

Biblical Counseling and Post-Traumatic Stress

BCC Partner Ministry Resource
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About This Resource

BCC Staff Note: All of the materials contained in this E-Source relate to the theme of *Biblical Counseling and Post-Traumatic Stress*. They have all been posted at the Biblical Counseling Coalition's [Grace and Truth](#) blog site which we describe as "Voices from the Biblical Counseling Community." The modern biblical counseling movement encompasses a broad spectrum of people and organizations committed to a biblical view of people-helping which is summarized by the BCC's [Confessional Statement](#). It is with this in mind that we have collated these resources into one document exclusively for our BCC Partners.

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Applying Truth to Truth: Practical Help for Post-Traumatic Stress

By Eliza Huie

Almost everyone has had things happen in their life that they wish never did. Sometimes they are simple regrets while others are life-changing situations. Some are things we actively participated in; others were caused by someone else's actions or circumstances outside of our control. Pain or even a feeling of desperation is often the result. The hurt of the situation or the sting of regret remains. Sometimes the reminders of these events can send a person into an upsetting spiral of discouragement, doubt, and fear.

What is Post-Traumatic Stress?

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is the name often given when a person struggles greatly after a difficult situation. PTSD has been described as a “normal reaction to an abnormal situation.”

That is a valuable description. It helps give a better perspective to what is going on. The reaction the person is having is really more normal than they think. It is the situation that has been so abnormal. While the definition of what is going on may help the person, it doesn't remove the pain or the struggle.

The situation has changed them. It has stayed with them in a significant way. It has marked them. So now what? What can they do with the memories, regret, or the continual pain that these circumstances can bring with them? Wishing it away doesn't work. Ignoring only lasts until that unsuspecting moment happens when something triggers a memory.

Why Help Can Be So Difficult

Offering hope to a person struggling with PTSD can be like putting a Band-Aid on wet skin. It just doesn't stick. The pain is not only real, it is also scary. People can wonder if they will forever feel the way they do about the situation. When talking with someone who is struggling through PTSD, I often hear the question, “Will I ever be normal again?” Going back to the description of PTSD may help them see that they are normal, and their reaction is actually normal as well. What they are often really saying is, “Will I ever be able to be free from the pain of the experience?”

The situation that brought the pain is now a part of their story. It cannot be expected to go away like a skinned knee or an unwanted blemish. The facts remain; the truth is—it happened.

But that is not the only truth. Stopping there would certainly be hopeless. At times it can be difficult to know what to say to a person struggling in this way. Something I have found helpful is to begin to help them to learn to apply truth to truth.

Helping Sarah

Sarah (not her real name) was sexually molested by several family members, male and female, when she was between the ages of 5-13. The things done to her have stayed with her over the years, invading her mind and creating stumbling blocks in her relationships. She became a Christian in college and while that has helped her to have new hope, she is still suspicious of relationships. Now in her 40s, fear keeps her a lonely introvert. She struggles with the reminders of pain. While time and counseling have helped her significantly, the memories can still bring fear in a way that paralyzes her relationships. She can begin to feel identified once again as dirty, unworthy, or guilty. In new relationships she wonders if this person in her life has intentions to hurt her. She questions people's motives for wanting to know her and can easily conclude that they are out to trap her.

How can she apply truth to truth in a way that is helpful?

It can look something like this. Yes, people who should have loved her instead hurt and abused her terribly. That is true. This new person in her life, who appears to want to be her friend, is not that person. That is also true. She may need to move cautiously, but she can move toward friendship because this is not the same person. Apply truth to truth.

Going Deeper: Applying Gospel Truth

A deeper way she can do this is in regards to the way she sees herself.

Memories can haunt her and invade her thinking with condemning accusations. They tell her, "What happened to you was dirty and ugly." While that is true it does not mean that *she* is dirty or ugly.

She can apply truth to truth. Yes, that was awful, but she is not dirty or ugly. Because of her faith in Christ, she can apply the truth that she is clothed in the righteousness of Christ and she is precious and loved. She can apply the truth of who she is in Christ to the truth of her past experiences.

People suffering from PTSD are not really that different from anyone else. We all need this kind of reminder as we face each day, do we not? Applying truth to truth is something that is needed no matter what your circumstance. We need to apply the truth over and over and over again. Often the remedy we offer to others is the very thing you and I need most.

