**1. Examine the Struggle – Discern (Listen & Question)**

*Two big questions here are How am I examining and What am I examining.*

**HOW AM I EXAMINING?**

In the book Instruments in the Redeemers Hands Paul Tripp says, *“As you ask questions that flow from a biblical perspective on people and their problems, your counselees are required to think more biblically about themselves and their situations. Your goal is to bring the counsel to a greater biblical self-awareness. As the data gathering proceeds, the counselee should be learning new things before any actual instruction takes place.”*

**Discern by Gathering Data** *“Not to gather data simply to find out where change should take place; rather, data gathering done well becomes a part of the change process.”*

* + **Intake/Assessment**. This is where the counselor receives the self-evaluated data. The counselee will give you their perspective of their struggles, if they consider themselves a believer, how are their spiritual disciplines, communicate their goals in counseling, and more.
  + **Verbal Commuication**. This is where the counselor asks intentional, clear, and relevant questions to gain a better understanding of the counselee’s situation*.*
  + **Non-Verbal Communication**. This is where the counselor can observe the body language of the counselee. How are their feelings being expressed in their posture, participation, facial expressions, attentiveness, etc.

**Discern through Listening Well.** Listen means to pay attention, to hear something with thoughtful attention: give consideration, to be alert. We want to listen carefully & compassionately to seek clarity.

* **Obstacles to healthy listening:** Thinking about the next question, Distracted/Distractions, Biased listening, Interruptions, Over talking, thinking of how this applies to you, assumptions.
* **Benefits to healthy listening:**
* **Demands** patience, concentration, focus, and ability to keep quiet
* **Demonstrates** respect, compassion, genuine interest, and a willingness to connect and understand
* **Destroys** misunderstandings, confusion, false assumptions.
* **Discerns** the information when gathering data for clarity to provide wise counsel.
* **Listen for what anxiety might be saying to them and then replace with the Truth**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Anxiety might be saying…** | **Replace with the Truth…** |
| What if… | Even if…I can trust in God |
| There is no hope in this situation | My hope is in Jesus, who is active in my life |
| I can’t do it anymore | The Holy Spirit is my helper and my strength |
| There is too much to do…  I’m overwhelmed… | God has created me with a plan and a purpose, I can seek His guidance and follow His lead. |
| I’m the only one who cares about this… | God cares, He hears my prayers, He is in this situation, and is near. |
| I don’t feel like it OR I’m afraid… | My emotions are not my authority |
| What’s the point? | *I am called to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to Him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of Him. I can only do this through His strength. (Reference Colossians 1:10-12)* |

*“You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you.*

*Trust in the LORD forever for the LORD GOD is an everlasting rock.” Isaiah 26:3-4*

**WHAT AM I EXAMINING?**

**Examine their HEART –** what is their inner state (condition) of their anxiety. What is ruling their heart (their thoughts, affection, actions)? What are their ungodly masters or functional gods? As biblical counselors we want to navigate the conversation to identify and reveal what or who actually controls their actions, thoughts, emotions, attitudes, expectations, desires, etc.

1. Discern their **thought patterns**. Our thinking can direct our behavior and feelings, so it is important to understand to help in changing our behavior *(Prov. 4:23, Mark 7:14-23, Eph. 4:17-24, Rom. 12:2).*

* What do they think about throughout the day? How is this impacting their daily tasks?
* What are the facts in the midst of their thinking/feelings?
* What thoughts are they communicating to themselves that need to be replaced with truth?
* Are they thinking of things that are pure, honorable, true, worthy of praise (Phil 4)?

1. Discern their **priorities**. Help to identify what or whom they are most committed to and then seek to regain a commitment to the gospel, to Christ as their guide, to sufficiency of Scripture, to loving their neighbor, to righteous living *(Eph. 2:4-10, 2Pt. 1:3, 2 Tim. 3:16-17, Jn. 13:34-35, Ps. 51:10, 1 Cor. 6:9-11).*
   * What/whom seems to be most important to them right now/in this situation?
   * What do they find themselves doing the most? Sleeping, watching TV, working, kids, shopping?
   * What is the purpose, motives, that drives their daily tasks, decisions, emotions?
2. Discern their **emotions**. Emotions are God-given. God is an emotional being. God the Father experiences anger. God the Son weeps. God the Spirit grieves. Having emotion is a result of being made in God’s image and likeness. However, when sin entered the world it affected our emotions. So, like the rest of human experience our emotions also need redemption. Our goal is to learn what our emotions are communicating and then how to evaluate them in light of truth, like we did in the chart earlier.
   * Emotion can be defined as a heart response (inner man) accompanied by a feeling such as anger, worry and fear OR body sensation (outer man) such as; pain, sleepiness, or illness.

* *What feelings are they expressing about their anxiety?* Emotions are normally communicated in the language of feelings. The words “I feel” has become an expression used for anything and everything people may experience, think, or want. There are 4 different uses of the word “feeling”. When someone says “I feel” you will need to examine how it’s being used[[1]](#footnote-1).
* Describing sense perceptions (“I feel tense” if muscles knot or stomach churns),
* Expressing emotions (“I feel angry, anxious, happy, thankful”),
* Revealing thoughts, beliefs, attitudes (“I don’t feel the Bible applies to my situation”)
* Conveying desires (“I don’t feel like talking to him”).
* *How much of what they do is driven by how they ‘feel’?* The words “I feel” are typically communicated with authority: “If I feel it, then it’s inherently true, right, and valid.” People act like their “feel likes” are authoritative impulses…we must beware that deceptive desires determine choices. Most of our “Felt needs” are idolatrous or selfish desires, which are meant to be killed by the Spirit, not indulged. God designed your emotions to be gauges, not guides. They’re meant to report to you, not dictate you.

