



YOU CAN HELP! HELPFUL AND UNHELPFUL INTERVENTIONS IN WITCHCRAFT AFFLICTIONS

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By contrasting helpful and unhelpful interventions in the following grid, we attempt to engage with the symbolic world of attacked persons and give the response a direction that can prove itself effective within a Christian framework. In our approach, it is not essential to know the precise nature of an attack. Are we dealing with negative spiritual forces employed by an outside witch, or with projections of semi-autonomous psychological complexes—similar to a dream—that force themselves into the consciousness of the victim? Spiritual, psychological and social worlds connect with the attacked “self” through a world of symbols. If we engage meaningfully with the symbols, we can widen the patient’s experience of the attack and see components in it that were previously overlooked, and that can help in the process of transformation and reconciliation.

At the same time, the helper must also break a web of stories, rumours and half-truths that vent anger onto scapegoats. People who are or who feel they are victims of witchcraft attacks easily tap into the emotions that are sustained by this “web of stories”, placing themselves into a victim-role of innocence. Thereby they buy sympathy from the community instead of sustaining the image of an evil other.

Trying to do justice to both demands, we build on the following guiding principles and theological clarifications:

1. A person usually accepts help in ways that correspond to his/her own experiences. Many people see their lives marked by a realm of non-ordinary reality that is linked with the person through powerful symbols. The forces of witchcraft, too, affect a person through such symbols. Some are taken from nature (night-animals like owls or cats, hyenas, snakes), others from social life (rituals practised at the crossroads), from domestic life (rituals practised at the rubbish heap before the house), and from people’s own bodies (hair, fingernails, or body fluids). If witchcraft forces are experienced as working through symbols and potencies to link up with certain realms of human existence, then meaningful symbols and rituals can also be used for the purpose of prayer and healing, within a Christ-centred worldview. We try to mediate healing from spiritual attacks through rituals and symbols.
2. Experiences of witchcraft attacks stand in relation to a person’s worldview and



understanding of the human body, with his/her family and social life, conflicts, ambitions, fears and plans. Given the multi-level reality that witchcraft represents, our interventions try to embrace all levels of human experience. Each level bears its own dynamics for healing. One may say, by using a concept from psychology, that the process of Christian healing is *over-determined*: We see the healing to be focused not on one single cause, but on multiple and complementary causes. Dealing with witchcraft attacks includes many dimensions: a quest for healing of the body, forgiveness of sins, reconciliation with the people one has been hostile to, reintegration into the community, finding one's place in society and in the world, and a realistic vision and mission for the future.

3. While many people expect prayers to protect them from harm and to give some form of instant relief from suffering, Christian healing presupposes that the mystery of evil and suffering is not outside the reality of God, as the canticle of Job so eloquently portrays. We avoid in our approach giving the illusion of living in a perfect world. While not attaching a false value to suffering, and while encouraging the afflicted to seek all legitimate means of remedying their situation, we may learn a lot from a spirituality where even spiritual attacks are part of the economy of salvation.
4. Notions of evil tend towards a proliferation of concrete concepts of witchcraft, which becomes a world of their own. A belief in the equal powers of witchcraft and Jesus Christ is incompatible with sound Christian teaching. Witchcraft cannot negate the powers of life. While not denying the reality of witchcraft, we emphasise the pre-eminence of Christ and his power to liberate.
5. We see this healing process as one of liberation: from being a mere victim of spiritual forces, towards becoming an agent of reconciliation, forgiveness and the building of a community by enhancing a sense of belonging. While the victim of witchcraft cannot change the heart of the perceived witch, he/she must work on his/her own heart and from here defeat the destructive powers of witchcraft.

According to these principles, we can now contrast a number of common interventions as helpful and unhelpful.

Helpful	Not helpful
Listening	
Attentive, compassionate and empathetic listening to the stories/experiences of the victims of attacks. To be aware that it is difficult for the victim to find the right words, since the symbols of witchcraft touch very intimate layers of life.	Overt scepticism or brushing away experiences with easy answers ("Don't worry, it's just a dream!").



