

When Christians Struggle With Mental Illness

I recently read a handout from a conservative Christian college's psychology class likening sending someone with eating disorders to a eating disorder clinic to sending someone with a pornography problem to a pornography clinic. In so many words, it set up vomiting as a sin to be rebuked from Scripture like pornography. It was stunning to read, and my heart immediately ached for those struggling through very real mental health issues who were shamed away from secular medical intervention at that college. Though much good progress has been made on mental health issues and the believer by way of organizations like CCEF, there is obviously still a long way to go.

Here is the key: The brain, like the lungs, the liver, the kidneys and the heart, is an organ. It is the most complex organ in the human body, made up of blood vessels and tissues and an incredible number of nerve cells. Just as lungs need blood flow, the brain needs blood flow. Just as clots in the blood around the heart cause heart attacks, clots in the blood around the brain cause strokes.

The same physical dynamic that causes my mid and lower body to feel exhaustion after a night of missed sleep or a missed meal cause my brain to feel exhaustion. As a type 1 diabetic, the loss of my pancreas' ability to produce insulin that affects my kidneys also affects my brain. The brain is an organ, and as my heart, lungs, kidney and pancreas can suffer through specific biological issues, so can my brain.

But the brain, unlike my lungs or kidneys, is also the central processing unit for my faith. My liver doesn't consider temptation to sin. My pancreas doesn't consider the truth of God's Word. My lungs are not proud. My kidneys are not humble.

But my brain is engaged in all of those feelings and thoughts.

The mix of biological function of an organ and spiritual function of the seat of faith is confusing to say the least. But it seems a lot more confusing for those who have never experienced biological malfunctions in the brain than those who do. My own experience as a type-1 diabetic has helped me.

When my blood sugar gets low, I first get depressed. If it gets really low quickly, I lose touch with reality while still walking around. Before getting my insulin pump, I had several scary episodes which included me saying weird things, pushing family away trying to help me, and being rude and angry with a good friend. I hated afterwards realizing how I had spoken to my friend. I owed her a sincere apology. But more than I needed to apologize, I needed to eat. **There was going to be no help for my anger and no chance to repair my relationship with her until my blood sugar was no longer low.**

The thing about the interplay of biological issues and sin issues is that when the biological issues are addressed, much of the sin issues are immediately diffused. It's like the child having a screaming temper tantrum because they are exhausted after a long day of activities. Get the kid a nap, and then addressing the tantrum becomes a lot more effective.

When my blood sugar stabilized after the angry conversation with my friend, no one needed to lecture me on how I had treated her. And my temptation to anger with her was immediately removed. Dealing with the biological greatly aided the spiritual.

Going back to the young woman vomiting to lose weight—self harm is a spiritual issue ... deeply affected by a biological issue. God's gift of common grace to the world as a whole and His children in particular is growing knowledge of our brain as an organ. Just as new therapies in cancer treatment are

gifts of God's grace to us, new therapies in the treatment of mental illness can be too.

Anorexia is a mental health issue. Note also that just as some cancer "treatments" are snake oil (we've had a recent case of this in Seattle), some mental health "therapies" are too. Not every idea is a good one. Not every treatment is a helpful one. But some are, and the reformed doctrine of common grace equips us to be open and accepting of mental health treatments that are research-based and approved by licensed professionals.

One thing I have noted in my own journey with biological issues that can affect my brain is that there is a big sin issue that tempts me again and again. The interesting thing is that it is the same temptation that all of us struggle with whether we have mental health issues or not. It is pride.

I am smart. I am educated. I am independent. And I do not want my mom encouraging me to eat healthy. I don't want my doctor to give me a new treatment plan. I don't want to face my diabetes at all some days, because it makes me feel frail and inadequate. That weakness scares me. It interrupts my independence and self reliance. But sometimes my body falls apart and my mind can't engage to fix it. As much as I hate that when it happens, I note that God gives grace to the humble.

He gives His common grace to the humble as He does His particular saving grace. Whether it's my mom or my doctor, my friend who read something online or my sister who hands me a glass of orange juice because I'm talking weirdly, my pride rouses up in resentment of the need while I desperately need to accept my weakness and humbly receive their help.

For anyone struggling with mental illness, your biggest temptation is likely self reliance when your greatest need is to humbly ask for help and receive it when it is given. It

grieves me to think of Christian institutions heaping shame on those who are doing the right thing by seeking help, pointing them away from the gifts of God's common grace to help them in that moment.

It grieves me to think of unlicensed Christian counselors trying to "root out sin" among those seeking help instead of affirming the wise decision of the one struggling to seek help at all. The very fact they are seeking help, listening to doctors and family and pastors, *is* the indicator they are rooting out the greatest sin issue that exacerbates mental health issues—being too scared to believe you have a problem and too proud to receive help from those God has given to speak into your life. May our churches and ministries get this right for the good of those deeply struggling.

For further reading:

*Adapted from **Wendy Alsup's** blog, . Wendy has authored three books including **By His Wounds You Are Healed: How the Message of Ephesians Transforms a Woman's Identity**. She is also a wife, mom and college math teacher who loves ministering to women.*