

Pa232 Counseling

Lesson Pa232-4 Basic Skill: Counselor

A person seeking counseling often wants to get answers, solve problems, and make progress. They may expect someone to just tell them what to do. They may get frustrated if you do not tell them. As you learned in your last lesson, an adviser may recommend or suggest some plan of action. The counselor role, however, is *open-ended* and not focused on providing an ‘answer’ for the person.

Job lost his wealth. His family and his servants were killed. Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said: “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised.” His body was afflicted with painful oozing sores from head to toe. He sat on a heap of ashes scraping his skin. His wife suggested he curse God and die. But Job said, “Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?” Through all this Job did not sin in what he said, nor did he blame God (Job 1:20-2:10).

There was no quick answer for Job. But God went with him through his suffering and the great losses in his life. Three of his friends jumped to false conclusions and gave poor advice. In the end, God spoke to Job about life and a human’s relationship with God. As a good counselor, you walk with a person through the telling of their difficult times. You help them finally focus on their relationship with God *in* their pain and problems. You do not tell them *why* they are there or *what* they should do.

A counselor walks and talks with a person *through* the trials and hardships of life. The answer comes in the process of listening (the counselor listens) and talking (the person does the talking). People are able to make positive changes in their behavior and can make better decisions. They can let go of past hurts and move out of anger. This can happen when they are able to talk about the events and situations that caused them pain. Or, they may need to talk about an on-going trial. When a person makes a decision to speak with you, it is essential you make a counseling plan:

- Set aside a specific time to talk to the person, along with a time limit for each conversation.
- Abide by the plan and do not go over the time set (say 30 or 45 minutes). This will help the conversations remain focused.
- Both you and the person need time in between conversations to process, pray, and think ahead to the next session.
- Keep simple notes about the conversations. Keep track of whether you ask the person to do something to prepare for the next time you will meet.

To counsel is to create and provide a safe space and time for a person to speak freely and openly. They must be convinced that their words and information are confidential, safe from gossip, and that they will not be judged.

Important point #1: *Active listening does not mean you condone or approve of what you are hearing.* Sometimes what you hear in a counseling session concerns illegal activity or harm to someone. The person must know that you are required to report this to the proper authorities. Examples are when there is abuse of a child, elderly person, or disabled person. A counselor provides a safe, comfortable setting. The counselee can freely speak their thoughts, knowing they are not being judged as they speak. This method of support demonstrates patience, empathy, and honest concern.

For example, a student in a class on the effects of sexual abuse of children came to the teacher after class. She asked to talk about her childhood experiences. As the student talked to the teacher, the story unfolded. She had suffered childhood sexual abuse and her mind had tried to protect her from the abuse. The way her mind helped her to cope was to make her withdraw emotionally. She had also developed personality disorders that distanced her from the trauma.

Often, the person looking for help is ready to talk and talk and talk. The pressure has been bottled up and wants to be expressed. The counselor can let the person talk at their own pace, with them choosing the topic. Suggestions to follow in active listening are:

- The person is to speak of *their* experiences not someone else's. The other person is not in front of you for counseling.
- Introduce basic questions when you need to keep the person focused. If they seem to stall in the conversation, you may ask a question like, "How did you find someone to help you?" "What were you afraid of?" "Who were the helpers in your family/friends that you could depend on?"
- As you listen to the person, ask God to show you what to say and what questions to ask. Do not be surprised if your main action is listening, and not speaking.
- Listen for when the person identifies an action or a hint of resolving their problem. Help them notice and appreciate the significance of self-awareness. For instance, they may comment: "I think if I could forgive her, I would feel better." "Maybe he hurt me because someone hurt him when he was younger." "If I had not gone through this, I would not be able to understand how other people feel who are hurt."

Important point #2: *Establish emotional boundaries.* Hearing someone describe devastating things from their childhood is not easy. You are confronted with a situation very tragic and sad—an adult still suffering from childhood tragedy. As a counselor you may feel overwhelmed with the level of pain and inability to function that the person describes. It takes focus and work to be a listener who responds in the best way. You must be calm, attentive, honest, but without over-reacting to terrible details. And it requires a level of detachment on the part of the counselor. You must be able to go about your own life, relationships, and duties in a normal way. Remember these things to insure your own emotional boundaries:

- The person is safe and no longer in danger.
- This person lived through the events. You can be strong enough to listen to them.
- God has placed you in front of this person to provide them the gift of listening.
- At the end of each conversation, give this person over to God.

A word of caution: It is unethical and unwise to disclose information about your life and people in your life. It may seem like it will help the person to give examples of your experiences in knowing how they feel. But experienced counselors will quickly tell you that giving personal information can come back to cause problems for the counselor.

As counseling progresses, emotions and point of view will change or events can be repeated. Allow the person freedom to repeat a story or go over the issues more than once. Look for changes in the way they describe things, what they leave out, or add. Notice the inclusion of positive comments added to the story. An example of a positive comment is when the person notes, "I must have been stronger than I realized to live through that." They are recognizing their own power and resilience.

A counselor uses the tools of listening and caring to help people in distress to sort out facts from fiction. They may need to replace fear with faith in God's power, relying on God's strength instead of their own. Over time the person will decide how they will address and handle the issues.

This lesson is **important** because it makes clear the difference between a counselor and an adviser. As a counselor, you actively listen while the person speaks about their experiences. You pray that your questions will be used by the Holy Spirit to show the person the solution to their problem.

The **main point** of this lesson is that your task is to be an active listener, not to offer an answer to a problem. The lesson lists important aspects of a counseling plan. It is important that you create a safe place for the person to freely share and that you assure them they will not be judged.

To **review** this lesson:

1. Is it best for the counselor to tell about their own life to help someone in counseling? [Pause]
A. If you said, "No, the conversations should focus on the person and not the counselor," you are correct.
2. What is the first part of a counseling plan? [Pause]
A. If you answered, "A plan should first set a time for counseling and a limit on the length of conversations, such as 30-45 minutes," you answered correctly.
3. What are the two important points to remember about counseling from this lesson? [Pause]
A. If you said, "Active listening does not mean a counselor approves of what they are hearing, and also, a counselor must establish emotional boundaries," you are right.

Your **assignment** for this lesson is to learn the aspects of a good counseling plan, what suggestions you should follow in active listening, and how to secure your own emotional boundaries. Ask God to lead you to someone who needs a listening ear. Begin to practice what you have learned in this lesson as you interact with that person.