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POST

Top 10 Counseling Mistakes

February 21, 2014

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In our efforts to bring truth and grace as a ministry to hurting people we have found 10 key mistakes we have made and desire to avoid. These principles also shape our ministry philosophy:



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15:14 Ep. 029 – Greg Gifford

COMMON COUNSELING

MISTAKE #1: *THE PAST IS*

A POT HOLE TO BE

AVOIDED

For fear of sounding
Freudian or hoping not to
give the counselee the
idea that the past is
determinative, many

Christian counselors give little credence to the counselee's childhood, family dynamics or long-term history. We have found that by listening carefully to their history and probing with heart exposing questions we are able to get valuable heart shaping information. By reflecting on the shaping influences of the past and reframing the language of the counselee we can speak the truth in love much more clearly and sensitively into their life and soul. Looking at the past is useful and important not because we are looking for blame or excuse but to hear heart themes as they emerge through multiple stories. They now sense we know them better, care more empathetically and we have the distinct advantage of planting a pivot foot into their worldview all the while keeping our other foot planted in a solid biblical worldview. Having an advocate in the room is invaluable both as an intercessor and for accuracy of perspective. The advocate also serves as a note taker to capture the key truths to be shared for application later. David Powlison does an excellent job of getting at some heart probing questions in his article on x-ray questions.ⁱ

**15:14 Ep. 028 – Ernie
Baker**

**Help to the Hurting: A
Response to the Shooting
in Las Vegas**

15:14 Ep. 027 – Kim Kira

**COMMON COUNSELING MISTAKE #2: *GOING AFTER THE OBVIOUS TOO
SOON***

Ah ha! My acute discernment gift and the painfully obvious fear theme in the paperwork lead me to believe fear of failure is the issue! I will asking leading questions about fear, give him great fear busting homework, and two verses on fear to memorize (to perfection) for next week. Although we may be on the right track, it is important how we approach these issues and help the counselee view fear. We could set the counselee up to tell us what we want to hear and fail to focus on the greater heart issues – i.e., self-sufficiency, need for approval, etc.

COMMON COUNSELING MISTAKE #3: *YOUR PROBLEM IS SIN—STOP IT!*

The “psychologized” counselee is often resistant to being told their disorder is really just sin. If the counselee has bought into the world's

label already, they will almost certainly be resistant to calling their behavior sin. It is very unlikely that significant change will take place if the counselee is told to simply repent of sinful behavior, stay renewed (more time in the word) and stop worrying about gaining others approval. A more winsome and effective approach is like Christ's ministry with the woman at the well (see John 4). Our goal is to get the counselee to see himself through the lens of scripture, to think of himself as God views him and his problems, and to feel God's conviction and comfort as he peers intensely in the mirror of God's word.

COMMON COUNSELING MISTAKE #4: ONLY ADDRESSING "FRUIT ISSUES AND RESULTING CONSEQUENCES"

We sometimes are tempted to be the answer man by focusing on symptoms and common conflicts with problem solving techniques or we find ourselves putting out our counselee's latest fire (their perceived crisis of the week) rather than performing invasive heart surgery (who is running this session anyway?). We might come up with two great proof texts to help a presenting problem but we are potentially in the danger of straining gnats. We need to go after the root issues of the heart and not continue to focus on symptoms.

COMMON COUNSELING MISTAKE #5: MAKING HOMEWORK MORE LIKE JUMPING THROUGH HOOPS

We can sometimes give the impression that homework is a competition. In the case of really hurting counselees, one size does not fit all. Great homework assignments for one person may fail for another ... consider Proverbs 18:13 and Ephesians 4:29 as you assign "learning opportunities".

COMMON COUNSELING MISTAKE #6: KEEP YOUR DISTANCE IT MAY BE CONTAGIOUS

When someone is really overwhelmed it can be hard to know how to be around them. "Do I act formal or try to cheer them up?" "Do I keep a professional distance?" "If I get too close I may not be able to speak with authority." We find that if we take the attitude that the ground at the cross is level and Christ is present in the counseling room, as is the Holy Spirit, then we can be ourselves, share our family news and struggles, use humor and even give a comforting arm around the shoulder to let them know we do not fear them or their "disorder."