Having a painful past that still hurts is an opportunity to build a deeper confidence in the truth of God's Word and what it says about you. This is not an exercise in positive thinking; it is telling gospel truth to yourself.

Allow Scripture to move in and speak truth to the horrible realities that you have faced. As you have gone through a desperate situation, allow it to make you desperate for Him and the truth that He holds out to you.

Questions for Reflection

How can applying gospel truth to the truth of your past suffering make a difference in your life?

Helping a Family Member Struggling with PTSD Symptoms Part One—Biblical Understanding

By Greg Gifford

Help for Family Members

The diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is here—to stay. It was once rare and used to describe combat veterans, but it is now working its way into the limelight of DSM-V disorders. Consequently, we are to be a people who wisely listen and engage what those with symptoms of a PTSD experience, particularly those within our own families.

Your family is the counseling room and you will be a counselor of some kind. What will you say? How will you respond? Here are some practical steps for your family's ministry to your loved one suffering from symptoms of PTSD.

Understanding Biblical Change and Their Struggles

All effective ministry happens in the context of understanding (Proverb 18:2, 13). First, one of the best things a family can do is to understand the process of biblical change as they seek to walk their loved one through that process. Ephesians 4:22-24 enumerates that process with the overarching principles of “putting off, being renewed in the spirit of your minds, and putting on the new self.”

Second, your family needs to seek to understand what your family member is going through. Watch what situations elicit responses such as flashbacks, negative thinking, irritability, and anger. What circumstances seem to be difficult for them? Is it car rides? Is it large crowds? What really sets off your loved one or what really tempts them towards PTSD symptoms?

Look and listen. You have a story line unfolding before your eyes and only when you take the time to observe and note what are the struggles and weaknesses of your family member can you help them. They are not a walking diagnosis or a personification of the DSM; they are real people with idiosyncrasies.

Exhibiting “Demanding Patience”

Paul Tripp notes that:

“The grace that adopts me into Christ’s family is not a grace that says I am okay. In fact, the Bible is clear that God extends his grace to me because I am everything *but* okay.”¹

We must exhibit the “demanding patience” that Christ exhibits towards us. We endure, we forbear, we are longsuffering, *but* we seek growth—true growth. This growth is none other than a willingness to submit to the will of God and His purposes for their life (Philippians 1:16). He has started something in their life, if they are a believer, and has promised change will happen: they must be growing into the image of Christ.

Remember that there is no “timeline” for recovery and “recovery” is not the goal: honoring God is the goal and growth into the image of Christ is the goal. Do not measure their progress by how much they struggled with PTSD a year ago, but by their growth in Christ. Your patience should be a patience that calls them to growth.

The Help of a Medical Doctor

Seek out the help of a wise medical doctor, preferably a Christian medical doctor. You will need their insights to help observe biological influences on your loved one with the symptoms of PTSD. While the Bible never teaches a deterministic model of biology, it does recognize the relationship between the inner man and the outer man (cf. Psalm 51). Therefore, we do not want to minimize that relationship either.

In addition to a medical doctor, seek to speak with a nutritionist and a sleep specialist. There are often vast improvements for people who simply practice good nutrition and ensure that they are resting adequately. These are both biblical ideas of stewarding our bodies as temples in which the Holy Spirit dwells and they are very wise to consider.

A typical symptom of PTSD is hyper-agitation that prevents good sleep, therefore insomnia ensues. Once insomnia has set in, there will be a compounding effect of the symptoms of PTSD. Therefore, preventative maintenance is very ideal, even if this means some type of sleep aid. Remember that stewarding the outer man well has significant influences on the inner man.

But whether or not you do visit a nutritionist or sleep specialist, you must be extremely mindful of sleep patterns. If your loved one is not sleeping enough, you will have to intervene very quickly. Insomnia is one of the dominant characteristics of PTSD, and it is a very real and dangerous aspect of PTSD. You cannot take insomnia flippantly or lightly.

¹ Paul Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer’s Hands*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 158).

Therefore, be cognizant of their sleep patterns. Note how many hours they are sleeping within the context of how many they would sleep before. If necessary, log their hours for your own records, but keep a watchful eye to ensure that your loved one is getting the proper amount of rest.

