



Urgent Care: Responding to Trauma



CONGREGATION & VISITORS



URGENT CARE:

Responding to Trauma

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Leader's Guide

How to use "Urgent Care: Responding to Trauma" by BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS.

Welcome to BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS: URGENT CARE. You've purchased an innovative resource that will help equip you and your leaders to minister in sensitive and complex situations.

Urgent Care handouts give a succinct and practical overview of the issues relevant in your situation. We hope you use these articles for their hands-on advice, theological guidance, and careful warnings in order that you may offer the best ministry possible in the toughest of situations.

These tools are specifically designed for easy and quick use by church leaders who are ministering to people who are suffering through trauma situations. If you have an urgent need, select the article most relevant to the demands you face, and follow the article's guidance. If time is on your side, use these handouts to launch a discussion and training for leaders in your church.

Select & Copy

This specific theme is designed to equip pastors and leaders who need to minister to those who are suffering through trauma, whether it's grief, severe or terminal illness, PTSD, job loss, domestic violence or abuse, or something else. Simply print and photocopy the handouts and distribute them as needed. (You do not need to ask for permission provided you are making fewer than 1,000 copies, are using the material in a church or educational setting, and are not charging for it.)

The following articles cover a variety of topics. For example, for an introduction to the important opportunity we have to respond to and help people in these difficult times, read "The Truth About Trauma" and "Don't Waste a Crisis." The articles in the "Care" section walk you through four very common, and difficult, types of trauma people in your church might be going through. To learn how leaders can heal from trauma of their own, and return to leading, see "Healing—and Leading—After Tragedy." And "Are You Ready for a Crisis?" will help you think through how your church leaders can better prepare to respond as needs arise.

Pray

Ask God to equip your church to minister sensitively and with great hope to those who are suffering through trauma.

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The Truth About Trauma

Key points for caregiving ministry.

For millions of people—and nearly all of us at some point—life is tainted by extraordinarily difficult and challenging circumstances. Local church leaders have to minister, almost literally, at the bleeding edge of these realities. Yet, few churches actually offer much intentional support to help people dealing with trauma.

Here four truths church leaders need to understand about people undergoing trauma and the opportunity the church has to respond:

- 1) **Trauma is broader than we imagine.** We tend to think of trauma in terms of sudden, violent mishaps like rape or robbery. But it's much broader. It includes upheavals in any area of life, from family, finances, health, or safety—any development that affects a person's sense of security and stability.
- 2) **People are most concerned with things that affect them personally.** In one study we asked adults to identify their concerns related to violence. Respondents largely identified concerns that could directly affect them or people they know: bullying at school (36% of adults were very concerned about this), gangs (34%), and domestic violence (33%) outpaced foreign wars (32%) and violence in entertainment (19%) as issues people worry about. In our polling, which was completed *before* Ferguson, 1 in 10 adults said that police brutality was a major concern. This was a top concern of nearly one in four African-Americans. The big, scary “out-there” problems get most news coverage, but it's the threats that reach our communities, streets, and homes that concern us most.
- 3) **Trauma ministries are rare in US churches.** A lot of churches fail to offer help to those dealing with trauma. Many pastors feel that providing counseling services is going to be sufficient. And while that's not a bad place to start, it leaves a lot of ground uncovered. For example, less than one in every 20 churches in the U.S. has organized efforts to help victims of domestic violence or to assist sexual abuse or rape victims.
- 4) **Trauma can lead to transformation.** Major life events typically categorized as “trauma” are actually some of the most fertile periods for spiritual transformation. People are most likely to experience profound and lasting spiritual transformation during major crises, such as divorce; financial traumas like periods of unemployment, home eviction, or bankruptcy; incarceration or victimization of themselves or a close family member; a major medical crisis or death of a loved one and so on. No one *wishes* these kinds of traumatic events on others. Yet they are frequently linked with spiritual development in people, especially when others effectively come alongside those experiencing such challenges.

People generally pursue equilibrium in life. They want to return to normalcy and continue life without interruptions or derailments. And if we're being honest, a lot of human communities (such as workplaces, neighborhoods, and even churches) are most comfortable when life is normal, predictable, and safe. Sometimes it's easier to keep the messy stuff out of sight.

But life in a fallen world will always involve trauma. Avoidance is not a strategy. We can't bubble-wrap people to protect them from experiencing the emotional, physical, and spiritual pitfalls of life. What we can do: prepare to help people find solace in Christian community, perspective in Scripture, and hope in Jesus.

— David Kinnaman is president of Barna Group and co-author of *The Hyperlinked Life* (Zondervan, 2014).

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Don't Waste a Crisis

Crises, while unwanted, are windows of opportunity for the cure of souls.

Romans 12:15

by John Ortberg

I once was part of a survey on spiritual formation. Thousands of people were asked when they grew most spiritually, and what contributed to their growth. The response was humbling—at least for someone who works at a church.

The number one contributor to spiritual growth was not transformational teaching. It was not being in a small group. It was not reading deep books. It was not energetic worship experiences. It was not finding meaningful ways to serve.

It was suffering.

People said they grew more during seasons of loss, pain, and crisis than they did at any other time. I immediately realized that, as a church, we had not even put anybody in charge of pain distribution! So now we are figuring out how to create more pain per attendee for maximum spiritual growth.

Actually, the wonderful and terrible thing about crisis is that it's the one resource we do not have to fund or staff or program. It just comes. However, pain does not automatically produce spiritual growth. Ghettos and barrios and abusive homes and trauma wards may produce scarred souls; they can cripple more human spirits than they strengthen.

Crisis can lead to soul strength, but not if the soul is starved of other nutrients, and not apart from certain responses.

If we have not thought carefully about the intersection of crisis and ministry, we may have neglected the most soul-formative moments that occur in the lives of our people. So what does wisdom teach about crisis and the cure of souls?

First, do no harm ...

No one wants pain. Not even long-time, mature Christians who want to grow. We will always find ways to avoid pain. Pain itself is a bad thing.

It is a little known fact that in Chinese, the word crisis is made up of two characters: "life" and "stinks."

Well, that may not be true, but the place to begin in crisis is with simple humanity. When someone is in crisis, don't start by teaching, leveraging, or explaining. Just be with.

Perhaps the single most disobeyed command the apostle Paul ever wrote was "Mourn with those who mourn."

He doesn't say, "Give good advice to those who mourn." He doesn't say, "Tell mourners to suck it up because plenty of people have it worse." He doesn't say, "Rebuke mourners because being around someone who's unhappy gets in the way of my own unbridled demand for incessant pleasantness."

No, mourn with those who mourn. We do not need answers or formulas to minister in crisis. Nicholas Wolterstorff is a brilliant Yale philosopher whose 25-year-old son died in a mountain-climbing accident. His *Lament for a Son* is as searingly painful and beautiful as any book on suffering I know. He points out that what we need—even more than answers—is Presence. Wolterstorff writes that what has moved him deeply is the Presence of the Crucified One who chooses to suffer with suffering people. He notes that Scripture says no one can see the face of God and live. He always thought that meant no one can see God's glory and live. But now he wonders if perhaps it means no one can see God's suffering and live.

Or perhaps God's suffering is his glory.

In crisis, especially in deep crisis, we may not be able to bring answers. But we can always bring presence.

When Job hit his crisis, he was surrounded by his friends: Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. They went to Job to "sympathize with him." The Hebrew verb here, *nud*, refers to body movement—

shaking back and forth, nodding the head. You see this sometimes when people experience trauma and go into shock, rocking themselves back and forth like a mother does with her baby.