1. Discern by looking for **habits**. Perseverance is about daily and weekly routines of regular life – spiritual disciplines or habits of grace - so it’s essential we develop and sustain cultivating life-giving habits. Healthy habits keep us on track even when we don’t ‘feel’ like it. You can help offer practical suggestions here and help them steward their time.
   * Are their current habits, repetitive behavior, that could have led to their anxiety?
   * Has their anxiety caused unnecessary stress, procrastination, isolation?
   * What patterns or habits have developed that is focused on self and not on the Lord?

**Examine their SITUATION –** what external factors are impacting their circumstances.

1. Discern their **current condition**. We will experience seasons of change, transition, loss, new experiences, health changes, etc. that will impact our heart and lives. We will need to grasp what outward circumstances could have contributed to their anxiety or emotional state.
   * What changes have happened in your life recently? New baby, new job/extra work/possible job loss, financial strains, relationship conflict, big decision or transition happening? What is their unknown?
   * Socially: What is their current support system for accountability, encourage and discipleship? What do the relationships in their life look like, or lack of?
   * Physically: Any new changes in their health? How active are they? How important is nutrition to them? Last visit to the doctor for a check-up? Are they taking medication?
   * Spiritually: What is their spiritual maturity? Clarify their salvation so you can communicate in the right place of their understanding. Is there a lack of spiritual disciplines that could be hindering them from walking in the Spirit (Gal. 5:16-26)?
2. Discern their **past**. Any past events that are contributing to their anxiety? Examine to see if anything is hindering them from moving forward*. Your past can potentially hinder your growth in Christ in at least six different ways; unanswered questions, unaddressed hurts, unsolved problems, unwise choices, unconfessed sin, unlearned lessons.* A good book to help with that is *Putting your Past in its Place* by Steve Viars and we have a handout in the ABC resources that is great to use as homework.

**2. Encourage with Scripture – Direct/Teach (Instruct)** *Now that you have listened well while asking good questions (examining the struggle), the hope is you understand the counselee as a person and the details of their situation well enough to make a concrete application of Scripture*.

In Session: Read Proverbs 3:5-8 – how are they trusting God alone in their situation. What areas of their life are their responsibilities to steward well and what areas are they trying to control that should be taken to God in prayer? Help them put their trust in the Lord and not lean on their own understanding.

Homework: Concerns/Responsibilities worksheet, Memorize Proverbs 3:5-8, Read Trusting in God by Jerry Bridges

In Session: Read Ephesians 4:17-32 –despite how we ‘feel’ scripture reveals what we should put off and put on. Walk them through the ‘Y’ chart to help them see their heart, their choices ‘point of decision’ and how that is either pleasing God or pleasing self. It might be hard at first to create new habit, but it will get easier.

Homework: Handouts ‘Y’ chart & Put off/Put on worksheet

In Session: Read Isaiah 40:28-31; 41:10 – discuss the Attributes of God and encourage them in their anxiety. Examples:

* **V28 – God is Eternal.** Things around us are wasting away, unstable, uncertain, untrustworthy, unsafe, unpredictable…we can rest in knowing that God is none of these things. He is eternal, he is unchanging, he is stable, he is limitless, he is without bounds. *In our anxiety we can trust in God’s promises, that are forever. God’s love is everlasting, His goodness, comfort, faithfulness, peace, joy, and graciousness are all everlasting. It doesn’t change based off how we feel.*
* **V28 – God is Creator -** His sovereignty is not removed from His creation, he created us to be in relationship with him. *I know in your anxiety it might seem like God isn’t with you, but God is near and active, supplying all you need when you need it to endure this struggle.*
* **V28 – God is all-powerful.** God has created us with limitations, we will grow weary and faint. God doesn’t, he has unlimited power. *You might feel weak, that you can’t do it but God is the giver of power, He is the one who increases and renews our strength. Let’s go to Him together.*
* **V28 – God is Incomprehensible** which means we can never fully understand God. God’s greatness is beyond searching out or discovering; it is too great to ever be fully known. **God is all-knowing.** God knows us, everything about us (Ps. 139:1-6), and his knowledge is without limitation (Jer. 32:17). *In our struggle we typically try to figure things out so we can fix them, but we don’t have to because we can go to the one who knows it all and that has a plan & purpose for our life.*

Homework: God Attributes book by Brad Hambrick in Gospel for Real Life Series.

**Resources for further study on Anxiety:** *The End of Anxiety* by Josh Weidmann, *Running Scared* by Ed Welch, *Overcoming Fear, Worry, and Anxiety* by Elyse Fitzpatrick, *Managing Your Emotions* by Amy Baker

1. David Powlinson, “What Do You Feel?” in *Seeing with New Eyes* (P&R, 2003), 212-214. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)