If they are not resting well then consider a myriad of factors: how much caffeine are they eating or drinking? How close to bedtime are they eating? Are they watching television or searching the Internet right up to bedtime? How are they winding down a part of each day? Some of these unknown habits are contributing to their sleeplessness and need to be discarded until your loved one has established proper sleep patterns.

The Rest of the Story

In Part Two, we'll explore some practical counsel—wisdom principles—for helping loved ones who are struggling with symptoms of PTSD.

Questions for Reflection

When it comes to diagnostic categories first established by the world, what should Christians do: ignore those categories, redeem those categories by redefining them biblically, use those categories as they are, or something else? Why?

Helping a Family Member Struggling with PTSD Symptoms Part Two—Biblical Wisdom

By Greg Gifford

Dealing Wisely with Difficult Circumstances and Memories

At the beginning of your ministry to a family member struggling with symptoms of PTSD, it will be imperative to avoid circumstances that prompt flashbacks. You will want to identify what circumstances trigger PTSD symptoms and seek to *contain* exposure to them as best as possible. It would be inconsiderate to constantly expose a person to circumstances that conjure up symptoms of PTSD. Yet, it would be equally terrible to never expose them to the circumstances that plague their memories.

Moreover, certain circumstances cannot or should not be avoided. For instance, one individual suffered from painful memories of a childhood that was extremely abusive—both physically and sexually.¹ Her flashbacks were typically triggered when she would enter the kitchen or take a shower, which are both places that she had to visit. Therefore, the counselor could not tell her to avoid these places, but rather to *observe* the patterns of her flashbacks and how they relate to these places.

Do these places or circumstances conjure up the painful memory, and what about the circumstances does this? Is it a smell, the lights, the noise level, or the people? What associates this place with the place that their painful memory occurred? Once you have connected this dot, then you can wisely approach a plan of thinking and doing, principles of being a truth-thinker, and other related efforts that orient your loved one back to reality.

For the circumstances that you can avoid (e.g., the market, the home, the woods, etc.), wisely seek to abstain from visiting these locations at first. You will want to counsel and disciple your loved one in preparation for visiting such places or types of circumstances. Secular psychology would term this *exposure therapy*, but it is nothing more than wisely and lovingly introducing the circumstances that stimulate the painful memories of a person's past. Your goal is to teach them how to approach these circumstances and then to live out that instruction in the midst of their difficult environment.

¹ See Stuart Scott and Heath Lambert, eds., *Counseling the Hard Cases: True Stories Illustrating the Sufficiency of God's Resources in Scripture*, 39.

Yet the aim is not behavior modification. Behavior modification says, “Avoid those type of circumstances, and all is well.” However, true and authentic heart change orients itself towards God’s purposes in the middle of those environments. For example, to avoid a place with a large crowd may be wise initially, but through the power of the Holy Spirit, a person can learn to trust God and believe He will not leave them *even* in large groups. There is enormous importance in being wisely reintroduced to environments that stimulate those painful feelings so a person can grow in those regards. To avoid the circumstance completely is only wise in a few instances.

Dealing Wisely with Known Stimuli

Likewise, recognize the stimuli in a person’s life. If you know that a person struggles in a loud environment (as most with PTSD symptoms will do), then seek to keep the noise down. This is a manifestation of the golden rule (Luke 6:31) and Philippians 2:2-5; consider their interests as more important or simply how you would want to be treated. Be careful not to slam the door or play a certain song. Ensure that you do not yell in the house or touch them in a certain way. The idea is that you know these stimuli so as not to tempt or incite painful memories unnecessarily.

Here are some questions that could be helpful in identifying these stimuli:

1. When do episodes tend to flare up? Is there a certain time of the day? Is there a certain event? Is there a certain context? Were you inside or outside? Was it close to a mealtime?
2. What was happening? What were you doing? What were they doing? What were others doing around them (i.e., the kids running around the living room)?
3. Where were you? Were you at home? On a car ride? In a shop? Eating out?
4. How was the person acting before? Were they tired? Were they irritable? Were they distant? Were they brooding? Were they in deep thought? Were they manic? What was the person acting like before the symptoms started again?

These types of questions can easily be logged so you can look for themes within your loved one. And in a very real sense, you may observe what they do not. They may not see that when they are hungry, they are more susceptible to flashbacks. They may not notice that when they are in deep thought with much free time, they have more flashbacks. These areas will be very important as you seek to understand your loved one and help them grow in their walk with Christ.

