



The Four Processes of Counseling: Reducing Symptoms

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Experiencing symptoms indicates that something is wrong with our physical and spiritual well-being. Symptoms are similar to when we notice our car's indicator lights alerting us to trouble with the car engine. When we notice someone's distressing symptoms, we need to pay attention, be curious about what they may be signaling, and practice ways to help them move towards healing and repair. This Toolkit focuses on the process of Reducing Symptoms.

Symptoms related to mental health can be painful—physically, emotionally, and spiritually—and, at times, overwhelming. They are wide-ranging and vary in intensity, and can also include distressing thinking patterns. Some examples of physical symptoms are insomnia, headaches, stomach discomfort, fatigue, and a racing heart. Symptoms that impact our thinking patterns can come in the form of obsessions, ruminations, worried thoughts, and painful self-judgments. People can experience symptoms through their emotional life, in sadness, depression, and/or intense panic attacks.

The Importance of Reducing Symptoms

Meets the felt-need

Because symptoms are so uncomfortable, they often serve as the catalyst for people to seek counseling and help. They are a significant part of the person's felt need, and when we, as caregivers, do not adequately address them, the person's experience of pain and suffering will often feel minimized or dismissed. We want to provide person-centered care that meets individuals where they are, as an act of love and mercy.

Addresses the whole person

God created us as embodied souls with an interconnected physical body and spiritual soul. To focus solely on the spiritual aspects of someone's struggle underestimates the intricately connected nature of our souls and bodies and fails to fully honor God's design. Symptoms both show what has been going on in someone's heart and body, including past experiences of trauma, and if not treated, they will further affect all parts of them. Untreated symptoms can make someone feel even more isolated and disconnected from others and from God. They may wonder if other people, even their

loved ones, can truly understand their experience or know how to help. They may feel distant from God or even abandoned by Him.

Allows for the deeper work of transformation

Most importantly, without calming someone's symptoms, we cannot address the deeper causes of their emotional pain. When someone has a serious physical injury, such as severe bleeding, the doctors must first care for the immediate physical symptoms before they can stabilize the patient and treat the underlying causes of the injury. Similarly, only when we help reduce symptoms will the person we are serving have the emotional bandwidth to look within and discover the deeper reasons for their emotional pain.

As they feel better, we can help them begin to explore the connection between their emotional and behavioral reactions and past hurts, unconscious beliefs, and strategies that they have adopted over the years. Reducing symptoms creates space for them to make sense of their story and move toward the deeper processes of grieving and heart change, which we will explore in the next two Toolkits of this series.

Tips for Reducing Symptoms

Paying attention to and taking care of a variety of symptoms is the first step to reducing symptom pain.

Here are some ways we can help the people we serve move toward relief.

1) Physical Relief

When someone experiences bodily symptoms, it is a best practice to encourage them to get a

full physical evaluation with a doctor to rule out medical conditions. This is important because certain medical conditions, such as thyroid disease, autoimmune diseases, and neurological conditions, can cause psychiatric symptoms, including anxiety and depression.

As caregivers, we can also help by teaching and having them try somatic practices:

1. Paced, slow breathing or deep breathing techniques activate their internal calming response system. For example, have the person breathe in deeply on a count of 4 and exhale out at a count of 5.
2. Encourage them to add exercise to their routine, even just for a short period. Exercise releases endorphins that help people feel better and reduce stress hormones.
3. Teach ways to practice self-care. Have the person evaluate whether they have had enough time to rest and relax. Offer suggestions for good sleep hygiene, such as putting their phone away at a certain hour. Help them think through their diet and nutrition, as well as the healthy use of media.

2) Thought Life and Emotional Relief

1. Encourage the person to examine what is going on with their thoughts and emotions. You can coach them, "Take a moment during the day in a quiet place and notice what thoughts and feelings come up for you at this moment. See if you can name the thought and feeling." Journaling is another way to take an inventory of their thoughts and emotions, as it helps them slow down and recognize contributing factors to their moods.

2. Teach them that their emotions and thought life change over time and from one day to the next. Gently remind them that what they are feeling now may not be the same as how they feel tomorrow. When they feel an overwhelming emotion, teach them to name the feeling and acknowledge it; then, have them recognize it will pass.
3. Encourage them to submit their thoughts and feelings to God in prayer and find comfort in Scripture and the biblical stories of others who suffered.

3) Safe support and connection

1. People often experience isolation when they experience difficult symptoms. Despite the urge to isolate, encourage them to think of a safe person to check in with and to share their experience of symptoms and suffering. One consequence of living in a broken and imperfect world is that our perceptions of reality can be flawed. The person they confide in can compassionately bear witness to their suffering and also help them gain another perspective.
2. Based on the severity of the person's symptoms, consider referring them to professional counseling support and/or a psychiatrist. Keep an updated list of professionals or trusted mentors in your church community.
3. Provide them with 24-hour crisis hotlines such as 988, where trained professionals can lend a listening ear and helpful support.

Reducing Symptoms: Encouragement from Jesus' Ministry & Elijah

God reached out to sufferers in the Bible numerous times. In the New Testament, Jesus ministered to those with physical ailments by healing their symptoms and then extending an invitation to a relationship with Him. Even when people were not interested in following Him, He still extended grace by relieving their symptoms. In Luke 17:11-19, Jesus heard ten lepers crying for mercy. He immediately healed them all, even though only one came back to thank Him.

In the Old Testament, the prophet Elijah experienced significant distress after receiving a death threat from Jezebel (1 Kings 19:1-18). When he fled in terror to the desert in Beersheba, his prayer revealed his internal distress and physical exhaustion.

Elijah showed signs of depression:

1. *He was physically exhausted.*
2. *He told God that he had had enough.*
3. *He felt defeated and worthless: "I am no better than my ancestors."*
4. *He wanted God to take his life.*

When God met Elijah, He did not start by talking to him, either to assure or correct Elijah, but instead God provided physical care. An angel of the Lord offered Elijah hot bread and a jar of water, and encouraged him to rest. After ministering to Elijah physically, God revealed Himself to Elijah in a gentle whisper. He then helped Elijah by broadening his support and perspective, revealing to him that others were still serving God and showing him that he was not alone. God took care of Elijah's symptoms of depression and hopelessness by providing for him both physically and emotionally.

Likewise, as caregivers, we can care for the suffering of others by attending to their physical needs, being present, caring for their physical and emotional pain, and providing resources. We can lovingly reflect God's love by providing holistic care that meets both their physical and spiritual needs.