**Don’t Be Afraid of Pastoral Counseling**

***What to Do, What Not to Do***

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Most pastors are occasionally called upon to provide counseling, both for church members and for those outside your church. However, many pastors have hadvery little formal training in counseling, and many pastors admit that they are uncomfortable doing counseling.

Pastor, don’t be afraid to counsel those who request it. You know the Word of God and you have the Holy Spirit to guide you. Many people won’t go to a psychologist, maybe because they refuse to talk to a stranger about their personal problems. They turn to you instead because they know you, respect you, and trust you.

Pastoral counseling is like everything else: the more you do it, the better you will get at it. With practice, you will learn what to ask and how to direct your conversation so that you can obtain the information you need to help your client best.

Here are some do's and don'ts of pastoral counseling to help you avoid problems and have rewarding counseling experiences.

**Twelve Do's of Pastoral Counseling**

**1. Beginning the Relationship**

Introduce yourself, offer to shake hands, and indicate the seating arrangement you prefer. Take a few minutes to visit informally even if they have interrupted your busy schedule. Making them feel welcome and important will help to build a positive relationship.

The first three minutes often determine whether a person will open up or come back for another session. Creating a positive atmosphere is essential for successful counseling. People will share their personal issues more freely with someone they trust.

The first interview is probably the most important session. Your goal is to identify the presenting problem, quickly decide whether you can help or refer them to someone else who can, create and build a positive working relationship, and set future expectations. As a rule, most counseling sessions are for 45 minutes to one hour.

**2. Maintain Boundaries**

A good pastoral counselor maintains professional boundaries. Do not allow the person you are counseling to get into your personal space, or visa versa. As a rule of thumb, maintain a distance of at least three feet from each another.

In many churches, members hug each other. But hugging and touching is a terrible idea in a counseling session. Don’t flirt. Dress modestly. The little foxes spoil the vine (Song of Solomon 2:15).

Counseling sessions often involve sharing intimate thoughts and feelings. That intimacy may lead to unhealthy fantasies. Hugging, touching, flirting, etc., only add fuel to that fire.

Depending on such things as the culture of your region and the age of the person you are counseling, it may not be appropriate to address the person by their first name. Some people don’t want you to address them by their first name until they invite you to do so. Sometimes calling the person “Mr. Jones” or “Mrs. Smith” will maximize their personal dignity and underscore the professional boundaries you have set. They will let you know if they prefer to be called by their first name.

**3. Listen More Than Talk**

Counseling is about giving people an opportunity to share about their issues/problems. Most people hesitate to open up about the real issues that are troubling them until a rapport has been established and trust has been gained.

Genuinely listening lets the person know that you care. Sometimes the main help someone needs is to get something off their chest and know that someone cares enough to listen.Pastors often report that a person left their session with a smile on their face, feeling good about their session when all the pastor did was listen.

When a person does need your pastoral insights, you will be more likely to identify their need if you have been listening carefully.

**4. Have a Toolkit of Good Questions**

As you are listening, ask good questions to clarify what has been said and to build a bridge from one event/emotion/feeling to another. Examples:

*• "How did/does that make you feel?"*

*• "Have you considered other options?"*

*• "If you had a wish for things to be better, what would it look like?"*

Good questions communicate that you care. Good questions also encourage the person to think about solutions. Good questions help the counseling process flow towards a possible solution. Develop a set of questions that you are comfortable with and have them ready when you need them.

**5. Suggest Possible Interventions**

The first part of the counseling process is to identify the presenting problem. The next step is to explore possible interventions to create different outcomes. They have come to you because they do not know what to do next or what they have tried does not work. While we may share or offer suggestions, our role is to help them formulate possible interventions. You can ask them, “Let me write these down for you.” Give them a list of possible interventions and tell them to try to use them this week and report back at your next session.

**6. Develop a Toolkit of Interventions that Work**

At your next session, have the person report back on the interventions that seemed to work for them. Tell them to discard the ones that did not work and reinforce the need to refine their list to the one or ones that seem to work. Examples:

* “Which intervention seem to work best for you?”
* “How did that make you feel?”
* “Did you gain expected your results?”
* “Did it help you manage or control your issue?”

Encourage the person to keep using the interventions that seem to work. Explain the goal is to develop a list that will work, a visual toolbox they can open and use when needed. Having the right set of tools make it easier to cope and deal with whatever they may be experiencing as well as giving them control.

**7. Know Your Limitations**

You cannot solve every problem or issue that comes along. When you discover that a person needsmore extensive services, refer them to an appropriate professional. Explain that their special needs are best addressed by someone who deals with those issues regularly and you care enough for their future to make this referral. This help bring an optimistic outlook towards future treatment.

**8. Be Judicious About Taking Notes**

Taking good notes may be helpful in evaluating your session and planning for the next one. However, don’t take notes during the first part of each session, and stop your notetaking from time to time to establish eye contactto let them know you are listening. Later in the session, you may ask, "Is it okay for me to take a few notes?"  Usually, the person is more receptive once you have established a little rapport.

Some people think that a pastor or counselor who is writing detailed notes from the very beginning is more interested in the details than the person. Your counseling session should be “person-centered” rather than detail centered. People will return and be receptive for help when you minister to them as a person.

**9. Pray for Discernment About “Hidden Issues”**

People who seek counseling will state a reason for coming, their “presenting issue.” But don't be surprised if the real issue surfaces much later. Superficial complaints often mask a deeper, less obvious reason for seeking help. Most counselors have experienced clients whodon’t share the real reason they are there until near the end of the session.

