

Wounded Souldiers: What a therapist wants the preacher to know

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He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.
Psalm 147:3 (ESV)

Helping professionals are real heroes ... period! Granted, much attention was paid to doctors and nurses who risked their immune system during the pandemic, but what about the helpers who sustained our spiritual needs? Who was there performing magic tricks to engineer livestream services off the cuff? Who were the ones praying over the phone with members in place of hospital visits? Who continued preaching the good news while getting bad news that their loved ones died of COVID-19?

While the world was hyper-focused on local business reopening, pastors were also on the front lines of an intense, unpredictable battle, taking blows of depression, anxiety, grief, and—well, I’m sure you could add to this list, too. And speaking of battles, I can’t help but see a correlation between soldiers and spiritual leaders. In both positions, each person is drafted, dresses for battle, develops relationships in the trenches, and reports to a higher authority. I imagine men and women who enlist are apprehensive about their orders yet remain faithful to the call. Yes, that call always comes to suit up, remember your combat training, and march off to war. For this reason and the nature of your calling, I will be referring to spiritual leaders as *Wounded Souldiers*. At first glance, you may have assumed I misspelled “soldier,” but I literally put “u” in it—as in “you,” the pastor, and how you tend to the souls of your congregations! Therefore, it is my prayer to offer simple tips and/or strategies from a mental health perspective, to help spiritual leaders with the following: protect yourself at all times, avoid burnout, and develop new ways to assist those in crisis.

Wounded Souldiers

What image comes to mind when you hear the word “wounded”? If you said someone who has been injured or harmed, then we’re off to a good start. Maybe you visualize a soldier based on a certain branch in the military, a specific uniform, unique skills, and how each troop works together for a common goal. Based on the descriptions given, I could stop writing as that both describes your role as clergy and allows you to reflect on such a solemn responsibility. As you continue reading, the term “Wounded Souldier” will be applied to pastors or clergy fighting the good fight, who may have overlooked the importance of their own mental, emotional, and spiritual triage and have failed to dress their own wounds before returning to battle. No, I’m not a pastor nor have I been in the military, but I am married to a well-spo-

ken Baptist preacher and have learned the art of telling a good story to illustrate a powerful message—so let's begin!

My father, Robert Cunningham, was drafted by the United States Army shortly after marrying my mother. He served two tours in the Vietnam War, taking shifts working burial duty and operating artillery. Earning a bronze star and enduring a life-altering experience, he managed to return home in his right mind. During my childhood, my father shared his photo albums with me, accompanied by vivid stories of how he survived, keeping his sanity by playing his guitar in his free time. To my young eyes, I did not notice many battle scars, giving me the idea that my history books depicted Vietnam all wrong. My dad worked as a letter carrier for thirty-two years, raised a family, and made others smile with his music. He was living proof that not all veterans are unable to reconnect with society.

The last few years of his life were spent in and out of hospitals due to a long list of health issues, including a weak heart, prostate cancer, kidney failure, and thyroid problems. Initially, I assumed genetics were to blame and that we should pay more attention to our eating habits. After speaking with several doctors, we found they all agreed on the origin of his conditions: Agent Orange. If you are unfamiliar with it, Agent Orange was a pesticide used as a tactic against the enemy to destroy Vietnam's vegetation (Cleveland Clinic, 2023). It is estimated that close to three million people were exposed to Agent Orange. Not injected. Not smoked. Exposed.

Protect Yourself at All Times

Pastors, please take the following words to heart: Protect yourself at all times. Because you are open to your member's lives, your community, spiritual wickedness, and even the criticism of the world, you are vulnerable to a host of harmful diseases on every level. For my father, Agent Orange attacked his health in later years; for pastors, what hurts you may not take years to surface. As a counselor, I hope to make you aware of a different aspect of vulnerability: the silent battle in your mind. I like to refer to this with yet another military term: "flying under the radar." This phrase originated during World War II, where fighter pilots noticed the enemy attempting to fly at a lower altitude to avoid radar detection, but leaving them vulnerable to an all-out attack (Imperial War Museums, 2023)! Are you aware of the negative words you rehearse in your mind? How often are you triggered by someone else's trauma? How often do you consider leaving your post? Depression, burnout, financial strain, transitions, shifts in how we gather after the pandemic, death, divorce, balancing the multi-vocational ministry, and temptation—all these and more might be actively flying under the radar at a lower frequency in your head.

Thank God there is a way forward, but you may not like what it requires: Seek professional counseling. What does the therapist want pastors to know? Open up and talk about how being a pastor, or life in general, can at times feel unbearable. All the years of seminary or professional training can never prepare you for the wear and

tear on your soul. And no one else knows better than you the kinds of injuries pastors and clergy sustain.

