

1988

Counseling Approaches - Chapter 11 of "Counseling and the Demonic"

Rodger K. Bufford

George Fox University, rbufford@georgefox.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/counselingandthedemonic>

 Part of the [Counseling Psychology Commons](#), [Other Psychiatry and Psychology Commons](#), and the [Practical Theology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bufford, Rodger K., "Counseling Approaches - Chapter 11 of "Counseling and the Demonic"" (1988). *Counseling and the Demonic*. 15. <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/counselingandthedemonic/15>

This Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School of Clinical Psychology at Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Counseling and the Demonic by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

COUNSELING APPROACHES

Chapter 10 dealt with spiritual interventions; this chapter will address other aspects of intervention. Just as demonic influence can affect personality, so physical, emotional, and cognitive functioning may influence a person's susceptibility to demonic influence. For example, a person who suffers from chronic low self-esteem may seek demonic influence in an effort to gain power, influence, or recognition. It is no coincidence that our literature abounds with stories of people who made a pact with the devil.

In the material that follows we will examine spiritual preparations for dealing with demonic influence, methods and goals of counseling, how to assess the various aspects of a counselee's

functioning, referral to other helpers, counseling strategies, and the use of spiritual resources.

SPIRITUAL PREPARATIONS

Spiritual preparations have been addressed previously. It is important for the counselor to approach the interventions presented in this chapter with those same spiritual preparations.

1. We must acknowledge that people actually may come under demonic influence or control.

2. We must know the most common historical and behavioral indicators of possible demonic influence.

3. We must be aware that any form of false worship, or any habitual pattern of sinful conduct, makes one potentially liable to demonic influence.

4. It is imperative to ensure the full, voluntary cooperation of the person involved unless he or she is so incapacitated as to be unable to choose to cooperate. To do less is to go beyond what even God would do (also, informed consent is a basic principle of professional ethics).¹ In these ways we may more readily and promptly recognize demonic influence when it is present.

5. The counselor must be spiritually prepared for confronting demonic influence. The Christian counselor—indeed anyone who encounters the demonic—is foolish to proceed without it. Such preparation includes a personal relationship with God; confession and repentance of all known personal sin; and a basic understanding of scriptural principles regarding sin, Satan, and the demonic, as well as the principles and practice of godly living (see chapter 10).

Specifically, as counselors we must submit ourselves to God and be filled with the Holy Spirit, equip ourselves with the resources God provides in the “armor of God,” and personally resist Satan in our own lives. This requires practicing the basic spiritual disciplines of confession, prayer, worship, fellowship, Bible study, memorization, meditation, and spiritual service. This is important for the protection of the counselor as well as the person receiving counsel.

METHODS AND GOALS OF COUNSELING

Beyond the preparations for counseling, there are two other major areas of concern in the counseling relationship. The first has to do with the means employed, the second with the goals of counseling. The legitimacy of both means and goals must be evaluated according to biblical teachings.

Methods

We often hear the expression “I’d give anything to. . . .” Such an approach to life is inconsistent with God-given standards, and opens the person to potential demonic influence. In effect, this approach makes the goal, whatever it is, more important than submission to God. It is, therefore, a form of idolatry, and consequently is not the path to freedom from demonic influence.

An example of an unacceptable method is seeking to help an individual overcome homosexual practices through overt heterosexual activities outside of marriage. The goal of overcoming homosexual activity is good, but the means of accomplishing it transgresses biblical standards and thus cannot be condoned.

Another example of unacceptable methods is to encourage counselees to begin to deal with suppressed hostility and rage by imagining they are hitting, kicking, or otherwise harming the individual with whom they are angry. Learning to deal with anger constructively means learning when and how to express it. But to imagine doing so in destructive ways is inconsistent with biblical teachings, particularly when we consider that what we think often leads to corresponding actions (see Proverbs 23:7, Matthew 12:33–37). The goal is good, but the method may make the person vulnerable to demonic influence.

