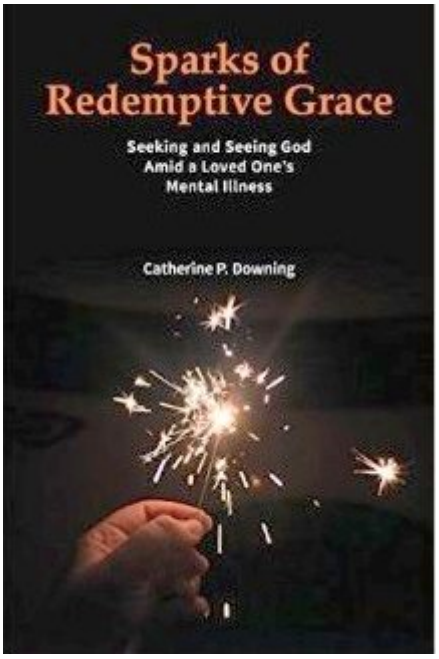
Mental Illness and the Family

The January 2017 shooting at the Ft. Lauderdale airport is still being investigated, but what surfaced immediately in seeking a motive for Esteban Santiago's deadly action was his family's observations that he appeared to be fighting a mental health challenge. When he returned from military service in Iraq, he reported hearing voices and his family reported that "his mind was not right."



Totally apart from the issues Mr. Santiago is dealing with, both psychologically and legally, my heart goes out to his family. The family members of a person struggling with mental health issues carry a heavy load, often in isolation and silence, because of the stigma of shame often associated with mental illness.

I am more sensitive to this after recently reading a different kind of book. *Sparks of Redemptive Grace – Seeking and Seeing God Amid a Loved One's Mental Illness* is a short but powerful book written by the mother of a young man in a battle with bi-polar disorder.

Catherine P. Downing offers grace-drenched perspective that can and should change the way we think about this struggle. I

learned a lot from her. For example, she writes,

It is a heartbreaking truth that I had to learn to say, "Douglas has bipolar disorder," instead of, "Douglas is bipolar." A minor wording difference. A monumental identity distinction. To have a disease, rather than to be one, is a defining stance of dignity.

But it's not just the family members dealing with mental illness who need to be educated on how to think and respond and love well. We the *church family* also need to be better equipped to love "the least of these" with the compassion of Jesus. That is going to mean loving the family members staggering under the weight of their loved ones' illness as well. We are often quick to arrange meals for new mommies or families where someone has had surgery, but what about the families trudging through the exhausting day-in-day-out invisible battle when it's the brain or the mind that is diseased?

One of the ways we can love families dealing with mental illness is by adjusting our unrealistic expectations. Mental illness isn't something people "get over" quickly . . . and sometimes not even on this side of eternity.

And then there is the ongoing grieving for the should-have-beens of lost dreams and hopes, and even the loss of the "normal" kind of life most of us assume we will live. The first sentence of the introduction reads, "My husband, Nelson, once said that if we ever write a book the title should be, *It Wasn't Supposed to Be Like This*." Those living with this kind of unrelenting grief need friends who will support them, never give up praying for them, being "Jesus with skin on" for them. (Check out this really excellent list of how to pray for families impacted by mental illness: sparksofredemptivegrace.com/31days31ways2pray4families/)

I was blessed to read this short list of suggestions for how the church can support the families of those dealing with mental illness in the Bible.org article "Mental Health and the Church":

> 1. Make your church a safe place for those who suffer. To do that, a church body needs to be transparent about brokenness and acknowledge that all of us struggle with weak areas in our lives.
>
> 2. Equip your church with the tools it needs to serve those with mental illnesses and their families. Develop or identify your congregation's theology of suffering. Train clergy and staff. Offer support groups. Create alliances with local mental health professionals.
>
> 3. Treat hurting people like people. Be a friend. Include them in gatherings. Invite them when groups are going to lunch. As needed, refer them on to professional help, but don't pass them on. At the same time, set healthy boundaries in your relationships. Don't expect them to be able to do that.
>
> 4. Address the stigma of mental illness by talking about it openly. Include general prayers for the mentally ill in congregational praying. Highlight and financially support local ministries who serve the homeless, the incarcerated and indigent mentally ill populations.
>
> 5. Treat those with mental illnesses and their families as you would any who have chronic pain in their lives or are lifelong caregivers. Pray for and with them. Give them space to talk about what is going on in their lives. Attend to practical needs such as transportation to medical appointments, assist, when appropriate, with extraordinary expenses.

I have committed to make hearing new news about the Ft. Lauderdale shootings a reminder to pray for the family members

of the troubled shooter. At the same time, I want to be "Jesus with skin on" for those in my world who need comfort for the same kind of pain in their family.

Also check out the website for this helpful little book, www.sparksofredemptivegrace.com

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/mental-illness-and-the-family/ on January 10, 2017.

"Can I Divorce My Bipolar Wife for Cheating Unawares?"

My wife is bipolar. I have read that someone with this disease can have a sexual encounter and not remember it. If this is so and I find out, could I divorce her for adultery or cheating?

This is difficult situation, and you have my sympathy. It's hard to live with the extreme mood swings of someone with bipolar disorder (also known as manic depression). But it's even harder to BE that person, I assure you!

When people experience blackouts during manic episodes, they are not in control. Their mental illness is in control. Like those with Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID, formerly known as multiple personality disorder), they can discover that they did things they would never have chosen if they were in their "right mind." A dear friend of mine tells me that one of her "alters" (personalities) was a smoker although she was not. She would just find the cigarette butts and wonder why the car smelled like smoke!

