

How Christians Should Respond to Kids With Mental Health Issues

A 7-year-old shouldn't need to see a therapist because of a struggle with low self-esteem or because they feel lonely even when they are fiercely loved by their family or feel like they hate themselves or have a constant self-dialogue that says, "Nobody likes you. You're a dummy."

But mental health issues are as real in children as they are in adults, and they require the help of a trained therapist.

Accepting our child's fragility and our own helplessness as a parent is devastating. Because aren't we as parents supposed to be able to wipe the tears away? To make everything better? To brighten up our child's world? To encourage them? To help them overcome their struggles? To be their rock? To help them know they are loved and cherished and wanted and celebrated?

Mental health illness in our children feels like walking on a tight rope without any training. You stand there, shaking, with knees that buckle in, arms stretched to the side, trying to stay balanced, and a paralyzing fear to even take a small step. Then you get pushed and you start falling. Fast. And there is no safety net.

What's wrong with my kid?

What am I doing wrong?

And we are aware that many well-intentioned people might start questioning our parenting, because kids are supposed to be carefree and happy. Without worries or unreasonable anxieties. Without struggling to get up in the morning or feeling sad.

So there is a feeling of isolation, because few can understand

that mental health issues in children are not a result of poor parenting. Yes, there are instances where mental health is a direct result of the environment: abuse, loss or neglect. But this is not an issue limited to negative circumstances. Mental health issues affect children raised in the most loving, accepting and positive homes.

Just do a quick Google search and you'll find that up to 20 percent of kids have mental health issues. That is one in every five children. Not much different from adults (one in every four). This is serious. This is real.

If you are someone who likes research, here is an article by the CDC, and one by the National Institute of Mental Health (with a great visual to understand mental health in children).

And here is what the American Psychological Association has to say about children and mental health illness:

"Mental health—an essential part of children's overall health—has a complex interactive relationship with their physical health and their ability to succeed in school, at work and in society. Both physical and mental health affect how we think, feel and act on the inside and outside."

And let me address this issue from a Christian perspective, because it's about time we crush the negative stigma that accompanies mental health illness. This is not an issue of a lack of faith or praying more or not allowing God to change us. Mental health issues are not a sin, and we need to stop treating them as such.

All we do is alienate people and make them feel like their spiritual journey is a failure. God is the God of the broken, and that includes all of us, each one of us, and our brokenness comes in many different forms.

Why does mental health illness happen? I don't know, but I do know that we live in a fallen world, and our bodies are

imperfect, vulnerable to illness of any kind, whether it be physical, or mental, because if you get down to basics, mental health issues are a result of a chemical imbalance in the brain. So instead of judging, let's love.

Instead of quoting Scripture, let's listen. (Scripture has it's place, but it's not helpful when you say "I struggle with anxiety" and the immediate response is, "Do not be anxious about anything." Let's listen, let's ask questions, let's figure out why there is anxiety). Let's be the body of Christ.

And let's pray. Let's pray and ask God to help our kids and help us know how to parent them and help them.

And let's recognize the fact that for some of us, our children struggle with mental health issues. Actually, let's talk about how we can support, listen and understand the challenges that our kids have or that our friends have with their children.

Mental health issues in our kids are real, and they affect everyone in the family. Every single member.

As I parent a child with mental health issues, I know that getting a trained professional will not only help my daughter, but all of us, because we are in this together, we are a family, and we know that God will hold our hands as we step toward healing.

It's not easy. But it's life, and it's real, and there is beauty in brokenness as God's love and compassion surrounds our life.

Author's Note: *This is a hard issue to write about, as I know I open myself to well-meaning "advice" about how to build better self-esteem in my daughter and what I can do as her mother. Please understands we are dealing with issues much deeper than that. My daughter spent the first four years of her life in an orphanage, and many of her issues stem from those first formative years. Also, her acceptance of her*

disability is becoming harder as she gets older (she has cerebral palsy). We are not dealing with low self-esteem; we are dealing with mental health illness. But nobody said parenting was easy. I am thankful for the resources available to her and to us. As I've spent time talking to other parents and professionals, I recognize this needs to be talked about as this is a significant "special need" in children.

*Adapted from **Ellen Stumbo's** blog at . Ellen is a pastor's wife and she writes about finding beauty in brokenness with gritty honesty and openness. She is passionate about sharing the real—sometimes beautiful and sometimes ugly—aspects of faith, parenting, special needs, and adoption. She has been published in Focus on the Family, LifeWay, MomSense, Not Alone, and Mamapedia among others.*