
Counseling People with a Medical Illness

I. Initial considerations:

“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 and a plan to help the counselee deal with their trial in a way that honors God.” ~FBC Counseling Ministries.

Rachael Barkey: Death is not Dying

Know God Know yourself Know the gospel Know your purpose

A. Biblical Principles of health and illness.

1. **All** health problems are a result of the fall (Gen 3:15-19).
Physical illness/death is universal.
2. **Some** sickness is a consequence of particular sin
(Psalm 38:3-11; 1 Corinthians 11:29-30)
3. Not all sickness is due to a particular sin
(John 9:1-3; Job).
4. God is sovereign over your health / illness.
(Ex. 4:11; Ps. 103:3; Deut. 32:39)
 - a. He does not promise perfect health (Phil 1:29).
 - b. God heals according to His sovereign will.
 - c. Sometimes He answers prayers with healing
(James 5:11; 2 Kings 20:5; Mt 8:5; Isa 38:2f)
 - d. But not always (Phil 2:26-27; 2 Cor. 12:7 -thorn)
John 6:26
5. Physical illness does not cause/excuse sin
6. Suffering is relative (Pro 17:22; Pro 15:15)

B. Potential Issues

1. Physical problems: pain, loss of function and abilities, loss of life.
2. Financial problems
3. Relational problems
4. Spiritual struggles
(why God, why me, why this, why now?)

II. Counseling Principles:

Spectrum of disease

Spiritual ←-----→ Organic

- A. Don't argue etiology
Don't give a medical 2nd opinion, instead concentrate on spiritual response.
- B. Don't be intimidated by a label
- C. God's Word is always relevant (our response)

III. Counseling Process

A. Offer Biblical Comfort

1. Through taking suffering seriously
(Romans 12:15—weep with those who weep).
2. Through compassionate listening:

Ask about The Illness: You do not need a physicians' 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

Ask about The Struggles:

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- Effect on lifestyle
 - Financial issues
 - Relatives and friends
 - Thinking and Attitude
 - Relationship with the Lord

3. Help them turn to God (Prayer / Psalms)

B. Discern heart issues.

Distinguish between suffering (endure) and sin (repent).

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; Rms 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 (Rms 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. Biblical Goals & Principles

1. Encourage appropriate medical care.
2. Relate biblical reasons for sickness (Pg 1).
3. Don't fear the why question (Deut. 29:29).

-- Our finite minds cannot completely understand the mysteries of God's ways (Isa 55:8-9; Rms 11:33).

Things we don't know (Job)

Things we do know (John 9: 1-3; Rms 8:28)

--Humility lives with unanswered questions (Is 45:9)

We have all that we need to know (2 Peter 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: honest expression of pain

(i.e. Psalm 10,13,23,25,40,37,46,73,77), while remembering and acting on truth.

5. Biblical Victory is possible, even with no cure (2 Cor. 4:8-9; 1 Cor 15:57; Rms 8:35-37)

Victory is glorifying God by:

a. Yielding to His will (Rms 12:2)

b. Not controlled by 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 (Rms 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.

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

- Members have different gifts (Rms 12; 1 Cor. 12; Eph 4).

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- 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. 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. (Remind us of our weakness and dependence, and His sufficient power)
- James 1:1-4. (Test our faith and produce endurance and maturity)
- 2 Cor. 1:3-6. (Equip us for compassionate ministry, as we share His comfort with others)
- Heb. 12:1-15. (Expose remaining sin and discipline us as beloved children)
- Phil 3:10. (Deepen our relationship with the Lord)
- 1 Peter 1:6-7, 13. (Wean 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

V. Resources

Trusting God Jerry Bridges

"Don't Waste Your Cancer," Piper, Powlison

Audio CD series: *Suffering Faith Resources*

Suffering and the Sovereignty of God Piper

When God Weeps... Joni Eareckson Tada

Suffering: Eternity Makes a Difference Tripp

*Whom have I in heaven but You?
And besides You, I desire nothing on earth.
My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart
and my portion forever.*

Psalm 73:25-26