Helpful	Not helpful
Whatever the helper's attitude about witchcraft, to value the story as a true experience.	Outright denial of the experience as a mere addendum on the edge of human imagination, as illogical, or subtly explaining it away ("It's just psychological").
Working with and through the symbols of witchcraft or the demonic while reshaping the worldview	
To encourage the afflicted not to see themselves only as victims, but as actors with willpower, intellect, emotions and faith. To place emphasis on their own strength that has enabled them to cope with such difficult experiences.	Statements and ways of interacting that reinforce a victim mentality and increase fear and powerlessness in the face of the occult.
While doing everything possible to get better, there should be a lot of freedom to see the experience as part of a greater development process.	Wishing and praying the experience away as a sole negative occurrence without a seed for personal growth.
To hold the symbols of witchcraft in a healthy balance with the symbols of life. Where the patient focuses strongly on the negative powers, the healer should bring in the positive spiritual powers of life, while not denying the negative experiences.	Over-emphasizing the symbols of witchcraft to the symbols of life, or painting a very dualistic world where the threatening symbols are portrayed as totally disconnected from the forces of life.
To recall the areas of life which give the victim strength during the attacks (faith, family, church, friends, own strong points that have helped) and to help him/her become more aware of the helping forces in life.	To be focused only on negative experiences or weaknesses (lack of faith, anxieties, broken relationships, injustice, the presence of evil in the family, jealousy...)
To find also positive value in a witchcraft symbol. Encourage a free-playing imagination and teasing with the symbol rather than sheer avoidance and fear. Find many associations with the symbol, even conflicting ones, to create a wider space of interpretation.	To have one single and fixed negative interpretation of a witchcraft symbol (e.g., "To see an owl means that something terrible is going to happen"). Or to discourage the person from thinking about it at all.
To look for alternative explanations for the experience within the witchcraft discourse that the victim believes in (e.g., "The person who visited you in the dream may not be the actual witch"). Simultaneously, to leave room for the possibility of an explanation outside the witchcraft discourse, for example by encouraging the victim to be open to natural explanations.	To be trapped in only one way of interpreting the witchcraft experience.
To dissociate the symbols of witchcraft from the concrete person of the witch.	To identify the symbols of witchcraft with a concrete person who thereby stands accused of



Helpful	Not helpful
<p>To gently help the victims work through their negative emotions, mental images, self-image, ideas, and to bring them in touch in a playful way with the witchcraft symbol, so it can become a symbol of potential growth and not remain a symbol of pure destruction.</p> <p>To encourage the person to rebuild a worldview where God is supreme and where his/her witchcraft experience can be seen through the eyes of faith, hope, love and humour.</p> <p>To encourage the victim to see the alleged witch in a new way: as a creature also in need of love and healing.</p> <p>To be sensitive to cultural discernments of the experience without being trapped in them. Such discernment by the families often shows where the lines of tensions and conflicts can be discovered to set the healing process on the right track.</p> <p>To discourage the victim from engaging herself/himself with forces of witchcraft. People who use occult forces and medicines to manipulate others or to protect themselves also make themselves more vulnerable to attacks by these forces.</p>	<p>witchcraft.</p> <p>To quickly diagnose and aggressively cast out or pray away the problems.</p> <p>To be trapped in a dualistic worldview (good fighting against evil).</p> <p>To see witches as creatures of pure darkness, incapable of love and unloved by God.</p> <p>To brush away cultural discernments that the family has undergone as “un-Christian” or invalid.</p> <p>To ignore people’s engagements with witchcraft or with “magical shortcuts”, or to deny the existence of witchcraft and its practice from the outset.</p>
Looking at the life context	
<p>To ensure security at home and if needed to look for an alternative place to stay (with relatives, etc.) in case the home presents an abusive environment. To identify helpful elements within the family. Spiritual attacks can be a way of communicating something (for example abuse) that the victim cannot communicate otherwise. To point to spiritual attacks can be a convenient way to help a person out of an abusive environment.</p> <p>To work together with the victim’s family and restore the victim to vital and healthy relationships.</p> <p>While acknowledging that the victim is part of a family, it is good to distinguish clearly the victim’s</p>	<p>To send a patient back home, after prayers, into an abusive environment.</p> <p>To deal with individuals in isolation, without regard to their life context and families.</p> <p>To enable the whole family to become absorbed in the story, or to identify with it, or to hold itself</p>



