What Do We Do?

As of the time of this writing, the news reported 74 school shootings in the United States since the tragic events that took place in December of 2012 at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. On average, there have been school shootings every 7.35 days since that tragedy where twenty children and six adults were murdered by a young shooter.

Every time a shooting takes place, whether at a school, a shopping mall, or a private residence, there’s an uproar and a call for stricter gun control laws, background checks, and other measures that would ensure safer environments for everyone. Others argue that criminals do not apply for gun permits and therefore stricter laws would not accomplish anything.

At the same time, a lot of the most notorious shootings have not been perpetrated by people with a criminal background. Over and over we hear of people with emotional problems, some diagnosed and under treatment, others not diagnosed but their friends and loved ones noticed unusual behavior. But there have also been many instances where the shooters seemed perfectly normal, who showed no signs of mental instability, and everyone who knew them was shocked at the news of what they had done. Then again, others have either taken their own lives or the lives of others because they were being bullied by classmates, roommates, or by total strangers.

In the case of the victims, we can only imagine the pain and sorrow their families must go through as they deal with the tragic loss of their loved ones, particularly if they are young people or innocent children. What can one possibly say to them to help them make their pain more bearable? What can we, as family life professionals, tell them so they don’t live with unresolved grief, which could cause them further pain and suffering? What part do we play in the emotional healing of the family?

Of course, the pain that parents and families feel is not confined to sad events like the death of a loved one. Parents experience great loss and pain when their child comes out with their news of their alternative sexual identity, when their children develop an addiction, or when their lifestyle goes so totally contrary to the way they were raised.

Family life professionals have the unique opportunity to help in the emotional healing of individuals and families so they may enjoy healthier, happier lives and relationships. While we can’t be sure that we are preventing future tragedies, we can at least know we are contributing to the emotional wellbeing of those we know or those who come to us for help.

Part of the value of the AAFLP is the networking opportunities we have, as family life professionals, in our work and ministry on behalf of families. In times of community crisis we can enhance our effectiveness through professional connectedness.

Ellen White wrote that, “As the mind of the sufferer is directed to the Saviour, the peace of Christ fills his heart, and the spiritual health that comes to him is used as the helping hand of God in restoring the health of the body.” As family life professionals, we’re not simply offering psychological help...
Healing For Self-Reproach

Self-blame is toxic to one’s spiritual and mental health. And yet, self-censure often continues long after the contrite soul has confessed his sin and divine forgiveness has been conferred.1

Whenever Jim2 had a flashback to the day he was molested, what stood out for him was not so much what the older man had done to him, but his own part in what had happened. Over and over through the years Jim had told himself that the molester had committed “the greater sin,”3 but he still blamed himself for what he didn’t do, and for what he did do.

He was 14 at the time and had been jogging along a secluded mountain trail and had stopped for a rest. A friendly-looking man had come along and started chatting with him. It was a pleasant conversation, and Jim felt quite at ease with this likable person. He didn’t even feel uncomfortable when he was casually asked about the kinds of sexual things the other guys at school did.

The questions became more personal, and before he realized what was happening the man had started caressing him, and one thing led to the next. Now, at age 30, he was still haunted because he didn’t say “no” to what the man wanted to do to him, and because he hadn’t resisted doing what the man had asked him to do to him.

Jim’s Christian counselor helped him to embrace the truth that what had happened was not a self-chosen experience; that, in fact, he would never have wanted to have his first sexual contact with another person to have happened the way it did for him. It was reassuring for Jim to hear the counselor confirm that he was in no way responsible for initiating what had happened. The molester was 100% responsible for taking advantage of him and he could free his mind from any thoughts that he had in some way influenced the man to do what he did.

The second unresolved issue was Jim’s implied consent to go along with what the man wanted. “If I’d just said ‘no’ to his first advance, nothing would have happened. I know this is true because at the end when he wanted me to do something that was repulsive to me, I refused, and he didn’t force me to do it.”