Goals

We are equally concerned with the goals of counseling; they must also be consistent with biblical teachings. One additional concern is that even those goals that seem superficially legitimate may be unacceptable if they are not held in proper priority. Jack’s desire to maintain his marriage is a God-honoring goal,

but it becomes unacceptable when Jack uses threats, harassment, intimidation, and physical abuse to keep his wife in the relationship. Superficially, it may seem that Jack's problem is the *means* he uses to keep his wife involved with him. However, the *goal* of keeping the marriage together at any cost has become more important to Jack than his submission and obedience to God; in effect, Jack's wife has become his god.

Another example of a problematic goal is seeking to free an individual of guilt regarding sexual promiscuity while that person continues practicing such behavior. Freedom from guilt is a legitimate goal, but not for the individual who continues transgressing God-given standards of conduct. In such instances, guilt is a God-given warning signal that danger lies ahead.

In many instances the methods and goals in question are not so easily evaluated. Thus, a good working knowledge of Scripture is of great value for every counselor, particularly a counselor dealing with the demonically influenced. Since, as we have seen, the number of persons demonically influenced is far greater than most of us have supposed, this is a concern for virtually every counselor.

The significance of recognizing subtle sins cannot be overestimated. Because any habitual sinful pattern provides an avenue for potential demonic influence, we must be concerned especially about those sins that seem to be socially acceptable. Many of these, in devious ways, involve "false gods."

False gods are anything that is more important to a person than his or her relationship and commitment to the living God. These idols may be such diverse things as the car the person drives, the house in which he or she lives, or personal appearance, clothes, athletic success, academic achievement, or business success.

Sadly, most of us—often secretly, or even overtly—admire people who are obsessed with false gods. In this way, we show that we tend to agree with them about the importance of the goals and objects they have chosen. The heart is truly deceitful and desperately wicked; only God can know it fully (Jer. 17:9–10). To be able to recognize some of these more subtle forms of false worship we need to seek God's wisdom diligently and consistently.

People under various degrees of demonic influence, or even those with worldviews different from the Christian worldview, may come to us for help with more limited goals, or quite different goals from what we as Christians might wish. For example, they may not wish to become Christian. Also, they may choose to continue living in a way that we perceive as harmful or sinful.

A couple may be living together without the benefit of marriage. In such instances it is essential to respect the wishes of the person or persons seeking counseling. While it is appropriate to encourage such a couple to consider changing their goals, ultimately the counselor must accept the goal of the counselee, or decline to offer counsel.

ASSESSING THE PROBLEM

One of the most important initial concerns of counseling is the careful assessment of the counselee's current condition. This involves two elements: examining for evidence that demonic influence is present and seeing what other conditions might also be involved. These conditions could account for disturbance in mood, thought or behavior; they may also complicate the primary problem. In any event, they must be identified and dealt with in an appropriate fashion if the person is to become whole. Neglecting to deal with all of them may doom the counselor's efforts to free the person from demonic influence, or may result in a subsequent recurrence of the problem.

For example, depression may result from a number of factors: grief over the loss of a loved one, losing one's job or health, financial reverses, or a variety of other factors; disorders of blood electrolyte levels, perhaps due to illness or the side effects of medication; substance abuse; a brain tumor (benign or cancerous); psychological stresses, such as interpersonal conflict; or chronic fatigue. What could be more discouraging or irresponsible than to provide extended counseling for depression while an untreated medical condition progresses to the danger point?

Similarly, it is both futile and potentially harmful to attempt to expel demons from a person who is suffering from a mental disorder. Given the high degree of similarity in the symptoms of mental disorders and demonic influence noted earlier,

considerable care must be given to exploring and evaluating the problem before commencing treatment.

Medical Evaluation

While depression is not generally believed to be an indication of demonic influence, many other conditions which have physical roots may be confused with it. Broadly speaking, these include all of the organic psychotic conditions described previously. Among the physical factors that could account for such disturbances are head injuries, diseases affecting mental functioning (such as a stroke, tumors, Alzheimer's disease, and dementia), the effects of drug toxicity or drug withdrawal (whether legal or illegal), and exposure to environmental toxins.

Referral for appropriate medical evaluation is essential. It is important that the physician be informed that the patient is receiving counseling and also be told of the nature of the problems he or she is experiencing. When demonic influence is suspected it may be especially helpful to refer the person to a Christian physician, or at least to one who is sympathetic with such concerns. In this manner the patient can acknowledge his or her spiritual concerns and receive needed medical evaluation and care without being scorned for personal religious beliefs.

