

How Do You Know If Someone Is Ready to Change?



by TODD STRYD

“Wow, what a day” Anthony says out loud as he drags himself through the door of his apartment. After a full day of counseling, he sinks into a chair, his head swirling from the ups and downs of his day. He soon finds himself replaying each counseling session in his mind. Three people stand out to him—Monique, Lee, and Alberto. His work with Alberto was so different from his meetings with Monique and Lee. Anthony felt like it was impossible to get traction with Monique and Lee, whereas Alberto is clearly ready and willing to face his problems.

How should Anthony understand what he experienced? These three individuals each represent a different point on the spectrum of readiness for change. *Readiness* is the extent to which someone is motivated, committed, and prepared to address a counseling problem. Readiness refers to the degree that a person is open and interested in changing. The idea takes into account that even though someone seeks help for a problem it doesn't always mean he or she is ready to address it. And so if we as counselors and helpers are unaware of this dynamic, or find we have limited ability to navigate it, it will create a hit or miss experience in counseling.

Todd Stryd (MDiv, PsyD) is counseling coordinator at CCEF and also serves on the faculty. He is the author of the mini-book: Schizophrenia: A Compassionate Approach.

This article will introduce the concept of readiness and provide both a biblical framework of understanding and practical ways of working with resistance and ambivalence in the counseling room. To do this, we will follow Anthony's work with Monique, Alberto, and Lee. Each person captures a different dimension of this counseling experience. We will watch how Anthony navigates and adjusts his methods of care based on each person's degree of readiness.

Putting a Biblical Lens on "Readiness"

Rather than a unique phenomenon, the waxing and waning of readiness is a normal human experience. That means it's not just a counseling issue; this is a general life issue. We live our lives continually vacillating between wanting to change something and not wanting to change something. We are often of mixed mind and mixed feelings about change.

Most who enter counseling are ambivalent or resistant to some degree.

This idea of readiness for change is not surprising to Christians. It fits well with a biblical understanding of people. We are creatures with divided hearts. On the one hand, we willfully run from responsibility and redemption, preferring to remain in the dark holding on to our pride. On the other hand, we are broken in ways that keep us from fully knowing ourselves and understanding what we are doing. We deflect, avoid, and minimize one minute, and are confused and bewildered the next. This is true of each one of us. The Scriptures make it clear that we habitually dodge, deny, and avoid our failures, weaknesses, and wrongdoing. People are a combination of authenticity, well-meaning intention, honest ignorance, habitual blindness, selfish ambition, and vain conceit (Jer 17:9; Jonah 4:11; Matt 9:36). To acknowledge this variety of explanations is to acknowledge the complexity of the person and the complexity of the change process.

Therefore, most who enter counseling are ambivalent or resistant to some degree or another. You just don't know where or how yet. Just because someone is open to changing something, it may not be the change that is needed. The change we're not quite ready for is what we

are resistant to or ambivalent about. In light of this, even if a person acknowledges a problem, there can be a chasm between the acknowledgment of the problem and the motivation and commitment to address it. Our relationship to our problems is an ever evolving one.

In light of this understanding, it's important to consider how readiness presents in counseling and how counselors can help individuals work through it. Helping relationships, either in the informal or formal setting, see resistance and ambivalence as an inevitable waypoint along the journey. If the counselor can hold off on reflexively labeling the individual as hardhearted and prideful, there will be a tremendous opportunity to help facilitate change. This is because a person's resistance is frequently the expression of a lack of insight, fear, confusion, and shame. While this is not always the case, here we will consider this likelihood and what patient, gracious ministry looks like.¹ In counseling, just as in daily life, we don't wait for others to have the proper attitude or motivation before we help. However, assuming the best of resistant and ambivalent people requires thoughtful and nuanced methods of care. Therefore, as we move further into the article, we'll explore the nitty gritty details of strategic help.

Discerning Someone's Readiness

The Christian God is a God of nuance and detail. He rejoices and delights in the subtleties of love and helping. He cares deeply about nuance precisely because he is nuanced in his redemptive acts toward his people. God engages us amidst our complexity and our confusion. He knows that we are both weak and wayward, sick and selfish. He knows that we are "but dust," and is "mindful of our frame." He ministers to us accordingly.

God's ministry to us involves accommodation. He adapts his help to individuals and communities. Like a good and wise father, God meets us where we are rather than waiting for us to come to him when we are ready. How we think about caring for others must always take into consideration how God cares for us. God's relationship with us is our example and prototype. As we consider the complexity of caring for people in

1. Later we will discuss when labeling a person's resistance or ambivalence as hardhearted, rebellious, and resistant is, in fact, the proper assessment.

To continue reading this article, visit ccef.org/jbc to purchase the individual journal issue or subscribe to the Journal of Biblical Counseling.

The Journal of Biblical Counseling

(ISSN: 1063-2166) is published by:

Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation

1803 East Willow Grove Avenue

Glenside, PA 19038

www.ccef.org

Copyright © 2020 CCEF

All rights reserved.