Their love is so strong, their grief is so great, that they sit next to him and take on his anguish.

“They sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him because they saw how great his suffering was.” It’s worth pausing here for a moment. Imagine sitting with someone in silence for seven days. This was such a powerful act, it became part of Jewish life; to this day they speak of “sitting shiva”—literally “sitting sevens.” Friends will come and sit with one who mourns over a period of a week.

I have a friend whose dad died. Someone from her church asked her, “Was your dad a Christian?” Maybe they wanted to minimize her grief by saying her dad was in heaven.

When she told them no, he was not a Christian, the other person just walked away. They were prepared to try to minimize mourning, but not to enter into it.

It’s interesting that after the seven days, Job’s friends will speak. A lot. They’ll get in trouble with God for what they say. Job’s friends have taken a lot of heat over the years—for good reasons. Their words are not so hot.

But their silence was brilliant. Their silence was a gift.

Maybe one reason Job is able to struggle with God in such honesty and persistence is because he had friends who would take on his sorrow in seven days of silence.

Ministry in crisis takes time

This immediately raises a critical issue for pastoral life today, which is the level of “hurry sickness” we all have. Because you cannot mourn in a hurry. Speed may be good when it comes to ambulances and Internet connections—maybe even when it comes to the length of sermons, if my wife can be trusted—but all the technology at MIT cannot microwave the healing of a human heart.

One of the ironies of crises is that often we have them because we feel we have no time—only to find that when the crisis hits, we suddenly have nothing else.

A man is so caught up in the demands of his career that he simply does not have time to devote to his marriage. Until his wife leaves him, and the divorce takes massive amounts of money and hours with lawyers and days in court, and suddenly he finds himself at home alone with all kinds of time.

A pastor is so busy with his church that he simply does not have time to be with his teenage daughter. Until she runs away from home. Then he spends every day in prayer, in tears, checking with police departments, talking with counselors.

If there is not enough time to deal with small crises, then eventually the pace of your life will create a large one. Then you will have time.

So here’s a little litmus test for your pace of life: can you mourn with those who mourn? Your church may well be too large for you to mourn with all the mourners. Ray Johnston of Bayside Church near me has a wonderful expression: he said that as the church grew, he realized that “the people would have to pastor the people.”

But if you are a church leader, there will be some co-workers or board members or key volunteers who hit a crisis. Will you have time to mourn with those whom God calls you to mourn with? If you don’t, and if some day your own time for mourning comes—and it will come—who will mourn with you?

Last summer, for the first time, I took a sabbatical. Our elders provided it. In fact, they insisted on it. I had firm instructions: don’t write anything, don’t speak anywhere, don’t do anything productive.

I was surprisingly good at it.

But during this period, a college teacher of mine who was much-beloved by my closest circle of college friends, passed away. We were all able to gather back at the college, to remember and laugh and cry and pray, and stay up late at night and eat breakfast till noon.

It dawned on me that part of why I was able to mourn in the way I think it was meant to be done—to mourn with ache and confusion and gratitude and wonder—is that I wasn't preoccupied with too many tasks for my soul to handle.

Of course, I can't always be on sabbatical. So that leads to this ...

Crisis is a temporary opportunity for a permanent gift

Psychologist Jonathan Haidt writes that crisis may bring growth—but only if we respond rightly.

For a long time, researchers have looked at what enables some people to endure suffering. But over the last decade or so, the focus has shifted from looking only at how some people make it through to how people are able to go through adversity and actually come through it stronger than before.

Just as there is a condition called Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, researchers are now talking about Post-Traumatic Growth.

One line of thinking is that adversity can lead to growth. Another line of thinking is that the highest levels of growth cannot be achieved without adversity. It may be that somehow adversity leads to growth in a way that nothing else does.

The “growth” that comes in a crisis will stop when the crisis stops—unless it leads us to make lasting changes. If you do ministry long enough, you know that there will be moments of crisis on a broad scale. In San Bruno, California, near one of our campuses, there was a gas pipeline explosion that destroyed many homes and killed several people. On a national scale, we can all remember how our entire nation hit a spiritual crisis during the attacks of 9/11. Churches were filled, community prayer services were held, and people cried out for God.

But eventually crisis fades, and spiritual urgency fades along with it. We need to help people learn how to make changes that will outlast the crisis.

It's as if in normal life we step onto a treadmill and begin running after something—money, security, or success—until adversity knocks us off. Suffering enables us to see the folly of chasing after temporal gods, and when people suffer, they often resolve not to return to their old way of life when things normalize. But you have a finite window of time to make changes, otherwise you drift back to old patterns.

Soren Kierkegaard wrote that “affliction is able to drown out every earthly voice ... but the voice of eternity deep in the soul it cannot drown.”

If you have courage to make changes in your life, something can happen in your soul. The Spirit will bring the courage if you keep asking while the experience of adversity is fresh. Ultimately, adversity can produce hope because of a reality much larger than you and me.

Crisis can purify my own ministry

Crisis isn't just something we minister to. It's something we minister from.

Over a decade ago I had a long-standing pot boil over. From when Nancy and I first got married, I would often do a kind of strange dance with her; I would vacillate from times of intense—even forced—closeness, to times when I would find something about Nancy that bothered me and I'd withdraw emotionally. I did not want to do this dance, but I could not find a way out of it.

Finally, after a particularly painful time of withdrawal, Nancy said she was not doing the dance anymore. She said this pattern clearly involved issues I needed to deal with that were not about her, and she was calling a time out while I dealt with them.

This triggered a long journey inward for me, and a time of pain and depression and coming to grips with the emptiness of a performance-driven life that was unlike anything I had ever known. I carried a ball of pain in my gut that became a kind of companion; I used to write in my journal each morning, “Good morning, ball of pain ...”

I could still study and preach, because I will be able to do those things until a few months after I die, but that was about all I was capable of. And even the fact that I was able to do them brought me no joy.

But I was given another gift—I was able to serve other people without getting my ego fed by it. I was, for a six-month window or so, “dead” to many of the motives that divided my will.

I learned, at a deep, deep level, that I was not in control. And while the pain of that era has lessened, so has some of the earlier emptiness. So has the dance of smother and withdraw.

Crisis reminds me that control is an illusion.

One of the most misquoted verses you’ll never find in the Bible is this one: “God will never give me more than I can handle.”

Huh? Really? Where’s that one? Poverty, genocide, war, failure, mental illness—people are given more than they can handle all the time! The Bible does say that no temptation is given to people without a way out, but that’s about temptation, not adversity. The Bible does not promise that you will only be given what you can handle. In fact, the one certainty of your life is you will die—and you definitely can’t handle that! You will never be placed in a situation God can’t handle.

God isn’t at work producing the circumstances I want. God is at work in bad circumstances to produce the version of me he wants.

Crisis can produce deeper roots

Imagine you’re handed a script of your newborn child’s entire life. Better yet, you’re given an eraser and five minutes to edit out whatever you want. You read that she will have a learning disability in grade school. Reading, which comes easily for some kids, will be laborious for her. In high school, she will make a great circle of friends, then one of them will die of cancer. After high school, she will get into her preferred college, but while there, she’ll lose a leg in a car crash. Following that, she will go through a difficult depression. A few years later she’ll get a great job, then lose that job in an economic downturn. She’ll get married, but then go through the grief of separation.

With this script of your child’s life before you and five minutes to edit it, what would you erase? Psychologist Jonathan Haidt poses this question in this hypothetical exercise: Wouldn’t you want to take out all the stuff that would cause them pain?

