

Megachurch Pastor Says Believers Must Respond to Today's Mental Health Crisis Now

We live in an incredibly anxious and depressed culture here in America, and the COVID-19 pandemic, civil unrest and divisive politics have further exacerbated this issue. According to a 2020 report from Mental Health America, more than 47 million adults in our nation are experiencing some form of mental illness.

My home state of Texas is one of the lowest ranking in the nation for quality of mental health and treatment for mental illness in adults.

Moreover, across America, approximately 4.4 million children have been diagnosed with anxiety and another 1.9 million have been diagnosed with depression. Most concerning, suicide has become the second leading cause of death among people 10 to 34 years of age.

We have an established mental health crisis on our hands. Sadly, the Christian church has often neglected to respond in a loving and supportive way to those who are struggling with mental health issues. I'm heartbroken to say many people who have sought help and hope within the church have been turned away, shamed or told—sometimes by well-meaning pastors or lay counselors—they just need to “pray harder” or “have more faith.”

2021 is a new year, and it's time for the Christian church to respond to this crisis in a new way.

In 2019, Lifeway Research surveyed pastors, congregants and

their families about mental illness and the church. The survey revealed nearly half of pastors (49%) “rarely or never speak to their church in sermons or large group settings about acute mental illness.” Additionally, close to 1 in 4 individuals surveyed indicated they had either “stopped attending church, had not found a church to attend or had changed churches based on the church’s response to mental health issues.”

I believe the church’s failure lies not in ill intention but largely in misinformation and lack of proper training. While there is a spiritual aspect to mental health that churches and pastors can and should address, we often have missed the clinical reality of mental health.

Complicating the matter is the fact that in my generation (Baby Boomers) mental health has often been viewed as a taboo subject to be discussed only at home, if at all. We were raised to believe that if you are a follower of Jesus, you’re not supposed to struggle with mental health, depression or anxiety. I remember thinking this way when I was a young Christian, and it took several painful experiences over the course of my life for me to grasp what it’s like to struggle with mental health.

My father was brutally murdered by a shoplifter at his store when I was 20 years old. Losing him in such a violent way launched me into one of the darkest valleys I’ve ever had to walk through. At one of my lowest points I seriously doubted God’s existence.

Then, 10 years ago, I was diagnosed with prostate cancer. The treatment and recovery periods were grueling and left me exhausted both physically and emotionally. Anxiety and depression took hold. I couldn’t sleep. I couldn’t eat. I couldn’t enjoy the things I once loved. I felt like a dead man walking, and I wondered if I was ever going to make it. Some Sundays I had to drag myself to the pulpit.

It took me more than a year to come out of that darkness. I sought the help of professional counselors who recommended different forms of treatment that were effective in my battle with depression. The church also played an indispensable role, caring, loving and encouraging me during my hardest days. This is what the apostle Paul exhorted us to do in Galatians 6:2, "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."

If we are followers of Jesus, we are tasked with not only caring deeply about the spiritual health of others, but their mental, emotional and physical health as well, for they are all tied together.

The good news is the church is uniquely equipped to care for people struggling with mental illness. As a local community of faith called to love one another, it acts as a crucial support system for all who are in need. Many of the Bible's teachings—such as forgiving those who have wronged us, recognizing the inherent value of every human life and giving thanks for the blessings we have—are used by professional counselors to help people cope with and overcome depression and anxiety.

The church has the potential to change the tide of the mental illness epidemic rising in our nation, but for this to happen we need to start talking about the issues. We need to equip ourselves so we can offer effective, practical care for people who need healing. This is why Prestonwood has started Life Recovery Ministry, a program to help people cope and heal from emotional, physical, relational and spiritual wounds caused by illness, addiction and abuse.

Life Recovery Ministry will host The River Conference March 19 and 20, to address mental health stigma, domestic abuse, sexual healing and more. This event will feature experts in psychology and religion and is open for in-person and online attendance.

We, the church, can no longer stand on the sidelines while people are suffering and hurting. We must step up and step in to end this critical cycle, before it's too late. {eoa}

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