

Mental Illness & Stigma:

SUFFERING IN SILENCE

■ by Kim Pronoitis, MA, LCPC

Many people who live with a mental illness suffer in silence. Why? Because they are afraid of the stigma and being judged. Stigma is something that people are ashamed of that is beyond their control. Because of a lack of education, people think that a mental illness is something that one can “get over”.

What does the church say about mental health? There is a common misconception that anxiety and depression is something that we should be able to control. This is not always the case. Often times Christians can be judgmental and make implications that the struggling person has a lack of faith or trust in God. In our suffering we should be there to support one another. Throughout the Bible, God mentions that we are not to suffer alone. Galatians 6:2 states to “carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ.” People stay quiet and do not talk about the things that they do not understand. Sadly, this stigma and judgement of others can isolate those struggling with mental illness and keep them suffering in silence.

What does the church say about stigma and mental health?

It is important to remember that you and I are the church. We need to gain and promote new awareness about stigma and mental health. Thankfully today, some churches and Christians are starting to take mental health more seriously. Numerous churches and leaders are starting to equip pastors and congregations with new information. Some churches are even starting mental health awareness groups.

Through the media, talk radio, and different publications, we are starting to educate and give our congregations and church communities a different perspective.

Despite these positive changes, the stigma behind mental illness remains common in churches and Christian circles. Mental health is not a common topic in the church, and so I encourage you, the church, to start speaking up.

Be a part of stopping the stigma

Starting the conversation on mental illness can feel scary and intimidating, but it doesn’t have to be. Here are some simple things you can do to help stop the stigma behind mental illness:

Acknowledge and promote scientific truth about mental illness

- Mental illness is no different than any other physical illness.
- People with mental illness are no more violent or dangerous than the general population.¹
- Mental illness is more common than you may think. One in five Americans is affected by a mental illness each year.²
- Ignoring or denying mental illness delays treatment and a return to normal functioning – like any other illness the sooner it is treated, the better.
- Suicide is a complex issue and those who take their own life are suffering.

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Acknowledge and promote spiritual truth about mental illness

- Having a mental illness is not a lack of faith or punishment from God.
- If God chooses not to heal a mental illness (or any other illness), it is not because we do not trust him enough.
- God does not say we should hide the pain in our lives. This includes our mental health. God tells us instead to carry each other's burdens to fulfil the law of Christ.
- Jesus has compassion on those who are afflicted. His concern is always for their healing – body, mind, and spirit – regardless of what caused the illness.

Educate yourself and those around you

- As a society we need to talk about it more – we need to talk about our mental health as we talk about our physical health.
- There is nothing wrong with normalizing therapy, as it can be an empowering experience.
- It's beneficial to be honest with who we are – choosing empowerment over shame.
- Be conscious of our language regarding mental illness. Many times we are not even aware of how our words can affect another. To someone who is suffering with mental illness, it is hurtful, for example, to hear someone casually say, "I'm so OCD!" just because they like an organized office.
- It is true that the media, movies, television, and society still portray a negative perception of mental illness. We need to correct that as the opportunity comes.
- In our education, we ought to encourage equality between physical and mental health.

Choosing empowerment over stigma

When we have not experienced something, it is easy to come to our own understanding and assumptions, which fuel fear, judgment, stigma, and even hatred. Therapy (counseling) gives insight and empowerment - there is nothing wrong with normalizing therapy. Life's issues are not always easy, and one does not have to have a mental illness to seek out therapy.

Honesty is the first step to healing - how can we be who God intends us to be without taking an honest look at ourselves first? We have to be honest. There are many of us - even Christians - who live in denial about our mental health. It is only through our own journey that we gain wisdom and insight. This empowers us to move past the stigma towards personal healing and helping others. Taking ownership of our mental health allows us to gain a confidence to our being. We don't need to stigmatize ourselves or others who struggle. We need to be able to stick up for all who are suffering so that they do not do so in silence. It's important for us to remember that it isn't the illness that defines an individual. God has a purpose for us all. ■

1 MentalHealth.gov. Mental Health Myths and Facts. <https://www.mentalhealth.gov/basics/mental-health-myths-facts>

2 NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness). Mental Health by the Numbers. <https://www.nami.org/learn-more/mental-health-by-the-numbers>

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