

Tips for Counseling Men

Three Obstacles Men Face When Coming to Counseling and Tips to Overcome Them

1. Past experiences have gone poorly

Sadly, too often men's experiences of reaching out and seeking an opportunity to disclose pieces of their sacred selves have resulted in a reminder of why it feels safer to remain anonymous. In their suffering, they then find ways of repressing their pain or coping with it on their own. How does this happen? It's not that pastoral caregivers don't care, but sometimes, they have difficulty simply listening, being present and empathizing. Pastors often feel responsible for the lives of their congregants and feel pressured to quickly deal with a problem, which can set them up for failure. Typically, people are more careful to provide understanding, compassion, and comfort for women, whereas with men, there seems to be a tendency to move more quickly to offering direction and guidance for solutions. When deciding to disclose, men may fear that the person they confide in will impose an immediate action or consequence, leading them to keep silent.

Tips for Overcoming Their Poor Past Experiences

1. **First, recognize that the man you are talking to probably has had some rough past experiences.** Don't be afraid to ask questions around that topic such as: *Have you ever reached out to someone in a situation like this before and if so, what was it like for you? Has it gone well or do you wish it had gone better? How would you have wanted it to turn out?* His answers will give you some clues of what he needs from you as he weighs how much he wants to disclose and how safe it feels.
2. **Build a new, corrective experience for him.** Be aware and thoughtful about the power differential between you. With that in mind, remember that you are not called or need to do too much beyond loving him well. Focus on cultivating safety, care, curiosity, and compassion, which are the foundations for a good counseling experience and incarnation of the Gospel. Express gratitude and reassurance that he is safe, not alone, and not entirely unique in his struggle. Convey genuine interest in what he is sharing and a sense that his story deserves the compassion that Jesus offers us.

2. Fear of Showing Up

Another common struggle for men is simply showing up as they are. All people have shame as fallen beings, but it shows up in a particular way, depending on our history of hurts and cultural experiences. Men may have been explicitly told by society as well as church culture what it means to be a man: to be strong, powerful, in control and not allow emotions to have too much influence. As a result, they may have specific shame messages, not feeling masculine enough, and not feeling



safe to show emotions and vulnerability. They learn to comply with social norms just to fit in and hide the parts they are ashamed of. However, when some find safety in being intellectual, they are also often shamed for not being sensitive enough. Either way they cannot win and there is a sense in which judgment, criticism, and rejection are real threats.

Fear of showing up can also come from past or present traumas, addictions, aspects of sexuality, etc. Shame is that inner voice that tells them there's a risk of rejection if they are exposed for who they truly are or what they have experienced. It is a condemning undercurrent that whispers if people really knew them, they would not stick around.

Tips for Overcoming Their Fear of Showing Up

1. **Be authentic yourself.** Don't feel like you need to have it all together. Your comfort level in being your whole self, along with your humble curiosity will set the tone for safety for him to show up as he is in the relationship. Not having all the answers or having limitations is normal and allowed as a caregiver.
2. **As a man begins to share, relate to where he is coming from and normalize his experience.** Validate him as much as you can in moments when a sense of vulnerability or reluctance is conveyed. This tells him, 'You can be who you are and we can figure out where to go from here when you feel safe to let me in.' It also gives him a reassuring message about who God is: no matter who you are or where you find yourself, God knows you and meets you just as you are. Invite him to be comforted and encouraged by the way Jesus showed his true self on earth, even in ways that were not always welcomed by others, breaking the norm of how a traditional man was expected to be.
3. **Be collaborative, curious, and interested in learning from this individual what they believe.** This helps create permission for him to show up and feel safe. *What about you or something in your life has given you the sense that it is not possible to show up as you are? How can I help create a safer experience for you? I'm encouraged that you've taken a first step in allowing that to happen here today. How can we enter into this together?*
4. **As you ask questions, think about how this man might see himself.** What experiences has this person had with other people that have influenced how he views himself? And how has this ultimately impacted his view of God and how he believes God views him? Working through his perspective and how he got there with him gives you the rare and unique opportunity to be a positive change in his life.

3. Fear of Disclosing Struggles

Men may have deep fears of disclosing struggles. They have not been given permission to be weak, to feel broken, or to have any sense of insecurity or pain. Even deciding to come to counseling or ask for help may reinforce a shame narrative that developed as they grew up. In my counseling



practice, many male clients take some time before they sense they are safe enough to disclose details of their lives they have never shared with anyone else. So many men share only the parts of themselves that they believe will allow them to remain safe and avoid deeper shame being reinforced.

Tips for Overcoming Their Fear of Disclosing Struggles

1. **Be patient.** Try to get a sense of why this man is reaching out to you now and honor that need. Recognize his courage in coming forward, knowing that he probably is fighting fear and hesitation. Fear is usually subconscious, though, so be aware that there is likely more than one layer to his story. His reason for coming to you may be overwhelming symptoms or a sudden consequence to his habits that he has kept a secret. The house of cards is falling. Reinforce that talking to you is a place where he can walk away without having regret for sharing part of himself with you.
2. **Withhold judgment.** Help him make sense of his life by listening well and understanding how his story has shaped his choices, pain, and view of self. Do this before moving to any action steps.
3. **Ask questions to help uncover his fears of transparency and disclosing.** *If you share more openly with me, what are you afraid might happen? What fears are connected with you wanting to talk about what is going on?*
4. **When needed, discipline like a loving parent.** In a church setting, the reality is there are times when consequences are necessary for the person disclosing. Like a parent who lovingly corrects a child, learn to strike a balance. Your main objective should be for him to get a real sense of God's tender love and grace—and yours—before moving into considering a response or consequence.

With God's help and guidance, you have the unique opportunity to meet the needs of men in your ministry well. It can be a powerful, transformational experience for men to share something hard without being humiliated or harshly punished. As you approach them with compassion and curiosity about their unique stories, you model God's heart for the men he loves and refuses to leave in isolation.