

Connecting with the Layers of People's Pain

We have probably all met people whose heightened emotional response seemed out of the ordinary or proportion to the event. Instead of judging people in these moments, we can help them navigate the complexity of their grief if we prayerfully and patiently unlock these key moments of pain. Working with them to uncover the many layers that are related to the wounds allows them to fully acknowledge the pain and bring them to Christ.

The Three Es of Trauma are Event(s), Experience, and Effect. The counseling process creates the space for people to process all three Es over time. When someone comes into your office, sharing about their wounded experiences, try these steps to make sure you cover the full extent of the pain. We'll use an example to illustrate.

1. **Go slow.** As the person begins to talk about the *event* (the first E), slow them down and create pauses in between their story telling. This is important because people often want to rush past their pain. You can use reflective statements to slow the pace.

Imagine you meet Steve. As you get to know him, he tells you about being bullied as a child. You can respond with reflections.

"Wow, that sounds like it was so hurtful."

"I can imagine that being so disappointing/upsetting/frightening."

You can reflect on how you are feeling as you hear Steve's story: "That really breaks my heart hearing that."

When you pause and reflect with him, you are extending compassion and care, witnessing the grief he has been holding. You are acknowledging that what he lived through matters.

2. **Go deeper to look beyond the event.** You want to draw out more details of their story. Ask for permission to explore the pain in a deeper way because that creates felt safety and allows the client to check in if they can tolerate revisiting the *experience* (the second E). Getting their permission creates trust and helps them feel they are in a safe environment where they maintain a great deal of control. "I would like to explore that moment with you, is it okay if we talk more about that experience and what that was like for you?"

With Steve, at first glance, you might conclude that the pain related to the bullying is what needs your immediate attention. But we often stop at the most obvious cause of pain. As Steve is encouraged to explore, he shares that it was not just the bullying that affected him, but the silent bystanders and his parents' silence when he shared it with

them. As we examine his story more closely, we discover what continues to be a trigger and is also a place for needed healing.

3. **Bring Awareness and Make Connections.** After people begin sharing about their experience, you can ask questions that bring in more details and awareness. Here you begin to help them process the *effect* (the third E)—you are drawing out how they have made sense of the world and relationships. You can ask questions such as:

“What do you notice is coming up for you as you are talking about this?”

“What emotions come up for you as you are thinking about that story?”

How did it shape your experience with that person? With others? Or with God?

You ask Steve questions like, “How did your parents’ reactions make you feel about yourself?” “What about the bystanders’ reactions?” He shares that their silence reinforced his feelings of insignificance. Now, whenever he has experiences where he feels like he is being dismissed, it triggers an intense emotional response. You can help Steve make the connection to that pain from his past and his current emotional responses. In doing this detailed work, we peel back the complexity of how his wounds affected him and continue to affect him.

4. **Understand what hurt the most.** A key question we can ask is, “When you think about that experience now, what was the worst part of it for you?” This is where we want to be aware that it is not just the event itself that brings up the emotional response. It may be a tone of voice, a touch, the look on someone’s face, or the lack of action that holds the most pain and, through the unconscious memory, the body continues to respond to, which creates recurring triggers.

Steve: “The worst thing about the bullying was that when I told my parents about the incident, their lack of response and action made me feel that what I had just mustered the courage to share didn’t matter. I felt insignificant and that what happened to me is not a big deal.”

At this point, you have detailed information on how that experience affected the person. This is where you can invite Christ into the complexity of the painful *event*, *experience*, and *effect* so the person can receive deep, personal healing.

The pain for Steve is feeling insignificant, unseen, unheard, dismissed. He needs to bring those pains to God, wrestle with Him and find that God sees, hears and cares for his every need.

If you want to know more about how to help people wrestle with God in their pain, refer to the Redeemer Counseling [September 2019 Toolkit](#).