

My Struggle With Mental Health

These Are My Confessions

I am a pastor, husband, father, and a writer. I love Jesus and I am excited about what He is doing through me and in me. Yet, there are two issues that I have dealt with my whole life: ADD and anxiety. I became aware of them pretty early on in life. The anxiety manifested itself in two ways, especially:

1. Public speaking
2. Dark, lonely places

I've always said God has a sense of humor because he called me to be a pastor: a job that requires a lot of public speaking and also a lot of traveling and staying in dark places alone. And truthfully I must confess, traveling was very difficult for me for the longest time. The anxiety got so bad that I couldn't fall asleep. And I will never forget how my anxiety took over when I preached my first sermon. I was so overwhelmed that even though I had 10 pages of written material I only spoke for 5 minutes. My girlfriend at the time was so unimpressed with my sermon she broke up with me soon after.

You Are Not Alone

The reason I'm sharing my experience is because I find so many leaders and members alike struggle with mental health issues. And to make matters worse they're getting terrible counsel. Unfortunately, many of us are dealing with everything from anxiety and depression to bipolar disorder and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) by ourselves. Anyone facing these issues alone knows that isolation only exasperates the problem.

Get Counseling

You know what helped me? Counseling helped. At some point we have to be honest and admit that sometimes you can't just pray depression away, or anxiety, or _____ (fill your mental health challenge here). "Pray harder" may not be the best solution.

In fact, when you pray and the problem continues it can create a false sense of guilt and shame. Many begin to believe that either God doesn't want to heal them, or that they don't deserve to be healed. And neither of these things are true. The fact of the matter is, mental health issues are not exclusively spiritual issues. They are illnesses that require medical attention in the same way a broken arm or a heart attack requires a physician. So if you're struggling with mental health go see a counselor.

Prayer Really Works

But in addition to the counseling, prayer really did help a lot. There is a calming effect to prayer. This calming effect is really why I believe talking to God is such a blessing. I can truly say that through prayer I've experienced the promise of Philippians 4:6-7: *"Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."*

Work With the Weight

I also found that doing my job regardless of how I felt helped. In spite of the anxiety, I continue to speak and travel. I've taken God's instruction to Joshua to *"Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go"* (Joshua 1:9). It's verses like these that teach me to trust in God's calling more than in my issues.

Talk Through It

And finally, I learned that talking to people also helped. Because there is a stigma attached to mental health issues it is oftentimes hard to open up. But when we share our stories with others it allows people to feel comfortable saying "that is my story too!" Vulnerability breeds community.

I want to invite you to seek help. The Father says, you are worthy. Jesus says, you are loved. And the Spirit say, you are special.