

Religion and Mental Health

About two years ago I came across an article by Dr. Ayomide Adebayo, a Nigerian medical doctor specializing in mental health, entitled “I’m Christian and I don’t Believe Mental Illness is Spiritual.” This captivated my interest, so I began peering into the article and first saw where he came across a Tweet by a Nigerian pastor who purported this thought: “The root cause of mental illness is sin (Rom 6:23) and the foundational solution to mental health is Salvation.”

Is that true? I know some might jump to the conclusion by stating that it is true. However, it is utterly false. Those of us who have a Christian belief system, we do agree that the reason all evil exist is because of sin in the world. But that is not what the pastor meant. He believed that if you are mentally ill or have some kind of emotional imbalance then you did something wrong spiritually or emotionally or physically, “therefore, you need Jesus.” “He also believes that knowing Jesus results in a perfect, free-from-illnesses-of-all-kind life. Therefore, a true Christian should not take pills, just take Jesus.” I am happy to say that this tweet did not last long on the internet. It was quickly deleted. It is false.

As I implied earlier, sin (original sin) is the reason there is pain, discomfort, or illness. But it is not true that all pain is the result of sinning. It is not true the only reason one is having pain would be because they did something wrong or sinful. This was the accusation that three enthusiastic, arrogant men accused Job of in the Old Testament. It was a common belief at that time, and still prevails today, that pain and suffering would only happen when you do something wrong in your life. This belief is more pervasive when dealing with emotional or mental illness. This idea is perpetuated from the pulpit to the pew. Therefore, they falsely believe that when a person has a schizophrenic disorder, bi-polar disorder, or a depressive disorder, taking of medication will be a sign of lack of faith in Jesus. But the opposite is true. Not taking medication for these illnesses can demonstrate a lack of faith and can truly make one “crazy.”

Let me further share from that intriguing article by Dr. Ayomide Adebayo . He argues “What do people mean when they say mental illness is spiritual?” He presents the following syllogistic argument. Notice the reasoning (*A syllogism is a kind of logical argument that applies deductive reasoning to arrive at a conclusion based on two or more propositions that are asserted or assumed to be true.*): (1) Everything is either physical or spiritual. (2) Mental illnesses are not physical. (3) Therefore, mental illnesses are spiritual. (4) The root cause of mental illnesses must therefore be sin. This is poor reasoning that can literally lead to death. The author exclaimed if we are willing to accept broken bones and tummy upsets, diabetes and HIV/AIDS as spiritual, then it’s okay to declare mental illnesses as spiritual too. But we know they are real.

It is my view that for many the word “mental” suggests something mystical or ethereal. Therefore, mental illness does not really exist, or it is the end results of thinking badly or sinning. It is imperative to note that the words “mental illness actually means “brain illness.” We have heart or stomach illnesses. We do not doubt those illnesses are real experience and that those organs actually exist. That brain is an actual organ. Scientists tell us that in the average brain there are 100 billion cells. Linked by synapses, each brain cell can connect to tens of thousands of other brain cells. The brain is used to store information. One author states that one way in which working memory is stored is by keeping neural circuits that encode the remembered items active.

Have you ever looked closely at a DVD? Hold it up and scan the flat, shining surface with your eyes. Can you see the people waking on the DVD. Can you see words, music score, or hear gun fire? No. It is impossible. Why? All information is stored in a form of mathematical formulas that produce what we hear or see. In a sense, the brain is similar. It stores all information in “code” for quick or long-term recall. Since we cannot see that actual people on the flat shining surface of the DVD, do we say the information is not there? Definitely not. So why do some have difficulty to understanding the reality of brain illnesses like they do stomach illnesses? Thus, it is imperative to take medication.

The reality is, medications works. It's that simple. "And they not only work quite dramatically (at least some of the time), for some conditions, they're almost the only way to go. Simple as this is, it at least shows that there must be something physical for them to work on." We know that "People with depression, anxiety disorders and schizophrenia experience everything from losing appetite and weight, missing periods and getting higher rates of health conditions like heart problems and diabetes." These are real problems. Brain know from brain imaging the difference that take place in the brain of people with severe psychological disorders. We can see it. Therefore, it is logical to conclude that a "damage" brain can delay or prevent recall or storage of information. Many of the psychiatric disorders are the results of the neurotransmitters of the brain not been able to relay messages and thus resulting in "brain illnesses." In most of these cases that only solution is medication. We do know that extreme religious fanaticism is usually the results of a severe psychiatric disorder. "We know that patients with schizophrenia usually exhibit religious delusions and hallucinations." The person makes irrational decisions and do unusual things. For example: Kneeling and praying for unusually long hours without eating. Holding the bible above the head to prevent Satan from coming into them.

Religion is to be the answer and not the problem. Far too many spiritual leaders are creating mentally ill people by their erroneous teachings. They have created so-call theological answers to physical conditions that are diabolically dangerous. Dear readers, taking of medication wisely is evidence of spiritual sanity. Start taking your medications today.

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