

Caring for others through trauma-sensitive language

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“Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen” (Ephesians 4:29).

I memorized this verse as a child and earnestly sought to live it out. For most of my adolescence, I thought it meant being nice and cordial to the people around me. After learning about trauma-sensitive language, the verse has taken on a whole new meaning for me.

I now am aware of the diversity of experiences I might encounter on a daily basis in my congregation members or clients. I must remember each individual has a different story and has experienced things that caused deep pain and harm in their lives. I must remember we all handle things differently.

As congregational leaders, we have an obligation to be mindful of the weight our words carry for those who listen.

Political correctness or deep caring?

Some might hesitate, believing this is about being politically correct. In reality, trauma-sensitive language is about how best to care for our congregation members.

If we can think back to when we first were called to ministry, my guess is caring for others as Jesus cares for them was at the core of our calling.

It matters how we speak to the people in our congregation, because every human being carries a different story and vastly different experiences. Being trauma-sensitive is not just about avoiding certain topics or censoring ourselves out of fear. Rather, using trauma-sensitive language comes from a motivation to be well-informed and loving toward the people for whom we care.

The following may be helpful in guiding us to be trauma-sensitive leaders.

Research trauma and its effects.

[Trauma](#) is the long-term psychological distress caused by specific events or incidents. It can lead to disturbing thoughts and functioning and negatively impacts coping mechanisms, resulting in extreme “fight, flight or freeze” responses and potentially life-threatening consequences.

Traumatic events can be acute—such as a one-time event—or they can be chronic—occurring over a long period of time.

Examples include car accidents, natural disasters, bullying, sexual assault, abuse, witnessing violence, poverty, gaslighting, racism, ableism, sexism and toxic relationships. COVID-19 is one of the most prominent examples everyone can relate to right now.

A key part of understanding trauma is that every single individual responds to traumatic events in one’s own way. Rather than prescribing one’s own view for how to cope or be “tough,” it is vital to meet a person where he or she is in the process of coping and grieving.

Suffering often is referred to as a good thing and something in which to find joy. However, we must be cautious how we preach and teach about suffering, understanding some who are listening are in the midst of suffering. We must not rush them through grief or consider them “holy”

because of their suffering.

Be considerate of trauma-informed interpretations.

Be aware of how various Scripture passages and illustrations might be interpreted by trauma survivors. Many passages can be especially jarring for those who have survived events like sexual assault, abuse and any kind of family separation.

We do not have a pass to apply Scripture prescriptively to our lives no matter its effects. Rather, as spiritual leaders, we should use God-given discernment to recognize we learn from the people of the Bible in order to refrain from the things they have done.

Sometimes, it is absolutely necessary to refrain from preaching certain passages from the pulpit. It is part of our pastoral responsibility to be aware of the context of Scripture and to be aware of the contexts in which we minister.

I recently heard a sermon illustration that centered on an abusive relationship between a father and son. The son—abused by his father—was told he never would let go of his anger until he went to his father and forgave him in person. While forgiveness is a tenet of Christianity and is beneficial to abuse survivors, this illustration is dangerous.

Out of love and care for survivors of abuse, we want to continue to protect their physical, mental, emotional and spiritual well-being to the utmost. By encouraging this man to go back to an abusive relationship, he was being encouraged to risk the danger of being exposed to abuse and trauma all over again.

When in doubt, consult others.

One might wonder how to talk about forgiveness while being trauma-sensitive. My best advice is to ask mental health professionals you know.

When you encounter a difficult passage on which you want to preach or teach—or even a passage you might have been pondering in your own life—professionals in social work, mental health and related disciplines have outlooks and training that will teach us how to love traumatized individuals well.

Seeking their counsel does not dilute the power of the passage or betray the word of God. Rather, it is a responsible and intentional way to care for every individual in the congregation.

A congregational leader's heart is devoted to the well-being of those in his or her care. Therefore, clergy must be willing to be trauma-sensitive in all their work, including the language we use in our roles as congregational leaders.

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