

You Don't Know What You Don't Know: Three Wrong Assumptions

By Robert Jones | March 5, 2018

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Your pastor asks you to counsel Heather, another church member. While he lacks details, he tells you that Heather's husband Ken left her to move in with another woman. You agree to meet with Heather.

As you prepare for the session, you rightly wonder, "What is Heather experiencing?" An obvious list comes to your mind:

- Shock
- Confusion
- Fear
- Embarrassment
- Sadness
- Anger
- Revenge
- Jealousy

The Right Answer

What is Heather experiencing? Here's the right answer: "I don't know."

While she *might* be feeling one or several of these emotions, there might be others you have not considered. Maybe Heather feels guilty—like a country song, she believes that she somehow drove Ken into the arms of another. Maybe she feels vindicated—she suspected infidelity, but Ken denied it and called her crazy and paranoid. Maybe she feels relieved—maybe Ken was abusive, or maybe Heather has her eye on another man.

You simply don't *know* what Heather is feeling until you enter Heather's world and listen—until you meet with her to hear *from* her what has happened and how she is responding.

The problem I am raising is the problem of assumption-making, the relationally-destructive practice that some have dubbed "assume-icide." While it does not end lives the way homicide and suicide do, assume-icide can hinder effective counseling

Bad-assumption Source #1: Your Personal Experience

There are at least three sources from which we might draw wrong assumptions. One is our own experience: "I know what Heather is experiencing. The same thing happened to me. I was abandoned." This leads to our well-intended but unwise comments like, "I know what you're going through. I went through the same thing. I've been there." Let me say it gently but directly:

Counselor, the person you are counseling today is not you. You have never been where your counselee is, and you don't know what she is going through.

Of course, you may have been in similar circumstances, but you must not, as Paul David Tripp warns us, "confuse *similar* experience with *identical* experience."^[1] No one's experience is the same as yours.

Here's a far better goal: rather than declaring to your counselee, "I understand what you are feeling," you listen so well that your counselee—not you—concludes, "You understand what I am feeling." Let your counselee affirm your empathy and understanding; you should not assume or assert it.

Bad-assumption Source #2: Your Observations and Training

We all have gleaned insight from watching people respond to life's problems; and you may have had formal training in counseling, so you are tempted to assume, "I know what Heather is experiencing. My biblical counseling professor talked about abandonment in our marriage counseling class. I read a case study on it in a biblical counseling book." But here's the problem:

Counselor, the person you are counseling today is not the person referred to in that classroom or book.

I like to put it this way: I don't counsel "alcoholics" or "adulterers" or "survivors." I counsel Joe (who gets drunk), Ana (who committed adultery), and Todd (who was abused as a child). I counsel *people* not case studies, categories, or DSM codes.

That's not to say that case studies have no value. They do. Case studies expand our awareness of the problems we might encounter. They suggest issues to recognize and explore. They remind us of the many, varied, idiosyncratic faces of sin and suffering. But they are no substitute for knowing Heather. Misused, they can morph our actual counselee into someone who doesn't exist.

Bad-assumption Source #3: Your Previous Counseling

If you have counseled for several years, you likely have encountered similar types of counseling problems. But that opens us to a third assume-icidal temptation: "I know what Heather is experiencing. I have counseled several women who have been abandoned by their husbands. These women always struggle with...." Again, we must sound the warning:

Counselor, the person you are counseling today is not one of the people you counseled previously.

This temptation carries a double danger. I might not only assume that I understand Heather, but also assume that I should counsel Heather in the same way I counseled others. Both assumptions are wrong. As someone humorously put it, experience is the ability to make the same mistake with increasing frequency and mounting confidence. One size does not fit all in clothing or in counseling.

The Better Way

What is the alternative to assumption-based counseling?

First, view Heather as an individual person. Like our Good Shepherd who knows His sheep by name (John 10:3), and like His apostle who ministered in specific ways to each individual (1 Thes. 3:11; 5:14), we must see each counselee as unique. We must never overlay anyone else's experience onto Heather's.

Second, build a warm, welcoming relationship with Heather—one that invites her to trust you and honestly open herself up so you can know her.

Third, listen well—actively and attentively, caringly and compassionately—to Heather. The Bible urges careful listening: "The one who gives an answer before he listens—that is foolishness and disgrace for him" (Prov. 18:13). Nothing is more God-like: "I have observed the misery of my people in Egypt and have heard them crying out. . ." (Exod. 3:7). Heather must feel heard.

Fourth, suspend all opinions until you have listened well to Heather and interacted with her. We must make sure that we base any and every conclusion about Heather solely on the insights we gain from our active, attentive, caring, and compassionate listening to Heather.

While the Bible gives us absolute truths that apply to every person, no two people are the same. Heather's experience is not the same as any personal experience you had, any case study you read or heard about, or any person you previously counseled.

Heather is Heather, and no one else. Counsel *Heather*.

Questions for Reflection

Which of the three bad-assumption sources do you most often depend on? Think of times when you committed "assume-icide." Which error did you make? How can you grow in your ability to listen more carefully and to form conclusions that are based solely on knowing *this* counselee?

[1] Paul David Tripp, *Instruments in The Redeemer's Hands* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P& R Publishers, 2002) p.170.

About the Author