The counselor explained that in a situation where one person has power over another it is very hard to say “no,” even when one desperately wants to do so. “But that’s exactly my point,” said Jim. “I didn’t desperately want to say ‘no’ or I would have said it. Alarm bells were ringing in one part of my brain, but there was another part of my mind that was enjoying the attention and excitement, and I didn’t want it to stop.”

“That’s precisely the kind of situation where the adult has the responsibility to help the vulnerable, emotionally conflicted person to say ‘stop,’ but the perpetrator did exactly the opposite and he’s criminally accountable for what he did,” said the counselor.

“I get all that,” Jim replied, “but the truth is that I could have said ‘no’ and I didn’t. Even if I was only 2% responsible, I was still at fault and my conscience won’t let me rest.”

“Although I don’t see it quite that way,” said the counselor, “let’s work with your present reality. Let’s suppose that you had the freedom and opportunity to say ‘no’ and instead you decided to say ‘yes’ to what the molester was doing to you—what needs to happen to free your mind of the guilt you are feeling about this incident?”

“I need to make it right with God, and I need to fully accept His forgiveness—that’s what I want to do.”

Jim’s third issue was his self-blame for doing to the man what he was asked to do. In his mind, this was clear-cut. He knew it was wrong, but he did it anyway. He had argued with himself about intent—he really didn’t want to do it; about duress—he was convinced that if he had refused, the man wouldn’t have forced him to do it, but in the end he went ahead anyway.

Meeting Jim where he was and joining him in his perceived reality, the counselor helped him to devise a strategy to deal with his pathological self-reproach. He decided that his first step was to write out an account of what had happened as accurately as he could. He would also include his estimate of what he believed to be the amount of responsibility for:  

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Emotional Healing in Families

The theme for this newsletter is one of great importance to members of the Adventist Association of Family Life Professionals (AAFLP). Families in our world and in our church are suffering from the effects of emotional wounding in many ways. Divorce, domestic abuse, conflict, poor parenting, and neglect of children are often connected with unresolved emotional issues in the adults in families. As President of the AAFLP, I would like to encourage our membership to do several things: first, do whatever you need to do to get emotionally healthy yourself. It is difficult to advocate for something that you have not done for yourself. This could mean joining a 12-step group such as Journey to Wholeness, a group sponsored by Adventist Recovery Ministries (www.adventistrecovery.org). It could mean engaging in individual or group therapy for yourself. Perhaps a personal Spiritual Companion/Mentor could be helpful. As family life professionals, we empty ourselves into the lives of others, but often fall short when it comes to caring for ourselves.

The second thing I would like to encourage our members to do is to learn about emotional healing, especially how it relates to families. Hebrews 12:15 instructs us well.

“Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many.”¹ This passage tells us that bitter roots are poisonous to us and to others. Emotional wounds lead to bitter root judgments of those who hurt us. Jesus, in Matthew 7:1, warns us against bitter root judgments because they come back to hurt us, and often we find ourselves doing the same thing we disliked the most in the other person (Romans 2:1). Not only that, but our bitter root judgments hurt those closest to us, our spouses, our children, our colleagues and our church families.

An overview of emotional healing would begin with embracing the truth of our life stories. Ever since the original wound in the Garden of Eden, God has allowed defense mechanisms to keep us emotionally sane. Some of those defenses include repressing and minimizing or denying the wounds we have suffered and how they have impacted our lives. Jesus promised, “You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (John 8:32). However, embracing our stories also means embracing the pain in them. The God of all comfort (2 Corinthians 1:3) was to give us the experience of His personal comfort for whatever pain we’ve experienced (all our tribulations). The experience of His comfort will draw our hearts to Him and enable us to trust Him in new ways, just as the people Jesus healed were drawn to Him.

