



Helping Clients Wrestle With God In Their Pain

Psalms of lament, such as Psalm 13, 39 and 88, to name a few, give us insight about what to do with our pain. They show that our pain should not be denied or simply asserted, but be processed with God. As counselors, we can help clients wrestle with God in their pain by first being mindful that our goal is to have them interact with God and not with us. Naturally, when clients have anger and hostility towards God, they would rather express it to us. But we can remind them to engage God, because we know that he is able to handle their outbursts, anger and despair. In this way, we can walk with our clients as they wrestle with God and go through the process of grieving and accepting.

In the imagery of wrestling with God, we find the following key principles and guidelines to consider when helping clients process their pain with God. This process of grieving and accepting can span over a number of sessions depending on the client's needs.

Wrestling involves grappling with an opponent and that requires direct contact.

We can set up clients to experience an encounter with God by asking them to use their imagination and place God in the counseling room. Then we can:

- **Help clients direct their uncensored protests to God.** Clients will be uncomfortable “being real” with God and telling him like it is. We can assure them that God can handle their raw words and emotions of desperation and pain.
- **Allow clients to plead with God.** Often in this process, clients will vacillate between begging God for help or blaming him for their pain and demanding relief.
- **Allow clients to cry in God's presence.** As Romans 8:26 suggests, sometimes the pain is too intense to articulate in words. So give clients the space to weep.
- **Resist the impulse to comfort them.** You don't need to defend God. Pray that the client will feel heard, understood and be able to receive his empathy.

Wrestling involves reciprocal action between the two participants.

- **Understand how the client is experiencing God's response.** As clients protest, plead and cry, it is important to understand how they are experiencing God. Ask clients how God is responding to them. What are they hearing from God? How are they perceiving God in the moment?
- **Respond to the client's experience.** Depending on the client's response, we can gauge where they are in processing their pain:
 - When clients report that they experience God's empathy in what they hear and perceive, then their wrestling with God is ending.
 - When clients report that God is silent or indifferent, then their wrestling – protesting, pleading and crying – should continue.
- **Help clients resume their wrestling.** Ask clients how they feel about God's silence or indifference. Ask them what they want to hear from God. Direct them again to tell God about it.

Wrestling can go for multiple rounds.

The process of grieving and accepting is not a one-time process. It can be a prolonged process requiring multiple sessions.

Wrestling with God leads to confident yielding to his love.

The grieving and accepting phase is complete when clients experience God's comfort. There is usually an internal shift where clients no longer perceive God as an opponent, but now see themselves as valued and loved. As a result, clients express to God feelings of relief and gratitude.

Arriving at this point transitions us to facilitate a process of repentance. In the security of God's acceptance, we can help clients see their brokenness more vividly, particularly their dependence on their strategies. Then we can help them gather the courage to admit, not just their woundedness, but also their need for forgiveness, drawing them into an even more intimate relationship with God.