Psychological Evaluation

Besides the fact that their symptoms are similar, physical disorders, mental disorders, and demonic influence may all be present in a counselee since the presence of any one of the three results in greater susceptibility to the others. For this reason, psychological evaluation is needed to discover whether the symptoms may be partly or completely the result of psychological factors. In such an evaluation, the person will be examined for evidence of psychotic conditions in particular, since these may produce symptoms similar to demonic influence. The person will be examined for symptoms of other mental disorders as well. Psychological testing should also be conducted to assess the person's general psychological and intellectual/cognitive functioning.

One dimension of psychological evaluation involves assessing the degree to which the person may be exaggerating or even faking the problem behaviors. Often, a person will pretend to

have mental disorders in order to gain various personal or social benefits accorded those presumed to be mentally ill, such as hospitalization or freedom from work and other responsibilities.

Other factors that may be included in psychological evaluation are current intellectual functioning, learning disabilities, neuropsychological functioning, and such aspects of interpersonal behavior as aggressiveness and ability to relate positively with people.

In seeking a psychological evaluation, it is again important to find psychologists who are Christian, or who are at least open-minded about spiritual problems, especially demonic influence. Developing good referral sources is difficult, but essential.

Spiritual Evaluation

Even when physical or psychological disorders have been clearly identified, this does not rule out the possibility of spiritual problems, including demonic influence. Thus, in any instance where demonic influence is a consideration, counselors who are not themselves expert in dealing with spiritual issues, especially those having no experience with demonic influence, will wisely refer the counselee to appropriate spiritual counselors, or involve such individuals in the counseling process. Both Allison and Dickason provide examples of taking this course of action.²

Social and Emotional Evaluation

An evaluation of the person's social and emotional circumstances is essential in understanding his or her current functioning. Often this is referred to as a "psychosocial evaluation." Included in such an evaluation, in addition to a history of the current problems, is a description of the person's present living situation, family membership and family history, physical and emotional health, finances, intellectual functioning, employment, and education. Special attention is given to any recent changes in any of these areas.

Personal History

Personal history is generally included in the evaluation of social and emotional circumstances, but additional factors

not ordinarily covered in such an evaluation may be essential to discern the presence or absence of demonic influence. Particularly important is historical evaluation for those factors commonly associated with demonic influence, discussed in chapter 8.

Additional elements of personal history to be examined include recent losses of any kind, whether death, divorce, custody changes, moving, being fired or laid off, retirement, broken dreams, disappointment, or financial changes. Even “positive” changes, such as winning the lottery, may have adverse emotional effects.

Other personal-history factors include such things as experiencing physical or sexual abuse, participating in or being exposed to alcohol or drug abuse, parental absence, and social stigmatization. Often, questions like “what is the worst thing that ever happened to you?” and “what is your earliest memory?” prove very helpful in this regard.

Drug and Alcohol Evaluation

A large number of mental disorders may result from or be worsened by the abuse of a variety of substances such as alcohol and prescription or street drugs. Some of the symptoms of substance abuse are similar to those of demonic influence. Thus, it is important to comprehensively evaluate the degree to which use of substances affects the person.

COUNSELING APPROACHES

In general, the approaches to be taken with persons who have come under demonic influence are the same as those for people who do not manifest such difficulties. As we have seen, the entrance of sin into our world has profound implications for the entire created order. First, the whole of Creation, including each person, is tainted with the effects of sin. Second, each person is naturally “bent” toward evil. Third, the earth is the domain of Satan and his demons, thus the potential for people to come under demonic influence is always present. Fourth, we have noted that Satan is a crafty being who chooses those approaches that are most effective in accomplishing his ends. In the contemporary Western world, with its strong materialistic

reductionism, it is not surprising that Satan chooses to work within this worldview rather than to appear in an overtly spiritual (immaterial) fashion. Finally, we have seen that physical diseases, mental disorders, and demonic influence are all the result of this process of sin in the world and satanic activity; all are instigated by Satan, yet all serve God's sovereign purposes and are under divine control.