Recently, I read an article in *Psychology Today* (June 2023) where they interviewed heavyweight boxer Deontay Wilder. A famous boxer, Wilder revealed how fighters struggle with protecting their mental health, and he shared his own personal bouts with depression. What got my attention was when Wilder said, “A lot of boxers don’t want to reveal what’s going on with them . . . I think a lot of fighters should get checked out” (p. 10). If a boxer who takes punches for a living is encouraging others to care for the wounds “flying under the radar,” then maybe it’s time for change.

Before marching off to fight, soldiers take inventory of what’s in their backpack. A compass, first-aid kit, water, or a flashlight are all essential for daily survival. Each item you carry holds weight, and over time your body will notice, which means carrying anything extra can slow you down. Talking about what you carry as a pastor is another way to unpack what is unnecessary, making it easier to maintain a posture for pressing forward.

Wounded Souldiers, if you are faced with the struggle of finding a reputable therapist or a lack of funds for session fees, getting together with other pastors may be just as effective. I am grateful to God for a group called The Ministry Collaborative (formerly the Macedonian Ministry). In 2012, my husband, Adam, was invited to become part of a three-year cohort, where pastors and clergy from various denominations met for fellowship and a sponsored pilgrimage to the Holy Land. From his experience alone, I witnessed his strength slowly return after years of feeling isolated, burnt out, and frustrated. Adam had the opportunity to meet other clergy from all over and exchange stories and experiences on how to stay focused, encouraged, and empowered by God’s word. Now, he serves on the board as Content Curator, mentoring other spiritual leaders who also bear the same wounds. Protect yourself at all times, souldiers—and that’s an order!

Avoiding Burnout

Givers attract takers. Spiritual leaders attract people needing healing, direction, and answers to their unique sets of problems. If one is not careful, the pastor may almost be mistaken for one’s personal savior. This may include, but is not limited to, drawing off your strength, incessant phone calls (at the worst times, I might add), or unreasonably high expectations for the pastor to bail them out from yet another emergency. Because of your disposition and caring heart, there is a part of you that wants to rush in, take the reins, cue the hero(ine) music, patch up their wounds, and still make it home in time to prepare a sermon. Friends, this is a dangerous position and here’s why. Remember the risk of being vulnerable? A Wounded Souldier who hasn’t been through triage is vulnerable to the temptation of appealing to their own ego, taking credit for the good that ultimately comes from God. Instead of appealing to the desire to take over during a time of distress, let it become a teachable moment.

This next part may sound odd, but God led me to encourage you to lean on the fundamentals of basic math. When presented with another's issues, pastors and clergy are often expected to "*solve for x*" while most people only share and show you a *fraction* of the real *problem*. Add to this, their judgment is clouded by pain and their level of spiritual maturity. *Take away* the idea they are ready to reveal how they can be agents of change in the process. Keep your focus when listening to the *volume* of problems, to discern if someone is using an *angle* to manipulate your authority. In these types of situations, the best strategy may be to find the *common denominator*. This strategy begins with an *order of operations*. This requires discernment and reliance on the Holy Spirit, and a skillful use of scripture that reminds us where to *divide* our ability with God's power.

By following the *order of operations*, you *multiply* the opportunities for others to experience the light of God's love in dark places. As the teacher, you ultimately demonstrate that *factoring* God in always *equals* the correct *answer*.

I understand how operating as a helping professional may give a false sense of security. I've learned as a counselor that there is one major assumption made by all clients: We have all the answers. It would be so much easier to just tell them where to go and how to make sense of their trauma—wouldn't it? But, as a Wounded Souldier on the way to being restored, take comfort in knowing that our Commanding Officer is *still* responsible for His troops!

I'm reminded of the story in Acts 3 where Peter and John encountered a crippled man, begging for alms. Peter's response was straight and to the point. He offered the man, not what was in his hands, but rather who was in his heart. "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you" Acts 3:6 (NIV). Jesus. Healer. Wonderful Counselor. Refuge.

By offering to others, your congregation, or even your family what you possess through personal experiences and in trials—along with the Word of God—God becomes their solution to solving for x ... not you. In older textbooks, the answers to math problems were in the back of the book. I believe God may sometimes use a problem in our lives just to see if we will open the Book. So, if someone comes to you only seeking an answer, you can guide them through the steps toward the ultimate answer—the solution will always equal trusting God.

S.P.A.M.

