

## I Struggle With Mental Illness. Does This Mean My Faith Is Weak? *by Rev. Sylvester Herbert*

We are living in a society where much stigma is associated with mental illness. Even in churches which should be safe havens where people can find support there are some very strong perceptions that sometimes militate against individual sufferers getting the help they truly need. Here are some common responses you hear even from the lips of Christians with regards to people battling mental health problems:



- There is a generational curse somewhere which needs to be broken. (Underpinning this view is that demons are causing the mental illness and they can be prayed away).
- God is punishing the mentally ill for their sins or as is expressed colloquially “their sin is catching up with them.”
- If they pray and believe God more or engage in spiritual warfare they will be completely healed of mental illness.
- Seeking therapy or taking medication to treat mental illness is a tactic of the devil to drive people away from the Lord.

While some specific cases of mental illness may incline one to the view that their condition is linked to one or more of the aforementioned statements, it is never right to view all or even most mental health cases this way.

Here are some reflections on mental health that will help Christians to deal with this issue with greater biblical discernment and compassion.

- (1) Mental disorders are not all the same and any given disorder can be mild, moderate, or severe in intensity. Not only have several hundred disorders been identified but there are multiple causes for these disorders.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) one in four persons worldwide will experience mental health issues.

- (2) While very general terms are used in Scripture to describe mental health issues, there are examples of outstanding biblical characters like David (Psa. 25:16; See also Psa. 42-43), Elijah (I Kings 19:1-8), and Jeremiah (Jer. 15:18; 20:14) who experienced dark moments such as severe depression and a desire for their life to end prematurely.
- (3) If it is O. K. for Christians to take medication to treat a broken limb, on what grounds would Christians refuse to take medication to treat a sick mind? Christian writer, Dawn Wilson, was surely on point when she wrote:

***Medicines, at their best, are gifts from God, tools to be rendered useful to counteract some of the harmful aspects of the Fall. It's important to identify physical disorders like chemical imbalance, schizophrenia, and true bipolar disorder. Diagnosed physical disorders like these should be treated like any physiological disease, by seeking medical advice from trained physicians and following medical regimens in the way they are prescribed.***

- (4) Christians share in the brokenness of a fallen world. Having mental illness is not incompatible with a life of faith. Charles Spurgeon, the 19th century British pastor who is sometimes called ‘the prince of preachers’ suffered from chronic depression. Some of his biographers believe this was bipolar disorder. Spurgeon often called himself a “prisoner” and wept without knowing why. He wrote: “The mind can descend far lower than the body, for in it there are bottomless pits. The flesh can bear only a certain number of wounds and no more, but the soul can bleed in ten thousand ways, and die over and over again each hour.”

Mental illness, like other types of illnesses, has no respect for age, race, status, social standing, nor the level of your spirituality. If there is nothing else the church can do, can we at least be there to affirm, support and sympathize with those battling with mental and emotional anguish?