

Shepherding Women in Crisis

Part 1: The War Within

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I recently found out that two of my friends have had an affair. One of them is married. I was floored when I heard the news, and it compelled me to spend several hours that night with the Word and my notebook, praying to God and examining my own heart for seeds of sin that need to be uprooted and confessed before they can grow and bear ungodly fruit. I know that I am not immune to sin – any sin. None of us are. Therefore, we must wage war against our flesh and teach those whom we disciple to do the same.

In my quiet time last summer, I walked through various passages that address how to respond to temptation, and a recurring element that I found is that whatever sin we struggle with – whether it is materialism, pride, or pornography – the primary battleground is the mind. We will not live righteously if our minds are in the gutter. Whatever we sow, we will eventually reap (Gal. 6:8).

“For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace” (Rom. 8:5-6).

I remember as a child in the days of dial-up Internet dealing with the annoyance of pop-ups on our home computer. I was always quick to exit out of them. How do you respond with the pop-ups that spring to mind? What are the pop-ups that you’re allowing to linger open? This can be a huge warning signal of sin that needs to be addressed.

In combat, the side that keeps losing more and more ground will likely lose the battle. This is why we must be intentional in combating sin in our minds and not losing that crucial battleground to sin. In my own life, renewing my mind consists of setting my mind on things that are above (Col. 3:2) and filtering the things that come to mind. If a thought doesn’t pass the Philippians 4:8 test (whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, etc.), then my mind does not need to dwell on it. Meditating on a particular verse of Scripture, praying, replacing the pop-up with something that does meet the Philippians 4:8 test, physically getting up and doing something active – these are all tactics that I use in fighting for purity in my thought life.

We need to be practicing such tactics ourselves as well as teaching them to the women whom God has placed in our life. Share with them how you fight against temptation. Point them to Scripture’s instruction on the topic. Remind them that they cannot resist the propensity to sin on their own power; the Spirit provides the strength to withstand our fleshly desires.

Also, don’t think that you can deal with sin in isolation. We need community. Those around us might feel ashamed to confess what they are truly thinking and what sins they are battling, but we need to assure them of our love and support as well as to remind them of the need that we all have for accountability because of our sinful state. The goal is gentle restoration, not condemnation.

All of this magnifies how depraved we are, but it also spotlights how loving and merciful God is to save and to forgive us, knowing what our hearts and thoughts are like. Praise be to God for choosing to love wretched sinners like us!

Part 2: Where Do I Start?

Although there are many times women will need professional and even medical help to find healing, often God will use women like us to help re-direct hearts and minds into a healthy direction. These next two parts in the series will guide us to help women “put off the old” and “put on the new.” I’ve added other resources at the end of the posts to help you find more help on the topic of crisis.

“I am angry with God because of a broken relationship that He allowed to happen. Can I be a Christian and be angry with God?” “How can God love and forgive me when I have acted so terrible?” “What do I do when I do not feel like God loves me, is with me, or is protecting me?” These are all questions I have heard voiced from different girls in my small group in *one week*, and I have felt so burdened by the struggles and issues that they have been sharing and have been driven to intercede for them and to cry out for wisdom as I meet with them. This past spring was so heavy with different girls sharing about depression, family struggles, money worries, anger, breakups (5 in one month alone), insecurity, suicidal thoughts, and mental illness.

While I am not a trained counselor, I would like to share a tool that I have been using and teaching my girls to use to help process emotions and to get to the root of what is going on inside of them. Sometimes I do this with them, writing as they talk, and other times, I have them do this as “homework” with us discussing it the next time we meet.

1. Start by drawing a web with the person’s name in the large middle circle (see the graphic organizer in this post for an example of a web).
2. From there, draw out smaller circles in which you write the name of various emotions that the person is feeling such as anxious, angry, lonely, sad, etc.
3. Draw a line from the emotion and write out reasons and thoughts behind that feeling. For example, I might feel hopeless because I do not see an end to the current hardship that I am facing or I might feel apathetic in my faith because I do not see the purpose in continuing to pray or to read my Bible when my situation is unchanging. Write out all the thoughts/reasons associated with every emotion. Keep asking yourself “why.” Why do I feel this way? When do I feel this way, and why does this emotion pop up in that circumstance? This may or may not be done in one sitting.
4. Ask yourself if the thoughts behind your emotions align with the truth in God’s Word. It may take digging into Scripture and using the concordance to look up key words to identify truth. If the thoughts behind your emotions do not align with Scripture, then those thoughts point to root issues and need to be attacked and changed.
5. Throughout this process, pray for God to “Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Ps. 139:23-24). Pray for God to show you the sin inside as well as the lies that you are believing. Pray for His Spirit to give you understanding of Scripture and discernment to distinguish between truth and error. Pray for Him to help you as you fight sin and seek to attack sin at its root.