At this point, I've tried to encourage every Wounded Souldier to protect themselves when exposed and warned about the temptation to be a rescue hero. This last tool can be used as a simple checklist when guiding someone through a crisis, and it may possibly shed light on how well a person is processing a situation. It consists of four areas and may help direct some immediate triage. I call it S.P.A.M.

S-spiritual. Nothing reveals more about one's faith than when they've been knocked down by adversity. When confronted with offering support, pastors and

clergy can be prepared for the spectrum of reactions that may follow by locating their solid ground. Even if you are in a public sector addressing unbelievers, meeting people where they are builds trust. Trust in a relationship allows for both parties to listen as well as be heard. It is also in those spaces where the world experiences Christ's compassion and love through you. Remember, if they are seeking the truth, they will find God.

P-physical. There's an African proverb that says, "When the heart acts, the body is its slave" (Idlehearts.com, 2023). Think of the physical aspects of trauma as a chain reaction from the heart to brain—weighing its options to fight, flight, or freeze. In his book *The Body Keeps Score*, Dr. Bessel van der Kolk expounds on how the nervous system and our emotions directly impact muscles, adrenaline levels, heart rate, breathing, and intestines, thereby complicating one's ability to control bodily reactions when emotionally overwhelmed. If the body allows the heart and mind alone to become the master, what follows may be a downward spiral toward isolation or worse, thoughts of suicide. By simply asking a person what story their body is telling them may cause them to pause and acknowledge the physical consequences of stress. Again, here's another simple opportunity to remind a person to breathe, maintain safe blood sugar levels, to eat or to even drink water. And never underestimate the power of a short walk to gain clarity.

A-While the first two letters in the acronym seem basic, the "A" acts as the glue for understanding the individual's toolbox when handling a crisis. The "A" stands for ability, or the degree to which one can apply coping mechanisms that lead toward healing and resilience. Ability depends on the following criteria but is not limited to: an individual's education on healthy coping, access to safe spaces, vocabulary for emotions, age, and brain development. If you recall the math analogy, a person's judgment is often skewed in a crisis, making it more difficult to find the common denominator. The quickest way to measure a person's ability is to hone their reactions the day after an event occurs. Why wait a day? Dr. Bessel van der Kolk found that the immediate human reaction to threat is always to self-protect, forcing us to stay in the fight, flight, or freeze response. However, when the nervous calms down, it is easier to observe how any coping skills may be applied as reality sets in.

M-mental. This part is slightly different from ability in that the mental portion focuses less on cognition and more on emotional memories. The American Psychological Association (2023) confirmed that both subconscious and conscious memories are stored in the amygdala. Once an event occurs, we log a specific emotion, further building a foundation for future responses to similar events. If the building blocks warrant a reason to protect, the brain trains that person to go in survival mode (Ex: childhood abuse). The same is true for a foundation built on safety and love. Here is a quick rule of thumb: if someone's initial reaction to a stimulus is hysterical in nature, you can likely assume there's a historical reason. As a pastor, you may never know exactly what your members have lived through, but based on their

responses, you will have a better chance of providing some trauma-informed care while guiding them to resilience and hope.

Wounded Souldiers, investing in your health is not selfish, it's called being a wise steward. I pray that if you haven't started yet, you will go forward stronger and wiser. Please understand that counseling is NOT a substitute for God's ability to heal and restore your strength. In fact, God uses other people through prayer, fellowship, and talk therapy to aid in the renewal process. Allow other trained professionals to dress the wounds that are keeping you from marching forward.

What does the therapist want the pastors to know? 1) Protect yourself at all times—mentally, emotionally, and spiritually because you're on the front lines. 2) Avoid burnout by continuing to trust God's ability to care for His children, while you act as a guide. 3) Check your S.P.A.M. folder. It's a simple tool God gave me to share to helping professionals that doesn't require a degree in psychology. For those of you who qualify as restored souldiers, you are in a wonderful position to help someone else! Start a mentoring group for spiritual leaders. Plan a fundraiser to offer scholarships to offer pastors a sabbatical. Demonstrate your concern for other souldiers by gathering names for a prayer list for pastors suffering from burnout. And for the rest of you Wounded Souldiers, keep marching and know when to get some help. You're at your best when your wounds are dressed ... first.

It is an honor to share my father's story as a Wounded Soldier who sacrificed his life for this country. It is a privilege to tell of my husband's journey, who also served in the Army and has been a multi-vocational pastor for twenty-two years. Finally, I am humbled to encourage every pastor or clergy person, fighting the good fight, leading their congregations onward in battle. From the heart of a pastor's wife and mental health counselor, pastors ... I salute you!

He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.

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