If you could erase every failure, disappointment, and period of suffering, would that be a good idea? Would that cause them to grow into the best version of themselves? Is it possible that we actually need adversity and setbacks—maybe even crisis and trauma—to reach the fullest level of development and growth?

Paul seemed to think so. “We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance produces character, character produces hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us” (Rom. 5:2-5).

Crises can deepen love

Thomas Merton wrote, “As long as we are on earth, the love that unites us will bring us suffering by our very contact with one another, because this love is the resetting of a Body of broken bones.”

Like large parts of the country, many people in our area have been hit by economic conditions. People are underemployed or unemployed for the first time in their life. This happened to a friend of mine, and though I called him when I first heard, he didn’t return the call

for some time, simply because the hurt was so deeply connected to his sense of worth and identity.

But some folks began a Career Action Ministry, where people who were in the same boat had a boat to gather in—and the depth of connection was palpable. People who had never met each other before found a common meeting place in the brotherhood of hurt. They were able to speak the same language; tell the same story without fear of pity or shame. They met with a degree of openness and vulnerability that created family.

The same is true for so many people in pain: people going through divorce, parents of special-needs children, families who have members that suffer from mental or emotional health issues, people who wrestle with addictions to substances or sex.

On the other hand, I saw a news story last week about pastors who have lost their faith. Their faces were blurred and their voices were disguised because they could not let anyone know—not even their spouses. And I wondered how much suffering they might have been spared, how different the outcome of their doubting might have been, if they could have had a community of fellow-doubters to know and be known by.

In normal times, isolation hurts. In crisis, isolation kills.

In normal times, community blesses. In crisis, community saves.

Jacob and Esau were separated by their struggle for the blessing. Eventually this struggle led to murderous threats and years of estrangement. Finally Jacob was coming home. In the strange story he meets and wrestles with a mysterious stranger, to whom Jacob says, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.”

Jacob is given a blessing, but also given another strange gift. His hip is wrenched. The next day he was limping because of his hip.

He looked up to see his brother. The text says that “Esau ran to meet Jacob.”

Jacob could not run. His running days were over. The rest of his life he would walk with a limp.

“Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept” (Genesis. 33:4).

Perhaps something about Jacob’s vulnerability healed Esau’s heart in a way that Jacob’s cleverness and strength never could.

Jacob was given a wound, and a blessing. Or maybe his wound WAS his blessing.

Maybe you will bless more people with your limp than with your strength.

Blessed are you who limp, for you shall walk with God.

In crisis, people are hungry for Hope

When a crisis hits, when the stock market plummets, or your morale is sinking, or your assets are shrinking, or your health is collapsing, you may wonder, *Is anything going up?*

Yes.

The chance to trust God when trusting isn’t easy is wide open, the prospect for modeling hope for a hope-needy world is trending upward, and the possibility of cultivating a stormproof faith is always going up. This is so because certain truths remain unchanged: God remains sovereign, grace beats sin, prayers get heard, the Bible endures, heaven’s mercies spring up new every morning, the cross still testifies to the power of sacrificial love, the tomb is still empty, and the Kingdom Jesus announced is still expanding without needing to be bailed out by human efforts.

God is still in the business of redemption, specializing in bringing something very, very good out of something very, very bad.

Yes, crisis is prime time in the cure of souls.

— *John Ortberg is pastor of Menlo Park Presbyterian Church in Menlo Park, California and editor at large for Leadership Journal.*

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Bigger Than Cancer

How to minister through prayer to people diagnosed with terminal illness.

Psalm 102:1-2

By J. Todd Billings

How do you pray for someone with a condition that doctors call “incurable”? I had faced that question as a church member, as a church leader, and as a seminary professor. But when I was diagnosed with an incurable cancer at the age of 39, I faced the question in a new way.

On one hand, when we pray in such a situation, we should not be paralyzed by fear. Like the Psalmist, we can bring our whole range of emotions before the Lord: our anger and grief, frustration and fears, longings and dreams. Whatever we’re feeling, we can trust that God hears our cries, our groanings. Even the most desperate prayers are offered in hope in the Lord and his promises—promises fulfilled in Christ. I have been grateful for all of the prayers offered for my family and me, knowing that they are taken up and perfected in the intercessions of Jesus Christ himself.

On the other hand, when we pray with someone else, it makes an impact upon that person. I sometimes felt buoyed and my faith strengthened by the prayers of others. And while it’s not my job as a cancer patient to act as “prayer police,” at other times the prayers left me feeling alienated and manipulated.

My diagnosis was unexpected. My wife and I had just celebrated our tenth anniversary, and we were living the busy lives of parents of a one and three year old. But my immune system seemed to be weak, so I underwent a battery of tests. Because of my relatively young age, we thought that an active cancer was very unlikely. We were wrong. When the results came in, the diagnosis was clear: the cancer was active and had already been eroding away my bones. I started intensive chemotherapy the next week.

Amid the shock, I was blessed with a congregation, seminary community, and group of Christian friends who prayed fervently for me and my family: in small groups, one-to-one, and in prayer services. But it was hard to explain my situation: my cancer could be treated through chemotherapy and a stem cell transplant. But there is no cure. Even if I go into remission and no cancer is detected in my body, the doctor was clear: “It *will* come back.”

Thus when others laid hands on me and prayed for a “complete cure,” I was not sure what they were praying for. Would they be praying for a “complete cure” if I was 85 and struggling with dementia? If not, what puts me in a different category?

Sometimes I was asked what they should pray for. I was glad to be asked. I requested prayer for my family and me, amid the challenges of treatment, that God would use the treatment to bring me into “deep remission” and that he would be working the whole situation to his glory. Why “deep remission?” If my remission was light, my lifespan would be much shorter. With a deep remission, I would have time to serve my family and vocation for 5-7 or even ten years before the next round of intensive treatment. Relapsed cancer is harder to treat, and the mortality rate for my cancer is very high. But to pray for a “complete cure” rather than “deep remission” seemed less like an act of faith than a denial of the reality I was facing.

I received numerous prayers for a cure—often with verses like Matthew 18:19 quoted, “If two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.” I appreciated the fervent petitions. But sometimes people were frustrated, even offended, when I asked that they pray for “deep remission.” Did I believe that God could bring complete healing, even to an incurable cancer? Yes—in the sense that it would not be beyond God’s power. With Jeremiah the prophet, we can pray to the Lord that “it is you who made the heavens and the earth by your great power.... Nothing is too hard for you” (32:17).

But praying for healing for someone with incurable cancer is akin to praying for someone who has lost a limb. God can provide healing. But until the final restoration in the resurrection, prayers of healing in circumstances like this need to be paired with prayers of ongoing lament—because nothing will turn back the clock. Even if my cancer completely disappeared—and I had no detectable levels left—doctors would *expect* the cancer to return. Thus even if I was miraculously cured, I would need to continue on maintenance chemotherapy for the rest of my life, along with cancer tests every three to six months. That’s still a deep loss. Whether God provided healing now, over a long period of time, or in final glory—there is no question that we can and should pray for healing. But not without lament.

There is no how-to list for praying for someone with an incurable disease. But here are some suggestions:

Listen. Ask. Listen carefully to the concerns of the ones you are praying for. If possible, ask them how they would like you to pray for them. They may not have an answer. Or the answer may surprise you. But starting by listening and asking is a way to honor and support those in need.

Pray with the Psalms. Whether in the hospital bed or at a prayer service, the most powerful and comforting prayers offered to me were from the Psalms. They don’t cover up the loss—they bring anger and grief before God. “My heart is stricken and withered like grass; I am too wasted to eat my bread.” And yet they bring all of this in petition before the faithful God of the covenant. “Hear my prayer, O LORD; let my cry come to you. Do not hide your face from me on the day of my distress” (Ps. 102:4, 1-2).