Because of the many fundamental similarities between mental disorders and demonic influence, treatment of these diverse problems often may be approached in similar ways. The commonly accepted approaches to counseling are generally helpful to persons experiencing demonic influence in its more blatant as well as its subtle forms. The one important exception is when demonic influence is so complete that the individual lacks the capacity to choose freedom from demonic control. In these instances, however rare, delivering the person from demonic control is a necessary precursor to counseling. Only then is he or she able to choose continued freedom from demonic control. However, it must be acknowledged that this person may choose to allow, or even to seek, demonic powers and control once more.

One additional precaution is suggested here. Since deliverance and exorcism are essentially religious processes, it is recommended that they be done in a religious setting and by religious counselors, such as pastors and lay Christian ministers. While involuntary treatment for drug and alcohol abuse is permitted by law under certain conditions, the legality of involuntary deliverance or exorcism is likely to be problematic; it is also likely to violate ethical guidelines for professional counselors such as psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, and marriage and family counselors.

In many respects, involuntary deliverance or exorcism is analogous to involuntarily detoxification for alcohol or drug abuse. Once the involuntary restraints are removed, the person may choose to continue in the treatment and recovery process, or may resume substance use at the first opportunity. Further, even though the person makes the initial choice for continued recovery, he or she may waver and stumble repeatedly before the new patterns of recovery and sobriety become well established. Experience shows that recovered substance abusers

undergo an average of three detoxifications before they reach the point of stable abstinence. As more information is gathered on the process of deliverance from demonic influence and possession, similar patterns may emerge. Satan's ways are both devious and truly enslaving. Considerable diligence and persistence, and much help from others, is required to become free from them.

A number of specific counseling strategies are of particular help to those who have come under demonic influence. These include providing emotional support, implementing behavioral change, correcting errors of thought and perception, and confronting patterns of self-deception and denial. It may be helpful to involve the person in both individual and group counseling to facilitate the needed changes.

Providing Emotional Support

"Beginnings are hard; all beginnings are hard," says a character in Chaim Potok's *My Name Is Asher Lev*. Certainly this is true of beginning the radical life-change that is essential to gaining freedom from demonic influence. To successfully undergo this process, the individual must have a great deal of encouragement and emotional support. Counseling is one important way in which emotional support may be provided.

The person undergoing change needs to be encouraged to experience and express his or her emotions. Bitterness, anger, disappointment, discouragement, and other unpleasant emotions (or complex combinations of emotions and thoughts) need to be acknowledged, evaluated, and resolved. Experiences may need to be examined and reinterpreted. Old hurts need to be forgiven and put to rest. Encouragement must be provided to initiate new patterns of interaction with others.

In addition to counseling on an individual basis, the person also needs to deal with emotional issues and to receive support in a group setting such as group counseling may afford. In some instances, this may be accomplished through active involvement in a small "shepherding" or fellowship group in a local church. In such groups, while Bible study is an important part, the focus must be broader, involving fellowship, prayer, mutual support and encouragement, burden-bearing, shared meals, working together on tasks of spiritual service, and corporate prayer.

Jane Jane came complaining of such profound depression that she needed antidepressant medication as well as counseling. When I first saw her she had been involved for some time in an extramarital affair. A Christian, she knew that the affair was wrong; she was experiencing considerable guilt, yet she found her marriage so unsatisfying that she was reluctant to give up the other man.

Initially, counseling provided most of Jane's much-needed emotional support. With my encouragement, she gradually became more involved in a few friendships which provided acceptance, support, and belonging.

As Jane and I worked together we discovered that she had a lot of resentment toward her husband. Some of it grew out of misunderstandings and misinterpretations of his interactions with her; these needed correction. Other hurts needed to be forgiven. As we worked through these issues, we also gave attention to a more realistic appraisal of her relationship with the other man. Gradually, Jane decided to break off her affair, though three or four times she reinitiated contact. As her depression and guilt lifted, and as she began to understand and accept herself as a person whom God had made and whom God loved just as she was, Jane gradually developed the desire to deal with problems in her relationship with her husband. At this point our emphasis shifted toward developing new patterns of behavior which would be more productive in dealing with him (see below).

