

# Narrative processing peer groups help pastoral leaders build resilience to face trauma

*In this Q&A, Kate Davis and Andrea Sielaff—both of The Seattle School of Theology & Psychology—highlight research from their white paper, Effective Small Groups for Pastors and Christian Leaders: Building Resilience Through Narrative Processing Circles, as a resource for theological educators doing formational work in degree programs and continued education offerings. In partnership with ATS, the two will present more on the model and research during a webinar open to all member schools from 1 to 2:15 p.m. ET on Tuesday, September 19.*



## **Q:** Why do you think that forming resilience to face trauma is an important part of formation for ministry?

**Sielaff:** Pastors are often on the frontlines of responding to trauma, which means they are both exposed to possibly traumatic situations and to vicarious trauma as others approach them with the most difficult moments of their lives. For example, the church I'm part of lost an 18-year-old woman this summer when she was shot while driving home from a July 4 fireworks show. She had graduated recently and was beloved by her peers in the youth group. One of her parents was an elder at the church.

In this kind of traumatic situation, a pastor may be called to the hospital to care for the family as their child passes from life to death, to address the questions of youth who may be angry at God for this loss, and to shepherd the congregation and the wider community through their grief. Too often, pastors only have a single pastoral care class to learn how to address these layers of grief and trauma—and no resources on how to manage their own grief and trauma responses.

Pastors need to be prepared theologically to address questions about suffering and be trained to do pastoral counseling, but they also need to be formed to handle the intra-personal impact of trauma. They need skills to understand how to engage their own grief and the vicarious trauma that results from identifying with the victims of trauma. A pastor who is also a parent, for instance, is likely to be deeply shaken when caring for a family who has lost their child.

**Q:** *Trauma is often, by nature, unpredictable. How can someone develop resilience to trauma?*

**Davis:** When we talk about resilience, we don't mean going forward without acknowledgment, and we don't mean bouncing right back to how things were before. Resilience is connected to spiritual maturity, the capacity to tolerate uncertainty and ambiguity. Resilience is the capacity to be present with others while also attending to your own spiritual and psychological health to foster post-traumatic growth.

Your point about the unpredictable nature of trauma is correct; that is why these capacities are best developed before they're needed next. We do that by helping leaders look back at what has helped them get through previous traumas or difficulties and guiding reflection so they can learn from those experiences to grow skills for resilience. Through integrating their past experiences, it becomes whole-person formation, not only a checklist of skills (though there are plans that can be created in anticipation of traumatic events).

In [Resilient Leaders Project](#), our research and continuing education program, we found that a particular element of that program was especially effective in developing resilience—narrative process peer groups. In the [upcoming webinar](#), we will share more about these groups that draw upon the past and present life stories of the participants. Two key assignments we'll share are the Early Childhood Story and the Unresolved Narrative.

**Q:** *As you studied why and how these groups were effective, what were the results? What surprised you?*

**Sielaff:** We found that the groups increased four aspects of resilience: (1) self-awareness, (2) self-compassion, (3) leadership skills, and (4) relationships. We also identified five elements of the groups that were key in developing resilience: (1) convener facilitation, (2) "being with" stance, (3) story-based, (4) commonality and diversity, and (5) structural elements.

What surprised me most was the way our online cohort (during the pandemic) used a lot of sensory language to describe their experience of this group. Many of them talked about being "really seen" and "feeling held" by their groups. This sensory experience of community is not easy to foster in an online environment.

**Q:** *What impact do you hope these findings will have in the field of theological education?*

**Davis:** The inspiration for these narrative process groups was a series of seminary courses that I took as an MDiv student at The Seattle School of Theology & Psychology. The courses are completed in small groups and give real-time feedback on pastoral presence and leadership effectiveness, while also helping students to integrate formational experiences. Many students at theological institutions have expressed a desire for peer support and



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greater preparation for the relational demands of ministry. I'd love to see this model and our research be used as a resource by more ATS member schools that are looking for best practices for clergy formation and relational groups.

The work of church leadership is about how we are in a group context—as we equip students for that role, we

need to create more “here and now” experiences and honest conversations so they can receive the most powerful feedback about themselves in a safe environment from people who care about them. We are excited to partner with ATS to present more about this model in the September 19 webinar.



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