

World Leader in Mental Health: Is Anxiety All in Your Head?

For far too long, people—and especially believers—have attached a stigma to mental health. They have made several false presumptions about anxiety and related issues. I hope we can put an end to at least one damaging myth that continues to circulate. The myth is that Christians shouldn't struggle with anxiety or depression; they should pray them away.

I know this myth still exists in some circles, but I've never understood why there's such a double standard between physical health and mental health. I've never heard people suggest that Christians shouldn't suffer with shingles or indigestion or diabetes. I've never heard anyone recommend praying away a broken leg. Treatment of physical illness and injury seems to be perfectly acceptable to the critics of mental health.

We don't mind calling a coronary event a heart attack, but it would be just as appropriate to call anxiety or depression a brain attack. The malfunction of the heart causes certain problems; the malfunction of the brain creates others. But both are physical, biological problems.

Some naïve critics seem to think that mental health issues are "all in your head," so to speak. The irony is, they are! But they are by no means imaginary, and they need to be treated as conscientiously as an appendix that threatens to rupture, a blood clot that is threatening to break loose or an infected tooth that's causing intense pain and needs to come out. In fact, mental health issues may require more time and attention to diagnose and treat because they often include confusion on the part of the patient.

Another version of this myth is that believers shouldn't need

to take antidepressants because faith in God should get us through any trying situation we face. I realize that some people's religious beliefs prohibit them from taking any kind of medicine for any kind of problem. I can appreciate that stand, even though I don't agree with it. I do agree that some people who are on medication don't need to be. But what I'll never be able to understand are those who criticize believers for taking medications such as antidepressants or mood stabilizers while they themselves are on meds for blood pressure regulation, cholesterol control, pain relief or any other health-related issue. It seems like a double standard to me.

Don't buy into this myth. If you're having ongoing struggles with anxiety, depression or any other mental health issue, your problem is just as real—and just as treatable—as any other physical problem. You don't have to simply accept it. God wants you to have hope and help, and the way that will happen for most people is finding the right doctor(s), medication(s), therapist(s) and other resources. All remedies, of course, should be accompanied by prayer and attention to the promises of Scripture—but you don't need a spiritual guilt trip on top of everything else you're suffering.

Untruth and Consequences

I've been calling the outrageous statement that Christians shouldn't suffer from anxiety or depression a "myth," but let's use a more accurate term. It is an outright lie. Jesus called Satan "a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44, NIV), but the devil isn't limited to spiritual falsehoods. The myth we've just discussed is an untruth that, if you believe it, can prevent you from finding the peace of Christ that's so abundant to those who honestly express their fears and feelings to Him.

In response to this myth, God has filled Scripture with many uplifting and encouraging truths. I want to focus on one at

this point: you are invited to “cast all your anxiety on [God] because He cares for you” (1 Pet. 5:7).

Don't be confused; this is not the same as “praying away” your problems. When I see the word cast, I think of all my friends who are fly fishing enthusiasts. They regularly pack up all their camping gear, prepare sack lunches, drive for hours to some remote creek or river, tie their favorite fly to their line and cast the line out. If they don't hook a big trout on the first cast, do they then pack everything back up and go home? No way! They keep casting until they get what they came for.

I believe that's what God has in mind when He invites us to let Him handle our concerns, worries and fears. Anxiety isn't quickly or easily expelled from our innermost thoughts. Someone has said, “Anxiety is a lot like a toddler. It never stops talking, tells you you're wrong about everything and wakes you up at 3 a.m.” But God is always eager for us to give Him our worries and ease our troubled minds, little by little. Keep casting your anxiety on Him until you get what you pray for. And like fly fishing, the more you do it, the better you will get at it.

Life is difficult enough without all the corrosive, toxic lies people propagate about mental health problems. If you truly want peace for your mind and hope for your heart, you'll see that these myths are roadblocks on the path to healing—for you or for someone you love. As you learn to cast them on God's broad shoulders and bask in the light of His truth, you'll discover God's blessings that you've been missing so far.

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