

A close-up photograph of a person wearing a white, textured robe. They are holding a large, reddish-brown terracotta jug with both hands. The jug has a wide, flared opening at the top, and a stream of clear water is pouring out from it. A piece of light-colored, fibrous material is tied around the neck of the jug. The background is a soft, out-of-focus white fabric.

GUIDING WITH LOVE & COMPASSION

for
Addictive/Compulsive Behaviors

SUGGESTIONS *for* BISHOPS, STAKE PRESIDENTS
and other ECCLESIASTICAL LEADERS

by ROBERT ROBISON, L.M.F.T

Bishops, Stake Presidents and other Ecclesiastical Leaders,

This has been written to provide information and support for ecclesiastical leaders handling a confession from individuals struggling with pornography or other addiction issues. It's not easy to confess and it requires a special humility in order to do so. The information contained in this guide is based on thousands of hours spent with clients who have experienced confession.

From the enumerable stories I have heard, there are common trends in strategies that are more useful than others. The purpose of this guide is to share those with you. If it can be useful to you our purpose has been served.

Handling a confession of one who struggles with pornography, sexual, or other compulsive behaviors is a very sensitive and challenging matter for many ecclesiastical leaders. The variety and depth of different personalities and the issues they face proves the unique nature of each individual spirit. The very nature of addiction involves continued attempts at sobriety with lapses in between.

This can become extremely frustrating to leaders, loved ones and especially the one struggling. Such individuals need continued support and encouragement.

It is the "lapses in between" that cause ecclesiastical leaders, loved ones and addicts repetitive frustration and concern. Slips, lapses and relapses don't seem to fit into the part of repentance that has to do with forsaking.

The stress and pressure of forsaking, often feeds into a paradigm of perfection equals self-worth. These emotions feed into the addictive cycle. In recovery, forsaking is a process and not a single event. The very term addiction means that one has experienced the repetitive cycle of unhealthy behavior, even after committing to stop again and again. Extensive research has shown that addiction is a health disorder. Recent research is showing the key to healing and long-term sobriety is love and connection.

In October 2011 Conference, Elder D. Todd Christopherson stated,

"Surely the Lord smiles upon one who desires to come to judgment worthily, who resolutely labors day by day to replace weakness with strength. Real repentance, real change may require repeated attempts, but there is something refining and holy in such striving."

Preach My Gospel teaches,

"Repentance may involve an emotional and physical process. ... Both repentance and recovery may take time. ... Even though a person may have some initial success, further emotional healing may be necessary to completely repent and recover." Preach My Gospel: A Guide to Missionary Service (2004), 187–188.

The first thing to remember is that anyone who comes in to confess on their own free will, is craving love and compassion. It is not an easy thing to do and the intent behind the confession is almost always due to the desire to change and to get right with God again.

It is a courageous and honorable person who has the courage to seek help in the first place.



I would like to thank my own mentor, Gordon S. Bruin for much of this content and helping me become what I am today.

Sincerely,

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The Power of Healing

The power of healing is strongly influenced by relationships. Four important and research verified conditions that can help prepare the way for natural change are:

- Empathy
- Compassion
- Safety
- Genuineness

Empathy

Empathy has been called the defining principle in any therapeutic relationship. It is a term loosely used in therapy circles, but what does it really mean? One definition (Webster's) is: the capacity for participation in another's feelings or ideas.

Another definition of empathy is: the capacity to think and feel oneself into the inner life of another person.

In a very real sense the one true master of empathy would be the Savior Himself because it was He who took upon Himself our individual sins and weaknesses.

He is the only one that is uniquely qualified to really understand on a personal level where an individual is at and what would help them the most at any particular time. Leaders are thus called upon to seek wisdom beyond their own when balancing Justice and Mercy according to individual needs.

Prearranged and fixed blanket punishments without room for personalization may not only result in partial confession but the confessor may shutdown altogether, fearful that a punishment has already been allotted. When a member experiences empathetic connection, safety is created and healing is taking place.

Compassionate Understanding

Closely tied to the concept of empathy is that of compassion and understanding. Research has indicated that for some the very experience of feeling understood opens the door to change. As one client reported saying,

"You have no idea how good it felt to be listened to that way."

Being present with those who come in to talk to you proves they really matter. They look to you as spiritual advisors and want to feel that God has not given up on them.