The next aspect of emotional healing that is important is to honestly look at our fallen, sinful responses to the pain we’ve experienced. We’ve judged and condemned those who have hurt us. We may have failed to honor our parents when they wounded us or we may have made inner vows that have bound us to them. These fallen responses can be dealt with through simple prayers of confession and repentance using 1 John 1:9, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Our thoughts must then be addressed. Wounded people often have negative thoughts about themselves, others, God or the world around them. Shame that leads to self-contempt is one of the biggest hurdles to overcome. Fear that leads to self-protection cripples many Christians. A straightforward way of looking at false beliefs or lies is to look at their origin. Satan is the father of lies (John 8:44). He knows that if he gets us to believe lies, he can control our behavior. These lies can be counteracted with truths about us found in the Scriptures. For example, in Isaiah 43:4, Jesus says that we are precious in His sight and He loves us. Daily repetition of these biblical truths can build new brain pathways of truth. The old pathways of lies weaken with disuse. In this way, we become new creatures. Old

Bitter Roots Are Poisonous To Us

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principles, as good as they may be, but we're also pointing people to Christ, the Divine Healer of our souls and families. What an honor and exalted privilege we have!  

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Next, Jim decided to write out, in his devotional journal, a confession of the specific sins that had been plaguing his mind, along with his appeal for the forgiveness promised in James 1:9.

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Questions for Discussion

1. Why did Jim feel so much self-blame for what happened and so little animosity toward his molester?
2. How accurate were Jim’s estimates of responsibility for what happened?

References

3 John 19:11.
4 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us [our] sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Good News Translation.
5 Then I confessed my sins to you; I did not conceal my wrongdoings. I decided to confess them to you, and you forgave all my sins. Psalm 32:5. Good News Translation.
6 The true penitent does not put his past sins from his remembrance. He does not, as soon as he has obtained peace, grow unconcerned in regard to the mistakes he has made. . . . He does not gloss over his wayward course, making his wrong a light thing . . . White, Ellen G. (1917) Prophets and Kings p. 78. CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association.
The Pastor as Family Emotional Healer

I knocked on her door; it was not a courtesy call. I was working as a literature evangelist, and I had books to sell. I had great anticipation that I would make a sale. But she seemed disinterested in my mission. It was obvious that she had her own agenda. Before I could finish my presentation she brusquely said, “I do not want your book. I have my own problems. My husband has been sick for months and the doctors cannot tell me what the problem is. I wish someone would just explain to me what is going on, but no one talks to me anymore. It hurts so much.”

I could see the tears running down her cheeks and I could sense the magnitude of her pain. With empathy in my voice, I told her that I understood her feelings and that I hoped that the doctors would soon find a diagnosis and treatment for her husband’s illness.

She became livid and screamed at me, “I do not want your pity, I do not want you to feel sorry for me, and you do not know how I am feeling. That’s what they all say; everyone told me that they would be there for me when my husband got sick, but now, where are they? No one even bothers to come by anymore, I don’t need your pity, and I don’t need your help.”

I saw the anguish and frustration in her eyes. I understood her anger, and I felt her pain. Courteously I explained that I was not implying that I knew her feelings, but that I could understand them. I reflected that she was feeling pain, anger, frustration, disappointment, and brokenness and that I could identify with all of those emotions. I then offered her some suggestions about how she could experience emotional healing.

Misguided Rage

rejection, death, and losses in general, are all factors that create emotional disturbances in families.

Studies regarding the association of life events and psychological illness have been undertaken by several groups of researchers.1 Virtually all have recognized that a series of life events occurring over a short period of time are related to subsequent physical or psychological illnesses.2 The rationale is that one event, unless catastrophic, is not sufficiently potent to affect the individual physically or psychologically, but rather a cluster of such events is much more likely to do so.

The Social Readjustment Rating Scale is composed of 43 life events; each event has a numerical weight to indicate its intensity.3 Holmes and Rahe (1967) believe that critical events occurring within six months, as represented by a score of 150 Life Change Units (LCU), are predictive of imminent physical or psychological illness in a person. A major life crisis is defined as a total of 300 or more LCUs.