Present your petitions in light of the Lord’s Prayer and Gethsemane: We are to bring our requests before God, in light of Jesus’ command and promise to answer our prayers. But this does not mean that we just pray for a comfortable lifestyle. Remember that our model prayer, the Lord’s Prayer, was enacted by Jesus at Gethsemane. He asked to be led from the time of trial, to be delivered from evil. He was right to ask, to present his heart before the Father. Yet, the petition of the one who defines perfect faith—“Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith” (Heb. 12:2)—was not granted. His cup of suffering was not taken away.

All prayer involves a relinquishment of our will to the Father. My friends wanted healing, strength, and courage for my family and me—and they prayed for it, as they should. But our faith does not cause answered prayer; moreover, we must remember that the center of God’s revelation is not a secret about how to live a happier, healthier life, or a message that God’s work is transparent to our eyes in a steady, upward journey. As ones united to Christ by the Spirit, we follow the way of the crucified Lord. We should not seek suffering, but we must also remember that God works in surprising ways: through the way of the cross.

Pray in solidarity. Those in crisis often feel alienated, so make the most of your prayerful, Christian solidarity with them as brothers and sisters in Christ. For example, I had to shave my head in preparation for intensive chemotherapy. After finding out when this would happen, over a dozen Christian friends shaved their head the same day. The seminary turned it into a joyful event that my family could also attend. I was in the hospital, but a group of supporters joined to cheer me on via Skype—cheering on the others getting a head-shave as well. There were tears, but also a lot of laughter. And it wasn’t just a one-time event: when I looked in the mirror, I did not feel isolated; I knew that others were with me—praying every time they were reminded of their funny-looking shaved heads. It was a living prayer displaying Paul’s words that “you will fulfill the law of Christ” when you “bear one another’s burdens” (Gal. 6:2).

Find care for yourself from those who are not at the center of the crisis: A cancer diagnosis affects many people, and it is crucial to find appropriate places for support, prayer, and encouragement. But as you seek to “bear one another’s burdens” in a crisis, it’s

essential to first remember the people who should be the main focus of your prayers and care. Imagine a circle with the main sufferers and their families at the center, close friends at a second layer of the circle, other loved ones in an outer layer of the circle. Then, look and see what part of the circle you occupy. Here's the rule of thumb: from wherever you stand, keep your eyes, prayers, and support directed toward the inner part of the circle, and get your own support from the outer part. Sometimes church leaders go to a person in crisis or their family and say, "I don't know whether I can handle this!" That is profoundly unhelpful. Instead, seek out friends who are not at the center of the crisis for your own support.

Finally, remember that prayer is not about offering magic incantations that will make everything better. In prayer, we bring our whole selves before the gracious covenant Lord in trust: lamenting, petitioning, thanking, and hoping in God.

It does not take a Ph.D. in theology to know how to pray for someone with incurable cancer. The most powerful prayer that I have received for my cancer was from a 15-year-old girl with Down syndrome in my congregation. She made me a colorful card, a week after my diagnosis, and wrote these words on it: "Get well soon! Jesus loves you! God is bigger than cancer!"

As soon as I saw it, I wept with tears of joy and wonder: God is bigger than cancer. My cancer story was already developing its own sense of drama—like a story that closes in the sky, enveloping my whole world so that nothing else could creep in. But God's story, the drama of God's action in the world, is bigger.

This girl wasn't denying my loss but was testifying to a God who is greater, the God made known in Jesus Christ who shows us that "the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:5).

Praying for someone with an incurable condition is not mainly about trying to "fix a problem" or even "finding the right words." It's about joining the suffering in crying out to a gracious and powerful God, acting as living testimony to God's promise in Christ that darkness will not have the final word.

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Loving the Wounded Warriors

How to care for those suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

2 Corinthians 1:3-5

by Steve Norman

“American Sniper” was the highest grossing war movie in U.S. history. Opinions vary on what the movie implied about the nature of combat and its aftermath for those involved. In one of the film’s early scenes, protagonist Chris Kyle receives a Bible as a child. Years later the same Bible appears among Kyle’s belongings while he’s deployed in Iraq. A buddy asks how the Bible is informing Kyle’s current experience. The question lingers unanswered.

For those of us in ministry, the question is significant. What does faith say to combat veterans? How can churches best respond to their community’s veterans? Specifically, how do pastors help those struggling with post-combat trauma or PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder)?

The “American Sniper” story is generating fresh conversations about the challenges veterans like Kyle face, especially since his tragic death occurred at the hand of another veteran. The drama in “American Sniper” doesn’t just surface in the white-knuckling, adrenaline-pumping snapshots of combat. It emerges in the eerie, lonely, disorienting quest for “normalcy” afterward.

And disoriented vets facing struggles with family members is the usual way that pastors come across PTSD.

Last year I was on a flight from Detroit to Chicago, a small plane with only two seats left of the aisle. I took the aisle seat. Moments later a man took the window seat and announced, “I go to your church.” I followed with my standard “So how did you find out about Kensington?” He explained he’d fought in Iraq and that in 2010 the wheels started to come off his marriage. He’d been drinking excessively and his wife finally gave him an ultimatum: he would change or she would leave. He found his way to our church, and four years later, by the grace of God, he made critical course corrections and saw his marriage restored.

When I asked about his combat experience, he said his unit was among the first on the ground in Iraq in 2003. The common assumption was that the action would be quick, decisive, and final. It wasn’t exactly that. When he returned from his first tour, everyone in his unit believed they’d have some time to catch their collective breath before being re-deployed. They were wrong.

When the call to leave again came, men he knew schemed to disqualify themselves from the service. Some failed their drug tests on purpose, but were simply disciplined and deployed anyway. One asked his girlfriend to hit him with her car so he wouldn’t have to go back. I never asked what happened in Iraq to warrant this level of response. I did, however, ask, “When guys get overwhelmed or depressed, do you at least talk to each other?” The answer: “No, everybody just kind of guts it out on their own.”

It’s taken me a while to recognize the deeper needs of veterans in our midst. Yes, we did the requisite honoring of the fallen on Memorial Day weekend and thanking of our veterans on the Sunday closest to Veteran’s Day. We have a Military Families Support Group and recently mailed a DVD of our Christmas service to a young servicewoman who’s deployed. But only recently have I started to ask, “How do we best serve combat vets and their families?”

One of the answers: Learn more about PTSD, what it looks like and current best practices for treatment. I contacted Dr. Deane Aikins, associate professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Neurosciences of the Wayne State University School of Medicine. Dr. Aikins’s research focuses on “treatments of combat stress disorders, investigating both those who are resilient and those diagnosed with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), both in veterans and military families.”

According to Dr. Aikins, “The bad news is only two drugs are approved for PTSD.” So far they’ve proven only modestly effective. The good news? Researchers are seeing success with “two

therapeutic approaches: prolonged exposure and cognitive based therapy.... A PTSD diagnosis doesn't have to be a death sentence."

One treatment is Cognitive Processing Therapy. Aikins explains: "If you're feeling badly, a thought is generating that emotion. Ultimately a different thought leads to relief. Each disorder has a thought that drives it. PTSD sometimes has a 'just world thought.' It goes:

*Good things happen to good people.
Bad things happen to bad people.
Bad things happened to me.
I must be bad."*

The challenge is to "get them to see other ways of thinking." Tragically, for some trauma survivors, such thinking can lead them to believe suicide is the only way to end their turmoil. He cites an estimate that 22 veterans take their lives every day, a stark reminder that the stakes for responding to spiritual and emotional needs of our vets are high.

