

Session One – Getting Started

Read Preface, Introduction, and Chapter 1 – pp. 7-25

And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.

– 1 Thessalonians 5:13

Preface

This book primarily focuses on Luther's kind, compassionate, prescient advice to those experiencing emotional distress. Reading his letters, I was astonished to realize that Luther was dispensing modern mental health advice. He understood and administered counsel that is essentially indistinguishable from what was developed in the twentieth century and used widely today. He focused on the way people think, understood how thinking could cause emotional distress, pointed out how thinking is often incorrect, and advised correct thinking. We now call such counsel cognitive therapy – one of the most effective health care interventions ever developed. In addition, he dispensed advice about behavior. He counseled against isolation and for doing enjoyable things. We now call that behavioral therapy – another effective treatment against emotional distress. (8)

- Was Martin Luther always known for his kindness?
- What help is it to look to Luther for an approach to mental health?
- What dangers lurk?

Introduction

Examples of mental distress and illness – pp.9-13

Luther's Thoroughly Modern Counsel

The letters show that Luther was a warm, caring counselor. Luther always emphasized the reassurance of the Gospel to console those in emotional distress. He knew that the devil was the source of all illnesses, including mental health problems. (13)

Note: chapter 5 will explore the connection between the spiritual and the mental/physical at greater length. What is the connection between illness and faith?

Why This Book?

This book is written to help readers, whether pastor or layperson, do what Luther wrote Matthias Weller in October 1534: "God has commanded men to comfort their brethren, and it is his will that the afflicted should receive such consolation as God's very own. Thus our Lord speaks through St. Paul, 'Comfort the fainthearted.'" (14)

- What help is it to have a robust mental health system?
- What dangers lurk?

As Luther did and as modern mental health professionals do, you can help people in emotional distress change their thinking and their behavior in order to feel less troubled. (14)

Note: Chapters 9 and 10 will address how to help... and when to refer someone for professional assistance.

Chapter One: Rates of Mental Health Illness and Associated Problems

Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment.

– John 7:24

The Epidemiology of Mental Illness

Research reveals that mental health illness is common and costly... about one in five adults ages 18-65 will have a mental illness during any given year. Anxiety is by far the most common mental illness, followed by major depression. Mental illnesses vary by severity and NIMH defines serious mental illness (SMI) as a mental illness that results in serious functional impairment – causing serious limits in one or more major life activities. About one in twenty persons has an SMI in any year. Many persons have more than one disorder. The chance of having a mental illness at some point in adulthood is about 46 percent. (18-19)

Risk Factors

Important information about risk factors for mental illness has been discovered. For example, men are more likely to develop a substance use disorder, whereas women are more likely to develop depression. Racial and ethnic minorities are more likely to develop a mental illness. Both unpleasant experiences in childhood and being the victim of domestic abuse put a person at a much greater risk of developing a mental illness. (19)

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

In a typical study, adults are asked whether they experienced various adverse events in childhood, including physical or sexual abuse, emotional abuse or neglect, or serious family problems (such as parental mental illness or incarceration). Results show that most adults have experienced at least one ACE, and that one in six adults experienced four or more. ACEs predict adult mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, substance use problems, and high-risk behaviors such as smoking and heavy drinking. (19-20)

Domestic Abuse

Domestic abuse is the experience in adulthood of physical, sexual, and emotional mistreatment by a spouse or partner... About one in three persons reported being the victim of domestic abuse at some point in their lifetime. (20)

Note: more specific definition and discussion in Chapter 10 (pp. 146-148)

Scrutinizing the Numbers

If your church has three hundred members, sixty will experience a mental illness in any given year. You can guess that fifty members had four or more ACEs growing up. If two hundred members are adults, sixty-five have experienced some form of domestic abuse. (20)

The Continuum of Mental Health

Most persons will experience some level of emotional distress in their lifetime... Some have mental illness that never goes away. The term serious and persistent mental illness, or SPMI, describes severe versions of lifelong conditions, including schizophrenia, cognitive impairment, and autism. Other mental illnesses are not quite as severe, but can last a long time, such as generalized anxiety disorder... Mental health, mental health problems, and diagnosable mental illness should be thought of as existing on a continuum. In contrast, most persons and most professionals tend to think in categorical terms – in black and white. For them, the person either has a mental illness or they do not. (21)

The Medical Model and Mental Illness

The medical model of illness dominates health care because it tends to work. Its primary supposition is that illness always has an identifiable cause. A body becomes sick because something was inflicted on it (e.g., an injury) or infected it (e.g., a virus). The medical model posits that people are either healthy or ill and that if the cause of illness is eliminated, health will be restored... Because there is so much variability in mental health problems, because it exists on a continuum, the medical model does not work well...

The question should not be, “Is this a mental illness?” The proper question is, “Is this problem bad enough to warrant help?” (22)

The Cost of Mental Illness and Mental Health Problems

Emotional distress is the defining feature of most mental illnesses... a less well-known but common consequence of mental illness is physical pain, including headaches and stomach problems. Pain is exacerbated by sleep problems. (23)

The family of a person with mental illness suffers the distress of watching a loved one in pain and confusion. They might witness their loved one get insufficient treatment. They might worry when treatment does not work well. (23)

Concerning Treatment

Psychiatric medications affect the biology of the brain... they do not usually eliminate a mental illness, but they can significantly reduce symptoms. Psychological interventions... involve talking about thoughts and behaviors in order to improve feelings and to improve functioning in roles and relationships...

There are effective medications and therapies for almost all disorders. (24)

Unfortunately... less than half of persons with mental health problems received treatment. Even worse, fewer than half of those who seek help will be treated by a mental health professional...

Persons with mental illness do not obtain appropriate treatment for various reasons. They might be unsure that the problem is serious enough to warrant professional help. They might not know where to obtain treatment, or they might not know what treatment would involve. The most likely barrier to seeking treatment is stigma... our society, and even many in the Christian Church, endorse ignorant and misguided attitudes toward mental health problems. (25)