

Helping the Doubt-Filled Counselee

Approach –

You'll find yourself sitting with believers who struggle with...

- Doubts about their own salvation
 - Doubts about whether or not God truly loves them after they're saved
 - Doubts about whether or not all their sins have been forgiven... all of it!
 - Doubts about who they are in Christ now and this glorious new identity that is theirs
 - Doubts about whether or not it's possible for them to truly change in certain areas of their life
 - Doubts about God being in control of all things
 - Doubts about God being with them in the midst of suffering
 - Doubts about whether or not God hears and answers prayer
- So, do you know how to help a counselee who's filled with doubts?

I. Give Them Permission to Express Their Doubts

Giving your counselee a safe place to voice their doubts is one of the best things you could do for your counselee.

When you examine the book of Job, as well as the 53 Psalms of lamentation, you realize that God is more comfortable than we are with the messy process of confusion and disorientation that some of our counselees are going through.

“People often ask real and raw questions, especially early in a grieving and suffering process, but they are not necessarily looking for you to provide an ‘answer’ just at that moment. But with time, if the questions, doubts, and confusion remain, and if you have been a faithful and patient helper, perhaps the person will trust you to help them wrestle through these questions.” *Saints, Sufferers, & Sinners*, Michael R. Emlet, p. 87

So, ask God to help you get comfortable with doubt. Because allowing your counselee to wrestle with doubt, out loud, in the presence of another trusted brother or sister can actually be the birth-pangs of a deepened faith.

“Like fear, doubt is not in and of itself a bad thing... He created us an intolerance of irrationality and contradiction. Doubt can cause you to ask profoundly important questions. Doubt will make you think deeply about very important things... Because doubt drives us to know and understand, it has the power to lead you to the One who knows and understands everything. Your capacity to doubt can drive you to God...” *Suffering*, Paul David Tripp, p. 91

II. Be Merciful in the Face of Their Doubts

Two of the brothers of Jesus give us some insight on how to best serve people who struggle with doubts.

Jude 21-22 “²¹ Keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. ²² And have mercy on those who doubt.”

The Greek word for ‘Doubt’ in v. 22 means ‘a wavering uncertainty’ or to ‘be at odds with yourself.’ This person has been thrown off balance. They’re in a state of internal disequilibrium that is most unpleasant.

So, He doesn’t say rebuke them, condemn them, or be frustrated with them. He tells us to have mercy on them.

James 1:6 “... the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind.”

Anyone who struggles with doubt can resonate with this word picture. They don’t have a fixed point of reference, so they feel tossed, with their emotions churning and going in different directions.

Also, don’t make the mistake of treating doubt as simply an intellectual problem, because doubt impacts your counselee on every level: emotionally, spiritually, and physically.

III. Don’t Treat Their Doubts the Same As You Would Unbelief

It’s possible for doubt to degenerate into a settled unbelief, but don’t be guilty of assuming that’s where they already are.

There’s a difference. Unbelief is clear about where it stands. It’s unambiguous in its denials of certain truths; whereas doubt – by definition – is unsure of its position.

Jesus and His disciples encountered hardened unbelief.

Mark 6:3-6 “... And they were offended at Him... and He could do no mighty work there... and He marveled because of their unbelief...”

Acts 19:9 “But some were hardened and did not believe, but spoke evil of the Way...”

But unbelief is different than the person who wants to believe but is still struggling with some doubts.

Mark 9:23-24 “Jesus said to him, ‘If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes.’ Immediately the father of the child cried out and said with tears, ‘Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!’”

“I am often surprised to find how my doubts can mingle so freely with my faith. Even at moments of most intimate prayer, a doubt - like a fly tapping and buzzing against the windowpane - can flicker at the edge of my thinking.” *Your God Is Too Safe*, Mark Buchanan, p. 61

IV. Take Time to Unpack Their Doubts

Ask some probing questions that can expose what’s feeding their doubt.