What does this mean for pastors? We have to prepare to walk with vets and survivors in our midst who are asking painful and critical questions.

A military expert once said, "We want to separate war from tragedy, but we can't." Pastoral care for vets isn't unlike the care we offer to others who experience sudden, unexplained tragedy. We dare not dabble in the shallows of pat and easy answers; we must learn to tread in the deep of questions for which we simply don't have categories.

In "American Sniper," there's a scene where Kyle is a child and his father explains there are three kinds of people in the world: wolves (who seek to do harm), sheep (who are threatened by wolves) and sheepdogs (who protect the sheep from the wolves). If only the reality of combat allowed for such clean and simple categories. In the last church I pastored, I met a young man who had served as an intelligence officer during combat in the Middle East.

He once told me that it was his job to call in air strikes on particular targets, buildings or residences. I asked if he was ever uncomfortable making such calls, if there were moments where the decision wasn't clear. He said yes, there were times when he was only 60 percent certain lethal force should be used. It seemed to me he was asking what happens when, in an attempt to check the wolves, the sheepdogs end up killing the sheep. Or what happens when sheep display wolf-like qualities?

When I asked Aikins what pastors can do for those with PTSD who come to our church, he said, "I'd be jumping up and down if a soldier comes to church. Their mere presence is a victory." He explains many PTSD victim can't tolerate being in a crowd, an unpredictable environment they can't control. And if they do come and are willing to engage? Just start by listening to their story.

A few months ago a man approached me for prayer following a Sunday service. He casually mentioned he was a vet with a diagnosis of PTSD. That week I reached out to him to hear his story. He told me: "I hate fireworks if I'm not forewarned. I hate the sound of vacuum cleaners." When I hear his combat experience, it makes sense.

He landed in Saudi Arabia just before Christmas 1990 to support the 1st Infantry tank units in Desert Shield. He served through Desert Storm and returned home in May 1991. He heard the bombs from miles away and felt the force of the explosions shake his tent. When his unit went in, they witnessed the unnerving sights and smells of the dead.

He explains PTSD "is a dirty little secret. I sleep 3-4 hours a night. In the last two weeks, I've had dreams of combat fire. When you have a bad dream, you don't want to go back to sleep.

For six years I slept with my weapon every night. We nicknamed our M-16s our girlfriends.

To this day I can't be around firearms. I'm all for the 2nd Amendment. [But personally] they make me think about what took place. I'm afraid if I'm having a bad day ..."

The great challenge is that "vets don't want to talk about it. The mentality is 'Suck it up buttercup. Just deal with it.' But you can't. You can't do it ... it's impossible."

He acknowledges the bouts of anger and the struggle to stay in control when it gets triggered. "When you get triggered, you go blank and you lose it. It's like someone punched you in the face." He's been seeing a therapist for the last year, learning breathing exercises, the importance of talking a walk, and using meditation and prayer to help him redirect his thoughts and emotions. "I've made progress," he says joyfully as he concedes, "I have a long way to go."

Three major challenges combat vets face with re-entry: anger, isolation and employment.

Another member of our church is Karl, an Army Ranger sniper, who served tours in both Iraq and Afghanistan. He says, "The army changed me. Like a friend said, I came back 'sharper, with an edge.' I was more or less a boiling, angry person a lot of the time." Eventually Karl enrolled in classes at a local college, which "forced me to re-integrate. I saw other students as tool bags. I wanted to say, 'Come live in my world for four seconds.' College forced me to tone myself down."

Aikins says it's not uncommon for vets taking courses to get angry with students they view as unprepared and disrespectful.

The biggest and most readily identifiable symptom of PTSD is anger. Aikins notes: "The military community comprises 1/2 of 1 percent of the total population. They tolerate the opinions about war from people who have no idea what they're talking about. We want to say, 'I know what you're going through.' You don't. You have no idea how horrible it is."

In addition to the struggles with anger, vets experience a deep sense of isolation. "The day after I got out, I was in a different world," said Karl. "In WWII they called it 'shell shock,' but then 11 percent of the generation went to war; now it's less than 1 percent." Perhaps that's why he says, "Community is huge. Vets tend to congregate around their preferred coping mechanism." Which means drinking. It's a chance to connect, to remember, and to forget with the tiny slice of the population who actually "gets it." Karl said leaving his unit left such a hole in his life that "3-4 times in the last 10 years I found myself in a recruiter's office" ready to enlist again. Why? Because "most vets experience camaraderie, support, brotherhood, mission, and focus on a higher level in combat than they will anywhere else."

Vets can also struggle to find steady employment, especially if they're exhibiting PTSD markers, like hyper-arousal and avoidance.

How can local churches best serve combat vets with PTSD? One of Karl's buddies put it this way: "community, and connection to assistance for health and employment needs and recovery programs." Karl notes, "If somebody's at church, they're recognizing drugs or alcohol isn't doing it."

While veterans may not readily self-identify as needing help, they are looking for the types of care churches can legitimately provide. And they're looking for more than seasonal recognition. They're looking for people who will listen without judgment and walk patiently with their questions.

—Steve Norman is a campus pastor of Kensington Church in Troy, Michigan.

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Hidden Hurts

How to respond to domestic abuse.

Psalm 11:5

by Justin Holcomb

At least one in four women is a victim of domestic abuse in her lifetime. And research shows that Christian women stay far longer in abusive situations and in more severe abuse than their non-Christian counterparts.

Many pastors want to help those being hurt by domestic violence, but they don't always know how. But ministers can offer *immense* help and support. Those suffering domestic abuse need care on various levels—practical, spiritual, emotional—from pastors. Responding effectively and referring victims to advocacy services results in fewer violence-related injuries and saves lives.

Here are some of the most common questions I received from ministers:

What is domestic abuse?

Domestic abuse is a pattern of coercive or controlling behavior used by one individual to gain or maintain power and control over another individual in the context of an intimate relationship. This includes any behaviors that frighten, intimidate, terrorize, exploit, manipulate, hurt, humiliate, blame, injure, or wound an intimate partner.

Is abuse dangerous if it is not physical violence?

Yes. Domestic abuse can take many forms, including willful intimidation, physical assault, sexual assault, battery, stalking, verbal abuse, emotional abuse, economic control, psychological abuse, spiritual abuse, and isolation. Threats of abuse can be as frightening as the abuse itself, particularly, when the victim knows the perpetrator may carry out the threats.

Should I encourage a victim to call the police and report physical abuse, or should we deal with it as a spiritual issue?

Following an act of violent abuse, a victim should first turn to the police. Pastors have much to contribute, but after the police have been called.

“Violent abuse” refers to using physical force in a way that injures or endangers someone. Physical assault or battery is a crime, whether it occurs inside or outside of the family. The police have the power and authority to protect victims from physical attack. And victims of violent abuse have the right to protect themselves and their children.

The police will be able to respond quickly to her situation 24/7 and will know where she can seek immediate assistance in the community. The police are informed of her medical and emergency housing options and can help facilitate safe travel to those places for her and her children. The police are the best first responders because they understand that an act of violence is a crime, potentially life threatening, and should be addressed immediately. They understand that without proper intervention this crime will most likely escalate and occur again. The police receive training on how to intervene in domestic assault situations and are prepared to keep the victim and themselves safe in the process.

What might an abused woman think about God?

Abused women who are Christians may rationalize their suffering as being “God’s will” or “part of God’s plan for my life” or “God’s way of teaching me a lesson.” But enabling one person’s cruelty to another is not the will of a just and loving God.

