

When Your Pastor Can't Help You

I had this light-bulb moment the other day as I was thinking through the advice I give to hurting people who contact me. Actually, I was thinking through the advice I *don't* give. At least, not typically. I rarely say: *You should see a counselor*. And I rarely refer to it in my blog posts.

This is a pretty significant omission and the reason for it might surprise you. I am familiar, and have a lot of experience with, the school of Christian thought that says counseling is bad. All you need is Jesus and your B-I-B-L-E (you stand *alone* on that thing, for goodness' sake!) I am *not* of that school of thought; not by a long shot. The primary reason I rarely mention seeing a counselor is because I pretty much assume that someone going through deep levels of grief has already heard that advice. I take it for granted, I think, and that's dumb of me. The secondary reason I don't mention it, is because I don't want to offend an already-overwhelmed person by implying that they may need professional help—this is also dumb of me. On some level, we probably *all* need a little professional help. I know I do.

I started seeing a counselor just before my husband was diagnosed with ALS. Shelley helped me process my thoughts and deal with the overwhelming sorrow and anxiety in healthy ways. When I felt like I was drowning, she helped me learn to breathe underwater. I don't see her regularly now, but I do when I run into a roadblock in my thinking. That happened last week. I hit an issue I could not resolve on my own.

I was getting some conflicting advice from people who love me, and I knew it was time to bring in the big guns. I sat on her couch yesterday and spilled a million jumbled thoughts. She helped me pick them up, one by one, really look at them and

decided which could stay and which should go. She helped me adjust my self-talk. And more than anything, she reassured me that—nine months in—I'm doing OK. I left her office feeling sort of wrung out and exhausted from the process, but I also felt ordered, clear and hopeful about the future. You know what I *didn't* feel? Ashamed. **I am not embarrassed that I can't figure everything out on my own.** In fact, I am proud of myself for being willing to ask for help when I need it and I think I've avoided a lot of time in emotional ditches because I know when to call the tow truck (that's a weird analogy, but I'm sticking with it.)

As a pastor, people come to me for counseling often. They tell me their issues, and I listen and offer biblical perspective. But if the thing they are facing is not primarily spiritual, then I often refer them to a counselor.

I don't have the training to deal with emotional or mental crises, and I also don't have the time that is required to give it the attention it deserves. I'm very particular about *who* I refer them to because—just like dentists, doctors and hair stylists—there are those I would trust and those I would not. And just like those other professions, sometimes it takes a few tries to find the right one, but the search is worth it for those who are truly committed to building healthy, happy lives.

I don't know why it's taken so long to address this on my blog. Let's blame widow-brain, shall we? The conclusion of the matter is this: If you are in a season of deep heartache—for any reason—or if you just need help getting your thoughts to come together and work for you rather than against you, would you please consider making one appointment with someone who can help?

The days of the counseling stigma are over, or at least they sure should be, so go ahead and ask your friends for references. Try someone out. Give it a chance. It just might

be the very thing that helps you escape (or avoid!) the ditch.

Bo Stern is a blogger and author of *Beautiful Battliefields*, *Ruthless: Knowing the God Who Fights For You* and *When Holidays Hurt*. She knows the most beautiful things can come out of the hardest times. Her Goliath came in the form of her husband's terminal illness, a battle they fought with the help of their four children, a veritable army of friends, and our extraordinary God. Bo is a teaching pastor at Westside Church in Bend, Oregon.