

10 Lies the Church Believes About Mental Illness

One Sunday when I was 16, I wore a hat to church, resolute in my misunderstanding of 1 Corinthians 11:6 (NIV): “For if a woman does not cover her head, she might as well have her hair cut off; but if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, then she should cover her head.”

Bipolar disorder had ravaged my young mind, and I clutched at another misinterpretation of Scripture: “Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed” (James 5:16a). In the middle of the 500-person service, I cried out during the pastor’s prayer: “Father, forgive me. I’m sorry.”

My parents held me tightly, quite embarrassed in the moment and apprehensive, not knowing what I’d say or do next. I remember speaking to the pastor afterward. Maybe I had asked my parents if I could apologize to him for my outburst, or perhaps my parents wanted me to give a sort of explanation. Either way, he forgave me, and we left it at that. But why didn’t anyone *do* anything? Couldn’t they see I was struggling with mania or even borderline insanity?

It’s been 13 years since my first hospitalization and five since the last. Both times, part of what sent me into the tailspin of mental illness were misunderstandings and false information. In our journey with this illness, my family has been misled by lies we were told or truths withheld. These lies continue to mislead the church and keep people from properly viewing mental illness as what it is.

Lie No. 1: You’re just going through a rough time. Pray, give it to God and give it time.

The reality is, if you are clinically depressed or you have

bipolar disorder, it is not good to forego seeing a mental health professional. Therapists and psychiatrists are qualified experts on the care and keeping of your mind. If you are in a chemically imbalanced state of mind, chances are, no amount of praying or time is going to help, unless God is answering your prayers for a good psychiatrist or psychotherapist.

Lie No. 2: You're simply in the middle of a spiritual battle. Just renounce and resist the devil, and he will flee.

You may be in the middle of a spiritual battle, but there's more going on here, too. Don't waste time renouncing Satan or anyone else, especially considering how vulnerable the psyche is in a mentally unstable state. Seek a medical professional's help immediately. You can seek spiritual support and seek God through prayer and at the same time, receive professional health care.

Lie No. 3: You're depressed? Pray it out.

Depression, if clinical, means your brain does not have the means to get out of the slump it's in. If you're relying on just praying it out, you're fighting an uphill battle. Though prayer has been shown to alleviate symptoms, being in a clinically depressive state is more than just a prayer away from wellness.

Lie No. 4: The Lord does not address mental illness anywhere in the Bible.

While the term "mental illness" isn't in the Bible, King David was very familiar with the reality of depression and perhaps even mania. Reading the Psalms, we see an outcry of emotions from this man after God's own heart. Elijah was depressed to the point of experiencing suicidal ideations (1 Kings 19). Instead of condemning him, God cared for him and sent an angel to meet his physical needs. These are only two examples of the many men and women in the Bible who suffered in deep

depression or from psychotic troubles, PTSD and other mental health issues.

Lie No. 5: You can be healed—if you have enough faith.

Oh, if we could just move that mountain on our own with the faith inside us. But God is sovereign, and that sovereignty means our faith to be made well is not a cure-all. God may heal you miraculously, but most often, He does not. Remember, medication is a gracious gift from God to apply to the infirmities of the mind, in order to bring about a different kind of healing.

Lie No. 6: Jesus healed everyone.

What about in his own hometown of Nazareth? Nope. They couldn't and wouldn't let him with the doubts they held, because they presumed to know who Jesus was already. And even those who believed were not always healed. Jesus left many behind as he moved on to minister to the next town or meet the next set of plans the Father had for Him (see Matt. 8:18).

Lie No. 7: You're choosing to stay depressed; choose to be happy.

If everyone could will it to be, they would be happy. This is especially true for those in depression. Just like having enough faith, "willing" yourself to be happy is never an option in depression. The mind can be responsive to conditioning and cognitive behavioral therapy, and it can adjust in time. Medications can help with that therapy, but to just choose to be happy in clinical depression is like choosing to be a marathon runner when you've never even run a 5K.

Lie No. 8: You're sinning somewhere—confess your sins and be healed.

I've seen this one before, believing that with enough faith,

and if I could only get right with God, He would heal me. God chooses not to heal most people who have chronic illness—although he does enable us to discover medications that can help us manage and live well with these conditions. The Bible makes clear that illness does not primarily function as punishment for individual and specific sin; it's an outcome of original sin and a backdrop for God's grace (see Jesus' explanation in John 9, where He healed a man who was born blind). It's also clear that no one who receives God's healing actually deserves or earns it.

Lie No. 9: Your behaviors are sinful; you should be ashamed. Repent!

Sometimes the behaviors that come from mental illness are sinful. We have no reason to call out people with mental illness as more sinful than other people; they're not. The outright wrong acts and behaviors one commits while mentally unstable are not necessarily expressing a person's intentions but are more like a knee-jerk reaction, because people with mental illness often experience poor impulse control and act on impulses that other people are able to resist or keep hidden. They may also misinterpret their surroundings and unknowingly behave in ways that are inappropriate. That does not make them any more sinful than other people, since sin really resides in our hearts rather than simply in our actions. Repentance may be required, but not in greater supply than for anyone else.

Lie No. 10: Psychiatric drugs are of the devil.

Psychiatric drugs are no more evil than any of the other medications we have developed to prolong life, improve quality of life and help people live to their potential. While the misuse or neglect of psychiatric drugs can be dangerous, the proper diligent monitoring and application of such tools are invaluable to aiding the healing process of the mind. Healing, care and restoration are part of God's work, not acts of evil.

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