

Facing Giants: The Giant of Mental Illness, 5/16/2021

Jillian seemed to live the charmed life. A pretty girl, a Christian home, lots of friends, straight A's. After graduating from High School, Jillian moved away from home for the first time to attend college. It wasn't long before she recognized that something was wrong. She says, "I felt like I was falling apart." The voices started in the spring of her freshman year. By July she was sitting in her room at home motionless and unable to respond to questions from her family. That month she was hospitalized for the first time. Eight days in the psychiatric hospital brought a diagnosis of schizoaffective disorder. She struggled to be consistent taking her medication, not wanting to confront the reality of her condition. By the fall she lost so much weight that she had to spend four months at a facility that specialized in eating disorders. Things seem to improve and she started back up college. The next 2 years were a rollercoaster of extreme highs and lows as she worked with her support team including her parents, psychiatrist, pastor and support group, at times she felt so good she dreamed about becoming a missionary in Tunisia, other times were marked by suicidal thoughts, auditory hallucinations and delusions. We will come back to Jillian's story at the end.

Welcome to the Giant of Mental Illness. 1 in 5 children and adults will suffer from any mental illness in a given year in the United States.¹ Mental illness is no respecter of race, gender, age, religion, socio-economics and IQs. Illness occurs the same rates in followers of Christ as it does outside of the church.² This means that there is a high probability that you or someone you know is afflicted with a mental illness. Let me give a definition of mental illness, which is distinct from mental health. Everyone has mental health which is just a description of your emotional and psychological wellbeing.³ Not everyone has mental illness. **Mental Illness is a clinically significant disruption of a person's thoughts, moods, behavior, or ability to relate to others, severe enough to require treatment or intervention.**⁴ Just as we have been doing through this series, we want to bring what many suffer from in darkness into the light to find help and hope in Jesus Christ. Jesus stands for those who suffer and we are called to stand alongside of those who suffer from mental illness. **My goal today is three-fold: 1) Myth Busting, Compassion Expanding, Hope Building,**

Myth Busting

Sadly, there is a stigma around mental illness that continues both inside and outside of the church that is fueled by a number of myths, 3 of which I want to address this morning.

Myth #1 People that have mental illness all act "scary and crazy".

Truth: Illnesses range from mild, high-functioning, highly treatable to severe, low-functioning and difficult to treat. Many people, likely people you know but have no idea they are diagnosed with a mental illness. Those with mental illnesses are more likely to be harmed than to harm

¹ <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/mental-illness.shtml>

² Edward Rogers, "The Effects of Mental Illness on Families Within the Faith Communities," *Mental Health, Religion and Culture*, 15 (2012), 301-13.

³ Simon and Jill Shute, Co-founders of NAMI DE.

⁴ Matthew Stanford, *Grace for the Afflicted*, p.33

others. **There are 19 diagnostic categories.**⁵ Neuro-developmental disorders like autism, schizophrenia disorders, bipolar disorders, obsessive-compulsive, trauma, sleeping, eating, sexual and gender disorders (gender dysphoria) to name a few.

Myth #2 Mental illness is caused by bad choices or a bad home life.

Truth: Mental illnesses are NO FAULT brain diseases. This confirms what we read in Genesis 3- We live in a fallen world. When we read of the brokenness that entered the world through the fall, it is not only sinful behavior. The fall of man resulted in disordered physical, emotional, mental, spiritual and relational health. While someone struggling with mental illness can respond in sinful ways to their struggle, mental illnesses are NOT a result of a character flaw, personality weakness or poor parenting. They are caused by chemical changes in the brain, believed to be uncovered by physical development and environmental stressors, for which science has not yet found a cause or cure.⁶ Therefore, mental illness should be met with compassion like Alzheimer's Disease, a neuro-degenerative disorder in the brain, than a bad attitude that needs to be corrected. This is so critical because there are so many parents who struggle with feelings of guilt, wondering if only I would have been home more, been a better parent maybe I could have prevented this. We all can be better parents- but your parenting isn't what caused the illness. This is also important for the church to recognize and develop compassion. When children struggle with self-control in the absence of obvious signs of disability, we're often quick to make assumptions about their parents. One mother in describing her family's experience in looking for a church with a son who has ADHD observed that, "People in the church think they can tell when a disability ends and bad parenting begins."

Myth #3 God will cure mental illness if you only have enough faith.

Can God heal mental illness? Yes, absolutely...in the same way he can heal someone from cancer. Certainly, Jesus demonstrated healing of the blind, sick, disabled, and those oppressed by demons. Should we pray for healing of mental illness? Yes, absolutely...and faith can often help ease some of the symptoms. **TRUTH: God can bring healing and recovery from mental illness through supernatural and natural means.** God sometimes chooses to heal miraculously in response to faith and prayer. Sometimes God brings healing, treatment and recovery from mental illness through medical intervention, therapy, and a caring, supportive community. About 80% of those with mental illness find symptom relief through treatment.⁷ While certainly there are cases and dangers of over-medication, we should never tell people to get off medication and just have more faith. Does the use of medication to treat a mental illness show a lack of faith in the healing power of God? No more than the case of using insulin for diabetes minimizes God sovereignty.⁸ **Sometimes God does not heal in this life** and allows the natural effects of living in a fallen world to persist, regardless of the amount of prayer and faith, for His reasons that we may not know this side of eternity. Even the great Apostle Paul. **2 Corinthians**

⁵ The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition. DSM-5

⁶ Simon and Jill Shute, co-founders of NAMI De.

