



Being Grounded: A Campus Minister's Guide to Working with those Struggling with Mental Health Issues

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Being a campus minister means you are often a “first responder” when students’ struggles with mental health become overwhelming. We hope this resource helps you feel more confident in what you have to offer when helping your students access the care they need.

Grounded in Your Role

Before I became a therapist, I remember having pastoral encounters where I felt ill-equipped as a minister. Looking back, I can see that I was equipped—as a pastor. When working with students with mental health issues, the greatest help you can offer is in being their minister. You don’t need to and should not be their therapist. They need you as a minister. By rooting yourself confidently in that role, you can offer them a safe place to wrestle with the soulful questions they carry with them. You are not a supplement to their therapeutic process; you are an integral part of their spiritual growth. Meet your students where they are in their faith. Use theological language. Talk to them about hope, forgiveness, resurrection, etc. Ask them how the themes of darkness in Advent relate to depression or how does resilience after trauma offer hope? Pray with them.

Grounded in Gifts

In the world of therapy, we use language like “scope of practice” and “core competencies” to articulate the boundaries of our skills and with whom we can constructively work. Do the same, even if you’re the only person who will see it. Sit down and write out what you have to offer your students. Prayerfully consider how you feel called to minister, what skills God gifted you with, and where those skills stop short. How many times can we hear it? You cannot be all things to all people. By having clear boundaries (even in your own mind) about what your role is and what you can offer, you will be a more effective minister within those boundaries. The students who step into that space with you will be reassured by the clarity you’ve cultivated within yourself.

One of the most important gifts that you can offer is creating space for students to make spiritual meaning out of what they are struggling with mentally. Through prayer, reflecting on biblical stories, theological concepts, hymns, and whatever you’ve found to be helpful yourself, you can help students integrate their faith into their healing. Possibly more than any other gift, you have a campus ministry community to whom you can help them connect through worship, fellowship, and mission. Helping the student integrate into a community as they seek healing might involve things like helping them discern who it is helpful for them to share their mental health struggles with and when that is appropriate. Some students will want to tell no one (a clue there may be heavy shame) and some students will want everyone to know (a clue there are poor boundaries). As a campus minister, you are an expert on community and can help them make healthier choices. Another gift you have is resources (though it may not feel like it!). Your office may have more funding than a student and their family. Can you dedicate part of your budget to supporting students who are seeking help for their mental health? By prioritizing

finances or other resources (e.g. helping a student get rides to therapy), you are demonstrating that their wellbeing is important to you and to God.

Grounded in Your Community

One of the most important ways you can minister to your students is by knowing people who have specialized skills different than your own. Maintain an up-to-date list of mental health professionals to whom you are confident referring. All therapists are not created equally; we specialize and work best with particular populations. We all know that campus counseling departments are increasingly overwhelmed with demand. Find out who they refer to. Ask other practitioners who they refer to. We refer to other people all the time because no mental health professional is the right fit for all people. To whom can you refer the student of color who is struggling with being on an overwhelmingly white campus? To whom can you refer the student to who is exploring their gender identity?

Grounded in Boundaries

Maybe you're thinking, "I can help with those kinds of struggles." Great! Do help. But know when you should make a referral. There are, of course, some clear guidelines here. In the case of problems like self-harm, active suicidal thoughts, and recent traumatic events, refer to an appropriate mental health professional (which may be your local emergency room.) Know your institution's safety policies and your state's mandatory reporting laws. When a student is not in an acute crisis, it may be more ambiguous. Here are some things to think about. If you are meeting with a student at least weekly hoping to "keep them stable," you may be over-functioning. If a student was to miss an appointment with you and your first thoughts include concern over their physical safety, that's a sign you know they need professional mental health care.

Something I know can be particularly difficult is navigating boundaries when a student in a campus ministry leadership position discloses mental health struggles that may impact their ability to serve in that capacity. This is a great opportunity for you to model supportive care. Remember, they are a student, and this is great opportunity for them to learn how to navigate something they may carry with them beyond college. As their supervisor, help them reflect on questions you may have had to answer for yourself at some point. How can they best care for themselves? Do they need weekly therapy? (If you're having this conversation, probably!) How can they balance care for self and their responsibilities? How do they ensure other students (and you) are not responsible for their mental health? Can they fulfill the requirements of the role? Do they need to step back or down? In my experience, when possible, open conversations about these questions are best. It's helpful (but maybe a little scary) to normalize that ministers disproportionately struggle with their mental health. Helping a student leader learn how to cope early is a gift you can offer.

Grounded in Collaboration

Ask your students how you can be helpful *as* their campus minister or chaplain. For example, "I'm honored that you shared your diagnosis of major depressive disorder with me. I'm wondering how can I imagine me being supportive to you as you navigate this?" Let your students be the expert on their own lives and tell you what they need. If all they can say is, "I don't know," hold space for the unknowing. Remind them unknowing and doubt are faithful. Because you've done your work to know your own boundaries, you'll also know what you're comfortable saying yes to. Many mental health professionals understand it is in the best interest of their clients to collaborate with other professional caregivers, including ministers. With the appropriate conversations and releases signed, they may be willing to "expand the system" by collaborating with you to give your students the care they need.

Grounded in Care for Self

Another important aspect of caring for students is caring for yourself. I know you've heard this countless times, but when you're working with students with mental health struggles, it becomes crucial. If they feel unmoored in their life and you do as well, you're going to float off into uncharted waters quickly. You don't have to be a beacon of mental health yourself. (The best therapists have therapists!) You do need to know what it takes for you to be able to offer an hour where you're able to listen and be present to a student's needs. It can also be helpful to have a plan for how you care for yourself after a particularly draining pastoral care encounter with a student. Don't go into helping a student without a plan for how to help yourself after.

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