

# Counseling During the Coronavirus

**By Ben Marshall**

Each year when I renew my ACBC membership, ACBC asks if I would be willing to counsel online. Each year I check “yes” for two reasons: (1) I genuinely do want to help those who are not within driving distance to receive biblical counseling and (2) I live near Seattle, which means I must say “yes” to all things technology. (Not really, but it certainly feels that way.)

Little did I know this last December, when I renewed my membership, saying “yes” to counseling online would be the only way in which I would be counseling just three months later. As I am writing this blog, the counseling ministry that I oversee has shifted to a non-physical format. In essence, all individual counseling, all group counseling, all counseling classes, all counseling internships, and ACBC counselor supervision are only offered either online or by phone. I am glad to report most counselors elected the online option and have continued to meet with their counselees.

## **Face-to-Face Contact**

The Apostle Paul, on numerous occasions, spoke of his longing to see the specific group of people to which he was writing (Romans 1:11; 2 Timothy

1:4). God has designed us for human contact and interaction, including physical touch, facial expressions, tone of voice, eye contact, body posture, emotional responses, and words. Aside from a hand on a shoulder or holding hands in prayer, online counseling offers counselors and counsees the ability to interact with one another almost as if they were in the same room.

When I log into my online video meeting, I see not just an image on a screen, but the face of a person—my counselee, student, fellow counselor, counseling intern, or ACBC Supervisee. I get to observe their eyes, hear their voices, notice their postures, and evaluate their words. The goal of all of this face-to-face contact is so that I can accurately interpret what they are communicating to give wise counsel in return. They can express their fears and concerns more accurately than a letter or phone call could provide.

Additionally, counsees can see my face, hear my voice, observe my posture and body language, as well as evaluate my words. All of this allows them to interpret what I am saying and make wise decisions. I can communicate my love, care, and concern in more ways than a letter or a phone call could provide.

### **Familiar Counseling Tools**

In addition to providing comfort through face-to-face contact, online counseling also provides the benefit of using familiar tools biblical counselors

and counselees are accustomed to using. These tools, while not mandated by any means, allow for the counseling process to continue in as typical a fashion as possible.

One of the critical components of biblical counseling is homework. Homework is the actual work that a counselee does in between counseling sessions, which the Holy Spirit can use to bring about substantive change. It is not uncommon for me to assign hours of homework over a week through Bible study, memorization, journaling, and other practical exercises.

Attempting to review all of this work on the phone would almost be impossible or at least a rather lengthy exploit. Online or virtual counseling, however, allows the counselee to visually share completed work, helping to keep the counseling time to about the same as it would have been if in-office counseling were an option. An added beneficial component to seeing the homework is that I can give encouraging feedback to those I am meeting with, i.e., "Greg, I love what you wrote down about Romans 8:28-29 and how you were able to use that this week as you ministered to your neighbor. You put a lot more thought and effort into application this week than you have in the past."

Teaching is also a pivotal component in biblical counseling. While I only need the Bible to be a biblical counselor, I find a few tools that help me to be a

better, more effective counselor. Two tools that I find myself using most often are my diagrams and my whiteboard. Over 20 years, I have amassed several diagrams that help me visually explain concepts that can be hard or complex to understand. Online counseling allows for me to continue to use those same diagrams with those that I am either counseling or training. The online platform I use, Zoom, provides an opportunity to share my computer screen with the person I am meeting with. We both are then looking at the diagram I have pulled up, and I can go through the diagram just as if we were in the room together. This benefit to online counseling is something that the phone cannot provide, making online counseling far superior to the phone.

Another teaching tool that I use in almost every circumstance is my whiteboard. I will take advantage of any drawing to drive an essential biblical counseling concept home. Once again, the online venue I have chosen, Zoom, allows me to have a virtual whiteboard that I can draw on to illustrate the concept I am talking about. I can then save the whiteboard and send it to the person I was meeting with, allowing them to retain the drawing for later use. This is not an option with a phone.

In the face of this particular Covid-19 crisis, those whom we are counseling and meeting with need our faithful counsel more than ever. Where in-person counseling is not an option due to government mandates and the ceasing of counseling is not an option due to Scriptural mandate, online counseling is an

excellent option allowing you to be obedient to God's Word as well as the governmental authority established by God. Remember, just as with face-to-face counseling, change always takes place as the Spirit of God uses the Word of God in the life of a believer. Whether we are writing a letter, talking on the phone, streaming online, or meeting in person, our central job is to be faithful to God as we minister His Word.