

# Overcoming the Stigma of Counseling

## Session One “A Different Understanding of the Causes of Stigma”

### 1. Understanding “Mental Health” and its relation to “Mental Illness”.

#### a. What is “mental health”?

Mental health refers to the status of a person’s “emotional, psychological, and social well-being”. (American Psychiatric Association)

- i. Mental health encompasses the mind, emotions, will, aspirations, etc.
- ii. *Good* mental health sits over against “mental illness”.
- iii. Good mental health is most commonly determined by a person’s inner sense that things are right and good or by feelings of “happiness” but will also include concepts like “success”, especially in the various relationships of life (e.g. family, work, friends, community, etc.).

#### b. What is “mental illness” and what does it encompass?

##### i. Mental illness is difficult to define.

*“Mental illnesses are health conditions involving changes in emotion, thinking or behavior. Mental illnesses are associated with distress and/or problems functioning in social, work or family activities.” “Mental illness...is a medical condition, just like heart disease or diabetes.” (APA)*

*“A mental illness is a condition that affects a person’s thinking, feeling, behavior or mood. These conditions deeply impact day-to-day living and may also affect the ability to relate to others.” (National Alliance on Mental Illness)*

*“Mental illness, also called mental health disorders, refers to a wide range of mental health conditions — disorders that affect your mood, thinking and behavior...a mental health concern becomes a mental illness when ongoing signs and symptoms cause frequent stress and affect your ability to function.” (Mayo Clinic)*

- ii. Mental illnesses encompasses any “disorder” of life whether in relation to the way a person feels, behaves, or relates to others, etc.

## 2. What is understood to be the “stigma” associated with mental illness?

- a. Negative judgments associated with mental illness.

“Far more than any other **type of illness**, mental disorders are subject to negative judgements and stigmatization. Many patients not only have to cope with the often devastating effects of their **illness**, but also suffer from social exclusion and prejudices.” (National Library of Medicine)

- b. Corresponding stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination.

“Stereotypes refer to prefabricated opinions and attitudes towards members of certain groups, such as ethnic or religious groups, whites and blacks, Europeans and Latin Americans, Jews and Muslims, **and the mentally ill.**” (National Library of Medicine)

## 3. The resulting stigma of counseling and corresponding resistance to help.

- a. There is wide recognition that the stigma attached to mental illness is a key cause of the stigma associated with counseling more specifically.

- b. But reasons for resistance go beyond what we would identify as matters of “stigma”.

According to *Psychology Today*, the following are the most common reasons people give for not seeking “therapy” (pay attention to the connections with what we’ve said thus far):

- Counseling is an admission that “something is wrong with me”.
- I’m afraid that people will think I’m “crazy”.
- Counseling makes me look weak.
- I afraid of what might be uncovered about me.
- I don’t want to be “labeled” or have a diagnosis affect future opportunities.
- I should be able to “tough it out” on my own.
- My friends or family can help me.
- I don’t want to go on medication.
- Change will require hard work; it’s easier to stay stuck.
- It’s too expensive.
- It requires too much time.

#### 4. A different way of looking at the problem.

- a. Consider the following in reference to the reasons given above:

It has been said loud and clear that mental health issues are treatable *medical* conditions, which is to say that they are indications that something is physiologically “wrong”.

Help is termed “treatment” or “therapy”-- terms which imply something is “wrong”.

*Professional* help is required which indicates that the issues are extraordinary and cannot be worked through apart from someone with an advanced degree and a license. Because these problems have been classified as health issues, insurance companies are often involved, and this has meant that providers must assign a “diagnosis” (a label) if a person’s insurance is going to cover the treatment.

Because much psychoanalysis has been oriented toward childhood experiences, is it any wonder that people are worried that something will be “uncovered”.

Because mental illness is largely viewed as *illness*; medications are often prescribed and sometimes as a first step.

Friends, family, pastors are warned against trying to provide “treatment”.

- b. The work of de-stigmatization may be a big part of the problem:

- i. The work of “education”.

“Mental illness is....just heart disease or diabetes”, but these are things “wrong”.

- ii. The work of “normalization” (platforming Hollywood).

But people don’t need professionals unless the problem is serious or complex.

- iii. The identity loop (remember the “stereotypes”):

“I am black” is in the same as “I am anxious.” “I am Jewish” is the same as “I am depressed.”

- c. The adoption of identity terminology itself leads to stigma.

- i. By definition a subset.

- ii. By definition different.

- iii. The adoption of an identity creates an emotional connection.

“I am...”

