

Benner PhD, David G.

Strategic Pastoral Counseling

8. The Stages and Tasks of Strategic Pastoral Counseling

This chapter walks through the three stages of strategic pastoral counseling: encounter, engagement, and disengagement. It treats counseling as a personal relationship, not a technique, and gives practical tasks for each stage, from the first meeting to referral and ending well.

Key takeaways

- Counseling is relational, something done **WITH** a person, not **TO** them. The three stages use relational names: encounter, engagement, disengagement.
- **ENCOUNTER** (first session): the pastor joins with the person, sets time boundaries (max five sessions), hears the presenting concern in the person's own words, gathers brief relevant history, and agrees on a focus.
- The pastor's own qualities are the foundation: empathy (openness to the other's experience), respect (valuing them as an image-bearer of God), and authenticity (being genuine). These are means, not techniques.

- Pastoral DIAGNOSIS is spiritual, not just psychological. Malony's eight dimensions (awareness of God, acceptance of grace, repentance, response to God's leadership, church involvement, fellowship, ethics, openness in faith) are a framework for listening, not a checklist.
- Agree on a specific FOCUS, but goals can stay flexible (an end point or a process). Focus is required; measurable behavioral goals are not.
- ENGAGEMENT (the heart of counseling): explore feelings, then thoughts, then behaviors, and help develop new perspectives and coping strategies.
- Start with FEELINGS. Emotions are part of God's good creation, not a result of the fall. Avoided feelings are empowered; they must be faced and owned before they can change.
- THOUGHTS matter too. Faulty beliefs drive problems, but the pastor's job is often to bring Christian meaning to unchangeable situations, not just correct wrong thinking.
- BEHAVIOR: don't just tell people what to change (that's preaching, not counseling). The person must own the goals. Examine the payoffs of unwanted behavior; make new goals concrete, realistic, and incremental.

- **DISENGAGEMENT:** review progress, name remaining concerns, refer if needed, and end the relationship, holding to the agreed limits even when the person or pastor wants to continue.
- Refer when problems exceed your competence: medical/psychiatric symptoms, serious depression or mania, psychosis, organic disorders, sexual/personality/dissociative disorders, and entrenched marital/family problems. Referral is wisdom, not failure. If referring to a non-Christian therapist, pair it with spiritual support from a mature believer.

Passages worth keeping

“Counseling is not something one person does to another person. Rather, it is something one does with another person.”

States the core conviction that shapes all three stages: care is relational, not mechanical.

“But feelings that are avoided are empowered.”

The reason the engagement stage begins with feelings rather than skipping past them.

How it connects

The whole approach is incarnational: as Christ came alongside people, the pastor comes alongside the one who suffers, trusting that God is the true Counselor and remains present after the sessions end.

Scripture referenced

- **2 Cor. 1:3** -- God as 'the God of all coming alongside' (comfort); the model of the counselor who comes beside the hurting.
- **Gal. 6:2** -- Bearing one another's burdens; the pastor absorbs and shares the person's pain.
- **Gen. 6:5-6** -- God experiencing sorrow; used to show emotion is part of God's own character.
- **John 11:35** -- Jesus's grief; evidence that emotions mark a healthy, mature humanity.
- **Luke 24 (Emmaus road)** -- Model of walking with someone until their eyes are opened to God at work in their circumstances.