A warning is necessary here: even though a person may have certain stimuli now does not mean they are sanctioned for ungodliness and unrighteous responses. Be gentle and gracious here by not exacerbating them, but also calling them to grow in this area. If your spouse really struggles to be calm and control their anger when the kids are yelling in the house, there is a two-fold obligation.

The first is to address the kids and call them to be kind, considerate, and die to their own desires to be loud and rambunctious. Next, there is an obligation to call your spouse to grow in this area. Even though the kids are screaming like wild banshees, your spouse has an obligation to honor God in that moment. (This may also be a great opportunity for the family member to show their loved one the biblical teaching that a person's circumstances do not determine their heart attitude but only reveals their heart attitude.)

Identify an Advocate

One of the common associations of PTSD symptoms is domestic violence, especially for military members suffering from PTSD. There is much research that needs to be conducted as to why certain demographics are more prone to violence than others, but do note that violence may be an issue that you need to consider. Part of that consideration is who to call alongside your family for help. At this point, Dr. Garrett Higbee has introduced the idea of an advocate.²

Although Dr. Higbee uses the idea and its implementation in a different context, there are huge implications for the person struggling with PTSD symptoms. An advocate is simply a person from the counselee's local church who attends some of the counseling sessions with the counselee and helps them to implement in their daily living what is being taught in the formal time of counseling.

In the instance of a person struggling with PTSD symptoms, it could be helpful to identify a person who could function as an advocate. This advocate would function in the same capacities but would be on call for help with their loved one. For instance, if your husband is having flashbacks again and now his anger is quickly escalating, and he is threatening, hitting walls, and throwing things, it would be a good time to call the advocate. The presence of another person who is outside of the immediate family can have cooling effects on the circumstance, but also can ensure that family members are not being physically or verbally abused.

Avoid Significant Free Times

Because PTSD symptoms very much include a battle of the person's thought life, be careful to help them to ration free time well. Meaning, look at the hours in a day and see where the gaps are in your loved one's schedule. When are they going to have a lot of free time? When will they be prone to introspection?

² See Lambert and Scott, p. 172.

Seek to help them to positively engage those times and fill them with fruitful and helpful things. Encourage them to start new hobbies, seek out new opportunities to serve the church, find some books that would be great to read, exercise, invite friends over for dinner, and find other ways that will be a fruitful way of engaging this free time.

The idea is that they will not have the time to sit around and rehash the painful memories. While this is not an end in itself, it is a very appropriate means to an end. In fact, introspection must be done in proportion for all of us, not only those suffering with PTSD symptoms. So help them to guard their time well as you help them to shepherd their thought life.

Fulfill Daily Responsibilities

One of the chief concerns you should have with your loved one is whether or not they are completing their daily responsibilities. Are they going to work on time? Are they going to school? Are they completing the responsibilities they have? Some of this will tie back into helping them to learn to manage their free time, but also seek to help them to fulfill their responsibilities. Employers will only be gracious for so long. Schools will only be gracious for so long. If your loved one is consistently failing to fulfill their responsibilities, it will snowball into a very difficult situation quickly.

Moreover, be willing to check-in on them. This is not a mild form of enabling, but rather a form of accountability. Try things like going by their work to drop off a surprise coffee or asking them if you can eat with them at lunch break. Take them to work and pick them up. Go by their house and help with some of the chores, or review homework and contact teachers to ensure that your loved one is fulfilling their obligations.

The best policy is to be very straightforward with your loved one and tell them that you want to serve them and help ensure that they are fulfilling their obligations, whether they want you to or not. You do not want to breach their trust in an attempt to serve them, but you can be very candid as to why you would like to serve them in this way. And even if they would prefer that you not come by their work or school, be creative and wise as to how you can fulfill that intent in a different manner (e.g., ask a co-worker, look at pay stubs, etc.).

The principle is that they must be fulfilling their daily responsibilities even in the middle of their struggles with PTSD. God has provided sufficient grace to do so, and to neglect their responsibilities is only going to make matters worse. Your close accountability may seem like police work initially, but it just might prevent the downward spiral of PTSD to joblessness to drugs or any other combination.

