

2nd Opinion: Mental health inside Southern Baptist churches

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“When I was diagnosed with depression, I felt as though I finally understood why I felt alone,” one man said after seeking help from his doctor. “However, I still was afraid of telling anyone in my church about my condition because of the fear of being ostracized, which made my depression even more desperate.”

This story could be told throughout the Southern Baptist Convention. It represents people with nonsevere mental health issues who are unsure of their ability to tell someone in their church about their condition.



Ken SartainThe story of the young man who was afraid of telling his church about his depression is even more alarming than you might think. He is the pastor.

One in four Americans suffers from mental illness in any given year, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness. Many look to their churches for spiritual guidance in times of distress. But they’re unlikely to find much help on Sunday mornings.

Southern Baptist organizations are highlighting the importance of mental health ministry in response to a motion at the 2013 SBC annual meeting.

The motion also prompted Frank Page, president of the SBC Executive Committee, to name an advisory group to gather suggestions about how Southern Baptists can more effectively minister to people with mental health challenges.

Advisory group

Members of this mental health advisory group include pastors, licensed counselors, healthcare providers, educators, social workers and a military chaplain. They represent churches, private practices, parachurch ministries, state conventions and national SBC entities. Many members of the group have dealt with mental health challenges within their own families in addition to their professional experiences.

The intent of the group is to determine what is being done in Southern Baptist churches to address the stigma of mental health. This includes two questions regarding mental health-friendly churches: Is the local church open to someone simply mentioning they have experienced anxiety or depression recently? Will someone who reveals mental health issues face repercussions?

The mental health advisory group has set up a survey that asks five questions to determine the extent of Southern Baptist ministries that focus on mental health. To take the survey, [click here](#).

Survey results will be used to explore innovative ways churches can address this increasingly prevalent issue. The emphasis will focus on awareness, not treatment, at the local church level.

Healthy relationships are key

If you or someone you know is experiencing mental health issues, there is hope. A recent study revealed people with nonsevere mental health issues can mitigate their symptoms by getting engaged with healthy relationships.

For every healthy relationship fostered, medication can be lowered by one milligram.

In his book *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell tells about people who migrated from Italy to the village of Roseto, Penn. These people lived much healthier lives than their neighbors. Was it due to genealogy or the environment? One reason explained why people from Roseto age 55 and younger suffered virtually no heart disease and a death rate from heart disease half that of the United States as a whole: They enjoyed healthy relationships.

We have the same opportunity to create healthy relationships in our churches. Christ calls us to be in a healthy relationship with him, as well as to create healthy relationships in our homes and churches.

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