# Overcoming the Stigma of Counseling

## Session Two

### *"A Different Understanding of What Counseling Is"*

#### **1. What is "counseling"--The conflicted common conception:**

- a. It is "therapy" provided by a health professional.

*"In counseling (also sometimes referred to as psychotherapy or, simply, therapy), mental health providers (or counselors or therapists) work collaboratively with people of all backgrounds to foster emotional/mental growth and healing." (U of W)*

- b. It is mystical—requiring deep insights.

"Clinical wisdom is an archetypal collection of accumulated and hard-won psychological, philosophical, existential and spiritual knowledge collectively drawn and distilled from psychotherapeutic practice or research, as well as other healing traditions. This precious clinical wisdom has been handed down from master psychotherapist to apprentice or disciple, from training analyst to trainee, from professor to pupil, from supervisor to supervisee, from author to student, growing more refined, developing, evolving and transmuting over time."

(Dr. Stephen Diamond, *Psychology Today*, "Essential Secrets of Psychotherapy: The Healing Power of Clinical Wisdom". January 6, 2012)

- c. Yet, it is simply someone listening and helping you through life.

"Psychotherapy...involves examining and gaining insight into life choices and difficulties faced by individuals, couples, or families."

#### **2. What are the common problems of counseling?**

- a. The common conception is that counseling deals with "labeled" problems: (Bi-polar, Clinical Depression, OCD, Paranoid Delusions, etc.)

- b. But according to *Psychology Today*, the following are the most common reasons people have sought counsel according to psychologists from around the country:

Fear of not being who they think they are supposed to be, and the imposter syndrome.

Perfectionism

Relationship problems, especially with online dating and dissatisfaction and fear of rejection.

Relationship boundaries

Difficulty saying "no" and the fear of disappointing others.

Anxiety, worry, and stress, especially related to work.

Sexual issues, including anxieties associated with expectations.

"Adjustment disorders"—divorce, death, job loss, culture changes, uncertainty.

Fears associated with current events, pandemic, shootings, politics.

Social anxiety.

Depression

**3. These common problems are...common problems:**

- a. Handout of "Mental Health Issues"

As one psychologist put it, "If you are going through a stressful time, or feel unhappy, anxious, or unsatisfied with yourself and your life, please don't talk yourself out of taking care of your feelings." But aren't stress and feelings of unhappiness, anxiety, dissatisfaction, etc. common life experiences for most if not all people?

***What is it about these kinds of issues that put them out of reach of biblical wisdom?***

- b. 1 Corinthians 10:1-13, esp. 13.

While many problems are not due to personal sin, all problems are temptations to sin.

**4. What, then, is the biblical conception of "counseling"?**

- a. Psalm 1:1
- b. Proverbs 1:1-5
- c. 1 Corinthians 2:1-7

# Overcoming the Stigma of Counseling

## Session Three

*“A Different Understanding of What Must Be Done to De-stigmatize Counseling”*

### 1. To de-stigmatize we need to de-professionalize.

- a. We need to understand counseling issues as “soulish” issues.
- b. We need to understand counseling issues as matters of *formation* (Romans 12:2 vs. Romans 8:29).
- c. We need to take counseling back into the church (Acts 20:25-32).

### 2. To de-stigmatize we need to de-mystify.

- a. We need to stop believing that counseling problems are “extraordinary” (1 Corinthians 10:13).
- b. We need to stop believing that solutions come from profound, hidden secrets (Colossians 2:2-3)
- c. We need to believe that we have what we need to counsel (2 Peter 1:2-4).

### 3. To de-stigmatize we need to de-personalize.

- a. We need to stop thinking of counseling as primarily therapeutic.
  - i. The insatiable soul: Proverbs 27:20; Ecclesiastes 1:8
  - ii. The inevitable despair.

If our chief goals are “happiness”, “success” in life, comfort, or the absence of difficulty, we inadvertently put the person on a uphill treadmill leading to despair.

- b. We need to re-orient counseling upward and outward.
  - i. The proper aim of counseling is to lead the person to understand their proper aim—to glorify God!  
*How can we glorify God?*  
*“We glorify Him by enjoying Him, loving Him, trusting Him, and by obeying His will, commands, and Law.”*
  - ii. “Not to be served but to serve” (Mark 10:45)

# Overcoming the Stigma of Counseling

## Session Four

*“A Different Understanding of What Is Most Needed”*

**1. The world says education, normalization, and professional providers are what is most needed.**

**2. The Bible teaches that it is the cross that is most needed.**

a. The cross is no small matter.

It requires a significantly shrunken view of God’s salvation and wisdom to conclude that the cross of Christ does not have the power needed for all of the soulish issues people face.