Pastors can say something like this:

“God knows and sees your suffering, and God cares about you and hears your cries and prayers. He cares for you so much that he wants you safe and delivered from threat and violence. If you

have children, he wants them safe too. And beyond physical safety, God wants you to heal from the many ways you've been hurt and wounded.

“Please understand this: Jesus responds to your pain. Your story does not end with abuse and violence. Your life was intended for more than shame, guilt, fear, anger, and confusion. The abuse does not define you or have the last word on your identity. Yes, it is part of your story, but not the end of your story.

“In Jesus, the God who delivers us from evil also offers us a path to healing. And it's time to let this truth transform the shape of your story.”

What can I say to a woman who is convinced the abuse she is experiencing is her fault?

“No matter what kind of abuse you have experienced, there is no action, thought, or sin you could have to make you deserving of violence. You do not deserve this. And it is not your fault.

“You did not ask for this. You are not worthless. You do not have to pretend like nothing happened. You are not damaged goods, forgotten or ignored by God, or ‘getting what you deserve.’

“You are created in the image of God. You should be treated with dignity, love, and respect, but instead you were the victim of abuse and violence, and *it was wrong*. You were sinned against.”

When should I encourage a woman to leave an abusive situation?

In general, if she is being abused and/or the children are being abused or feel they're in any kind of danger.

Make a safety plan. Simply Google “making a safety plan” for help in what steps to take if they are experiencing physical, sexual, emotional, and/or verbal abuse from a partner, spouse, family member. A safety plan helps her know what to do if/when she decides to leave or finds herself (and/or children) in an emergency.

Since it's such a sensitive document, tell her to be careful when creating, printing, and/or completing a safety plan. Consider who will have access to it and where it will be stored.

Leaving is a critical step for a woman in an abusive relationship, but as critical as it is, it is also dangerous. There is an on-going risk even after leaving an abusive relationship. Over 75 percent of separated women suffer post-separation abuse.

Doesn't the Bible require a woman to stay in a marriage even if it's abusive?

Abuse is a form of oppression that twists God's good intention of marriage. The Bible condemns domestic violence, viewing it as sinful and unacceptable. Scripture condemns abuse and proclaims God's judgment on physical abusers. The psalmist, for example, declares God's hatred of abuse in no uncertain terms: “the wicked, those who love violence, he hates with a passion” (Ps. 11:5).

No person is expected to stay in an abusive marriage. Marriage is a covenant. When a spouse chooses to be abusive, he breaks the covenant. If his wife chooses to separate, she is making public his breaking of the covenant, and this does not go against what the Bible says about

divorce. It is the abuser who must be confronted about breaking the marriage covenant, and, as Ron Clark writes, “victims need to know that leaving is well within their rights as a child of God.”

If I suspect a woman is being abused, how do I approach her to confirm my suspicions and provide help?

Schedule a time to meet with just her and tell her that you have noticed certain things and are concerned about her safety and well-being. Explain to her what you see and why you think it means she might be being abused. Very often women in abusive situations don't identify it as abuse because maybe that was how they were raised, or because it is emotional, verbal, or spiritual abuse. You can do some educating on what is abuse.

Ask her what she needs and how the church can care for her. If she says “I don't know,” be prepared to offer a few options depending on her situation. Does she need emergency shelter (know of a few places she can go), medical care, or legal support (have a list of domestic violence shelters with legal advocates that can help)? Let her know that she isn't alone, doesn't have to make a decision today, and that you are there for her when she is ready to get help.

It may be very helpful for you to call a local domestic violence shelter or the National Domestic Violence Hotline (1-800-799-7233) to ask for specific things to ask or not say and get some practical things to offer if she opens up about abuse.

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When Unemployment Hits

How the whole people of God can minister to the unemployed.

Job 4:3

by Jeff M. Sellers

The job loss known as "downsizing" leaves much of our workforce in a state of uncertainty. Richard Kew, an Episcopal priest, speaker, and author of Starting Over—But Not from Scratch (Abingdon), wrote for eight years for National Business Employment Weekly as a career counselor. Here are insights from Kew, gleaned from an interview with Christianity Today, about how Christians can cope with unemployment.

How can the church help the newly unemployed?

Initially, just by being there for them. The uncertainty can almost be worse than unemployment itself—there is this sense of being exposed, insecure, of not knowing whether you are going to have the material resources to meet the challenges the future is going to throw at you. Pastoral care from clergy, and care within groups in congregations, is extremely important.

How can groups help?

It's important that those who are struggling with even the possibility of unemployment be willing to open themselves up, to share their discomfort so that others might reach out to them. These issues first come up in the person's context, be it a church choir, a Bible study group, or a ministry group. It's also important for congregations to form groups where the unemployed can come together and support one another—and not just those in the church, but anyone who is unemployed. Such groups can help people network with one another and to work with one another in presenting and developing résumés.

Why do family, friends, and fellow church members, feel helpless about how to come alongside someone who is unemployed?

They look at somebody else and say, "It might be me next!" It's like being at the bedside of a dying person, and you watch doctors coming in, and then they come in less frequently, and then they don't really come at all. As communities of Christians, we need to face our own fears. At the same time, the unemployed are probably keeping their situation quiet because they're ashamed of what they're going through. But in fact, if you're looking for new employment, you *should* want the whole world to know that you're on the market.

How can an unemployed person can face emotional challenges?

There is shame related to job loss, though in reality there may be no reason for it. Rather, [job loss] is the great tsunami of the economy that goes lurching on, and you're caught up in the tidal wave. If you're caught up in it, then other people are going to be as well, and you can provide support for one another as well as being open in the way that you handle all this.

You're going to go through the whole cycle of grief, because when you lose your job, you have to let go of what might have been. So there is some inner dying that goes on, and there is the anger that accompanies that—"Why me?"

Some people, when thrown out of work, cave in spiritually on themselves—turning against themselves, rather than moving on to the next step. To be conscious of falling into that and looking for help is the first step.

The second step is to maintain a devotional discipline alongside maintaining a life discipline. When you are unemployed, your full-time job is to find work. Therefore, set up an office. There is a tendency for unemployed people to lose any sense of discipline.

How does a person's spiritual identity come into the picture?

Men in particular relate their identity with their work. When a man loses his job, there is something of his identity taken away from him, and one of the things unemployment does is bring you face to face with the real "you" rather than the imagined "you" that most people are hiding behind. That loss of self-identity that is job-related is in some instances a good thing.

The tendency is to say, "How can I find something as good if not better in terms of material things than the job that I've done?" rather than saying, "Is there an opportunity for me to totally reorder my life? Maybe I've been making more money than is good for me, but that job is not where my heart is. There's something better that God has in mind."

We can use this as a time to do some exploring: "What do I want to do with the rest of my life? What does God want me to do with the rest of my life?"

—Jeff Sellers is former associate editor for Christianity Today.

—Richard Kew is rector of Church of the Resurrection in Franklin, Tennessee.

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Healing—and Leading—After Tragedy

Recovering from trauma is possible, necessary, and very difficult.

Matthew 11:28-29

by Anna Morgan

Millions of predictable seconds will tick by, marking out a lifetime for each of us. Just a handful of moments will stop us short, altering our future so completely that it's not recognizable as connected to our past. Thirteen years ago, I was confronted by this kind of moment.

To celebrate our second wedding anniversary, my husband Rich and I took a few days off for a road trip. He wanted to be back well before our youth service, so we started our eight-hour drive home the night before. I took the first shift and Rich took over in the early hours of the morning. I drifted off, trusting all was well.