I use this tool in an effort to help others and myself “put off the old” and “put on the new” as Ephesians 4 and Colossians 3 discuss. People whom we disciple come with so many questions as well as emotional baggage, and even after several years as a small group leader, I still send up silent prayers to God as I am talking with girls because I never know what they will share or ask. While I do not know it all, I do have the Spirit and the Word and am so thankful that God promises to give wisdom to those who ask for it in faith (James 1:5)!

Part 3: Renewing the Mind

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In seminary, one of the most practical classes that I took was “Counseling Emotional Problems,” and in it, my professor emphasized the importance of “renewing our minds” as Christ-followers (see Eph. 4:21-23; Rom. 12:1-2). With any emotional issue or sin struggle, we battle temptation or lies in our minds, and our actions merely reflect the content of our thoughts. Therefore, for change to occur, you must begin at the root of the emotional issue or sin struggle – the mind.

So how do I “change my mind” and help women in crisis change theirs?

First of all, this will not be something they can do on their own power. We cannot pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps, heal, and deal with the root of depression or anger or an eating disorder on our own. We need the Spirit of God, the Word of God, and the people of God to help you. Seek the Lord in prayer, asking Him to help you. Dig into God’s Word and learn the truth. As a Christ-follower of the same gender be a woman with whom other women can share.

I also do not want to negate the use of biblical counseling and the proper use of medication when needed and used hand-in-hand with counseling. It is not a sign of weakness to talk to a counselor or to use medication. A counselor can help equip us to better understand and face various situations, and medicine when properly used can improve health and functioning, enabling the individual to better process and cope.

Second, remember the acronym “ABCDE.”

- **Actuating Event**

What is the event that triggers negative thoughts or invites temptation? For example, parents divorcing might cause feelings of insecurity or anger. Another example might be that a coworker or classmate’s thoughtless remark all of the sudden causes a woman to feel pressured, insecure, or ashamed. In these examples, the divorce and the careless remark serve as the actuating event that begins the chain reaction inside.

- **Belief about the Event**

You cannot change events that have happened in life, and they are often out of our control to begin with. While we cannot prevent or erase them, we can change how we think about them. To do this, we need to identify what our beliefs/thoughts are about the event. What emotions do those events trigger, and what are the thoughts behind or associated with those emotions? This is where using the web described in the previous post can be helpful in determining emotions and beliefs.

- **Consequences of the Behavior**

Our beliefs lead to consequences. If we am angry at God because He permitted a broken relationship to happen, then that anger can lead to depression, which can lead to a host of other consequences from health problems to strained relationships to suicidal thoughts. If we do not like the consequences, then we have to change what *leads* to those consequences – our beliefs!

- **Dispute the False Belief(s)**

Do our beliefs and thoughts align with the truth proclaimed in Scripture? Do we even know Scripture well enough to answer that question? We cannot identify error unless we know truth. Study Scripture. If a woman struggles with anger, use the concordance in the back of your Bible to look up verses that relate to anger, forgiveness, and love. Let verses about God’s character and God’s promises be what you encourage her to fill her mind with. This will not be as easy as it sounds, and perseverance will be needed because it is a daily battle

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to combat deceptive thoughts and to speak truth to ourselves. If we're not intentional in filtering thoughts that do not align with Scripture and replacing them with truth, then we will lose the battle.

- **Experience the Effects of the New Belief**

We can experience different consequences, positive consequences, when we dispute false beliefs.

Ephesians 4:21-23 states, “to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”

By renewing our mind, we are taking off the old self – our flesh – and putting on righteousness. In all of this, remember the grace of Christ – grace that He demonstrates in His loving sacrifice.

“Such grace should make us so in love with God that we cannot stand whatever in our lives re-soils us and offends him. Biblical grace makes us intolerant of evil in our lives” (R. Kent Hughes)

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Resources:

Women Reaching Women in Crisis book

Transformed Lives

A Trusted Friend

Women Reaching Women

Shepherding Women in Pain, Bev Hislop

I Will Carry You, Angie Smith

American Association of Christian Counselors