The message of the cross addresses every human need including mental, emotional, aspirational, even physical needs.

b. The cross is essential for the humility needed to receive counsel.

i. Pride prevents our coming (James 4:6),  
but the cross crushes pride (Philippians 2:8),

ii. Shame keeps us cowering and covering (Genesis 3:7-10),  
but the cross gives comfort and courage (Genesis 3:21;  
2 Corinthians 1:3-5).

c. The cross is essential for the healing needed for those who come.

i. This is truly the Great Omission of much Christian counseling.

ii. The cross—*the power of God!* (1 Corinthians 1:18-25).

Surely we believe that God’s salvation encompasses the anxious heart, the angry heart, the grieving heart, the lonely heart, the perfectionistic heart, the depressed heart, every heart!

# Overcoming the Stigma of Counseling

## *Questions for Reflection/Discussion*

### **Session One:**

- How might defining mental health problems as mental “illnesses” contribute to stigma?
- Why might this lead to a resistance to receive counseling?
- What is the standard for what constitutes “good” mental health?
- What do terms like “therapy” or “treatment” imply about what happens in counseling?
- How might psychological “labels” lead to stigma?
- How might they lead to despair?
- What is the possibility of “cure” if mental illnesses are equated to unchangeable human characteristics like ethnicity?

### **Session Two:**

- What are the conflicting messages concerning what counseling is? Why might this create confusion?
- What would most people likely consider to be the common problems addressed in counseling? Why is this so.
- What effect will this have on how people perceive counseling?
- Among the common problems discussed, how many are “uncommon”? Why is this important to know as Christians seeking to help?
- Why have we concluded that “psychological” problems are beyond the scope of the Bible? Looking at the list of common problems, is this the case?
- What is biblical counsel?

### **Session Three:**

- Why would it be helpful to “de-professionalize” counseling?
- What would it take to do this?
- How is counseling made “mystical”?
- Why would it be important to de-mystify counseling?
- What goals do most people have in mind when thinking of counseling?
- Why might a “therapeutic” approach to counseling lead to despair?
- What is the proper aim of counseling?

### **Session Four:**

- In what ways have we flattened or shrunken our understanding of the cross?
- Why has this happened?
- Why is it necessary that we have a cross if people are going to seek genuine help?
- Why is the cross essential for the healing needed by those suffering?



Abandonment  
Abortion Issues  
Abuse / Survivors of Abuse  
Academic Concerns  
Addictions and Compulsions  
Adjusting to Change / Life Transitions  
Adoption issues  
Aggression and Violence  
Aging and Geriatric Issues  
Agoraphobia  
Alcohol and Drug Addiction  
Anger  
Anxiety  
Avoidant Personality Disorder, i.e. social anxiety  
Body Image  
Borderline Personality  
Breakup  
Bullying  
Career Counseling  
Caregiver Issues / Stress  
Chronic Illness / Disability  
Codependency  
Commitment Issues  
Communication Problems  
Compulsive Spending / Shopping  
Control Issues  
Creative Blocks  
Depression  
Dissociation  
Divorce / Divorce Adjustment  
Domestic Violence  
Drug and Alcohol Addiction  
Eating and Food Issues

Emotional Abuse  
Emotional Overwhelm  
Emptiness  
Exercise Addiction  
Family Problems  
Family of Origin Issues  
Fear  
Fertility Issues  
Forgiveness  
Grief, Loss, and Bereavement  
Guilt  
Health / Illness / Medical Issues  
Helplessness / Victimhood  
Identity Issues  
Inadequacy  
Infidelity / Affair Recovery  
Internet Addiction  
Irritability  
Isolation  
Jealousy  
Life Purpose  
Men's Issues and Problems  
Midlife Crisis  
Money and Financial Issues  
Mood Swings  
Multicultural Concerns  
Narcissism  
OCD / Obsessions and Compulsions  
Panic and Panic Attacks  
Paranoia  
Parenting  
Perfectionism  
Phobias  
Physical Abuse

Postpartum Depression  
Power  
Pregnancy and Birthing  
Prejudice / Discrimination  
Premarital Counseling  
Rejection  
Relationships and Marriage  
Religious Issues  
Self-Actualization  
Self-Care  
Self-Compassion  
Self-Criticism  
Self-Doubt  
Self-Esteem  
Self-Love  
Sensitivity to Criticism  
Sexuality  
Shame  
Sleep Disorders  
Smoking Cessation  
Social Anxiety / Phobia  
Spirituality  
Stress  
Suicide  
Teenage Issues  
Trust Issues  
Values Clarification  
Women's Issues  
Workplace Issues  
Worry  
Worthlessness  
Young Adult Issues

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