

Five Steps To Effective Christian Counseling

*And 12 other words of wisdom
for Christian counselors*

Stan DeKoven

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Dr. Stan DeKoven

ISBN 978-1-61529-220-2

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Published by:

VISION PUBLISHING
RAMONA, CA 92065
1-800-9-VISION
www.booksbyvision.org

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Introduction

Having been a counselor for almost 40 years, I have learned a few things. Whatever your role is, whether a pastor, lay leader, or a chaplain that does counseling, these five steps and principles, along with some other points of wisdom to follow, when judiciously practiced will keep you safe in your counseling and effective for the sake of your clients. They have me! I encourage you to review this booklet periodically, as it will keep you on the road of helpfulness and health for your clients and yourself.

Dr Stan DeKoven

Chapter 1

Ministry, especially counseling ministry, is all about relationships.

I remember all too well my earliest excursions into the ministry of counseling. I was about 14, and for an unknown reason to me, already had other young people and even some adults coming to me for advice. What power...and how scary. Other than having read my bible through once or twice, I was certainly unqualified to give advice on life...I didn't have one yet! Nonetheless, God gave grace, and I learned early on that when people put their trust in you, by telling them a part of their life story (even if embellished, which it often is), it was an honorand they deserved my undivided attention and a strong listening ear.

Step One: Build a Relationship: It is essential, in the earliest stages of counseling to build a relationship. Really, all of counseling, and all of ministry is built on the ability of developing what is commonly called a therapeutic relationship. Here are some of the important aspects of developing a therapeutic relationship.

Empathy...which is the ability to feel with a person. Though we never disrespect a

client by feeling sorry for them, we must be able to connect with the person at an emotional level, that is, empathize with them, feel their pain so to speak, without becoming overwhelmed with their pain. This is key, as we must always guard our hearts.

Warmth...which starts with being friendly, having an open smile, and showing a genuine interest in the person you are counseling...as a person not as a patient.

Respect...the root of the word respect is to view someone or something from a clear perspective. We do not judge a person by their looks, background, or symptoms ...but we endeavor to see them as God does, created in God's image and likeness with a purpose to fulfill.

Social ability...which is sometimes called emotional intelligence...it helps if you are a nice person, polite, engaging, with a sense of humor...people connect with someone who is likeable...something we all need to work on.

Listening (Active)...that is we must listen with response and a desire to learn about the person we are counseling, understand

their issues, and together work towards solutions.

You have to say something after they tell you how they feel and what they want or don't want. This requires some questioning to help you.

Step Two: Explore the Problems. Not every presenting problem is the problem...not every person is truly honest but often presents themselves in the best light possible (nice way of saying they cover up often due to shame). Whoever makes the call is the person with the problem. Thus, much of the initial part of counseling is simply exploring what the problem is. The first step in solving a problem is defining it. Thus, it is essential that we...

Ask open ended questions...questions that open the door to deeper conversation, such as "how did...make you feel?" vs. "Did that make you feel good or bad, happy or sad"...as the latter leads to a simple answer and stops the conversation. Open ended questions move the dialog forward.

Requests for clarification: Not all clients are clear about their own story, and at times you can become confused as you try to sort out the story from the story. Thus, period-

ically asking for clarification is helpful ...e.g. “you said, or what I heard you say was...is this correct, is there more?” etc.

Withhold judgment: Try not to come to conclusions too quickly or prematurely ...give the client time to unfold their problem, as most people share their life like one peels an onion... layer by layer. Remember, God is in charge of the process, and it is Immanuel, God with us in the counseling process.

Once you are clear on the problem that you are dealing with, consult with your client.

Step Three: Decide on a Course of Action, and when I say decide, I mean that the client must decide from the options developed in your dialog together.

Remember, the solutions come from:

A joint effort...you, the client, and Holy Spirit. This may take some time and patience. Often clients unconsciously, resist taking any action. One reason is that everyone hates pain, and change means that I will have to do some new things that are likely to be uncomfortable (pain). Let's just

not change. Secondly, change is risky, and clients fear both success and failure. You will have to really work with them to come up with some logical solutions that they can embrace and choose to try.