I woke up as our vehicle swerved, and my head banged against the doorframe. The SUV began to roll over. I held on, willing it to end, relieved when the truck finally came to rest upside down. I dazedly glanced over to the driver's side. Rich was gone.

My stomach lurched as fear and adrenaline flooded me. I scrambled to unbuckle myself from the seat and dropped down into the broken glass and debris. I managed to crawl through the crushed window frame and frantically looked around to get my bearings. We were sprawled across the interstate with traffic stopped on both sides, my things littering the highway. Rich was about 50 feet away, crumpled in a little heap, his head lying in a pool of blood. He was absolutely still. The terror that rose in me still resonates in me today as I write.

An ambulance came and whisked him away, then another came for me. They strapped me onto a gurney, popped me into the ambulance, and drove to a nearby hospital. I remember the worried eyes of the EMTs and the whispered conversations as they wheeled me into the emergency room.

I waited, still strapped down, until an elderly doctor came into my stall. He stood there, clutching his clipboard. With tears brightening his eyes and a quaver in his voice, he told me Rich had died. Rich was 20 years old. I felt like I'd been punched in the gut, hit by a bus. My insides felt like they were shredding.

As alone as I felt in that moment, I wasn't unique in my brokenness. Unfortunately, everyone will likely face severe emotional pain in this lifetime. The truth is that most of us limp a little, working through different stages of our healing, and that's okay. But we can't stay there.

I have friends who have gotten stuck in their hurt. Years of unhealed pain can lead to infections of bitterness, fear, or depression. If these kinds of deep soul wounds are not healed, they can lead to mental ill health. Pain we don't deal with winds up controlling our lives with depression, post-traumatic stress, and anxiety. God did not design us to live trapped by hurt.

Unhealed trauma has the ability to permanently alter our worldview. When we see life through this lens of pain, circumstances look darker and scarier. The Bible teaches us that "a broken spirit saps a person's strength" (Proverbs 17:22). This kind of brokenness robs us of strength and energy for living. Finding success in our relationships and in our work is harder.

Recovering from effects of trauma is possible and is necessary. Jesus came to redeem the broken places in our lives and give rest to troubled souls. Jesus promised us, "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy-laden and overburdened, and I will cause you to rest. [I will ease and relieve and refresh your souls.] Take My yoke upon you and learn of Me, for I am gentle (meek) and humble (lowly) in heart, and you will find rest (relief and ease and refreshment and recreation and blessed quiet) for your souls" (Matthew 11:28-29, AMP).

Healing is a journey. It doesn't happen quickly. As with our bodies, the worse the wound is, the longer the recovery takes. Pain does not go away by being ignored. Getting total healing from

trauma is possible, but it requires that we be willing to let God touch memories we may prefer to avoid. For me this was incredibly difficult but well worth it.

Over time, I chose to believe that God was good, regardless of my circumstance. It was enough that Jesus died for me. He proved his love for me a long time ago. Nothing that happened could erase that truth. I took a shaky deep breath one morning, and my spirit was refreshed. My soul, however, was still shattered.

I did my best for a while to ignore my emotions as completely as I could. I tried to shut down my feelings. I kept myself busy, avoided being alone. I connected myself with people who were so different from Rich that they wouldn't remind me of what I had lost. In my efforts to cope, I did a few things that I regretted almost immediately, some of them sinful, some just foolish. Even though I wanted to do the right thing, I felt like I was failing.

I had deep, defiant rumblings of anger inside. Sometimes I was angry with God, but more I was angry with Rich. I felt abandoned by his recklessness, left behind with hundreds of hurting teenagers while he casually strolled streets of gold. Most of all, I was angry with myself—that I didn't insist on a wiser plan, that I wasn't braver at the scene of the accident. I was disappointed that I wasn't handling this better.

Keloid scars are thick, raised, sensitive scars from injuries that didn't heal right. If we avoid dealing with these parts of our hearts because it's painful and embarrassing, things won't fully heal. This can lead to soul scars of bitterness and hatred. It takes rubbing in the oil of the Holy Spirit regularly to soften those places and complete the healing.

Getting scars healed requires persistence and determination. It begins with realizing we are scarred and deciding we want to get better. Scars happen to us; they aren't something we intentionally create. As a result it's easy to feel powerless, victimized by circumstances that made the scar. Jesus provides healing so we don't have to go through life wounded or scarred. Jesus is not an idea or a moral code; he is real and his healing is tangible. When we believe that his love provides us with strength and wholeness, it does. Scars fade as we daily focus on Jesus, giving him our pain and our loss, as we choose to trust him for a better future. Sometimes we have to walk a journey of forgiveness to see those scars heal.

It didn't happen immediately, but healing began to ease through my heart. It wasn't microwave quick, but as I look back I can see how God orchestrated things in my life to guarantee my healing.

Great friends made space in their lives and hearts for me. These relationships were essential to my recovery. God will bring us the right people. If we look for them, we will see them. Relationships will bring healing only to the extent that we take off our masks around these people. Honesty and authenticity are essential. Sometimes we need to speak to a professional counselor if we get stuck in pain.

I've seen leaders who carry their wounds into ministry and try to pretend they aren't there. These wonderful people do their best to give when they don't have much in their emotional tank. Unfortunately, they often isolate themselves or create unhealthy leadership cultures within their teams. Pretending we are great all the time is not helpful to us or to the people we serve. People don't grow by seeing leaders who have it all together. They grow when they see us grow and heal and the path we take toward wholeness becomes one they can follow.

All leaders will have to face grief at some point, both in their own lives and in the lives of the people they lead. These thoughts may help you navigate this challenging season. They certainly proved true for my life:

Don't try to answer the question "Why?" for people. The strongest support we offer people is our love, shared grief, and prayers. Our reasoning does not help the hurt. Most of the time there is no why. The most powerful answer we can give someone is to love him or her authentically and consistently, as a representative of Christ.

People appreciate some understanding of how long to expect the hurt to last. For me the painful emotional state was acute for six months and then slowly began to subside, taking years to fully heal. This journey requires patience but not resignation. It will pass as we move forward.

Loss is something that happens to us but should not be absorbed into our identity. It is part of our story, but the loss should not define us forever. I was widowed, but I do not describe myself as a widow now.

If you lose someone while you are leading, get wisdom about your ministry. While we are emotionally debilitated, trying to minister despite the loss will result in bleeding all over people, which isn't helpful to anyone. Extreme pain doesn't last for a long season; it will begin to diminish into something more manageable. As it does, those who continue to lead during their healing process can provide a pathway for others who experience loss to follow. This sharing brings healing.

— Anna Morgan has been in ministry for 15 years and currently serves as a church consultant, speaker, author, wife, and mother. Anna's blog, "Church Girls Who Don't Bake Cupcakes," can be found at annamorgan.com and information about her ministry at johnandannamorgan.com.

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Are You Ready for a Crisis?

What church leaders should—and shouldn't—do when a traumatic event takes place.

Matthew 11:28-29

interview with Mel Lawrenz

In the aftermath of tragedy at Elmbrook Church—a member was shot to death by her husband, also a member—*Leadership Journal's* editors sat down with Mel Lawrenz, one of Elmbrook's ministers-at-large. We discussed what church leaders should—and shouldn't—do when a traumatic event takes place in their congregation or community.

Leadership: How can church leaders prepare for crisis?

The church exists for times of crisis as much as it does for the easier parts of life. So it's critical for staff and key leaders to be ready for crises before they happen. Leaders can prepare for it by preparing their people. This looks like teaching biblically, talking realistically about the easy and difficult things of life, making sure that there's a culture of support in your church, and encouraging spiritual growth. If your staff and congregation are prepared, then when the crisis hits they are ready to deal with it. If you're able to respond well, these times can be an extraordinary time for ministry.

