



It's Tuesday morning. You roll out of bed, shower, and head to your favorite coffee shop for your weekly meet up with a friend. The past few months have been hard. It's all finally starting to hit. You're tired, anxious, listless; overall feeling like you've just plateaued relationally, professionally, emotionally, and spiritually. Your friend graciously listens as they sip their vanilla latte.

You wait for a response, wondering if maybe you were a little *too* honest at 7:43 on a Tuesday morning. They smile and empathetically talk about how they feel similar things too. You have a good friend!

I think you should go to counseling.

Wait what? Where'd that come from? The conversation shifts to your friend sharing how they think you're struggling with depression, anxiety or addiction. They've been there too. And you need to get some help. *Well maybe that would be good, you think, Maybe it is a medication issue. Maybe I do just need a professional to help me out.*

As you part ways, your friend gives you a counseling office's contact information and shows you how to make the appointment. You finally know what to do.

Or do you?

These types of scenarios have become commonplace. For decades, counseling and therapy were seen as taboo, an accommodation for the weak. There was a real stigma, which for many, this still holds true today. But for younger generations, namely Millennials and Gen-Z, counseling has become fairly normal. Even to the point of Millennials being called the 'Therapy Generation'.

13% of 18-25 year olds have had a major depressive episode in the past year. 20% of all U.S. adults had any anxiety disorder in the past year. 31% experience an anxiety disorder at some point in their lives. 1 in 6 U.S. adults are on medication for a mental health issue. These statistics are concerning.

Therapy can be like a breath of fresh air for the suffocating heart. For many people, the Holy Spirit changes lives through counseling. They were stuck in extremely dark places and had tried every other type of help imaginable before entering into therapy.

Counselors can serve as God's visible means of grace in the world. Isaiah 9:6 describes the long-awaited Savior of the world, Jesus, as the 'Wonderful Counselor'. Jesus is our high priest who listens to us, empathizes with us and walks with us through our pain. Counselors can serve as a beautiful reminder of who God is and how He relates to us.

Counseling can be a wonderful gift. We should be thankful for the continual de-stigmatization of mental health issues like depression and anxiety. Gaining access to certain tools and medicines can be a gamechanger for many.

However, as a church family we need to be aware of the drawbacks that come with counseling being de-stigmatized and normalized. With these pitfalls, we want to have a plan as a church so that we can actually serve people in a helpful way that points them towards Jesus.

- 1. Friends referring friends.** The story mentioned above is not hypothetical. It happens all the time in churches. In some cases, mentioning counseling is totally valid. But there are dangers to friends-referring-friends.

Our first response to people after they tell us what's going in our life reveals much about what we believe is the solution. Do we believe that people ultimately need Jesus? Or do we believe people ultimately need practical tools and tips? Not that there's anything wrong with useful tools and tips, or even a professional counselor, it's just that we can be too easily inclined to think that they are the solution. Too often when telling someone to go to counseling we end up labeling someone incorrectly and giving them a crutch instead of a helping hand.

We ultimately need to be pointing people to Jesus, not therapy. There are too many Christians going to a therapist just because they are struggling to follow Jesus in a broken world. It should be no surprise to believers that we experience trials, painful emotions and suffering.

This is part of the Christian life. This is why we need the promises of God. This is why we need community. This is why we need constant reminders of the Gospel. We'd recommend giving your friends some verses and encouragement before giving them a counselor's phone number.

As a community of believers our first inclination needs to be to step in and help. You have the ability to care for your friends! This may mean entering into painful, stressful conversations in which you don't have all the answers. You may even think, "I don't have the tools to help this person!"

As a fellow believer in Jesus, you have more than just a few tools, you have the Spirit of God living in you. You have access to Him, ask Him for help when it

comes to caring for your friends. Open your Bible and read the words of the living God over a struggling friend.