When pastors are aware of these life-changing events and their emotional and physical impact on the wellbeing of individuals and families, they are better able to provide the kind of pastoral care that is needed for emotional healing in the family. Such emotional crises may include:

• Indistinguishable unhappiness: the loss of a relationship or a loved one can create unhappiness. This is a normal reaction to loss. However, whenever the reason for the unhappiness is not apparent, spiritual insight, pastoral care, and emotional support can prevent hopelessness and despair.

• Misguided rage: the woman in our story demonstrated misguided rage, or displacement. Hurting people frequently direct their anger at innocent others. Helping an individual to identify the real source of the problem can direct their response more appropriately.

• Self-Induced solitude: it is not normal or desirable for one to be alone all the time. However, individuals in need of emotional healing frequently choose solitude. This is a deliberate attempt to escape from people. They often generalize their perception of rejection or non-support to everyone. Pastors should help individuals reconnect with their church community and help the church community to reach out to people who feel isolated.

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Sticks and Stones May Break My Bones, but...

You likely know the rest of the sentence! “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt (harm) me!” As a child, I believe I shouted these words a few times when kids were yelling hurtful things to me, and there were other times I wished I had the courage to say them. Oh, it was the usual playground stuff... while playing ball at recess or when kids wanted to be by themselves and I wasn't included. I don't know where I first learned this taunt. Maybe it was from a few adults who, when I shared about what other kids had said, were encouraging me to develop a thicker skin and not take things so personally. When I did say it, I said it with as much conviction as I could muster; but it never really helped much because words did hurt me... and I knew they hurt other kids as well.

However, this rhyme remained in my head, and I now realize I have used it in two ways. These words fortified me in a way, building a hedge of protection around myself when people said hurtful things. I reassured myself that words didn't really hurt... being hit or assaulted would be way worse. But on the other hand, I discounted the power of negative words; and I ultimately suffered from that. Now I realize that what I was discounting was a component of emotional abuse. Along with others, I know the negative voices and words in our heads can linger and continue to hurt for years and years.

Yes, we all know that words can hurt! They may not break bones, but they can break our hearts. Words devastate, wound, ruin reputations, destroy relationships, and even start wars!

Maybe kids don't use this phrase anymore; but Wikipedia informs us that it is common to all English speaking people and was first noted in print in 1862 in The Christian Recorder. Long before 1862, the power of negative words was well documented in Proverbs.

“The hypocrite with his mouth destroys a neighbor.” (Proverbs 11:9)

“Reckless words pierce like a sword...” (Proverbs 12:18)

There's no question that children can be damaged by hurtful words, by put-downs and name-calling by friends, teachers, siblings and other family members. Who has the most impact on a child? A child is most vulnerable to the hurtful words said by a parent. “Parents are the center of a child's universe, and if they are saying bad things about you, it must be true,” writes Susan Forward in her book, Toxic Parents.

Forward writes, in the chapter entitled “The Bruises are all on the Inside”, about 42 year-old Jason who was a police officer and had been hospitalized because the police psychologist had concluded he was a suicide risk. She learned Jason was consistently putting himself into unnecessarily life-threatening situations. Recently he had tried to make a drug bust by himself, without calling for the appropriate backup. He came very close to being killed. On the surface this appeared to be a heroic act, but it was actually reckless and irresponsible behavior.

After several sessions, and when she had established a good working relationship, he told her about his bizarre relationship with his mother. His told her his dad had left when he was two years old because she was so difficult to live with. Jason was told he resembled his father, and she never let up on him. “I don't remember a day when she didn't tell me she wished I'd never been born!... I didn't think this crap bothered me anymore, but my insides turn to ice every time I remember how much she hated me.” Jason's mother had sent him a clear message. She didn't want him. When his father left and made no attempt to be a part of his son's life, he reinforced the point: Jason's existence was worthless. Susan explains that through his actions on the police force, Jason was unconsciously trying to be a dutiful, obedient son. In essence, Jason was trying to wipe out his existence, to commit suicide indirectly in order to please his mother.

