

Pastoral Counseling Network Workshop: Comprehensive Pastoral Counseling Case Study

Ted has come to your church, desperate for help. You invite him into your office and ask him to tell you his story, and he gladly obliges. He is a 43-year-old married man, a father of four, and an office manager. After some initial small talk, he explains that he is suffering from chronic worrying, so intense that he has difficulty concentrating on tasks at work, focusing on what others are saying to him, and sleeping for more than two to three hours a night. He says that at times, it feels like his head is racing, like his brain is on over-drive, and he gets an almost painful constriction in his chest. As you try to gain some background information, you find out that he has a number of what might be called “high-strung” relatives, and his Dad once told him that he took medication for anxiety throughout his 30’s, 40’s, and 50’s.

Ted was an only child. His parents were both strict, rigid Christians and had extremely high standards for Ted’s behavior and performance in school (e.g., throughout high school, they challenged him to become a medical doctor, even though he was, at best, a B student). They often argued with each other, and privately both of them often seemed like they were on the verge of “losing it” or taking off. He remembers his mother saying, whenever someone would raise a question her about anything she did, “You would all be better off without me!” But they would also criticize mercilessly whatever he did (grades, chores, performances in school). He describes his childhood as feeling like he was always “walking a tightrope,” trying constantly to keep them happy.

They live in the same town now, he says, and he can’t stand to be around them. But he can’t tell them that, he complains, because it would devastate them, so he remains the dutiful son, visiting them every weekend and calling them during the week.

He mentions in passing that he sometimes hears a voice yelling at him. When that happens, he gets immobilized, just sits in a chair at home, and loses track of time, until it goes away.

He doesn’t feel loved by his wife or his children, in spite of being run ragged on the evenings and weekends, taking them places. But he concedes he doesn’t deserve their love. He says his wife also complains about him continuously, and he secretly hates her. But his way of coping with all this is to watch a lot of television and try to stay out of everybody’s way.

Towards the end of your time together, he adds that for the past year he has been making weekly visits to pornography websites, and he’s very afraid that his wife will catch him at home or he’ll be discovered at work, but he hasn’t been able to stop. He says he sometimes goes to church, but he admits he rarely spends any personal time with God. He believes that the Bible is true and that God loves everyone and sent Jesus to die for our sins, but he feels that God is just as disappointed with him as everyone else is.

Questions regarding the Four Dimensions of Human Beings

I. Assessment of Possible Embodied/Biological Causes

Are there indications that there may be some possible problems with his body, including his physiology, that could be contributing to Ted's difficulties? Is there possibility of addiction? Are there physical conditions that could be impacting his life (e.g., chronic pain or illness, or a physical handicap)? Could there be problems neurologically?

II. Assessment of Psychosocial Issues

Are there memories of abuse or evidence of insecure attachment? Are there problems in his behavior or thinking patterns, memories, social skills, views of himself, views of others, personality problems, relational problems? Is there evidence of trauma or poor relationships from childhood or the past that may be affecting him? What is the quality of the person's relationships, work performance, current family life? Is the person more positive or more negative emotionally? What are the person's primary negative emotions?

III. Assessment of Personal-Communal/Ethical Issues

Does the person seem to have much self-awareness? Do they seem deceptive or self-deceived? Does Ted take responsibility for him (e.g., for his sins, brokenness, or relational struggles)? Is he able to enter into relationship with others very deeply? Does he have close friends? Is he engaging in ongoing sinful activities? How repentant does he seem to be? How defensive is he when challenged? Does he tend to ask for forgiveness? How much guilt and shame does he carry? How much of the guilt/shame is false vs. true?

IV. Assessment of Spiritual Issues

Does it appear that Ted is a Christian? Does he have a close, personal relationship with God, or does it seem more formal/intellectual or a function of his upbringing? Are there problems with the way Ted views God? Is there a gap between how he acts religiously and where he's actually at spiritually? Does he have unresolved anger at God? Does he understand anything about union with Christ? What are possible idols in his life? What is his devotional life like? How much focused daily time is spent with God? Does he engage in meditation?