

I have a family member who is living with depression.

He's had it my whole life.

That's how I've always known him.

And I've grown up hearing my other family members argue about him.

They don't say this to his face, of course, but some of them think he's not pulling his own weight.

He's lazy.

He's selfish, they say.

He won't do anything for others.

He makes other people around him work so much harder because he can't fulfill his responsibilities.

He lives in filth.

How can he exist like that?

Why hasn't his apartment been condemned.

He drinks too much.

He needs to stop drinking.

His alcohol consumption has contributed to his depression and vice versa.

I've heard my family members discuss the possibility of an intervention, a dramatic conversation in which those closest to him will speak honestly with him about the help that they think he needs.

I've also heard them talk about ways that others enable him.

People shouldn't let him get away with what he does.

He needs to go to rehab.

But he doesn't want to go to rehab, he's made that clear.

We should force him.

He's not a productive member of society.

We can help him see what he's capable of!

These are the discussions that I've been privy to for as long as I can remember.

I have largely remained quiet during these conversations.

However, I have been learning a lot about mental illness as our church works on being more intentionally supportive of people with mental health concerns.

So I recently spoke up.

I finally broke into the conversation and said,

“He’s sick! Why is that so hard for you to understand?”

He’s been living with a chronic illness for his whole life, and it’s not our job to fix him.

He’s been this way for the past 31 years of my life and I don’t see him changing anytime soon.

So instead of sitting around diagnosing his problems, strategizing about how to ‘cure’ him and kvetching about how frustrated we are with him,

maybe we should just try loving him as he is, depressed alcoholic and all.

He’s no less worthy of love than the rest of us.

In fact, he probably needs love and support than healthier people, precisely because he has lived with these burdens for so long.”

After I said that, you could have heard a pin drop in the room for about 30 seconds.

Then the conversation got raucous again and the debate continued about what to ‘do,’ about my wayward family member.

Needless to say, I don’t think my words stuck.

But that’s okay, I’ll keep trying.

I’ll speak out again at our next conversation.

What I have realized through thinking about my beloved family member in conversation with all that I have learned about mental illness recently, is that it's not our job to fix people and it's not our job to judge them.

When folks disclose that they're struggling with a mental illness, this is so often the reaction that we have.

First, try to fix it, and if they don't take our advice, we judge.

Or, if we don't know the person very well, we might skip the first step and go straight to judging them from what we know about them.

I think these reactions usually come from a well-intentioned place, but they're actually really dangerous.

The problem is that these reflexive responses actually perpetuate stigma, and they keep people in the shadows.

Who in the world would want to speak up and speak out if they knew that's how people would respond?

If they knew they'd be judged?

Or, who would want to disclose a mental health concern if they were pretty sure they'd be met with an onslaught of unsolicited advice from well-meaning people who suddenly fancy themselves amateur psychologists, counselors or therapists?

Maybe even worse (or at least more awkward) than advice and judgment, what if you decide to share something of your mental health struggles with someone, and you're met with... silence?

You quickly realize that they don't know what to say.

They fumble for some words to string together, hoping they'll come out okay.

We're not used to hearing these kinds of disclosures, so for many of us, the words don't come naturally when we hear something like that.

All of those reactions, judgment, advice, awkward silences, they're awful.

This is what keeps people with mental health concerns from reaching out and asking for support.

It's what keeps them from asking for prayer requests on Sunday morning.

It's what keeps people from telling friends and family about what they're struggling with.

Of all the possible responses, it's most likely that they'll be met with an unhelpful if not painful reply, so people stay quiet.

This perpetuates the cycle of shame and silence, which can drive people into deeper despair and in some cases, even to end their own lives.

♦ I firmly believe that removing the shroud of silence and shame from mental health is about saving lives.

It's about shining a light on these illnesses that one in four people live with.

One in four.

Harvard Medical School says that 26% of adults in the U.S. have an anxiety, mood, impulse control, or substance disorder in a given year.

And this is nothing new.

I have read about mental health issues being related to modern technology, but depression, anxiety, mood disorders, these things have been around for as long as people have.

And mental health issues are all over the Bible.

I chose today's Bible story because it's lifted up in mental health communities as a biblical example of someone who is living with depression.

Elijah exhibits all the symptoms of depression.

He left his servant, a sure sign that he is mentally done with the ministry to which he had been called.

He fled to the desert where he took refuge under a broom tree, then he told God that he wanted to die.

Instead of going to be with friends, he isolated himself and expressed the desire to die.

He was also exhausted and feeling rejected and worthless.

In today's world, a mental health professional would see those as signs that this person needs help.

This is not a mentally well person.

And you know what happened then?

Did God give Elijah unsolicited advice? No.

Did God judge him? No.

After Elijah said he wanted his life taken from him, did God respond with an awkward silence? Nope.

God let him sleep, first of all, because he was exhausted.

Then God sent an angel to take care of him.

And what did this angel do?

Did she wax poetically about all the things Elijah could or should do to get better? No.

She gave him a cake baked on hot stones with a jar of water.

The angel stayed with him and fed him and made him drink.

She took care of him.

Then Elijah fell asleep again, and after allowing him to rest, the angel woke him and told him to eat and drink again.

She abided with him.

She ministered to him until he was ready to return to his community.

The text says that *“He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food for forty days and forty nights to Horeb.”*
(1 Kings 19:8)

He got up.

He had the agency here.

He chose what to do.

Nobody forced or coerced him.

I think it’s natural for us to want to expect others to do what we would do in any given situation.

This often comes from a place of love, we love them so much that we want to see them succeed, according to our definition of success.

But as Christians, that’s not what we are called to do.

Loving people doesn’t mean expecting them to ‘get better,’ or ‘be productive’ in the ways that we understand it.

Loving people means meeting them where they are and sitting with them there.

For as long as they need.

Feeding them and giving them drink helps too.

We are called to journey alongside people on the path that they chart for themselves.

We are not here to diagnose, suggest or prescribe help.

There are medical professionals who have gone through lots of training, that's their job.

We are called to let people know that they are loved, exactly as they are.

Then, when people do feel inspired or motivated to make changes, they know they have their church community as a source of support, who will continue to help them along that path, just as we've been here all along.

In working to become a WISE congregation,

this means that we are Welcoming, Inclusive, Supportive and Engaged with people with mental health concerns,

we are going to learn together how to best love and support each other when we have mental health issues.

We all struggle with this at some point throughout our lives.

Mental wellness is a spectrum, and nobody is completely mentally well throughout their entire life.

I pray that through learning how to better support each other, we will become more effective conduits of God's love.

As I said about my family member, it's often the people with mental illness that need the most love and support.

Together, we are going to learn how to offer that, so that we can more fully live into our calling to be a church in which all are welcome, and all are loved.

No exceptions.

Amen.

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