- How long have you been thinking and feeling this way?
- Is there an incident or triggering circumstance that sent you down this path?
- Is there something you’ve been taught from the Bible that disturbed you far more than comforted you – and it sent you down this path?
- What would you say are some of the themes of your life so far? And how have you been connecting the dots or interpreting what’s been going on in your life?
- Where have you experienced disappointment or feel like God’s promises have not proven true for you?

A. It Could Just Be Spiritual Immaturity

How long they’ve been a Christian, where they’ve gone to church, and what their spiritual diet has been will be factors in how much they struggle with doubts.

2 Peter 3:18 “Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ...”

B. It Might Be a Spiritual Attack from Our Enemy

One of Satan’s top priorities is to keep on harassing and confusing believers with his accusations and condemnation.

Revelation 12:10 “And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, ‘Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God.’”

1 Peter 5:6-8 “⁶ Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, ⁷ casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. ⁸ Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.”

C. It Might Be that They're Guilty of Listening to Their Feelings Instead of Talking to Themselves

There are places in the Psalms where the Psalmist is talking to himself and exhorting himself, not other people.

Psalm 103:1-5 “Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless His holy name! Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.”

Psalm 42:5, 11; 43:5 “⁵ Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise Him... ¹¹ Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise Him... ^{43:5} Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise Him, my salvation and my God.”

“I suggest that the main trouble in this whole matter... is this, that we allow our self to talk to us instead of talking to our self... Have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you’re listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself? ... You have to take yourself in hand, you have to address yourself, preach to yourself...”

And then you must go on to remind yourself of God, Who he is, and what God is and what God has done, and what God has pledged Himself to do. Then having done that, end on this great note: defy yourself, and defy other people, and defy the devil and the whole world, and say with the Psalmist in Psalm 42:5, ‘Why so downcast, O my soul? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him’” Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965). pp.20-21

V. Be Patient as They Process Their Doubts

It’s true of all counseling, but especially when dealing with doubters, that we need to be patient. Each person is unique, so the length of their faith crisis or ‘Season of Doubt’ has no set timetable.

Think of how the book of Job gives us long, meandering conversations, as well as gut-wrenching questions that are messy, unsettling, and even repetitive.

“God has given us 42 chapters in Job. Why? Well, maybe because when the suffering question and the ‘Where is God?’ question and the ‘What kind of God...?’ questions are asked... they cannot be answered on a postcard. If we ask, ‘What kind of God allows this kind of world?’ God gives us a 42-chapter book. Far from saying, ‘The message of Job can be summarized on a postcard or in a tweet,’ God says, ‘Come with me on a journey, a journey that will take time. There is no instant answer... Job cannot be distilled.

It is a narrative with a very slow pace and long delays. Why? Because there is no instant working through grief, no quick fix to pain, no message of Job in a nutshell.” *Job – The Wisdom of the Cross*, Christopher Ash, p. 22, Crossway, 2014

To be an effective counselor you'll have to get comfortable with just being present, waiting, sitting... listening, asking clarifying questions, and not just making biblical truth proclamations and expecting your counselee to get with it!

Sound-bite answers and stand-alone Bible verses will likely not help them, so ask them to read longer passages, and to soak in chapters of the Bible in order to get the broader context.

For example: Instead of having them memorize **Romans 8:28** have them slowly and prayerfully chew their way through **Romans ch. 8**, journaling what they see about God, see about our world, see about themselves.

Additional Reading or Homework Suggestions

Doubt: Trusting God's Promises (31-Day Devotionals for Life), Elyse Fitzpatrick, P&R Pub., 2018

Trusting God Even When Life Hurts, Jerry Bridges, Navpress, 1988

Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy – *Discovering the Grace of Lament*, Mark Vroeguoop, Crossway, 2019

Being There – *How to Love Those Who Are Hurting*, Dave Furman, Crossway, 2016

Embodied Hope – *A Theological Meditation on Pain and Suffering*, IVP, 2017

When the Darkness Will Not Lift – *Doing What We Can While We Wait for God and Joy*, Crossway, 2006