Why do they do that? They may want to see how you responded to their presenting issue before they decide whether they can trust you with their real problem. A person’s hidden issues may be painful for them to talk about.

This is one reason why it is so important to listen carefully. You may be able to discern the real issues from less important facts. Some examples:

• "I've been in such pain." (The hidden issue is emotional.)

• "I feel anxious nearly every moment I'm awake." (The hidden issue may be heavy drinking or drug use.)

• "I'd like to discuss some of my relationships." (The hidden issue may be AIDS.)

• "I want some advice about my mother. I wonder if she's becoming senile." (The hidden issue may be the person’s concern about their own mental health.)

When a person’s issue/problem/complaint is presented, write down the person's exact words so you can refer to it as needed.

*"This is the reason you stated you came for help. Is this still the same?"*

One good way to ferret out the real problem in the opening interview is to ask, *"Is there anything else bothering you?"*

**10. Praise One's Accomplishments and Progress**

As progress is achieved, point out how proud you are of their accomplishments. Everyone likes a compliment, especially those who are mentally or physically struggling with an issue. Genuine words of praise instill hope that progress is being made. Questions like, “How does that make you feel?” or “Do you feel you are making progress?” helps them to validate their progress.

If your client does not feel they are making progress, offer reassurance to increase their sense of confidence. "I'm on your side. We'll get this job done. Trust the process." Body language (smiles and nods) can also be reassuring.

**11. Closing Each Session**

At the close of your first session, state what you perceive to be the presenting problem and summarizewhat you have heard. That allows the person to modify or amplify upon what has been said and to correct misunderstandings.

At the end of each session, state what comes next and schedule future sessions.

*"Let me look over all that we have discussed today. I want to develop a plan for us to solve this problem. Shall we meet again next Tuesday?"*

*“My goal is to help you to develop the tools you need to address this issue/problem. Let me think of ways to help you. Shall we meet again next Tuesday?"*

**12. Bringing Your Counseling to a Close**

Pastoral counseling usually should not continue beyond a few sessions. Many pastors have discovered that too many sessions with a church member may lead to a negative outcome. The more you learn about a member’s personal problems, the more uncomfortable they may feel in your church.

At some point, you and your client will agree that future sessions are no longer necessary. Hopefully, that is an indication of success and a reason for celebration. Reaffirm the accomplishments they have been made and reinforce the strategies they have developed. Assure them that they are welcome to come back for another session when they consider it necessary.

**Six Don'ts of Pastoral Counseling**

**1. Don't Be Impersonal**

The number one complaint from people who seek counseling is:

*"The counselor did not show an interest in me."*

*"The counselor did not hear what I was saying.”*

*"The counselor tried to fix my problem before they even understood the problem."*

Especially at the start, and continually throughout the entire counseling experience, focus on developingand maintaining rapport and trust.

**2. Don't Offer a Quick Fix**

Counseling is a process, it is a journey. You are helping someone through their difficulty and guiding them on a path to healing. Your goal is to lead them in finding their own solution. Your goal is to help them achieve greater independence in their life.

**3. Don't Be Afraid to Address the Real Issue**

As counseling progresses and hidden issues begin to emerge, don't be afraid to address sensitive issues. Don’t be afraid to talk about suicidal thoughts, violence, substance abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, sexual issues, pornography, depression, guilt, unforgiveness, anger, or mental health concerns.

In other words, don’t ignore the elephant in the room. If you ignore the problem, the problem may never go away.

**4. Don't Counsel People (Especially the Opposite Sex)in Total Privacy**

You don’t want you or the person you are counseling to be vulnerable to temptation. No one is immune to temptation; those who think they are especially vulnerable. Also, you do not want to leave yourself vulnerable to false accusations.

There are many ways for good counselors to protect themselves:

• Conduct your counseling session in a room next door to where another staff member or volunteer is working.

• Have a window in your office door.

• Leave your door cracked open slightly.

• Instruct a staff member or volunteer to interrupt your session toward the end of the session. That lets your client know that others are present.

• Make sure there is an easy exit for a client (if they make an accusation, they can be asked: Why didn’t you just leave?) and for yourself.

**5. Don't Spend Most of the Time Talking About Yourself**

While counseling someone, it is tempting to draw upon your own experiences -- in marriage, work, life. But please don’t do this.

Secondly, you may be communicating that you have already been there and done that, which is another way of saying that the person’s situation is not as unique as they think it is.

But here is a universal truth: we ARE all unique. We all come from different backgrounds; we all think and act differently; we all cope with things in different ways. It is fine to make suggestions, but a person's treatment and interventions should be tailor-made for them and by them.

**6 Don’t Succumbto Secondary Trauma**

As you counsel others, closely monitor your own feelings and thoughts. Some caregivers become so closely connected with the hurts, feelings, and traumasof others that they begin to experience some of the same effects. That is called“Secondary Trauma” or “Compassion Fatigue.” (See our article on Compassion Fatigue on our website.)

It can be difficult for a pastor or counselor to detach one’s personal feelings from what your counselee is experiencing. When you feel this happening, take a short break to breathe and clear your head before you continue the session. Jesus frequently slipped away from the crowds and all their problems for times of rest and prayer.

**DISCLAIMER:** This outline is not intended to make you a professional counselor. It is merely a guideline of ideas and helps to think about within the counseling process. Please understand your limitations and refer your client to a professional when and if needed.