

Finding hope in Christ, not our failing strategies

“But being myself is not enough, so I have to push myself more and be perfect,” replied Susan¹ after I pointed out her tendency to be hard on herself. Many of us often feel similar to Susan: when we face difficult or painful situations, we just try harder at whatever we have been doing. But we struggle with frustrations and hopelessness when we attempt to go through life by relying on our own strength and knowledge.

When the Susans of the world walk through your door, they may want you to fix their broken system: “Pastor, make my anxiety less so I can do more at my job.” Be mindful that not all systems need fixing. Some need to be let go, in a sense, to die. Ministers often get a front-row seat to their congregants’ struggle with issues related to things and desires people use to shape their identity and put above God—their idols and idolatrous strategies. Here are steps to help people trade their failed strategies for the humble dependence of walking with Jesus and internalizing the Gospel.

1. **Consider that more is going on than what they first share.** When Susan first came, all she may have said is, “I constantly feel like I am inadequate and I have to work harder all the time.” Your instinct may be to address that initial problem only, but instead, dare to go deeper. Show compassion and lean into curiosity as you explore deeper aspects of a person’s experiences, emotions and beliefs. Over time, you will better understand those you minister to, strengthen your relationship with them, and enrich the care you provide to them.

To go deeper, start by asking questions such as:

- What is going well and what is not going well in your life?
- How do you feel when things are not going well?
- And what do you do when things are not going well?

2. **Identify the failing strategy.** As you listen to what is not going well, help the person connect the dots between situations that trigger them and the patterns of how they handle those moments. The first step toward identifying a failed strategy is to pay attention to words you hear people share like must, should, need, ought to. For example, I **must** be perfect; I **should** try harder; I **need to** be successful; other people **ought to** always do their best. Make note of these words and patterns.

¹ Name changed to maintain confidentiality

Those words allow you to identify their failing strategy and deeper idols. Those with the control idol, like Susan for example, may have a strong desire for things to be perfect and may be frustrated by mistakes and disappointed when things are not up to their standards. While it is not inherently a bad thing to have a desire for control, when this desire becomes excessive, it turns good things into ultimate things, forming their idolatrous strategies that eventually fail. Idolatrous strategies in this case can look like being highly critical of herself and others; Susan may also avoid taking risks or trying new things for the fear of losing control.

3. Uncover how the strategy developed by learning their story. Though these strategies are unhealthy and not working any more, they developed for a reason. Understanding why the person developed this strategy and having compassion for that is an essential step toward them letting it go. With Susan, you want to go with her into her past to recognize when and why that need to try harder developed. Here are areas you may want to explore with examples.

Purpose	Example
Explore how and why the strategy was formed.	<p>Who told you that you have to try harder and be perfect, whether by their words or how they made you feel?</p> <p>Think of a time when you first realized that you must try harder and be perfect. What was happening?</p>
Explore what the strategy meant.	How did trying harder and being perfect help you? And what did it get for you?
Explore how the person currently utilizes their strategy.	Where and when does this need to try harder and be perfect usually happen?

4. Help the person recognize the strategy is failing. The next step is to help the person explore:

- “Does this strategy still serve me or am I following an old routine?”
- “How does this strategy make me feel?”
- “When has this strategy not worked the way I wanted?”

As Susan becomes increasingly aware of the ineffective or negative consequences of her current strategies, such as burnout, anxiety, and self-criticism, she can start to consider replacing those strategies.

- 5. Create space to grieve the failed strategy.** Facing the reality of why we form a strategy and that this way of handling things no longer works is challenging. While coming to terms with the hard reality of failed strategies, anger is a common response and part of the grieving process. Normalize grief for Susan by making space for that pain and sorrow of her failed strategy, which can help her accept reality and move forward.

Here are some basics of creating space to grieve:

- Encourage the person to set aside time to focus on grieving, without distractions like electronics.
- Work with them to choose a setting to grieve, a place that they would feel comfortable and safe, so new or public places may be less ideal and not as conducive.
- Help them have compassion for their younger self and grieve the situation where they found it necessary to try harder (the first three steps).
- Have them name and grieve the ways the coping strategies held them hostage for years and the consequences they lived with as a result (the step above).

- 6. Help them turn to God instead to experience hope and freedom in Christ.** You can facilitate healing and renewal for those who have chosen to let go of their idolatrous strategy. Ask the person to reflect and meditate on questions like these to facilitate this exchange:

- How have I been trying to prove my worth by striving?
- How is God different from the person or circumstance who taught me I needed to be perfect?
- Heavenly Father, what do you want me to know about who I am in Christ? How do you see me?
- If I could believe that about God, how would I approach my need to always try harder differently?

Just as Jesus' death marked the end of an era and his resurrection marked the beginning of another, so letting go of old strategies brings hope for an identity transformation and a new way of living. With God as our ultimate redeemer, we can let go of our strategy to redeem ourselves. Old strategies die. Our hope and redemption are found in Christ.

Other resources: [FEB 2018: Identifying Core Hurts](#)