**How Faith Communities Can Break the Stigma of Mental Illness**

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Christians are often surprised to learn that individuals experiencing psychological distress, both believers and nonbelievers, are more likely to seek help from a member of the clergy or ministry staff before any other professional group. Unfortunately, research shows that 30 to 40 percent of people with mental illness who approach the church for assistance are told there is no such thing as mental disorders. Rather, their illness is “spiritualized” and suggested to result from a lack of faith or personal sin. Ignorance is simply not an excuse for a community of believers who have been called to “bear one another’s burdens.”

I am often asked by pastors and people of faith if mental illness occurs at the same rates in the church as it does outside the church. The numbers are close: In the general population, an estimated 25.6 percent of Americans 18 and older experience a diagnosable mental disorder in a given year. In our most recent study of mental illness and the church, we found that in a sample of 5,899 congregants, representing 24 different Protestant churches across four denominations, 27.1 percent reported that they or a member of their family experienced a mental illness during the previous year.

Those families struggling to care for a loved one also reported that they had significantly greater relational conflict, more financial problems and increased difficulty connecting with both God and the church when compared with families who did not deal with mental illness in the previous year. A quarter of families in the church are struggling to survive on a daily basis. And suggestions such as “you need to pray more” are ineffective in dealing with these serious medical conditions.

Our churches should be sanctuaries. The first step toward developing an environment that promotes hope and healing in those living with mental illness is to break the silence; brought into the light, stigma quickly dies.

Here are some simple steps to begin:

* As a faith community, pray in a general way each week for anyone who is struggling with a mental or emotional disorder.
* Invite congregants living with mental illness or caring for a loved one to write down their particular spiritual and emotional needs. Read these during the weekly prayer intentions.
* Prepare sermons that acknowledge the struggle experienced by those with mental illness.
* Invite a member of the church who has struggled with mental illness to witness to the congregation.
* Place brochures and other sources of information regarding mental illness and available resources in the back of the church or in the pews.
* Invite a mental health professional to speak or offer a seminar to teach that mental illnesses are brain-based disorders.

The fact that individuals living with mental illness are seeking assistance and counsel from the church should prompt us to rise up. A biblical response to mental illness relieves physical and psychological suffering while revealing the unconditional love and limitless grace that is available through a personal relationship with Christ. This is done through the application of both biblical truth and psychological and psychiatric resources. God is leading his hurting children to us. It’s time that the church stopped abdicating its role in mental health and started leading.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:**

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