"Act like you've got only fifteen minutes, it'll take all day; act like you've got all day, it may only take fifteen minutes."

Compassionate understanding is a lot easier said than done. When we try to jump in and fix things too quickly by giving advice the doors of empathy may quickly close. People open their hearts to change when they are listened to and understood.

The tendency is to try and fix the problem.

People don't want to be told what to do, they want to be listened to. This can feel like a paradox because many members ask, "What should I do?". In most cases they already know what they should do. When we try to push or pressure someone into changing something, it has the tendency to create the opposite effect.

I have a personal joke from my early days of being a therapist and that is, "I have a huge pile of suggestions that I gave clients that never left the office because they were mine."

The founder of the 12 step movement Bill Wilson stated the following,

"We found that addicts would not take pressure in any form. They had to be led, not pushed."

I had a newly called Bishop talk to me after one of his members had seen us 3 times in therapy. This was the first addicted member he had worked with. This individual had a relapse, confessed and the Bishop asked me,

"When will they be better? Why isn't this therapy thing working?"

My response to those moments is,

"I wish I had that much power. But I promise to keep guiding them to find that power in them through the Savior."

Allowing individuals the loving guidance to come up with their own solutions, is where change occurs.

Safety and Genuineness

Safety and Genuineness means that you can demonstrate the ability to listen without condemning. It also means that you can create a safe environment for the truth to be discussed and explored and that you're not putting on an act.



When people come into confess, it is important to gather some basic information as to the nature and duration of the negative behavior in order to best help them. The techniques used for gathering this information, can help or hinder how safe they feel.

There is a significant difference if someone has used pornography 3 or 4 times total over a year and someone who has used multiple times, every week, over many years. Both are in need of compassion and a safe place of accountability. Only one is an addict. The trend I, along with many other therapists and church leaders, notice is that we often over-diagnose and likewise, under-diagnose addiction.

In order to find the balance between Justice and Mercy it is helpful to get a clear picture as to the truth. The way you are with those who come to confess to you, will play a big part whether they will feel comfortable with a full confession or just a partial confession.

If a leader responds without empathy and love the confession will most likely only be a partial confession. And sometimes, even with that safety, they may take time to fully confess everything.

The real challenge for ecclesiastical leaders seems to be finding the unique balance of encouragement without in anyway shaming, condoning or minimizing the behavior(s). In reality, if addictive behaviors are not checked, they can lead to far worse things. The very nature of addiction is progressive and destructive. Denial and minimization from addicts is often a coping mechanism to manage the deep internal hate and shame they already feel inside. Some even get to the place of emotional shutdown due to how long they have dealt with self-loathing and shame.

Compassion and safety can help re-awaken the senses. Most addicts know how unhealthy their behaviors are. They are just afraid, like Adam was, and they tend to hide.

Without knowing it, we often push others to see the destructive nature of addiction rather than gently leading them to feel safe enough to admit it for themselves. If a leader comes across as too harsh or condemning they can actually feed into shame and the addiction cycle due to the way the instinctive part of the brain works.



Leading With Love

Remember that addicts will not be pressured, they must be led. I have had many clients inform me that they will never go back to certain leaders, with their problems, because it just made things worse. They left feeling condemned, threatened and hopeless.

Shame leads one to want to blame another due to the pain they already feel. We call this projection, or passive shame. Another form of passive shame is going back to the numbing behavior that brought them to get help in the first place.

If a person goes out of an ecclesiastical leader's office feeling worse than when they went in, the probability that they will return has decreased.

Again, remember that the way in which a leader responds and communicates will determine if they will feel safe enough to talk about what is really going on with them and thus begin the process of recovery and change.

The goal of this guide is to encourage the proper balance of justice and mercy when dealing with an individual who struggle with addictions or compulsive behaviors. Finding that balance of justice and mercy is a journey based on each individual. This journey is often a process for church leaders as well. Don't be too hard on yourselves as you learn and progress with each member. It is my opinion that when one is trying and willing to confess and enter treatment if necessary, that mercy comes into play notwithstanding the continued struggle with the addiction.

Does one need to be perfect in order for the atonement of the Savior to come into effect? What addicts struggle with is a thirst that never seems to go away. The work of recovery is to help them understand that there is water that can satisfy that thirst.

"But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water ... shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life". - John 4:14

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