A logical and faith focused approach ...based upon God's word and common sense. Both finding the "right word" and something that fits the situation of the individual need is not always easy. However, there are many resources available that can be called upon for that purpose.

The will of the person, as they must choose in time, a course of action, and then you become the cheerleader of change.

Stimulate action...that is, when you have identified what the problem is, explored some ways of addressing or alleviating the problem, and the client has chosen a course of action.

I highly recommend "*The Bible In Counseling*" by this author as a resource for this purpose, also available from Vision Publishing.

Step Four: Encourage Follow Through to the action chosen. In fact, about 70% of the time the client will sabotage or resist their own change

...don't be discouraged by that, but use the resistance as a talking point, and continue to encourage action in a health direction.

Sometimes it is helpful to find a **protagonist**, or someone in the client's life that can come along side of them and help with the decision to change...this can be a family member, friend, pastor, etc. Of course, the best made plans of mice and men can fail.

Regroup as needed and develop a new strategy...working together to solve problems is key, and removing shame is important. If at first you don't succeed ...try, try again.

The goal of counseling is to help a person who is confused, suffering or in another form of distress resolve the problem, forgive the past, learn what they need to learn, and then move on, not become independent from people, but interdependent on healthy men and women in the body of Christ and the community at large.

Thus, the counselor's role, which is primarily as a catalyst between the person and God's provision, must diminish and eventually cease in the life the client.

Step Five: Terminate the Counseling Relationship. From the start of counseling, the goal is to terminate the counseling relationship...no counseling relationship is to last forever. The hope is to see the client make some new decisions, try new behaviors, change their thinking to line up with God's word (renew their mind).

When the **problem is solved**, help them down the road.

The goal is to teach them **skills which are adaptable** for the rest of their life. They eventually take their counselor in their head with them and learn to solve their own problems within the confines of the community of faith.

When **insight leading to action** occurs it is time to move the client into inter-dependent relationships with the church community.

Leave an **open door** to future consultation as needed.

Counseling, within a chaplain's role, as a pastor, or a lay leader, can be the most demanding and rewarding of work. Whether working in a church, youth group, prison, hospital, hospice, military or other setting, people have issues, and they will look to you, a counselor, as the expert to help them.

I have found that these simple steps can help organize the process and keep you on track. With that said, one simple caveat. Remember, blessed are the flexible, they shall not be broken! Trust the process, trust the Lord and his word, and see what the Lord can do through you.

Chapter 2

Helping and Counseling: Knowing When to Speak and When to Keep Silent

(Eccl. 3:7)

My mom was a pretty bright lady. She had her issues, but also had lots of basic folk wisdom. During a time that I was apparently pontificating my truth (at 12, what did I know?) she said “remember Stan, there is a reason God made you with two ears and one mouth...so you can listen twice as much as you talk! Point taken.

The fact is, many counselors, especially pastors, are at best frustrated teachers, who cannot wait for the client to stop talking so we can tell them what to do. There are principles that need to be communicated with people in distress, but how to communicate and when is an artform that counselors must learn...and the two thirds listening, and one third talking is a good place to start.

Scripture speaks to us about listening and being quiet, and informs us how to wisely care for a person in need. Here are a few words of wisdom from the Word of God, with my commentary,

First Word: Listening

All good human interaction, and especially counseling requires listening. In Proverbs 18:3 we read; If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame, and in James 1:19-20 Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.

Taking the time to hear a person's heart, by listening intently and intentionally to their story is a gift. Listening actively (nodding, responding with words designed to continue the dialog..."I hear you saying...tell me more...that is interesting...and reflecting content with emotion (I hear you saying you are really sad...angry...happy...or whatever, that must be really painful...or wow, you must be REALLY angry, etc. The goal is to listen to gain content, but more importantly to hear the music or themes of the heart.

Again, having two ears, we are to listen twice as much as we talk, and listen with an attempt to understand, not judge. Become focused on the person you are working with, as they are a unique person, created in the image of God, worthy of your full attention.

Second Word: Rely upon the Power of God for Knowing How to Counsel

The first scripture I memorized as a child was Proverbs 3:5-6 “Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.” A companion scripture to the is Proverbs 15:28, “The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things.”