Correcting Thought and Perception

Most of us carry with us some degree of distortion in our thoughts and perceptions. Though many are able to live productively despite such distortions, distortions in thought are disabling in some instances. The modern approach of cognitive behavior therapy specializes in correcting patterns of thinking and perception that contribute to guilt, depression, anxiety, and a variety of other mental problems. We find in Scripture that one of the basic remedies for errors in thinking is through learning and meditating on God's Word. Psalm 119 addresses this matter at length; see also Jeremiah 17:10 and Romans 1:21-2:2.

Sometimes, thinking disorders result from conscious or unconscious efforts at self-deception. Most of the classic defense mechanisms described in the psychological literature are forms of distorted thinking and perception. At times, misperceptions and thinking errors are the unwitting result of exposure to the sinful patterns of others. For example, the person who grows up with alcoholic parents is commonly exposed to certain patterns of behavior which result in distorted thinking and behavior patterns that often produce mental disorders, adult alcoholism, and perhaps demonic influence.³

Jane's father was extremely critical. When she failed to measure up to his expectations, no reason or explanation was considered valid. His wrath and punishment were certain, but forgiveness seemed impossible. As we worked together, Jane discovered that she was unable to believe that others, even God, could forgive her. She in turn found it difficult to forgive those who offended her. Gradually she was able to discover that others did forgive her, and she began to experience God's forgiveness. She also was able to begin to forgive those who had offended her. Through this process Jane gradually changed her belief about being unforgivable.

Behavioral Change

As a general rule, one dimension of being under demonic influence is the presence of various sinful or destructive patterns of behavior. Typically, behaviors involve a complex pattern, an interplay among thoughts, feelings, and behavior. For instance, at Satan's urging, Eve chose to eat the forbidden fruit. She doubted God's word that she would surely die (thought), she desired to know as God knew (emotion/motivation), and she took the fruit and ate it (behavior).

Behavior patterns that lead up to demonic influence are complex. Typically, they involve both the presence of sinful behavior and the absence of alternative godly conduct. The problem with a thief is not only that he or she takes things that belong to others. It also includes elements of greed, ingratitude, and selfishness—thoughts and feelings—and the absence of desirable behaviors such as working to meet personal needs and giving to meet the needs of others (see Ephesians

4:17–24). Behavioral psychologists such as B. F. Skinner have shown that problem behavior involves both behavioral excesses and deficiencies. For example, the person who throws tantrums or is aggressive also lacks appropriate negotiating and cooperative behaviors.⁴

In Jane's case, the fact that she was seeing another man was an obvious behavior problem. As I came to know her better, I learned that part of what was missing was the effective communication of anger toward her husband, followed by an effective solving of problems in their relationship. As we worked together, she learned how to communicate disappointments and hurts to her husband as well as how to invite and encourage him to share such experiences with her. Often this process is referred to as assertiveness training.⁵ For Jane, the goal was to develop intimacy with her husband through the sharing of thoughts and feelings, thus paving the way for realistic problem solving.

Confronting Self-Deception and Denial

Jeremiah tells us that “the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked” Many other Scriptures echo this theme. Furthermore, the devil is the father of lies. Thus, it should come as no surprise that people with mental disorders and especially those with problems of demonic influence engage in self-deception and denial. In most instances, the denial and distortion in which they engage is subtle; it is rare that we fall for blatant untruths; but tainted or twisted truth may deceive us fairly readily.

The basic antidote to deception is truth. There is often no better way to deal with such patterns than to begin with the truth of Scripture. There are many ways to do this, both for Christians and for unbelievers. Persons concerned with demonic influence are generally professing believers; thus, there is an implicit commitment to an acceptance of Scripture. At the same time, the counselee may also be openly or subtly rebellious against Scripture, and this attitude must be addressed.

Jane recognized from the outset that her involvement with the “other man” was wrong. She vacillated between being committed to him and recognizing that he was exploitive and

dishonest with her at times. One task was to help her see both the good and the bad at the same time, thus making it more difficult for her to vacillate in this relationship. Eventually, this process helped her with the decision to end the relationship.

