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Mental Illness

What to Know and How to Help





Contents

INTRODUCTION

One Family's Story 5

CHAPTER 1

Mental Illness: An Overview..... 13

CHAPTER 2

Families in Crisis 31

CHAPTER 3

Misunderstandings about Mental Illness..... 49

CHAPTER 4

How to Help 63

AFTERWORD

Seeing beyond the Illness 91

Resources 97



Misunderstandings about Mental Illness

IF WE WANT TO BE THE KIND OF PEOPLE, CHURCHES, and communities who respond with compassion and dignity toward those with mental illness and their families—who really see them as precious human beings made in the image of God just as much as you and I are—then we need to start rethinking some popular assumptions. There are three common misunderstandings about mental illness that are particularly damaging.

MISUNDERSTANDING #1: Mental illness isn't real.

Some people think that mental illnesses are not real medical—or even psychological—conditions.

“Depression is just normal grief.”

“Eating disorders are teenagers acting out.”

“ADHD is made up.”

“Anxiety means you're not trusting God enough.”

Perhaps you've heard people say things like this. Perhaps you've said them yourself. But the truth is mental illness is real, and it must be taken seriously.

Some people assume that mental illness simply reflects a spiritual problem, not an actual illness. Of course, we would never tolerate such a dismissal of other kinds of illnesses, like cancer or diabetes. Well, brain injuries, chemical imbalances, and disorders of the mind should also not be dismissed. They are just as real as other illnesses. They're documentable, and they're treatable.

We are horrified (and rightly so) by people whose religious beliefs cause them to deny medical treatment to the sick, yet some people claim mental illness

should not be treated because such treatments are not found in the Bible. The Bible does not describe the use of chemotherapy, painkillers, antibiotics, or general anesthesia either, yet those treatments have helped millions of suffering people.

Denying the reality of mental illness in our faith communities has the same effect as denying the reality of other illnesses. It hinders people from crying out in their pain, bringing their illness to Jesus, and finding the help they need to ease their suffering and find wholeness. It forces sick people and their families to choose between their church's teachings and their own life and health.

It doesn't have to be this way.

MISUNDERSTANDING #2: Christians can't have mental illnesses.

All sorts of places—workplaces, charities, churches, social clubs—have official rules and policies they operate by. But have you noticed how it's often the unspoken “rules” that are the most influential? In some faith communities, one unspoken rule is that no messes are allowed through the church doors—or at least not the kind of crippling, persistent messes that a few more prayers and more Bible reading can't cure. In these spaces, people suffering from the “mess” of mental

illness are given the impression that that's just not something real Christians have to deal with. A friend observed, "One of the things I learned from therapy is there is nothing you need to be afraid to talk about, but that's not the faith system that a lot of churches promote." Another expressed it this way: "People think Christians aren't supposed to get depressed, because they're supposed to be joyful."²¹ An overemphasis on victorious, joyful Christian living can leave little space for people to grapple with and talk about the very real and very painful reality of suffering.



It's true that, as Christians, we *do* have victory in Christ Jesus. In fact, that's the heart of the gospel. Consider what the apostle Paul says:

But thank God! He gives us victory over sin and death through our Lord Jesus Christ.
(1 Corinthians 15:57)

I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength. (Philippians 4:13)

Despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us. (Romans 8:37)

God has promised to remove us from this world someday and to replace these imperfect bodies with new bodies (including, I believe, new brains) perfectly suited for life in a world without decay and suffering (see 1 Corinthians 15:12–57). In the meantime, however, life on this side of heaven is far from perfect. We’re all broken and flawed. The Bible clearly tells us that our bodies, minds, and souls are impacted by sin, sickness, and decay, and we should not expect *complete* victory in this present life. We are all affected by the world around us and the brokenness within us. This, too, is Christian doctrine at its most basic. But we sometimes forget to walk in the humility of the knowledge that we’re all scarred, broken, and will face many sorrows. We forget the “not yet” part of “already and not yet.”