“In addition to inflicting enormous hurt and bewilderment, this form of verbal abuse can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Jason's suicidal tendencies are relative common among the children of such parents. For these adult children, facing and dealing with their toxic connections to the past can literally be a matter of life or death” (p. 115).

Jason's experience was extreme and clearly abuse and neglect by his parents. Thankfully, he found a helping
lies pass away and our thinking becomes new (2 Cor. 5:17). Ellen White affirms that we can find our true identity in Christ.

When self ceases to wrestle for the supremacy, and the heart is worked by the Holy Spirit, the soul lies perfectly passive—and then the image of God is mirrored upon the heart, the soul is in accord with the mind of God, and human identity is lost in Jesus Christ.²

Following this, the structures we have built to survive need to be brought to death. These structures are things that we have learned to habitually do to protect ourselves. They might include controlling behavior, self-dependence, performance orientation, living as a victim, or self-comfort through addictive practices. We don’t consciously choose these structures daily. They become a part of how we respond to life. However, each of these structures gives God a message about His inadequacy in our eyes.

He was not powerful enough to manage our lives, so we chose to manage them ourselves. To deal with these structures, we invite God to bring them to death and to replace them with His resurrection life. We now live the new life of freedom and fullness of life that He promises. We must then move to forgiveness of those who hurt us. This is a wonderful process that is beyond the scope of this column.

The third thing I would like to encourage AAFLP members to do is equip our churches with the knowledge and skills for emotional healing. Many of us have become so focused on being right and believing the correct doctrines that we miss the matters of the heart. Our churches need to be safe places for hurting people to come and receive healing. They become safe when the members honestly look at themselves and begin their own healing journey. We can be leaders in equipping our members to create communities of emotionally healthy people. Our churches are only as healthy as the families in them. Please join me in making this a priority in your life.

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Questions for Discussion
1. What does it mean to embrace the truth of our stories and the pain in those stories?
2. What is the difference between being victimized and living as a victim?

References
1 New Living Translation
2 White, Ellen G. Manuscript Releases vol. 9, p. 324
PARSONAGE PERSPECTIVE from page 5

- **Illogical weakness:** is unjustifiable feebleness. It renders one a cripple, thus exhausting the person’s inner strength and heightening the perception of weakness. The refrain of “I can’t, I can’t” holds them back from even trying. Pastors should help family members face their reality and think positively.

- **Inappropriate expressions:** people who are hurting emotionally are sometimes abrupt or indiscreet with words. They express themselves in inappropriate ways. Sometimes they are not cognizant of their behavior, or they may rationalize that, because they are hurting, they are entitled to say and do whatever they please. Pastors play a vital role in helping these individuals understand and correct their dysfunctional behavior.

- **Nonchalant Health Care:** it is not uncommon for emotionally distraught people to neglect their health. There is a strong correlation between physical health and emotional health. Pastors can help emotionally distraught people to realize that by exercising regularly, eating healthfully, and getting enough sleep, they will benefit in many ways.

- **Wiling Spirituality:** unfortunately, emotional trauma can cause spiritual declension. The power of the Holy Spirit can revive one’s fainting spirit and overcome feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. So the pastor should empower the emotionally hurting person to renew their dependence on God.

People who are in need of emotional healing become absorbed by the boundaries of their mind. What they feel, think, or experience is often perceived as ultimate reality. They become crippled by their own imagination, paralyzed by their own distortions, and draw conclusions that are either irrational or that render them dysfunctional. It is through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit that feelings of deepest despair, emotional agony and painful rejection, find healing. For as the Psalmist says, “Except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it.” (Ps 127:1).

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Questions for Discussion

1. What should church leaders do when someone projects misguided rage at them?

2. How can church leaders best help people who are facing multiple crises?

References

3. Ibid.