There have been many times that I felt overwhelmed and outmatched by a client. They were too closed off, too evasive, too clever or deviant, or just too confusing to understand. Also, there will be clients that you meet that you simply don't like for one reason or another. This can be difficult to deal with, but in fact, nothing is insurmountable with God's help.

Relying on God starts with your relationship with the Lord. A devotional life is important, reading and praying, fellowshiping and serving. Added to that is an assumption I make when in a counseling relationship...really two assumptions.

First, I am convinced that the word of God is true, that where two or three agree on anything, that the Lord himself is in the midst (Holy Spirit). In fact, I

usually invoke (pray) and acknowledge the presence of the Lord with my client (if they are believers).

Knowing that the Lord is present, that he is good, and that as I remain submitted to him his wisdom is available to me (I can trust him) is key. Secondly, I am acutely aware that I did not cause the problems or concerns of the person I am trying to minister through counseling to, nor do I have the solution ...both are between the person and the Lord.

So, in many ways, as I listen to the client, I am also listening to the still small voice in my heart and head waiting as patiently as possible until I hear from the Lord...in other words, I ponder a response...without being worried about how long the process takes...the Lord is in charge.

Remember, the Lord loves the person you are counseling infinitely more than you ever will...and life is a journey...trust the Lord in the process.

Third Word: Maintain Genuine Interest and Love

With the above statement in mind (the Lord's vs. your love) having your heart and mind focused on your client is like "Oil and perfume make the heart

glad, and the sweetness of a friend comes from his earnest counsel.” (Prov. 27:9)

To maintain interest requires discipline, discipline in active listening, remembering previous areas discussed, and cutting out unnecessary distractions so you can focus on the client.

To remain in love towards your client, especially your more difficult ones is to remain prayerful. As we bring a client before the Lord in sincere and heartfelt prayer, our hearts will usually soften towards them, not in sentimentality or co-dependency, but in a healthy desire to see them healed and whole, and moving in a healthy path in life.

Fourth Word: Empathy, Warmth and Respect

Accept the counselee:

To accept someone is to show them value for being created in the image of God. One way to demonstrate our acceptance of their value is by show or demonstrating, in our words, our facial expressions and our intonation empathy (feeling with them, not sorry for them) warmth, and respect. The latter word is key, and the root of the word in Hebrew is to view or see someone as God does.

Jesus was a master at demonstrating care with words and actions towards the least of us...a characteristic essential to good counsel.

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. (Rom. 12:15) Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. (Gal. 6:2) Oil and perfume make the heart glad, and the sweetness of a friend comes from his earnest counsel. (Prov. 27:9) Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. (Gal. 6:1) And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her. (John 8:7)

Fifth Word: Know when to Speak and When to be Quiet

In many ways, silence is golden. Knowing when to talk and when to wait, even in silence is a great therapeutic tool. For example, when I was a younger and much less experienced therapist, I would often begin to speak in order to "keep the conversation going" out of my insecurity regarding the process. Now I can wait as long as the client needs...and often in the silence, the Lord brings to my mind or the clients just what needs to be discussed to move the healing process forward. Here are a few

scriptures that speak to the importance of the wisdom of silences.

A man of great wrath will pay the penalty, for if you deliver him, you will only have to do it again. Prov. 19:19; Whoever belittles his neighbor lacks sense, but a man of understanding remains silent. 11:12; Whoever restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding. 17:27. Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent. 17:27,28; Do you see a man who is hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him. 29:20; also consider James 1:19.

Sixth Word: Timing

Along with allowing silence to move the therapeutic process forward, sensing the timing of when to intervene, correct, question, clarify or instruct in the counseling process is important. Discernment is needed. Often in counseling a person working through the grief process, it is wise to avoid clichés or insensitive statements.

The fact that someone might have done something different to prevent a loss may need to be discussed, but not on the day of the loss. Thus, as the word of

God states; To make an apt answer is a joy to a man, and a word in season, how good it is! (Prov. 15:23)

Seventh Word: Keeping Confidences

My first pastor was a lovely man of God...having been used by the Lord to lead my whole family to Christ as a young man. He was a wonderful evangelist, but not too good as a counselor. Frankly, this is why we loved going to prayer meeting on Wednesday night...we could find you who the Pastor had been counseling, as he usually preached/taught on their issues, even using them as illustrations.