Jesus said:

I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world. (John 16:33)

We are not immune to suffering from illnesses—and that includes mental illnesses. We are affected as much as anyone else by the curse on this fallen world. There’s no reason for us to assume that people who trust in God, follow Christ, and repent of their sin won’t have the trouble that is part of the human experience in this world. Those who are truly effective in ministering to others in need are the ones who are aware of the need in themselves. If you’re approaching others as though “You have problems, and I don’t,” then you won’t be a safe person for people to turn to.

When we don’t make space for the truth that people in our faith communities can and do suffer from illnesses that affect the brain, then, on top of the initial crisis of dealing with a mental illness, we set them up for a secondary crisis. We send them the unspoken message that their mental health problems must mean that they’re not real Christians, that they don’t belong here, or that God has walked away from them. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Christ does redeem our suffering, and one day he will make us new, with new bodies that don’t decay, minds that don’t get sick, and spirits that don’t lose heart. We have great hope in this life and for the next, but our hope is not in the avoidance of suffering in the here and now.



MISUNDERSTANDING #3: The person with the mental illness must be to blame.

Some people believe that mental illness is essentially a spiritual problem that can be fixed by the sufferer through spiritual means. Perhaps because brain disorders affect an individual's cognitive abilities and emotional processing and because this in turn affects a person's behaviors and spiritual expression, there is a lot of confusion about what causes mental illness. Some people believe it's caused by demon possession or demonic attack. Others think it's caused by a lack of faith. Some see the root cause as unconfessed sin. As one woman put it, "The first thing about church was, if you've got a problem, you must not be walking with the Lord." Another woman, who had depression and sought counseling, was told by her pastor that she must have undealt-with sin in her life that was making her depressed.²²

Individuals with mental illness and their families often feel condemned for what they're experiencing. And sometimes when they go to their church leaders, instead of finding the no-condemnation grace of Jesus, they find an assumption that they must have done something wrong to deserve their suffering. It's sometimes even implied that they'd better fix themselves and their family's problems if they want to be part of the faith community.

Spiritualizing mental illness translates into blaming sick people for their illness. This kind of thinking traps people in working harder and harder to achieve enough righteousness to make themselves well. This is not the gospel message. It's a message that discourages people from acknowledging their mental health struggles and from seeking help.

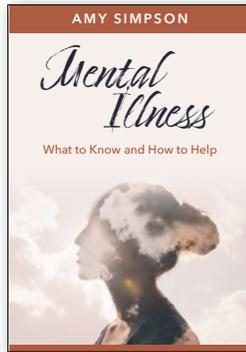
Mental illness can happen to any of us. If you pay attention, you can find countless examples of faithful people whose families have been affected by mental illness.



Mental illness doesn't mean that God doesn't love you or that you haven't done enough for him. We live in a world that's deeply and pervasively damaged by rebellion against God. Good behavior and serving God are not magical charms that will make our problems go away. We don't hold the remedy for our infirmity; Christ does. But he has not fully unleashed his healing upon the world. God loves every single one of us and he grieves with us in our suffering. The apostle Paul assures us in Romans 8:35–38 that having trouble—even the very worst kind of trouble—does not mean God's love has left us:

Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death?... No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us. And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love.

And I would add to that list: *not even mental illness.*

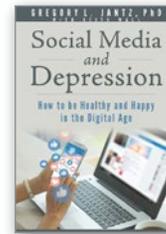


Mental Illness, What to Know and How to Help

When family members see a loved one exhibiting symptoms of mental illness, it can be shocking, disorienting, and even traumatizing. Most families are overwhelmed and have no idea where to find support. And when they do reach out, their friends and churches often aren't sure what to do, what to say, or how to help.

Author and speaker Amy Simpson knows this difficult journey well. She has spent years walking alongside a family member with a mental illness. She now educates churches, families, and people helpers about the best ways to provide support for those facing a mental health crisis. In this book, she clears up common misconceptions about mental illness with a biblical understanding of God's heart for those who struggle. You'll find resources and practical suggestions for how to help effectively and safely. You'll learn how to care for a loved one with both compassion and healthy boundaries.

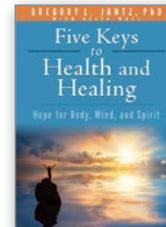
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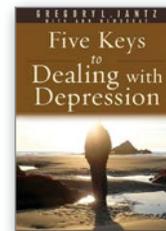
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