

DIAGNOSING PROBLEMS

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This discussion does not pretend to be exhaustive, but covers a few principles of diagnosing problems for lay persons, along with some common dangers. When a serious physical or emotional problem is suspected, be sure to urge the person to seek professional help.

Spiritual resources are important in diagnosis:

1. Only God knows the heart. Jer. 17:10; I Sam. 16:7
2. His Word is effective in diagnosis. Heb. 4:12,13
3. He gives wisdom to those who ask. James 1:5
4. He promises wisdom, insight, knowledge and understanding to those who seek it.
Prov. 2:1-6

Issues to Consider in Diagnosing Problems

1. **Functioning.** As you interact with someone who is struggling, ask yourself: Are they able to function effectively in their...
 - a. personal life?
 - b. close relationships with others?
 - c. relationship with God?
 - d. work or study responsibilities?
 - e. social life?

If not, to what degree are they hindered now in each area? What differences are there between their description of their functioning and others' descriptions? Ask them how things are going in each area. If they speak in generalities, ask for specifics.

2. **Pain.** How much are they hurting inside? Some people function quite well even when in deep emotional pain. Pain may be expressed verbally and nonverbally.

In what specific ways are they hurting? Are they experiencing depression, anxiety, fear, guilt (real or false), unresolved grief, low self-esteem, self-hate, discouragement, inability to cope or alienation from others?

If they do not specifically talk about their pain, rather than ask direct questions, invite them to talk by using tentative statements, such as, "It sounds like you're hurting..."

3. **Difficulties in Perception.** To what degree and in what ways is their perception of reality hindered? How do they see themselves, God, others, their close relationships, present situation, work, past, present and future, etc.?

Invite them to discuss their perceptions. For example, “How do you see yourself? Your situation? Your marriage? Your work?” Do they respond to reality in accord with their stated perceptions? Do they consistently see everything as negative or positive?

How congruent are they in their speech and nonverbal communication? For example, do they describe a terrible situation with a smile? Do they perceive their situation as hopeless? Be careful that you don’t get caught up in their distortion of reality!

4. **Factors Influencing His Condition.** No problem happens in a vacuum. Try to discern what issues are underlying the problem.
- What predisposing factors appear to be affecting them? For example, genetic tendencies, childhood abuse, or long-term negative attitudes.
 - What precipitating factors are affecting them? For example, stressors, family problems, or physical illness.
5. **Trends.** What trends have there been in problem areas? Have they been getting better, worse or staying the same?

At what rate has change been happening? Is this a chronic or acute problem? Are they stable? Or, are they deteriorating, rapidly or slowly?

If they do not discuss trends, ask, “How are things now compared to last week? Last month? Last year?” You might ask them to draw a graph of their condition over the past few weeks, months or years.

6. **Coping Ability.** How is their ability to apply resources to resolve their difficulties? How well are they coping now? What kinds of things are hindering their ability to cope? In what ways can you help them in this?

Six Common Dangers to Avoid in Diagnosis

- Assuming that the first problem is the real problem.** They may not know what the real problem is, or they may bring up a less threatening issue to test how you will react.
- Confusing symptoms with root problems.** What they believe is the root problem may only be a symptom, which may be unrelated or remotely related. Often the pain itself is seen as the problem.

3. **Making firmly held hypotheses too quickly.** You will probably begin to make hypotheses right away, often unconsciously. These can hinder or help. Be aware of them and hold on to them loosely. Do not verbalize them too quickly; they can lead you astray.
4. **Oversimplifying.**
 - a. Oversimplifying the causes. For example, saying, “It’s a spiritual problem.” There are often multiple causes, and these may not be the obvious, surface causes.
 - b. Oversimplifying the solutions. What may seem to be an obvious solution to you may be irrelevant, and what worked for you or someone else may not work at all for them.
5. **Judging or condemning.** See Romans 2:1-3; 8:31-34. Judging can severely hinder your perception and ability to diagnose accurately. It will also cut off open communication.
6. **Assuming that what you hear is reality.** It’s actually three times removed from reality! See the illustration below.



You may not be able to solve every person’s problem, but you can be of great help by understanding how serious it may be. Then you are able to encourage them to get whatever help they need.