His lack of confidentiality in counseling did indeed reduce his counseling load...for all the wrong reasons. If you are counseling someone, you must be willing to live and die with their secrets, other than for illegal activities, such as child abuse, Senior abuse, or a clear threat of suicide or homicide.

Scripture speaks to this issue as well.

Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets, but he who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a thing covered. (Prov. 11:13);

Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets; therefore, do not associate with a simple babblers. (20:19);

Whoever keeps his mouth and his tongue keeps himself out of trouble. (21:23) Along with this, we must be honest...Whoever rebukes a man will afterward find more favor than he who flatters with his tongue. (Prov. 28:23) Better is open rebuke than hidden love. (Prov.27:5)

Eighth Word: Helping and Edifying

Continuing to discuss what we share, our focus is to learn from the client what the problem is, not for our benefit, but so we can give some help and encouragement to the person we are ministering to. Most people seeking counseling are looking for help and support, and do not need criticism or condemnation. They need strength or faith for their journey. Giving help and encouragement is one of the key gifts we can provide in our discipleship-oriented counseling.

So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. (Rom. 14:19) Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness.

Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. (Gal. 6:1-2) But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. Heb. 3-13)

Ninth Word: Encouraging

Life stinks, then you die, if you are lucky, but God is good! I have said that, perhaps too many times, but there is a lot of truth in this simple (and some would say silly) phrase. Sometimes our lives can be filled with circumstances, losses, fears and tears that create significant anxiety or depression in one's life.

In counseling a person with significant life issues, we need to ensure what we are dealing with (is it physical, emotional, spiritual or a combination of issues) and encourage our client with hope that God is still with them, there are answers (though it may take time and hard work to find them), and you are with them on this journey. Again, the Word of God helps us to be an encourager, and we as counselors need to encourage ourselves in the word.

Anxiety in a man's heart weighs him down, but a good word makes him glad. (Prov. 12:25) For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual

gift to strengthen you—that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine. (Rom. 1:11-12) And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. (1 Thess. 5:11)

Tenth Word: Giving Advice

Saying the right words at the right time is much of the artform of counseling. After listening carefully to the unique story of a fellow struggler in life, it comes time to give some feedback on what you have heard. Even the most reflective of counselors (“What I heard you say is...tell me more...what do you think? etc.”) has to eventually say something to the client, that is hopefully helpful and therapeutic (healing in focus).

What we say, and how we say it as counselors should be wise (based upon knowledge and understanding that can be acted upon) and, as scripture states, spoken truthfully in love. With that in mind, here are some scriptures to inform our thinking on the importance of advice giving.

There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing. (Prov. 12:18) To make an apt answer is a joy to a

man, and a word in season, how good it is! (Prov.15:23) Gracious words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body. (Prov.16:24) Whoever sings songs to a heavy heart is like one who takes off a garment on a cold day, and like vinegar on soda (Prov. 25:20). So, it is important to weigh our words, and remember the 2/3rds rule...listen twice as much as you talk, and when you talk, do so carefully and prayerfully.

Eleventh Word: Teaching and Admonishing

As mentioned above, an aspect of counseling is discipleship, which requires individualized teaching of principles that are to be applied over time to the life of the client. Thus, if the client is struggling with anger (for example), they probably don't need to learn much about how to be angry...they are already proficient at it.

What they need is to learn self-control (which is the goal), and may require learning about peace, love, relaxation, etc. to help him or her reach the goal. Thus, teaching and admonishing (correcting some wrong beliefs about God, themselves and others) may be a part of what you do in counseling. Again, we do this because we care for the soul of the person we are ministering too...and want them to live a life of wisdom which brings peace to their hearts and glory to God.

I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another. (Rom. 15:14) Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God (Col. 3:16) And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. (1 Thess. 5:14).

Twelfth Word: Modeling

In the counseling ministry, we all want to be followers of Jesus. He did not just teach, he modeled how we should live. Further, Paul lived his life as a model for others to follow. The fact is, clients carry in their heads and hearts the words and actions of their counselors with them after each counseling session. We need to at all times practice what we preach, and live a life pleasing to the Lord, as God gives us grace.