Remain faithful as you see your loved one suffer. In a very real sense, they have experienced some of the most heinous events a person can experience. They are sufferers. Yet, don't let them stay there. Graciously call them and prompt them towards a posture that engages their suffering and uses it to grow in Christlikeness and to glorify God. And in the process, you will see that God is working in them to will and to work His good pleasure.

Questions for Reflection

What additional suggestions do you have for wise help that avoids the extremes of enabling a person struggling with PTSD symptoms or of abandoning/ignoring/pretending that the person's symptoms are not real or do not require understanding, compassion, and assistance?

New Research: Volunteering Gives Purpose and Help to Veterans with PTS

By Charles Hodges

Since the attacks of 9/11, our nation has been engaged in war for the longest period in our history. As a result, we have a growing number of men and women who have returned from the battlefield struggling with post-traumatic stress.

For many veterans, the transition from the battlefield to the homefront proves to be very difficult. They struggle with nightmares, sleep disturbances, anger, fear, and sadness over the losses they have suffered. They may also struggle with significant battlefield injuries. They are at times alienated from family and friends by the way they respond to the veteran. They struggle with shame and guilt because they lived and their friends did not. They come home to a society that expects them to be as normal as when they left. If they are now separated from their unit, they can find themselves isolated with no one in whom to confide.

What can be done to help these men and women who have given much so that we can breathe freely? Researchers have shown that putting veterans back into service may offer real help. A new study recently published by researchers at St. Louis University has shown that veterans who struggle with post-traumatic stress find help when they are involved in community service programs.¹ The Mission Continues is a non-profit organization that connects veterans with service missions in their communities. These missions go beyond volunteering on a casual basis; they involve 20 hours per week for six months (with a stipend).

The outcomes of the study were encouraging. Before beginning their volunteer mission, 50% of the 348 veterans reported symptoms of post-traumatic stress and 23% reported symptoms of depression. After their term of service, those reporting PTS dropped to 43%, and those with symptoms of depression dropped to 15%.

When asked why volunteering would help struggling veterans, Dr. Monica Matthieu stated that the mechanism of action remained a question. “One of our theories has to do with behavioral activation and the purpose surrounding the activity...when we get up and move and that

¹ Monica M. Matthieu, Karen A. Lawrence, and Emma Robertson-Blackmore, “The impact of a civic service program on biopsychosocial outcomes of post 9/11 U.S. military veterans,” *Psychiatry Research*, 2017; 248: 111
DOI: 10.1016/j.psychres.2016.12.028

movement is geared toward a purpose of helping others, it is like stepping outside our own lives to focus on the needs of others.”²

So, the main elements were physical activity and purpose aimed at helping others. The Bible speaks to these ideas. For years, I have been telling people struggling with depression that they can find help in changing their purpose. Paul told us that our purpose as Christians is to glorify God with our lives. As he told the believers at Corinth, “Therefore also we have as our ambition...to be pleasing to Him”(2 Cor. 5:9). The sentence that I encourage strugglers to learn is “I want to glorify God with my life more than I want to breathe.” Glorifying God gives us purpose when all else fails us.

Our purpose needs to be grounded in loving God “with all our heart soul and mind” and then loving our neighbor as ourselves (Matt. 22:37-39). That purpose will drive the believer to live by the imperatives of Scripture: “He who loves me will keep my commandments” (John 14:15). Finally, our purpose must lead us to serve others. In John 13 we see Jesus washing the dirty feet of His disciples and then telling them that they should do the same for each other.

Organizations that help veterans struggling with PTS by placing them in structured volunteer service positions are following a biblical model. And they should be commended. Giving servicemen and women something to do with a purpose to help others and supporting them while they do it is a good work.

Question for Reflection

How have you sought to help veterans?

² Saint Louis University Medical Center, "Volunteering Eases Veterans' Transition to Civilian Life," ScienceDaily. ScienceDaily, February 2 2017, <www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2017/02/170202141318.htm>.

Recommended Resources

By the BCC

[PTSD: Healing for Bad Memories](#) – Mini-book by Timothy Lane

[Helping the Individual through PTSD](#) – Lecture by Curtis Solomon

[PTSD Counseling Questions](#) – Panel discussion with Curtis Solomon and Greg Gifford

[Learning about PTSD](#) – Podcast with David Powlison and Alasdair Groves



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