COMMON COUNSELING MISTAKE #7: ASSIGNING “MORE OF THE SAME”

“Mature Christians” can be told to read and memorize scripture all day long with little affect. It is not that the Word of God is ineffective; it is that their hearts are dull, hardened, or dead. We need to find out why their hearts are wandering and always anchor them back into relationship and emphasize their identity in Christ. An effective way to bring about a fresh perspective resulting in hope and change is to emphasize the abiding relationship with Christ when approaching prayer, the Bible or spiritual disciplines. At [Twelve Stones](#) we talk a lot about “being” and assign more meditation than memorization when folks are in crisis. Meditating in scripture like Psalm 16:11 (joy in the presence of God/ abiding) and being close with Christ, Proverbs 23:26a (“Give me your heart . . .” a father saying this to his son, like God says to us). Many people within the church come to counseling with much more biblical knowledge than they are currently applying. We must point them to the bridge between knowing and doing...meditation (Psalm 19:14: my words = espoused theology which is what I know, my meditations = lived theology which is what I do). An option for homework might be to read Andrew Murray’s book “Abide in Christ”ⁱⁱ and assign chapter 1 which is a masterful weaving of John 15 and Matthew 11:28-30.

COMMON COUNSELING MISTAKE #8: MUCH EFFORT, LITTLE PRAYER

It is easy to get stuck in counseling. At [Twelve Stones](#) we often remind each other that we cannot work any harder than the counselees or we will get frustrated and hopeless. We need to place them at the foot of the cross in prayer and in action during the counseling time with them, not just before and after. That might mean taking a break and going on a prayer walk, asking the advocate or a spouse to pray, or giving them an assignment and calling it a day...but going away to pray ourselves or get counsel from a trusted mentor to gain perspective before going back in. We cannot tell our counselee’s to trust God in their crisis while we lean on our own skills, effort and Bible knowledge (John 5:39). More Bible knowledge only falls upon a hard heart; prayer is often the only way to furrow the soil so the Word can take root (Matthew 13 parable of the sower).

COMMON COUNSELING MISTAKE #9: ACT LIKE YOU ARE ABOVE THEIR SIN OR SUBTLY PATRONIZE THEM

Counselees need to be able to get to the place of conviction by the Holy Spirit, but I am afraid we often make that harder by quietly judging them in our hearts. This may come out very subtly in the way we advert

our eyes, change the subject or even how we ask questions. Most of us know of someone in our lives that have “played the Holy Spirit” instead of placing us in the hands of God for that work. If appropriate, this is a great time to share your own testimony or even personal struggles in the session. We often cite 1 Corinthians 10:13 as we share common struggles to build trust. As counselors we must always consider why any sin would seem too heinous for us to relate to. If you are tender from being sinned against in a similar manner, or struggling with similar sin issues you might need to refer the counselee to another biblical counselor.

COMMON COUNSELING MISTAKE #10: *SENDING YOUR COUNSELEE BACK INTO THE “LONELINESS” OF THE CONGREGATION*

We need to realize that our interactions with counselees are often deeper and more intimate than any they have ever experienced or certainly then is normal in their daily lives. We have asked them to get real and to walk more closely in community than ever before. Most of their peers will not have had this experience and may be less inclined to be as serious about a biblical worldview or abiding in Christ daily. This is why an advocate, a small group member, or a trusted friend should be invited in to the counseling. If it is not possible for them to be a part of the entire counseling process then at least inviting them to a bridge session would be helpful. You need to hand off the counselee to the church in a very intentional way. Community will be key to a counselee’s continued growth.

ⁱ Powlison, David. (1999, fall). X-ray questions: Drawing out the whys and wherefores of human behavior. *The Journal of Biblical Counseling*, 18(1), pp. 2-9.

ⁱⁱ Murray, Andrew, (1979) *Abide In Christ*. Whitaker House.

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About the BCC

The BCC exists to strengthen churches, para-church organizations, and educational institutions by promoting excellence and unity in biblical counseling as a means to accomplish compassionate outreach and effective discipleship.

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