Don't be afraid of messy situations or emotions, or the awkward scenarios where you don't know what to say. Sometimes you just need to be present with people. Sometimes a hug is enough. If you've pushed more people to therapy than you have prayed over them, it might be time to re-evaluate your approach.

And there are times when counseling is on the table. We have a process. Instead of making a judgement call based on your opinion or experience, the next step is to set up a meeting between your friend or group member and a Citizens' pastor.

This allows us to actually get them the help they need and set them up with the right people.

2. Counselors are the new pastors. If you've been to therapy and stick with it, you know that over time you begin to really respect your counselor. They know everything about you. They have given you guidance in some of the toughest seasons of your life. It would make a lot of sense to give them a large voice in your life. Once again, we need caution.

Counselors are not pastors. This may seem obvious, but there's a tendency to mix this up. Counselors have a very unique relationship with clients. Different from almost every other relationship, they only see you individually (most of the time) and only hear your perspective on your life. This means:

- They actually don't know what other people think of you.
- They don't see how you treat others.
- They don't know if you're actually a good husband/wife or parent.
- They don't see how hard you work.
- They don't see how you manage your money.
- They don't know your parents.
- They don't know about how you actually interact with people at your church.
- They DO get paid by you.

What this means is that their perspective is limited and revolves primarily around your perception of reality. The danger is that when you start saying things like:

- “My counselor said I shouldn’t serve as much because of boundaries.”
- “My counselor thinks our marriage should look like this...”
- “My counselor thinks my pastor/church shouldn’t have done this...”
- “My counselor talked about how the Bible says this...”
- “My counselor thought it was a great idea for us to move.”

These insights can be incredibly limited. Yet we end up talking about them as if they were words from the Bible. Or whenever our actual pastor or community teach/tell us something, we don’t listen because our counselor told us something different.

Counselors are wonderful, but they are not the spiritual authority in your life, nor are they your primary community. They are a singular voice, who know the deepest things about you, but probably know very little about what your life actually looks like. They are not your “God-given spiritual authority”. They also won’t give an account for your soul before God. Both of those responsibilities fall on the elders of your church.

Your pastors were given authority over you by God. They answer to Him for your soul. Your counselor doesn’t. They shouldn’t get the last word in your life.

3. Medicine. As we mentioned earlier, many adults are on medicine for mental health issues. We thank God for His grace that there are medicines that allow for healing and growth in the midst of dire mental health issues. However, we again advise caution.

We like to think of this in terms of ‘on-ramp/off-ramp’. Currently it is very easy to see the on-ramp into medicines for depression or anxiety. Saying ‘you should be on medicine’, is almost as common as the, ‘you should try counseling’. It’s quick and it makes things better fast.

These medications provide alleviation for severe symptoms of depression and anxiety. In doing so, they allow for the taker to function and work on the deeper issues at play. But a problem arises when that work doesn’t happen. When the medicine becomes the solution. Too often are there men and women who have been on antidepressants or anti-anxiety meds for years and years. This is dangerous.



This needs to be an intentional process, where the therapist/psychiatrist are moving the client towards the off-ramp. This may take months or years, but it should be the goal.

We are grateful to be a church where 'counseling' is not a word we're afraid to say. Counseling is a gift and that's how we want to use it. Counseling can be a means of God's active grace in our lives, where we work to see Him more clearly and seek freedom from the things that ail us.

We want to make sure we're shepherding people well in the midst of trials and difficulties, not offloading the 'real' struggles of our people onto the professionals. That's not how we think the church works. Here's how it works:

1. The primary means of care in each other's lives are the Christians we are in Community Group with.
2. Occasionally there are things where elders have to step in and provide further care.
3. Sometimes we will do off ramps where someone sees a counselor for a season to get some help.

We believe we're the people of God, rescued and redeemed by the blood of Jesus, walking through trial, depression, anxiety or anything else by faith and by each other's sides. We want to do this to the best of our abilities, prayerfully helping our people get the help they need, whether it be in a Community Group, a pastor's office or in a counseling center.