

THE CHURCH AND MENTAL ILLNESS

Jesus Christ came to bring us abundant life. Abundant life includes mental health, too. Unfortunately, the Church has not always reacted with grace to those struggling with mental health. The Church is the place where the children of God are meant to find healing and support, whether that be for an abortion, the loss of a loved one, or a struggle with addiction or mental health. The Church is designed to be a community where each member supports the other. God uses the Church as the place where we are meant to find life and find it abundantly. However, the Church often drops the ball when a member is struggling with something invisible. This makes sense. A broken arm is much easier to recognize than a broken spirit. Chances are you know someone who has been impacted by a lack of understanding in the Church, or unhelpful attitudes towards mental illness.

In the Christian community, people sometimes believe that mental health issues are due to sin or an imperfect understanding of God and the Bible. While a right understanding of God is an important part of healing, Christians often think that the best or only way to “solve” someone’s mental illness is to help them understand God’s love or grace better. This often develops into the idea that the person experiencing mental illness somehow sinned or isn’t a good enough Christian - if they were better, they would not be facing this struggle. However, mental illness is very

much like physical illness – it is often not the result of a specific sin or weakness, but a general result of the Fall and a reflection of human brokenness. Like asthma or dementia, it often just happens to people without them doing any specific thing to cause it.

The Church, either leaders or congregation members, can respond with “Who sinned, this man or his parents?” But as Jesus showed us in his response to His disciples’ questions about a man born blind, suffering is not generally a punishment for sin.

This attitude towards mental illness makes it difficult for members of the Church who struggle with some variety of it to admit to themselves they are struggling, and to seek help from within the Church. This attitude makes them feel like they’ve done something wrong, or that they have failed. The issue is compounded because mental illnesses often reinforce feelings of guilt or failure.

Just like with a physical illness, often the Church doesn’t have the medical expertise to heal the person struggling with mental health. So, just as with physical illness, the one struggling should seek professional medical help. God can heal any illness; however, he can use whatever means he chooses to bring help and healing, be that medical professionals, family, friends, or the Church. I want the people I love to experience abundant life. I’m sure you do, too. But sometimes misunderstandings within the Church can make it harder for people struggling with mental health to find the help they need.

So, what can the Church do instead?

One important step is for churches to talk about mental health struggles in a compassionate and informed way. This will help people in the congregation understand mental illnesses better; and help those who are struggling find help within their church community. Mental illness, like physical illness, is not always cured. But like helping someone with a physical illness, the church can help people learn how to live with their illness and draw closer to God in the midst of it.

There are many resources available for those struggling with mental illness, or congregations that want to minister to the mentally ill. [Mental Health Grace Alliance](#) provides resources to start a support group, and workbooks to help navigate the mental health journey for those directly affected. [Fresh Hope](#), an organization founded by a pastor diagnosed with schizophrenia, provides support groups online and in-person.

When someone in the midst of mental illness tells you about their struggle, chances are they aren't looking for advice. Telling them any variation of "you should trust God more," "love God more," or "pray more," is not what they need to hear. Chances are they already feel like God is far away no matter what they do. Often what they need is someone to walk beside them in the darkness, helping them carry their burden. Sharing mental health struggles usually takes a great deal of courage for those suffering from illness.

There are many kinds of mental illnesses, like depression, anorexia, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or PTSD. There are several categorizes for these illnesses as well. These disorders have a wide variety of affects, and everyone expresses the symptoms differently. Because of all these differences, experience with one kind of mental illness, or one person's struggle, does not necessarily equip someone to understand another person's struggle. This is why churches need to be equipped to refer those facing mental illness to certified and licensed professional help. When churches attempt to do this on their own, it is far too easy to get it wrong.

The Church is a place where believers can help each other grow in Christ and find encouragement and support in the darkest of situations. So let's make it easier for our brothers and sisters who carry the burden of mental illness to find abundant life in Christ. After all, we weren't made to do this alone.

10 ways church leaders can support people with mental illnesses

The Interfaith Network on Mental Illness

- 1.** Make sure you know when to refer people to mental health professionals and where to refer them when the need arises. You can also refer congregants and family members to a variety of support groups and classes.
- 2.** Stay in touch with the person with mental illness and his or her family after you make a referral. People with mental illness and their family members need your ongoing support.
- 3.** Encourage your congregation to treat people with mental illnesses the same way they treat people with other illnesses. Offer to visit them when they are hospitalized. With their permission, ask your members to send them cards and bring them casseroles when they are ill.
- 4.** Plan a specific day to focus on mental health (perhaps in conjunction with Mental Health Month in May or Mental Illness Awareness Week in October). Say specific prayers for people with schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, anxiety disorders, depression and other mental illnesses.

5. Talk about mental illness in your sermons, classes, and adult forums, especially when you are addressing compassionate outreach, social justice and erasing stigma and discrimination. Talking openly about mental illnesses reduces the grip of stigma. Emphasize the biological nature of brain disorders and remind your congregations that they can affect anyone, regardless of age, race, religion or income. Mental illnesses are not the result of personal weakness, lack of character or poor upbringing.

6. Pay attention to the words you use. Avoid stigmatizing language and encourage everyone in your congregation to do the same. Do not refer to people as "crazy," "psycho," "lunatic" or "mental." Use phrases like "people with mental illnesses" rather than "the mentally ill."

7. Educate your congregation. Bring in speakers from NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness), the medical community and your local mental health center. Run a series of articles in your congregation's newsletter. Show videos on the subject and then encourage your congregation to discuss the issues raised.

8. If you have a peace and justice ministry, encourage them to get involved in the systemic problems that affect people with mental illness. More people with mental illnesses are in jails and prisons than are in mental hospitals.

Programs for people with mental illnesses are under funded and axed quickly

when budgets need to be cut. Many chronically homeless people have chronic mental illnesses.

9. Housing and jobs are critical to the recovery process. Encourage members of your community to help find jobs and provide housing options for people with mental illnesses.

10. Start a spiritual support group in your faith community for people with mental health challenges and their families.

Encouraging Truths for Christians with Mental Illness

Even as we struggle, we must remember some important facts. One, we are not alone. The truth of the Gospel is that we are deeply loved. We were loved by God as evidenced in creation and we remain loved by God as He demonstrated in sending His Son to die for us while we were sinners ([Romans 5:8](#)). God loves us and sent His Son to die for us and provided His Spirit to reside in us, speaking on our behalf ([Romans 8:23-26](#)).

Two, the presence of sickness, struggle, and suffering does not negate God's presence and love for us. [Romans 8](#) provides a critical chorus for us as we reside in the "already, but not yet." We live in the Saturday of passion week – grateful and redeemed through the death of Christ on the cross on Friday and awaiting our own resurrection and glorification on Sunday. Christ has gone ahead as the first fruits of the resurrection ([1 Cor. 15:23](#)), the forerunner of our faith ([Heb. 12:2](#)), and we wait in expectant hope and promise. While we may suffer and struggle now, it is nothing compared to the glory to come ([Romans 8:18](#)). Our current suffering is designed to ignite the flame of our hope for Him, knowing that "*nothing can*

separate us from the love of God” ([Romans 8:39](#)) and “His strength is made perfect in weakness” ([2 Cor. 12:9](#)).