What are some mistakes you've seen leaders make in responding to a crisis?

Not dealing truthfully with the situation is a main one. Often, well intentioned people want to spin the truth in order to make people feel better. If leaders think too much about *How are we going to handle this?* they can begin to “manhandle” the situation. It becomes artificial. We start to feel as though it's our job to manipulate feelings or to push aside people's experiences in search of resolution.

The challenge is to deal truthfully with the situation. This includes being truthful and careful about information. In crisis we can't allow ourselves to speculate about things that we don't have information on. It's important for leaders to communicate the facts and come up with a plan of unified communication regarding the tragedy for the church to follow. This helps ensure that the truth isn't spun or twisted in the chaos following a traumatic event.

In a previous *Leadership Journal* article, you made a distinction between grief and trauma. How are these different? How can church leaders respond appropriately to each?

Well, grief is our natural response to irreversible loss. In these situations grief is a normal, though difficult, part of life. The pastor's role is to help people to work through their grief, to really do the grieving. In Scripture there's a very specific role for mourning. Ecclesiastes 7 says, “It's better to go into the house of mourning than into the house of laughter ... a sad face is good for the heart.” That doesn't mean we want to mourn, but when a genuine loss has happened, the appropriate thing is to mourn, to “live” in that house for a while.

Trauma is when a loss happens that breaks the normal rules and assumptions of life. Your grandma dying in a nursing home typically brings grief. When somebody's sister is shot in a random drive-by downtown, that is traumatic. They started that day assuming that they'd talk to that person in the evening, and then all of a sudden they are gone. Natural catastrophes, murder, rape, suicide are all examples of traumatic losses. Responding to trauma as a pastor means that you have to walk with people both through the grieving process, but also through their response to the violation of their persons, or assumptions about life.

In both situations, the most important thing is to be present. To really be with people. To let them know that they are not alone. Pastors need to be prepared for the whole range of human shock and grief once they are there, but showing up is the first step.

How can a leader respond if they find themselves the unjustified target of blame or criticism after a church crisis?

People in crisis are frightened. They're often frustrated. It's important to understand that. That's the context for accusations or attacks on leaders. Often this is just venting. Leaders need to understand what's happening and consider that it's actually a privilege (though not a fun one) to let people vent at you. Don't see it as a threat to yourself. In those moments you have a tremendous opportunity to walk with people through their loss.

Beyond this, leaders can do a lot to alleviate tensions by responding quickly and openly when a crisis does come up. If they can close gaps in communication and take appropriate charge of the situation, people will take comfort. People see that. It earns their respect.

How do churches grow through crisis?

Crises are often decisive moments in the life of a church. They aren't interruptions to our work. They are the work. This is what we ready ourselves for. During crisis you can speak in direct ways, straight to people's most basic needs. In such times you know that you are with people at a crossroads in their life. It is a privilege to be there as a pastor, and as the church community of someone walking through a hard time. Churches naturally grow in these kinds of circumstances.

What should a pastor not do in these times?

Well, they shouldn't try to do everything. If there's any complexity to it at all, don't put the burden of a hard situation all on one person's shoulders. Even in a smaller church, the burden can be spread around by delegating to trustworthy lay people or partnering with neighborhood ministers. But as I mentioned before, pastors cannot manipulate people like some kind of puppet master. Even with good intentions, we can often find ourselves trying to artificially move someone's thinking or emotions from one spot to another. But this is the opposite of presence.

Of course we work to move people from a place of weakness and grief to strength and faith. Of course we speak words of truth and faith into the situation. But you don't "handle" people. People don't want to be handled. They want to know that you're there with them, supporting and praying for them, helping ground their experience. They don't want you to try and move their process artificially. They want you present and engaged.

Tell us how grace and truth play out in times of crisis.

Grace comes out in a true, uncomplicated, compassionate response to loss. That in itself is the core of the ministry of presence. After all these years of ministry, I still doubt it a bit and find myself thinking, *It's such a small thing to go and to be with somebody*. What can I really do? But I hear over and over, "Your being there meant the world to me."

Grace means other things too, like practical support. It means that people in your congregation drop everything to bring meals, work out practical details, and so on. Showing grace this way—grace that brings dignity—is our most important work.

One way that truth plays out is in regard to information. In crisis, information gets very messy very quickly. People play fast and loose with facts and information, and it can have hurtful, confusing consequences. Leaders can help by sharing appropriate, factual information and working to quell rumors. Truth also has to do with leading people into the reality of the situation. We need to come to terms with the reality of a traumatic event.

When a really big crisis happens that affects a lot of people, even people that don't know the people directly involved, it is a lot like an earthquake. The ground has shifted under people's feet, and their normal assumptions about life have been violated. Cracks open up in unexpected places, places that you wouldn't have thought would be affected by this event. People may come forward asking for marriage counseling or with other issues simply because they feel so shaken up. It's difficult. It's challenging. But it's also an opportunity. A crisis is a decision point. And just like an earthquake allows for rebuilding stronger and higher after a disaster, crisis can be a powerful time.

How can leaders care for their own wellbeing?

Again, spread the task around. Delegate. It's important to make sure that communication is clear so that no people or important details slip through the cracks. It also helps leaders make sure that they're in a healthy place during the situation. Trauma and crisis can take a toll.

With this said, we also need to understand "secondary trauma." If somebody sits down with a rape victim and hears the full story of that kind of violation, a normal human being will experience an extension of the victim's trauma. It's vicarious loss.

With these things in mind, we need to watch out for each other. If a staff member recently did a difficult funeral, and then a week later they counsel a trauma victim, and then right after that they are working in a domestic violence situation, that person has been on the frontlines an awful lot in a short span of time. Somebody needs to step in and support that person, and maybe even relieve that person for a tough task or two. If staff or volunteers at your church aren't sufficient, this is a place to call on other churches in your area to help the work of the greater ministry. Ensure that you and your congregation are supported in these tough times.

— *Mel Lawrenz is the former senior pastor and current Minister-at-Large of
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Further Exploration

Books and resources for ministry to people going through trauma.

BuildingChurchLeaders.com. Leadership training resources from Christianity Today.

- “Cancer” Survival Guide
- “Domestic Violence” Survival Guide
- “Responding to a Crisis” Survival Guide
- “Suicide” Survival Guide

LeadershipJournal.net. This website offers practical advice and articles for church leaders.

A Place of Healing: Wrestling with the Mysteries of Suffering, Pain, and God’s Sovereignty by Joni Eareckson Tada. In *A Place of Healing* Joni shares her current struggle with physical pain and the mystery of suffering in light of a God who heals. (David C. Cook, 2010; ISBN 978-1434765321)

Bearing the Unbearable: Trauma, Gospel, and Pastoral Care by Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger. In this book Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger weaves together threads from the fields of psychology and pastoral theology as she explores the impact of trauma on people’s lives and offers practical strategies and restorative practices for dealing with it. (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2015; ISBN 978-0802871038)

Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering by Tim Keller. Keller answers one of life’s most troubling questions: why do bad things happen? (Dutton Adult, 2013; ISBN 978-0764207310)

Wounded Warrior, Wounded Home: Hope and Healing for Families Living with PTSD and TBI by Marshelle Carter Waddell and Kelly K. Orr, PhD, ABPP. This book offers a hope-filled way forward, giving hurting families a look inside the minds and hearts of combat veterans and guiding them to develop their own plan for physical, emotional, and spiritual wholeness. (Revell, 2013; ISBN 978-0525952454)