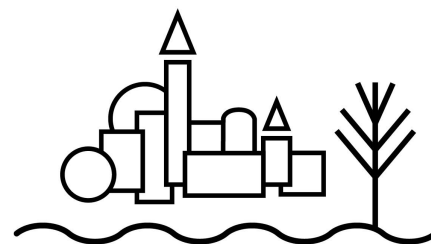


Connecting with My MENTALLY ILL Neighbor

Luke 10:29-37



Many people are apprehensive or reluctant to be around a person with mental illness, but the truth is most of us have experienced it or have a family member or friend who has suffered with depression, anxiety, substance abuse, paranoia, and/or some mental illness at some point. In fact, one in four people experience mental illness in any one given year (MHC). I have been the neighbor to our mentally ill brother or sister many times in my work as a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) in a community mental health center. The mental illness may be a serious chronic illness such as schizophrenia, or it may be depression that results from the death of a loved one, divorce, or loss of a job. Anxiety may result from unrelenting stress at work or home. One day at work while I had a client in session, I heard a commotion going on in our crisis office with another client. The female client was very loud, tearful, hitting on the wall, and experiencing delusions. I was unaware of who the client was, but knew the person was very upset and psychotic. When we finished our current session, we went out of my office at the same time the crisis worker was opening the door with the upset female client who happened to be one of my clients. When she saw me, she immediately came to me and hugged me. I hugged her back and spoke with her, and she calmed down. The mentally ill often just need someone who knows them, understands them, and does not judge them to speak calmly to them.

Reflections

1. Have you been that helping neighbor, or have you been like those who look on, stare or laugh at the person, or even walk away because you fear that person?
2. Have you ever been the “robber” described in the above scripture text, by ‘stripping them’ of their dignity and self-worth or by casting judgment? List ways we unintentionally judge mentally ill. How can we build up rather than strip them of their dignity?
3. We need to be mindful of the needs of our mentally ill neighbors and to turn to them in Christian love. One of the best compliments I received in my counseling was a thank you note I received from one of my clients who told me: “You say you are not a ‘Christian counselor,’ but I can tell you are a Christian and you show it to me in every session.” Do we show we are Christians by our love? How can we show mercy to those who are not like us?
4. Read Romans 15:1-2 for a good plan of action. Also read and discuss John 14:27, 1 Peter 3:8, and Romans 14:13.

A Call to Action

1. Volunteer at your local mission to get to know one of your chronically mentally ill neighbors.

2. Check with your pastor and session about your church hosting a support group such as NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness), or Grief Share for those who have suffered the loss of a loved one, or Divorce Care for those dealing with the grief of divorce.
3. If you know of someone who is dealing with a mental illness or is the caregiver of someone who has a mental illness, make a point to talk with them, to offer to sit with them, provide transportation to and from appointments, or provide a weekly meal. Show your love and support in a practical way.

Resources

1. Mental Health Cooperative www.mhc-tn.org or 1/866-816-0433
2. NAMI – National Alliance on Mental Health; name.org/ioov or NAMI HelpLine 1/800-950-NAMI (6264); www.namitn.org
3. Tennessee Suicide Prevention Network – TSPN; www.tspn.org
4. Crisis Text Line Partnership – www.crisistextline.org **Depression is a very serious mental illness and may be accompanied by thoughts of death or suicide – Suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the U.S. and 3rd leading cause of death among ages 15 – 24. (MHC)
5. Check with your state and local community to see what is available in your area.

Prayer

Jehovah-Rapha, Lord our Healer, We thank you that you sent us your son, Jesus, the great comforter and counselor. “Lord, you are close to the brokenhearted and you save those who are crushed in spirit.” (Psalm 34:18). Open our eyes and our hands to see how we can love, serve, and help our mentally ill neighbor. In Jesus name, Amen

ABOUT THE WRITER:

Author Tracy Clark is an active member and ordained elder in the Dyersburg 1st Cumberland Presbyterian Church (TN). She and husband Steve have two adult sons, Ethan and Adam, and daughter-in-law Brandi. She has a Master’s Degree in Social Work and has worked as a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) in many domains including community mental health, schools, hospital social work, and home health. Because she has a heart for serving, she accepted a call to work in the helping profession when she was still in high school.

(Update: Tracy's husband Steve, had been dealing with major depression & anxiety over stress from his work for about a year at the time this article was written in February 2017. He was a great Christian witness to many; an elder; a Sunday school teacher; a Gideon, & a wonderful father & husband; however, that did not protect him from the depression and he ended up taking his life on 4/17/17. Tracy now has an even greater passion to bring awareness to the church about our neighbor who is suffering from mental illness. Please remember in prayer Tracy and other families like her dealing with this issue.)