A second dimension of dealing with Jane's problems was to help her view her relationship with her husband accurately. She tended to blame him for all that was wrong and to discount her role in their problems. As we explored their relationship, however, several problems emerged. The first was unforgiveness for offenses he had made over the years. We worked together on learning to forgive and put away past offenses.

Jane also discovered a vengeful attitude toward her husband whenever he disappointed her. She confessed that she used to kick him while he was asleep. Another time, she discovered that she got back at him for not spending time with her by scheduling appointments which she knew he would not want to keep. She also recognized that he was quite tired and tended to be more irritable under such circumstances. As we explored this together, she was able to allow him free time for rest and recreation, even if it meant watching the TV.

A second dimension of dealing with this pattern was for her to learn to ask her husband more directly for what she wanted him to do, and to express appreciation for his cooperation. Initially, she tended to become angry with him if he in any way communicated that he was not glad to do as she requested.

A third dimension of dealing with this problem was Jane's discovery that she did not trust other people, and doubted they would like her; hence, she did not try to develop friendships with other women. Part of this grew out of her relationship with her mother.

Group Counseling

Although much of what we have discussed is best accomplished in individual counseling, some things are most effectively addressed in a group. Two of these are social-relationship issues, and issues involving self-deception and denial. Groups can also have a powerful effect in correcting errors in perception and thinking.

The literature on alcohol and substance abuse focuses on pervasive lying as a common part of the life patterns of abusers. It is so common that the following joke is considered a truism: "How do you know an alcoholic is lying? His lips are moving." It is less clearly documented, but it seems likely that those involved in overt demonic influence may also practice subtle patterns of dishonesty, especially with themselves. Thus, group counseling is an important method of treatment for such problems.

Although Jane did not choose to receive group counseling, it is often helpful for those with similar problems. A large part of Jane's difficulty was relational; groups provide a helpful setting for learning new ways of relating.

A major factor that may lead people into demonic influence is the desire for personal significance. This often grows out of an experience of being a social misfit. Further, extensive involvement in demonic influence requires personal passivity, and may in other ways interfere with normal social relationships. Thus, deficiencies in social relationships are likely to be common. For all of these reasons, group counseling is an advisable part of the counseling process.

USE OF SPIRITUAL RESOURCES

As already suggested, the person seeking freedom from demonic influence needs both counseling and spiritual development. He or she ought to be involved in active worship, personal Bible study, fellowship with other believers, and active personal service (ministry) of some sort, and should maintain a consistent prayer life. Being personally disciplined or an active participant in a small fellowship or study group is particularly important. This fosters spiritual growth, and also contributes to social and emotional development.

While a balance of work, worship, rest, and recreation must be achieved, it is important that the individual not have large periods of free time available, especially initially. The saying, "idle hands are the devil's workshop," is most true of people who are seeking to break free from old sinful patterns involving demonic influence. Being involved in meaningful activities is one of the most powerful antidotes to coming once more

under satanic influence. The biblical pattern is “put off sinful ways . . . and put on righteousness” (Eph. 4:13–31, 5:11–18).⁶ The value of this approach is underscored by the biblical alternatives: we are either slaves to sin or servants to righteousness.

SUMMARY

In counseling with those under demonic influence, several factors are important.

First, the counselor must be prepared spiritually, especially if the spiritual dimensions of the problems are to be met. Second, it is important that the goals of counseling, and the methods of achieving them, be scrutinized to ensure they are consistent with biblical principles.

Third, all the dimensions of the problems need to be evaluated—spiritual, medical, psychological, social-emotional, personal history, and drug and alcohol abuse. Each problem area discovered needs to be addressed in treatment; many aspects of this process will require cooperation with or referral to others. The ideal arrangement is for all individuals involved to work together in an effective team. Fourth, counseling in both individual and group modes may be required. Such counseling should address a number of dimensions, including the provision of emotional support, correcting distortions in thinking and perception, fostering behavioral changes, and dealing with self-deception and denial.

Finally, spiritual resources need to be utilized to support and aid the major changes the individual must undergo to effectively gain freedom from demonic influence. It is important to remember that freedom is not gained by the mere absence of evil spirits; it comes only when the person is effectively brought under the power of God through personal commitment and the support and encouragement of others.