⁷ Matthew Stanford, Grace for the Afflicted, p.234

⁸ Ibid, p.54

12:8-9⁸ *Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹ But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”*

Let me also say as an aside, we must be extremely cautious in suggesting that any particular mental illness is the cause of demonic oppression and therefore its cure is deliverance. Mental illness is no more demonic than any other illness, it just happens to be in the organ of the brain instead of the leg, stomach...Do you know what every person Jesus healed had in common? They all eventually died. The hope of a cure is ultimately in eternity with Christ. John 16:33 *In this life you will have trouble, but take heart I have overcome the world. No one is suffering from any illness that a good resurrection can't cure.*

Compassion Expanding

Matthew 11:28-30²⁸ *“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.*

You want to know the heart of Jesus, it's right here- gentle, approachable, humble, understanding of our greatest weaknesses. So many of us believe that Jesus is repulsed by our weakness, sin and failures...it's the opposite, he's drawn to us. This is where you would find Jesus. Dining with sinners and tax collectors. Sick not the well. Isn't that all of us?

1 John 2:6 *Whoever says he abides in Jesus ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.*

The best indicator of our spiritual health and maturity is not the amount of our knowledge about God but the pursuit of his heart. Allowing your heart to break for what breaks his heart. 1 Cor. 13-Knowledge puffs up, love builds up. **Following Jesus Means we move toward the weary and burdened.** The Scriptures do not give us qualifiers about who we should minister. They tell us that if we see people in need and do nothing to help, the love of God does not abide in us and our faith is of no value. The church is the #1 place people struggling with mental illness will go for help. Will they be met with compassion, patience, gentleness, approachability and humility? You may not be a medical or psychological professional but you can help.

Help Erase the Stigma: Stigma causes resistance to care and a profound lack of outreach, compassion and service. You can do the myth busting.

Educate yourself. Grace for the Afflicted, NAMI DE.

Meet Practical Needs. In general, churches are really good at meeting **practical needs** when people are in crisis, like there's a death in the family, or somebody's seriously ill. Churches might take care of the kids, bring food, provide financial help, visit people in the hospital, and yet when that crisis is related to mental health, it's very rare to get that sort of help. In fact, mental illness is often called the “no casserole” illness for that reason, because people tend to draw back and think they don't know how to help. Well, you do know how to help; you do it for everybody else. You can visit people when they're in a behavioral health hospital, you can bring casseroles to their family, you can give financial help.⁹ You see someone in the lobby standing by themselves, go talk with them.

⁹ Stephen Grcevich MD, “Barriers to Church involvement”

Hope Building

If you are struggling with mental illness I want to speak directly to you. The enemy wants you to believe lies to tear you down and defeat you. He whispers negativity to you, but God whispers hope-filled truth.¹⁰

Negative Message: I hate myself. Truth: You are made by God and Loved!

Psalm 139:14

I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.

Romans 8:38-39

³⁸ *For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers,*

³⁹ *neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

“I feel the illness has open my eyes to how much I need God. Only God can possibly know the pain I’ve experienced. Only the creator of awareness could be completely aware of every aspect of my struggle. I depend on God to fill so many relational holes. He’s a father, a brother, a friend, a constant companion, and someone who can constantly be on my side. I lean on God’s love.” -Blake, Major Depressive Disorder¹¹

Negative Message: I don’t matter. Truth: You have purpose!

Ephesians 2:10

For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

The presence of a mental illness does not alter or thwart the perfect purpose and plan that God has for a person’s life.

“After my trauma, I am learning to be a wounded healer. I have great hope and long to see how God will use my pain, struggles and brokenness to bring healing and hope to others.” -Monica, PTSD¹²

Negative Message: I don’t fit in. Truth: You belong!

Do you know that if you struggle with mental illness you are in good company in Scripture with someone who was said to have a heart after God’s own heart?

Psalm 88:6 *You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths.* The Psalm ends- **v.18 You have taken from me friend and neighbor—darkness is my closest friend.**

You aren’t alone in Scripture, you aren’t alone in the church, and you belong here.

Romans 12:4-5

¹⁰ Adapted from www.kaywarren.com, “The Hope Circle”

¹¹ *Grace For the Afflicted*, p.97

¹² *Grace for the Afflicted*, p.129

⁴ For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, ⁵ so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.

"I do not know what we would do without the Lord and his people. They have strengthened us and helped us carry this incredible burden. They have made us see that our child can be used mightily by God to reach others that no one else without a mental illness could possibly reach."
-Jennifer, Mother of a son with Schizophrenia¹³

Negative Message: I feel useless. Truth: You are needed!

1 Corinthians 12:18,21-22

¹⁸ But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. ²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!"

²² On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable.

"While I may not be able to maintain employment anymore, I love that my church asked me to help with their landscaping and to visit people in the local hospital. It brings me so much joy."
-Shirley, Bipolar Disorder.¹⁴

Negative Message: I want to give up. Truth: You can keep going!

You may be struggling with suicidal thoughts. Again, you aren't alone in Scripture. Elijah asked God to kill him. So did Job, Jonah. The Philippian jailer prepared to commit suicide before Paul and Silas convinced him not to, Paul in 2 Corinthians 1 said that he despaired of life itself. It's OK to struggle, and the best thing you can do is tell someone and get help. I know that you believe that you are relieving your family from the burden or that no one cares. It's not true. You will leave a wound that never seems to fully heal. And the kingdom needs you, we need you. No one, not even yourself has the right to take a life. **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255)**, available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

"During the difficult times I did ask God, 'Why do I have to go through this?' He simply told me, 'I haven't asked you to understand why, but I love you and I'm with you.' That's when I really started believing God was with me in the struggle. My disorder drives me to God." -Jillian, Schizoaffective Disorder¹⁵.

NAMI DE

¹³ *Grace for the Afflicted*, p.61

¹⁴ *Grace for the Afflicted*, p.80

¹⁵ *Grace for the Afflicted*, p.63