

# Trauma

## Caring for Survivors

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After Bible study, a group of young women approached me. They were deeply shaken. Their dear friend Emily<sup>1</sup> had been sexually assaulted by her boyfriend in a brutal attack, and when her friends had seen her afterward, she had still been bruised and in shock. Understanding the gravity of what had happened, Emily's friends wanted to help her to get counseling. They knew she would need support.

In addition to giving them some potential counselors' names, I asked the young women how they thought Emily was doing. They told me that she was not sleeping and had not seemed coherent when she told them what had happened. One friend pointed out that her face had not changed expression as she spoke about her visit to the police station: "It was like she was detached from the horror."

I wanted Emily's friends to know that her most urgent need was to be oriented to her experience—to know what to expect. It is normal for the first few days and weeks after an assault to be challenging. I explained that it might be hard for Emily to sleep and concentrate and that she might experience additional, more pronounced physical symptoms of anxiety.

I explained that this was the time for her friends to grieve with her, not to ask Emily questions or to press her to reveal more than she was comfortable with sharing. She probably wouldn't be able to focus on what they were saying anyway. Instead, it would be healing for Emily if they wept and lamented with her. Their presence would be more important for her than any words.

And I explained that Emily also needed to know one simple truth: the attack was not her fault.

Carefully planning for and addressing the impacts of trauma requires a wealth of wisdom. The suffering of traumatized people like Emily is significant, and they are easy to wound further if we do not engage with them thoughtfully and intentionally. As we will see, caring for people who have been traumatized is complex. After a brief overview of trauma and its symptoms and challenges, this booklet will focus on the *foundations* of trauma care: (1) addressing the overwhelming impacts of a survivor's trauma, (2) stabilizing the survivor, and (3) helping the survivor to build trust with you before you delve into the intimate details of their story and struggle. Whether you are a professional counselor, someone in church ministry, or a concerned friend, there are ways you can help.

## What Is Trauma?

The word *trauma* refers to the emotional, spiritual, and physical disruptions that occur when a person is overwhelmed by extreme suffering. People use the word *traumatized* to describe a person who has been severely impacted by a terrible event—such as rape, a natural disaster, or a car accident. An event may rise to the level of a traumatic experience when it is sudden and unpredictable, involves a threat to life, or is a profound violation of trust. The word *traumatized* also describes a person who is overwhelmed after a series of adverse experiences—such as occurs in childhood abuse, war, or domestic violence. Traumatized people often experience a severe disruption in their relationships with God and others because of what has happened.

With that description of trauma in mind, let me make a few clarifications. Not everyone who experiences a horrible event will be traumatized by it. And for those who are, some will have symptoms that resolve after a few weeks, while others will wrestle with long-term effects. Although symptoms of trauma often share similarities, individual responses to events can vary widely.

Trauma care is therefore challenging because it requires us to attune ourselves to the specific needs of an individual and to discover how *they themselves* have responded to and processed their experiences. As we encounter individuals who

have been traumatized, we must ask, “What do I need to learn, understand, and know about the experience of trauma before I care for this tender soul? How has the person in front of me been affected by trauma? And how does Scripture speak to their heart and situation?” To do so is to be both trauma informed and biblical.

## Trauma Informed and Scripture Informed

At its core, to be *trauma informed* means to be familiar with the signs and symptoms of trauma and to understand its vast impact on a person. The information on trauma that helps us to do this comes out of the important observations many professionals (such as police officers, teachers, social workers, counselors, and doctors) have made about its effect on the people they serve.

When I first heard the term *trauma informed*, I thought, “Why would I want *trauma* to inform my care? I want the Bible to inform my care!” And rightly so. We need to be on guard against taking on a worldview that is centered around trauma. Although secular therapists and other professionals are correctly concerned about people’s suffering, they do not view people as image bearers who live, body and soul, before the living God. Because their anthropology is inaccurate, their understanding of the problem—and its solution—will not point others toward true hope: the gospel. And though trauma is important to

understand, it cannot be the sole or principal lens by which we understand suffering people. Rather, Scripture's perspectives on human suffering, sin, and redemption should control how we understand traumatic experiences and approach survivors.

At the same time, there is tremendous value in being trauma informed—in reading widely to understand the impacts and effects of trauma on a person. Literature on trauma encapsulates key research and a wealth of case studies that help us to see impacts of trauma that are not immediately apparent. When I consulted secular research on trauma, it confirmed the very things I was noticing as I worked with survivors and provided keen observations and descriptions that helped me when I encountered challenging counseling cases.

The more I learned from studying traumatized people and trauma literature, the more I had to wrestle with the complexity of body-soul suffering. This pushed me back into Scripture, and I probed God's Word more deeply to find robust and biblical conceptualizations that would give me hopeful ways to minister to sufferers.

The goal of our study—of Scripture and of other literature—is to be able to make case-specific, biblical applications for traumatized individuals and to bring God's words of comfort to refresh weary, troubled souls. Thus, to be trauma informed does not mean we need to

understand or agree with everything that has been written about trauma in secular literature. But the information on trauma that we gather helps us to be better stewards of the people God has placed in our care (1 Peter 4:10) as we reinterpret it through a biblical lens.

Ultimately, the goals of biblical counseling should compel us to learn more about trauma and how it has impacted the people we are working with. Good biblical counseling involves carefully mining the Scriptures so that we can speak to a person's situation and condition, acknowledging that we are embodied souls whose bodies may need just as much support as our souls do, understanding that community plays a vital role in healing, recognizing that the human heart actively interprets the world and its experiences and needs to be guided to interpret it well, knowing that God's pursuit of each person is highly personal and so our care must be as well, and addressing faith questions that arise in a season of suffering. Now, that is a long list! But this is how we are called to love people under our care, and stewarding what we learn about trauma through a biblical lens can help us to fulfill this calling.

## Trauma in Scripture

Helpers are most helpful when they have a basic knowledge of trauma and the many ways it impacts a person.<sup>2</sup> As we consider how Scripture