

PTSD is in your church, and you can provide care

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I'm going to go out on a limb and say your church includes folks suffering with PTSD. The issue is you don't know who they are, and they're not likely to tell you they deal with recurring nightmares, intrusive memories, hopelessness and loneliness. In fact, they may seem to be your most well-adjusted members. But lurking beneath their façade is a victim of trauma who needs help.

June 27 is PTSD Awareness Day, and as someone diagnosed with the disorder, I want to make a personal appeal to your church: How can you minister to those with post-traumatic stress disorder and those dealing with post-traumatic stress, which are two decidedly different things?

What defines post-traumatic stress disorder?

Post-traumatic stress disorder is a diagnosable mental health condition that may occur in people who experience a traumatic event, such as a natural disaster, serious accident, combat, rape, or any other type of violence or moral injury.

I like to explain it this way—when your old worldview doesn't match your new reality and you can't reconcile the two.

Post-traumatic stress is simply the reaction anyone can have after a traumatic event. This is completely normal, and almost all of us experience it.

Post-traumatic stress might turn into post-traumatic stress disorder for many reasons. For example, if a person doesn't find a way to reconcile the new reality, reframe the experience, work through the pain or change the old worldview, the internal conflict can manifest as a long-lasting disorder.

If people with post-traumatic stress have disturbing thoughts and feelings lasting more than a month, if the reactions are severe or if they have trouble getting things under control, it might be post-traumatic stress disorder. If a victim of trauma has suicidal thoughts or actions, post-traumatic stress has gone too far. They need to seek medical advice or therapy.

How your church can help

How can your church help? Here are a few suggestions for how to minister to those suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

1. Learn about it. There are many sources you can read. One of my favorites is *Restoring the Shattered Self: A Christian Counselor's Guide to Complex Trauma* by Heather Gingrich.

2. Talk about it. From the pulpit to Bible studies, offer a few moments to share your concern. Ask for help from folks who have worked through their trauma.

3. Pray about it. Ask God how you can help victims of trauma. Set up prayer teams, or set aside a day to pray for those who suffer.

4. Offer safety. One of the biggest issues with post-traumatic stress disorder is broken trust. Those suffering will not trust you unless you provide safety and security. Maybe offer a support group specifically for trauma survivors.

5. Offer work. Care for others can be cure for the soul. If you let trauma victims participate in ministry, it often can help them integrate into their community, which can be a big part of their recovery.

6. Offer counseling. Whether your church offers clinical or pastoral counseling, I encourage you to promote mental health alongside spiritual health. Look for resources in your community if you don't have the expertise or ability to provide counseling. Texas Baptists offer counseling services. Contact Dr. Katie Swafford at (800) 388-2005 or by email at: counselingservices@texasbaptists.org.

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