

When Pastoral Counseling isn't Enough

Ministers are on the frontlines of our nation's mental health crisis. Most of us are not licensed professional counselors, though some are. Many of us do not feel comfortable providing even pastoral counseling to church members. However, regardless of our credentials or varying competencies, here are five truths we need to keep in mind:

1. As ministers, we are likely the first point of contact in our local church or ministry for a church member who is struggling with mental health issues or considering suicide. Ministers are also the "go to" person when someone truly is "asking for a friend."
2. Unfortunately, we probably are not watching for signs of distress among members or planning to be interrupted by crises in their lives because we are focused on other ministry tasks.
3. We feel undertrained when it comes to mental health issues and therefore ill equipped to provide help.
4. And yet, if we pay attention, we can be a helpful part of their support team to spot the signs of an impending mental health crisis in a church member, refer them to a professional Christian counselor, and provide them ongoing spiritual and emotional support.
5. The best care we can provide someone who shares their trauma or a family member's mental illness is simply not to respond with shock or shame. When we respond with acceptance and love, we send the message that we are safe people who can help.

Ministers are like general practitioners or country doctors. We are the first point of contact for many people experiencing emotional problems. We hear their situation and provide them with primary love and care. When their mental health needs require professional or ongoing care, however, we refer them to a mental health specialist such as a licensed counselor, psychologist, or psychiatrist. This analogy has helped me understand what I can and cannot do as a pastor when it comes to mental health. On the one hand, I could provide much-needed pastoral counsel to people in distress. I can pray with them, encourage them with Scripture, and be present with them as they navigate grief and loss. But if the situation called for more than three sessions of pastoral counseling to individuals in these circumstances, I would see that as outside my scope. On the other hand, if either the church member or I felt a need for lengthy, intensive counseling, I would refer them to a Christian mental health professional. As a pastor, I always kept an up-to-date list of such professionals. I developed the list based on conversations with trusted colleagues about local counselors, as well as on favorable feedback from church members about counselors who had helped them. Sometimes, church members resist referrals to mental health professionals. They might believe you no longer care about or want to invest in them. They might conclude that you think their case is so serious you can't help them. They might resist because they don't want to start over with someone they don't know. Money might also be a consideration. Why pay a counselor when they can talk to you for free? These are legitimate concerns. Below are a few ways I personally handled these types of concerns. It starts with the first session of pastoral counseling. My routine introduction for that session went something like this:

"I'm glad you're here! As we begin, let me set expectations about our time together. I'm an ordained minister, not a mental health professional. I can listen, pray, and share Scripture with you, but I cannot provide long-term professional counseling.

“Everything we talk about is confidential, with a few exceptions. I’m a mandatory reporter, so I am obligated to report child abuse and imminent harm, whether to yourself (suicide) or others (homicide). “Do you have any questions about what I’ve said? Are you comfortable to continue?”

“Great. I’d like to open in prayer.

“Now, what brings you here today?”

By the end of that first session, I typically knew what the future held, whether pastoral counsel was sufficient, or a professional referral was needed. When I proposed a referral, I talked through the church member’s concerns, saying things like:

“I’m limited in my skills, and you deserve the best care available.”

“I know a Christian specialist who would be a good fit for you.”

“It’s not that I don’t want to help you. It’s that I want you to get help better than I can provide.”

“I will continue to be your pastor, but someone else will be your counselor. In fact, if you desire, your new counselor can have you sign a release so they can update me on your progress and the three of us can work as a team. “Sometimes, church members would express concerns about the cost of counseling. This is a legitimate concern, especially when insurance only pays for a limited number of sessions, if it pays at all. In such situations, I would often use analogies such as the following:

“If you had a heart attack, medical intervention would save your life. You might have to pay the bill for a long time, but it would still be worth it, right? So how much is your marriage worth? Can you put a price tag on your parenting relationship with your teenagers? If counseling helps you recover from depression, isn’t the extra cost worth it? “Sometimes, pastors themselves express resistance to referring church members to mental health professionals. Perhaps they have reservations about psychology. Perhaps they feel guilty about admitting their limitations.

If you feel that way, consider this analogy: In the course of your ministry, you will run into church members who need specialists to address a variety of problems they are experiencing: a plumber, a probate attorney, a cancer doctor. No pastor in their right mind thinks they need to be competent to address all these issues.

If we recognize the need for specialists in situations like these, we shouldn’t hesitate to refer people to mental health care professionals. The worst thing you can do for church members is to try to be an expert in every area, to provide counseling beyond your skill level. The best gift you can provide church members is to assess their mental health needs and direct them to the best care possible.

Dr. Ryan Darrow is an ordained Assemblies of God minister and psychologist. He’s a member of the AG Mental Health Committee, which advises the national office of the Assemblies of God on mental health issues. He shares the following basics for when ministers should refer church members to mental health professionals:

1. When the Holy Spirit leads.

2. When the presenting problem is clearly outside a minister's scope of practice (eating disorder, cutting, alcohol or drug abuse, etc.). These can exacerbate quickly and become lethal.
3. When a self-reported underlying mental health issue is present (depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, borderline personality, etc.).
4. When there is a threat of self-harm or to harm someone else.
5. Before the person becomes dependent on the pastor to have their emotional needs met. If a pastor finds themselves becoming the sole source of emotional nurturance. Counselors are trained in how to ward off these feelings and maintain a working relationship.
6. If the person is making no or minimal progress or is even getting worse. Referring someone to a mental health professional should not end a pastor's responsibilities to that person, however. Focus on studying the Word of God — such as Jesus' teachings or the Psalms of lament. Encourage them to journal what Jesus is teaching them about their emotional and spiritual growth. Check in with them regularly during the course of their outside counseling.

One final thing pastors might consider is to improve their people-helping skills. You don't have to be a mental health professional to offer emotional first aid. There are a number of excellent resources available.

If you'd like to grow your ministerial skill set in this area, I'd encourage you to check out Mental Health Coach First Responder Training by The American Association of Christian Counselors. Mental health coaches help people develop a healthy balance in life, give guidance in decision making, offer support in navigating mental health difficulties, and assist in establishing a recovery plan.

Mental Health Coach First Responder Training is a 42-hour, biblically based, clinically excellent training program that features some of the world's leading mental health experts. The course lectures are online and on demand available 24/7/365. Go to LightUniversity.com/Mental-Health-Coaching for more information.

AACC offers Assemblies of God ministers full scholarships to defray the cost of this training. The only charge will be a \$54 tech fee. Use MHC4AOG when you order the product.

Finally, the Assemblies of God Mental Health Committee has put together a list of Christian counselors through-out the United States. Go to MinisterFamilyCare.AG.org. If you feel the need to find a counselor, feel free to use the Find a Counselor tab to locate a mental health care professional in your area. It also will help to familiarize yourself with the resources listed on the back of your newly renewed minister's credential card.