Helpful	Not helpful
<p>problems from the problems of the family and work on a sense of personal responsibility.</p> <p>To distinguish inner and outer worlds. To discourage any accusation based on experiences in the inner world of a person. To encourage the addressing of issues in the outer world (aggressiveness of the supposed witch, frightening words, etc.)</p> <p>As a helper, to try to remain detached from the events and from accusations. When accusations have been openly pressed, to listen to all sides, and not only to one side. To maintain healthy boundaries. Not to use words which may come across as pointing a finger at a witch. (Some helpers have ended up in court themselves because of misleading words used during prayers!)</p> <p>To encourage the victim to continue interacting with the alleged aggressors, giving them what is due to them (human respect, decent human interaction, etc.).</p> <p>To look at the reasons why a suspected witch would attack the person. Are some of them valid? Are there issues that the victim should address? To take the opportunity of reforming one's life and ways of dealing with others where necessary. This applies to both the accused and the accuser.</p> <p>To point out family issues or injustices that need to be spoken out in the family (even if people are reluctant to speak about them).</p> <p>To acknowledge that spiritual problems often have a medical dimension. Many illnesses, including HIV and AIDS, come with drastic personality changes and changes in biological compositions that play themselves out in dreams and visions.</p> <p>To acknowledge that spiritual problems are related to difficulties in the life-context (school, work, etc.) which need to be addressed together with the spiritual problem.</p> <p>To acknowledge that spiritual problems have a historical dimension that sometimes goes back to</p>	<p>(or specific family members) responsible for what happened to the victim.</p> <p>To base one's judgment on the inner world of the victim or of a "prophet". To neglect events of the outer world.</p> <p>To be trapped in the story. To disregard what other family members (and the suspected witch) may want to say. To speak of a person as if he/she is a proven or convicted witch—judgement is beyond human scope in our approach.</p> <p>To avoid the suspected witch.</p> <p>To easily buy into the "victim-story": the witch is evil while the attacked person has never done anything wrong.</p> <p>To ignore injustices and imbalances within the families or between the people accusing each other.</p> <p>To drive a wedge between biological and spiritual problems.</p> <p>To treat spiritual issues in isolation.</p> <p>To treat spiritual issues without reference to personality development.</p>



Helpful	Not helpful
<p>childhood. Traumas, sexual and physical abuse or unresolved family conflicts can play themselves out in the way attacks are experienced.</p> <p>To acknowledge that the personal spiritual problems of an individual often stand in a reciprocal relationship with the social and spiritual problems of the wider society.</p> <p>To discuss with the patient a realistic plan for the future (studies, work, marriage, etc.) that touch the major areas of life. To discuss how to go about these issues and agree on a timeframe. To help the patient come up with a realistic road map for the future.</p>	<p>To treat the spiritual attack as if it had nothing to do with or about society.</p> <p>To leave the patient with an unrealistic plan that he/she will never be able to accomplish. To have no vision for the future makes a person more likely to be tossed around by spiritual forces.</p>
Bringing the experiences into prayer	
<p>To bring the experiences of the victim into prayer, in which the helper feels comfortable, and able to radiate confidence and peace.</p> <p>To pray with a whole range of feelings, emotions, mental states, attitudes (like in the psalms...).</p> <p>To pray with the materials of people's experience and at times to creatively present them in poetic and dramatic modes for the victims to experience them in a new way.</p> <p>Some people need a ritual through which they can experience a transformation, coming out as new creatures and ready for new relationships. The use of material symbols/sacramentals should be done in such a way as to develop and encourage faith, hope and love, as well as other virtues: patience, fortitude, humility, etc.</p> <p>To look for God and address God in the ordinary events of life (breathing, daily food, sleep, rain, sunrise, etc.). A person who has learnt to find God in the ordinary will not easily feel separated from God.</p>	<p>To refer the prayers to so-called "specialists" or to copy prayer-styles from others.</p> <p>To keep fixed images of God that remain unchanged by this experience.</p> <p>To pray away (exorcise) the inner experiences without giving room for transformation. This may entrench victims in their condition, or cause a relapse with greater severity.</p> <p>Any purely magical understanding of the material symbols/sacramentals and ritual prayer.</p> <p>To focus prayers on miracles and extraordinary manifestations. A miracle, even if it takes place, rarely carries a person through their whole life.</p>
Aftercare	
<p>To allow the experience of the victim to be integrated into his/her life story in a natural way. To allow the experiences to be retold in different ways. While retelling an experience, one can often gain new insights.</p>	<p>Fixed styles of testimonies, which can close the experience into one single interpretation. To narrate an experience under group pressure. To retell the story when no new insights are emerging in the process.</p>



Helpful	Not helpful
<p>To provide a sympathetic support group and helpful materials.</p> <p>To assist the person to be grounded in the Christian faith and be at home in the church. To encourage a stable spiritual life.</p> <p>To ensure the person knows that each witchcraft experience is different. Some may fade away like a dream after some time; others are remembered for life. Forgiveness and healing are sometimes a life-process.</p> <p>To acknowledge that the victim's experience is unique.</p>	<p>To think that a once-off prayer meeting has done the deal.</p> <p>To go from one powerful pastor, priest or prayer group to another.</p> <p>To remain stuck in only one way of looking at the witchcraft experience.</p> <p>To universalise the experience of the victim and to see it present in different life-stories. (Many people who have been involved with Satanism or demons see Satanism and demons everywhere; it becomes their vocation to liberate everybody. This fixes their experiences and those of others into one single framework.)</p>