health and illness:

A. All health problems are a result of the fall
(Gen 3:15-19. Physical illness/death is universal)

B. Some sickness is a consequence of particular sin
(Psalm 38:3-11; 1 Corinthians 11:29-30)

C. Not all sickness is due to a particular sin
(John 9:1-3; Job).

D. God is sovereign over your health / illness.
(Ex. 4:11; Ps. 103:3; Deut. 32:39)

1. He does not promise perfect health (Phil 1:29).

2. God heals according to His sovereign will.

3. Sometimes He answers prayers with healing
(James 5:11; 2 Kings 20:5; Mt. 8:5; Isa 38:2f)

4. But not always (Phil 2:26-27; 2 Cor. 12:7 -thorn)
John 6:26

E. Physical illness does not cause/excuse sin

F. Suffering is relative (Pro 17:22; Pro 15:15)

G. Spectrum of disease

Spiritual <-----> Organic

1. Don't argue etiology (cause)

Don't give a medical second opinion, instead concentrate on spiritual response.

2. Don't be intimidated by a label

2. God's Word is always relevant (teaches right response to trials)

Compassionate Listening

III. Counseling Process:

A. Gain Involvement:

1. Through taking suffering seriously

(Romans 12:15—weep with those who weep).

2. Through compassionate listening:

a. Ask about The Illness: You do not need a physician's understanding of the illness. You need to know the counselee's perception of the illness.

- How diagnosed (lab tests? Behavior?)
- Prognosis
- Treatment options: effects / side effects

b. Ask about The Struggles:

i. Physical problems: pain, loss of function and abilities, loss of life

ii. Financial problems

iii. Relational problems

- Relatives and friends

iv. Spiritual struggles (Why God, why me, why this, why now?)

- Thinking and Attitude
- Relationship with the Lord

B. Discern heart issues.

Distinguish between suffering (requires endurance) and sin (requires repentance).

Biblical Truth

C. Offer Biblical Hope and Encouragement (Connect their story to the Gospel).

1. Teach Biblical Principles of Suffering

2. Remind them of the promises of God

- Your Father chose you and is for you (Eph. 1; Rom. 5-8; John 15:17; 2 Cor. 5:17).
- Jesus empathizes with you as a faithful High Priest and is able to help (Heb. 2:18; 4: 1-16).
- God is your ever-present comfort and refuge (Psalm 46; 2 Cor. 1:3-11).
- God will pour out His grace sufficient for the trial (2 Cor. 12:9; Jude 24; Heb. 4: 16).
- God will be gracious to strengthen you (Isa 41:10; 1 Pet 5:10).
- The extent of suffering is not comparable to future glory (Rom. 8:17-18; 2 Cor.4).

• Four promises in 1 Corinthians 10:13

1. Your problem is not unique
2. God is faithful
3. The trial will not be too difficult
4. God will provide the way to escape

D. Teach Biblical Goals & Principles

1. Encourage appropriate medical care.
2. Relate biblical reasons for sickness (see Page 1).
3. How to address the why question (Deut. 29:29).
 - Our finite minds cannot completely understand the Mysteries of God's ways (Isa 55:8-9; Rom. 11:33).
Things we don't know (Job)
Things we do know (John 9: 1-3; Rom. 8:28)

- Humility lives with unanswered questions (Is. 45:9)
We have all that we need to know (2 Pet. 1:3-4).
We should focus on giving adoration to God, not demanding explanations from God.

4. Put off lies and put on truth (2 Cor. 10:5; Phil 4:8)

A right response involves honest expression of pain (Lament Psalms-- 10,13,23,25,40,37,46,73,77), while remembering and acting on God's truth.

5. Biblical Victory is possible, even with no cure (2 Cor. 4:8-9; 1 Cor. 15:57; Rom. 8:35)

Victory is glorifying God by:

- a. Yielding to His will (Rom.12: 2)
- b. Not being controlled by a constant pursuit of relief
- c. Growing to be more like Christ..
 - In endurance (James 1; 2 Cor.12: 8-10)

In Focus on others rather than self

Don't waste your cancer (Piper).

Be a Christian oyster (Rom. 8:28-29)

- d. Not grieving as those who have no hope (1 Thess. 4:13; Col 1:5).

Hope: a confident expectation based on God's character and promises.

Comfort Given

E. Wrap them in the arms of the body of Christ.

- Members have different gifts (Rom. 12; 1 Cor.12; Eph. 4).
- What are the logistical needs? Childcare, cleaning, meals, transportation to appts., etc.
- When people are helped within the church, the glory goes to God (John 17:22-23).

IV. Giving Homework (how to respond to illness)

1. Read 2 Corinthians 4: 6-9 three times this week.

Two columns : Suffering / Response

How could Paul look at his suffering in this way? See Verses 16-18.

How would it look in your situation to apply these thoughts?

What would change in your attitudes or actions?

2. Read Romans 8:28-29: Define each word or phrase in verse 28. How does v 29 define what the 'good' is in verse 28? How have you found hope in meditating on this verse? Memorize.

3. The Bible teaches that God uses the suffering His children experience for good.

How do the following passages show ways God uses suffering for good?

- 2 Cor. 12:9. (Reminds us of our weakness and dependence, and His sufficient power)
- James 1:1-4. (Tests our faith and produce endurance and maturity)
- 2 Cor. 1:3-6. (Equips us for compassionate ministry, as we share His comfort with others)
- Heb. 12:1-15. (Exposes remaining sin and disciplines us as beloved children)
- Phil 3:10. (Deepens our relationship with the Lord)
- 1 Peter 1:6-7, 13. (Weans us from loving this world, that we would hope in Him and heaven)

How can you apply these verses to your situation? What would change in your thinking or behavior when you do?

Name 3 specific ways you will change this week in response to these truths.

4. Study God's Attributes

Journal: Which attributes are the most significant to you at this time? What difference does it make in your illness that Yahweh is sovereign, wise, good, omniscient? What areas in your life require repentance and a commitment to change?

5. Assign a daily reading from "The Gospel Primer" to help them remember 'the big story'.

6. Write your own Psalm, crying out to the Lord about your situation and His character. Refer to the Lament Psalms in III.D.4.

V. Summary:

The Christian counselor can have the skills need to respond to the "emergency" of a counselee with a medical illness.

The counselor does not need to be an expert on the illness.

The counselor needs to know how to apply the ACBCs.

VI. Resources:

"Trusting God", Jerry Bridges

"Don't Waste Your Cancer," John Piper

Audio CD series: Suffering Faith Resources

"Suffering and the Sovereignty of God", John Piper

"When God Weeps", Joni Eareckson Tada

"Suffering: Eternity Makes a Difference", Tripp

"A Gospel Primer", Milton Vincent

VII. Perspective:

"Counseling is always about trouble."

"Counseling is always about the process."

-David Powlison