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Restoration for a Traumatized World

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Restoration

for a traumatized world

This last year has been difficult, to say the least. Amid a pandemic, isolation, social justice concerns, and societal uneasiness, along with the pressure of leading a church through all of this, perhaps you have felt an emotional weight begin to overtake you. You are not alone. Symptoms of anxiety and depression have drastically increased, with one survey in the United States showing that the number of people with these symptoms has doubled from a previous survey just a few years ago.²

In the first months of the global pandemic, Dr. Bessel van der Kolk—a renowned trauma researcher and psychiatrist—identified the coronavirus and its effect upon the world as a “pre-traumatic condition.” “The stage is set for people to really be very vulnerable to trauma,” van der Kolk explained in an interview. “It in [and] of itself is, for most people, not a trauma, but there’s two conditions. One is you’re immobilized, so you cannot move around. And immobilization is one of the core preconditions for getting traumatized. And the other one is that you don’t know what is going to happen. So, you cannot say tomorrow will be a different day or the day after. And so when the world’s unpredictable and you cannot move, then the vulnerability to become traumatized is very great.”³

Immobility and unpredictability are a perilous combination. The stage has been set for many to experience trauma.

The reaches of trauma

But what is trauma, and why should pastors, in particular, be concerned about it? Emotional trauma can have many different causes, but the result is that the individual feels helpless, unsafe, or unable to cope in the wake of a distressing and overwhelming experience. In the last few decades, scientists have discovered that significant trauma can drastically affect a person’s brain and body. When faced with something perceived as physically or emotionally threatening, our body naturally goes into its stress response. This means that our executive functioning, which allows us to make calculated decisions, is shut off. Stress hormones are released to allow self-preservation instinct to kick in, resulting in a flight, fight, or freeze reaction: we may run from the threat, attempt to overpower it, or simply halt to allow it to pass us by.

This is a God-given and life-saving response. When an animal jumps in front of your car, you are grateful for your stress response swerving you out of the way. But trouble comes when the stress response works in overdrive—hypervigilance and activated stress hormones begin to wear on the body and brain. This is what scientists are concerned about right now because research points to some troubling symptoms of trauma.

In the 1990s, a ground-breaking study was conducted by the CDC in conjunction with Kaiser Permanente.⁴ This study sought to determine whether there was any correlation between

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common health problems and a number of traumatizing events experienced in childhood—called adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). These ACEs included experiences such as homelessness, physical and sexual abuse, divorce, and more. What was found was absolutely shocking.

The more ACEs a person experienced before the age of 18, the greater risk they had for a myriad of health problems. For example, compared to someone with 0 ACEs, someone with 4 ACEs is twice as likely to contract heart disease, 4.5 times as likely to develop depression, 7 times as likely to become an alcoholic, and 12 times as likely to attempt suicide. The ACE study demonstrated that the traumatic experiences of youth can have shaping and pervasive effects for the rest of a person's life—emotionally; physically; and, consequently, spiritually.

This is why what our world and the members of our congregations are experiencing now is so significant for the future as well. The door is open for overwhelming struggles for years to come. Given this foreboding horizon, what is a pastor to do?

A God of restoration

Thankfully, God loves us too much to let us stay weighed down by our traumas. In fact, He had a plan of salvation right from the start. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to *save* the world through him” (John 3:16, 17, emphasis added).⁵

In the original Greek, this word, which is most commonly translated as “to save,” has a pretty big meaning. This word, *sōzō* (σῶζω), is used when discussing the topic of salvation in the New Testament. We are *saved* from our sins. But other translations should be added to our understanding of the word *sōzō*. It means to restore, to heal, to make whole; to take something that is broken and mend it. For example, James 5:15 states that the prayer of faith will *sōzō* the one who is sick, speaking of physical healing. In Luke 8, Jesus casts the legion of demons out of a man and into a nearby herd of pigs. The crowd is amazed at how Jesus has healed the man, saying that he had been *sōzō*-ed (v. 36). You see, when God says that He will “save” us, what He is saying is He wants to *completely restore* us from sickness of the body, of the mind, of the soul. All this brokenness that weighs upon us as a result of sin,

God wishes to mend. It is His desire to restore us completely.

The weight of emotional trauma can certainly feel overwhelming. But the wonderful fact is that we serve a God of restoration. God desires to *sōzō* His children today. He also wants to use us to bring His saving power into the lives of those who need it most. That is part of the calling for ministers of the gospel.

God's tools for healing

Throughout Scripture, we can see God demonstrating ways to bring restoration to traumatized people. The incredible thing is that the tactics God uses to reach and restore the traumatized match perfectly with what modern science and psychology are recommending. God provided methods for healing even before humanity knew what the problem of trauma even was. As we seek to shepherd and minister to those in need, we can follow God's methods for gently working with those wrestling with the weight of trauma. We must, of course, remember that God has gifted some with the ability to work with mental health crises and disorders. In addition to the following tools, as you minister to others, be sure to provide mental health referrals to those in need that they may receive the best support possible.