Jesus said Follow me (Matt.4:19)...Paul said Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.

Goals for the Early Stage of Counseling

Goal One -- The first goal, after the initial social phase of counseling (how are you; did you have trouble finding the office; tell me a bit about yourself) is to understand the counselee's current situation, which requires listening with attention to detail to the story of the client.

Each person has a story to tell, and they will do so in their own inimitable style. It is important to give them room to share their heart and mind with you...so give them time, space and opportunity, and listen without judgment and with open ears and open heart.

Understanding does not mean you really know why or even what is causing their distress, but it does mean you are clear as to what they think their issues are and what help might be needed. Listen carefully with the goal in mind to understand.

Goal Two -- Presenting problems do not happen in a vacuum, and most people have tried many things. Some perhaps were successful in fixing their problem, some not so much. It is important to understand how they have tried to handle this problem. What has worked in the past might work in

the present and future. What hasn't worked might be so because they did not work it. If it was clearly an inadequate approach it may not be tried again, but at least it provides information on what will not likely work. It is all helpful information as you help the client grapple with possible solutions to their issues.

Goal Three -- We start the counseling process with a presenting problem. This presenting problem is identified by the client and expresses their view of the problem. Their view might be limited, but it is their view and is to be respected as the launching point for further inquiry. Remember, it is their life, their happiness or misery, and we are facilitators of a process in assisting them to see their problem and possible solutions through the interaction in the counseling office.

Goal Four -- When first starting the counseling process, it is reasonable to ascertain the person's reasons and motivation for seeking counseling. Is it seeking healing, symptom relief, vindication? What motivates most Christian clients is to overcome issues of sin; to be more Christ-like, build healthier relationships, or all of the above. Learning the motivation can be used to help move the person towards change.

Goal Five -- Every person has strengths and weaknesses. Some counselors focus on the apparent weaknesses of an individual, but most seasoned counselors try to find the strengths. They can then use them to help the client to grow, to change, and to overcome.

The strength to overcome is derived from within, but it is supported and encouraged from without. The Holy Spirit, God's word, the client's inner drive and determination can be the strengths necessary to overcome. Counselors call on the Lord and encourage the person to try new things, risk change, and grasp the hope that is within us in Jesus Christ.

Goal Six -- It is often difficult to see the forest for the trees as a person shares what is often a chaotic story. Thus, we must take time to evaluate the total problem.

The real problem may be larger or smaller than it seems to the client. The solutions may be simpler than once thought. Take time to listen to the whole story, often clarity comes as we stop and summarize the content.

Summarizing ensures everyone's understanding of the problem, but it also allows the client and the counselor to take another look. In summary you can

help the client clarify their life problem and understand their situation.

Goal Seven -- Finally, as Christian counselors we will want to look for the opportunity to include others; pastors, family and friends, in the Christian growth of the client. If they are not yet a believer in Christ, present the Gospel as opportunity allows.

Every new counseling starts with a hello, and it ends with a goodbye. Knowing what to say and not to say between hello and goodbye is the artform of counseling as ministry.

About the Author

Dr. Stan DeKoven is President and Founder of Vision International University and the International Training and Education Network www.vision.edu, and Vision Publishing www.booksbyvision.org.

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He is a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist in the State of California with over 35 years of professional services, specializing in:

- Crisis Ministry
 - Domestic Violence and Recovery
 - Substance Abuse Treatment
 - General Family problems with children and Teens.
 - Personal Coaching for men and women seeking improvement in vocation or relationship.
-

Dr Stan speaks on a wide range of topics including:

- Christian Business,
 - Christian Counseling,
 - Leadership,
 - Team Dynamics,
 - Personal Coaching,
 - Church Consultancy,
 - Setting up Local Church Counseling,
 - Teaching and Mission Ministries,
 - World & Urban Missions,
 - Youth,
 - Church Structure,
 - Personal and Corporate Vision.
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Dr Stan is in demand around the globe to speak in Leadership Conferences and to teach in Bible Colleges/Universities.

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