

Dear Christians, Please Stop Equating Mental Illness With Sin

I recently sat across my computer screen from Sara, a lovely woman in her 20's, who was attending a virtual eating disorder support group I was leading. She spoke slowly and softly, gaining confidence as she opened up and shared her story. Both her mother and her grandmother have eating disorders, and she was told that every day she needs to go to God and ask for His forgiveness for having one as well. This pattern had kept her so trapped in guilt and shame, that in all the time before coming to this group it had never before occurred to her to simply ask God for help.

In our weekly time together, I relentlessly and lovingly reminded the group that it is not a sin to have an eating disorder. It is not any more of a sin to be sick with a mental illness than it is to have cancer. Yet our culture doesn't always see it that way, and neither does the church.

For countless men and women that I have sat with, separating sin from illness allows the light switch of hope and recovery to turn on and often elicits incredible change and healing almost instantaneously.

While I believe it is pivotal to separate sin from sickness, I also believe that repentance is vital to our spiritual, emotional, mental and physical well-being. I know wholeheartedly that all have fallen short of the glory of God –and we are all in need of God's mercy and forgiveness.

When I think back to my own recovery, there were countless sin patterns that showed up as a part of my struggle with an eating disorder. I was in a massive web of self-deception, idolizing and demonizing my body and its size, abusing my

health and lying to those who loved me.

When I finally sought treatment, I was met with unbelievable compassion and grace. I was not told to focus on the behaviors that resulted from my illness, instead I was told to look to the healer and the places in my past and my heart that needed untangling. I was encouraged to seek clinical treatment and to consider trying medication along with nutrition to help balance my brain chemistry. I was told that I was not alone in my struggle, and that there was more freedom—and a more full life—available to me.

Though I was not yet a Christian, my early recovery happened at a Christian support group I stumbled upon called New ID. There in that warehouse building in uptown Charlotte, North Carolina, I was told that God loved me just as I was, eating disorder and all. I learned that eating disorders aren't a choice, and aren't rooted in vanity. While I made choices that got me tangled in the web of my eating disorder, this group helped me understand that people don't consciously choose to have an eating disorder, that they are result of genetics and environmental factors. Above all else, I was taught that because of the glorious truth of Jesus' death and resurrection there was unmerited grace available to me. That grace spurred incredible change in me and allowed me to begin the healing process, which included both seeking and granting forgiveness and surrendering my life and body to God fully.

Mental health struggles are rampant, and disastrously misunderstood by the world—and even more sadly, by the church today. Too many of us are told that if we muster up enough faith or spend more time in prayer, our struggles will melt away and somehow our feelings will catch up with the truth in our minds. All too often, the guilt we feel when this isn't the case keeps us trapped in our pain and shame spirals.

As Rick Warren aptly reminds us, "We need to remove the stigma of mental illness. It's not a sin to be sick, and the church

should be saying that more than anybody else.”

Too many of the clients I see at Rock Recovery have been deeply harmed by well-intentioned church leaders that are so focused on the sin patterns they were experiencing as a result of their illness that they couldn't show compassion to the soul suffering in front of them. All too often, issues of depression, anxiety, addiction, eating disorders and even bipolar disorder have been labeled as issues that result from a lack of faith brought on by the individual. People are frequently told to repent, pray and turn from the behavior with little support, tools or guidance. For matters related to mental illness, this is not an appropriate or helpful response.

We have the power to be a community that changes that and provides those who are struggling with a safe place to land and belong. This mental health awareness month, I want to invite all of us, especially those in the church, to check our own bias and stigma around mental health and to approach those who struggle with the same mix of truth and grace that God extends to us. {eo}

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