1. Calmness. As the Israelites stood at the bank of the Red Sea, crying out in desperation, fear, anger, and panic, what did God tell them? “Moses answered the people, ‘Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still.’” (Exod. 14:13, 14). You need only be still. God is calling for quietness and calmness. He says you do not even need to fear because you are about to see your salvation. God is calling for His people to fix their eyes on Him and put their trust fully in Him.

One of the greatest tools we all have to combat the effects of trauma is our God-given breath—the very first gift God gave to mankind (Gen. 2:7). When someone feels overwhelming emotions rise and their stress response begins inappropriately kicking in, simply taking a few slow, deep breaths can help relax the mind and body. For best results, researchers suggest breathing in through the nose and then exhaling through the mouth for twice the amount of time it took to inhale.⁶ This intentional stillness that God calls us to is something we can easily teach and share with our church members, especially

those we can identify as struggling to regulate their feelings of anxiety and stress. It is a tool available to everyone, and science proves its immediate benefits.⁷

2. *Connection.* In John 8, a woman who was caught in adultery was thrown at the feet of Jesus, her accusers demanding a response from the Messiah. It is true that the story ends with Jesus telling the woman to “go now and leave your life of sin” (v. 11), but He does not speak this correction into her life until after He establishes a caring relationship with her. He defends her against her accusers and tells her that He does not condemn her. Only after showing this love does He tell her to sin no more.

Invariably, when ministering to traumatized people, there will be behaviors or attitudes that we would like to see changed: perhaps they are self-destructive or tend to lash out at others. Before rebuking and correcting, be sure to establish a caring relationship. The adulterous woman’s accusers also told her what she was doing was wrong, but it was the love of Jesus that stirred a real change in her heart. Like Jesus, we must first seek to establish a loving connection.

3. *Consistency.* All throughout Scripture, we see people who have been traumatized as a result of sin in this broken world, and each person seems to interact with God differently. When Elijah was alone and being hunted for his life, he was filled with depression, believing God had nothing else left for him but his destruction (1 Kings 19:4). But when Job sat upon his pile of ashes, covered in boils, he still refused to doubt God and curse Him (Job 2:10). And when the recently freed Israelites saw God’s miracles in the wilderness, they still grumbled and complained against their Savior (Exod. 15:23, 24; 16:2, 3). Still, throughout every story, for each individual and for humanity in every generation, God has remained the same (Heb. 13:8). God’s love and care are consistent, no matter our response to Him. “I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness” (Jer. 31:3).

While we are human and far from the perfect love of God, we have been called to love with His same consistency. For everyone, but especially those who have experienced trauma, consistent relationships are key. They need to know that they are safe in a relationship with you and that you will support them. As mentioned above, this does not mean simply allowing them to stay amid poor decisions. It means that your love and care for them do not depend upon their deeds or

actions. Your church members should know that they are seen and safely cared for within your relationship.

Confronting trauma with love

This is perhaps the most challenging task we have been given as conduits of God’s restoration in the world; but as ministers of the gospel and followers of Christ, this is what we have been called to do. “A new command I give you,” Jesus has told us. “Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34, 35).

In the history of the world, there has always been trauma. It has left angry scars across countless hearts. Today, we know that this will only increase. As Christ’s disciples, we must take up the love of God and boldly go forth to minister to broken hearts. God seeks to *sōzō* each and every one of us. May we seek to see His kingdom of restoration increase.



- 1 The International Center for Trauma Education and Care seeks to help facilitate long-term healing from trauma through awareness by educating and supporting healing in organizations, churches, and communities across the world. It is dedicated to equipping people to meet trauma with the powerful message of restoration. <https://www.andrews.edu/cas/socialwork/traumacare>.
- 2 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Anxiety and Depression: 2020 Household Pulse Survey,” last reviewed May 5, 2021, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/covid19/pulse/mental-health.htm>.
- 3 Alex McOwen and Peter Biello, “Lifelines: How COVID-19 Creates ‘Pre-Traumatic Conditions’ in the Brain,” New Hampshire Public Radio, May 4, 2020, <https://www.nhpr.org/post/lifelines-how-covid-19-creates-pre-traumatic-conditions-brain#stream/0>.
- 4 Vincent J. Felitti et al., “Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading causes of Death in Adults,” *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 14, no. 4 (May 1998): 245–258, [https://www.doi.org/10.1016/s0749-3797\(98\)00017-8](https://www.doi.org/10.1016/s0749-3797(98)00017-8).
- 5 Scripture is from the New International Version.
- 6 Pratibha Pradip Pandekar and Poovishnu Devi Thangavelu, “Effect of 4-7-8 Breathing Technique on Anxiety and Depression in Moderate Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease Patients,” *International Journal of Health Sciences and Research* 9, no. 5 (May 2019): 209–217.
- 7 Andrea Zaccaro et al., “How Breath-Control Can Change Your Life: A Systematic Review on Psycho-Physiological Correlates of Slow Breathing,” *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 12, September 7, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2018.00353>.

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