This means that if you learn your wife had a sexual encounter that she did not choose and does not remember, it would be

unfair and unloving to hold it against her.

Do you remember the part of your wedding vows that says, “in sickness and in health”? Your wife has a sickness. If she got cancer, would you divorce her for not being healthy? If you became disabled, would you want her to divorce you because you couldn’t provide for her?

It sounds like you might be looking for a loophole to justify divorcing your wife. I respectfully urge you to close down that search and open up a new one for a marriage counselor.

Cordially,

Sue Bohlin

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“Your Answer on Generational Curses Really Helped with our Bipolar Daughter”

Actually, this is a thank-you email.

Our (adopted) daughter is only five years old, and has very obvious childhood-onset bipolar. Unfortunately, this is a new diagnosis among children, and many people refuse to believe that such young, innocent children’s lives could be affected by mental illness. Believe me, there is nobody who would want to believe that more than the children or the parents of the children who are suffering with these illnesses. But,

unfortunately, they do exist. In fact, there is now PROOF that a dog that can sense-out a seizure just before it happens can also sense-out a bipolar episode. This is probably do to the nature of bipolar, as they now believe bipolar is a form of epilepsy.

Recently a Christian teacher asked me, "Could this be a generational curse? After all, God doesn't want any of His children to suffer. We will definitely be praying for your daughter." This got me thinking, and I ended up at your website reading the article "Could My Children's Autism be the Result of a Generational Curse?" Boy, was I thankful to learn about what a generational curse really amounts to. Our daughter is on medication, and even that BARELY works.

Going to your website not only taught me about generational curses (enough to where now I can go back and speak with the woman more informatively!), but it also reminded me that this is NOT my fault. I tend to try to lay blame somewhere, and the best person to blame is myself. I can second-guess everything I've done "wrong," imagined and perceived, and say that is why she is suffering. And believe me, she IS suffering, and doesn't mind saying so! For several months, we lied to her and told her bipolar simply means you are very smart. I got tired of lying to her. Today I finally agreed with her, and said, You're right. It IS a bad thing, but you can learn to live with it. Either you can defeat it, or it can defeat you. If you want to NOT let it get the best of you, you have to work very hard at it, especially when you're older.

But we'll get through it together.

It's so hard, I just can't begin to tell you what it is like to deal with a mental illness, especially in such a young child. We love her with all our heart and might. She has shown us how to love unconditionally. Sometimes, though, it takes everything inside us to stay strong.

Thank you for explaining about generational curses, and the fact that sometimes an illness is an illness, not necessarily a sin.

Dear _____,

BLESS YOUR HEART!!!! I am so sorry to hear about this trial your family is going through, and will be for a very, very long time. Our pastor's young son was also diagnosed with BPD when he was even younger than your daughter. It makes for a living hell some days, doesn't it?

I am delighted that you were able to find this article and that it encouraged you. How unfortunate that the teacher has such a profound misunderstanding of God and the role of suffering in our lives. What do people do with verses such as 1 Peter 4:19, which talks about those who "suffer according to God's will"? I guess they skip over them.

Recently, I had the privilege of chatting with the pastor of Wedgwood Baptist Church in Fort Worth; you may remember that this was the church where a gunman murdered a number of students and staff at a "See You At The Pole" rally a few years ago. Dr. Al Meredith, who obviously knows something about suffering, suggested to me a wonderful book called *Don't Waste Your Sorrows* by Paul Billheimer, which I am in the process of reading right now. It's excellent, and I recommend it to you in view of the suffering you are experiencing.

I would also like to suggest that you pass on the blessing to your daughter that you received in owning the truth that her CPD is not your fault; she is not too young for you to bless her with the truth that it is not HER fault, either. Often when children experience suffering of various types, they personalize it and believe that they did something to cause it. The fact that it's illogical doesn't stop them! The message of "It's not your fault" is a type of revelation; children usually cannot know or figure out this truth without

someone else telling them. You just might relieve her of a terrible burden she could be carrying needlessly by sharing this wonderful freeing news with her.

I pray you and your family will know God's comfort and peace as you live out this challenge to His glory and your benefit.

Blessings,

Sue Bohlin
Probe Ministries

Posted 2004

"Why Wouldn't God Let Me Commit Suicide?"

Hi Sue,

I just read your article Do People Who Commit Suicide Go to Hell?". I believe everything you say to be true and biblical…and then I get stuck.

I have bi-polar depression, I thank God that I am now stable, but last year there were many times when I seriously considered suicide. I believe in God, His grace, and Christ's death for all sinners, and I believe, like Romans 8 says that we can never be separated from Him – but my one question is, "Why am I still here? Wouldn't it have been/be much easier to die and be with Him in His glory for eternity?" I mean I'm not sure that the suffering is worth it…

I believe God kept me from suicide…but I still wonder if it's so easy to be with Him (in death) then where's the catch?

Dear _____,

Bless your heart. I have friends who are bipolar and we have gone through some DEEP depression with our son over this.

What's the catch, you ask?

Well, to make what's probably a weak analogy, are you familiar with the NBA draft that has signed young basketball players just out of high school? Oh wait, I see you are in another country. Oh well—I bet you can appreciate it anyway. . . There is a promise of money and fame and glory for these young athletes, so why "waste" their time in college when they could be making big bucks playing basketball? Sounds good—only, they are too young to appreciate the maturing process that happens in college. So often, they crash and burn once they turn professional because they're not ready. The trials of being a college student, it turns out, are deeply beneficial for maturity and character development; they prepare students for life as professional athletes.

Our life on earth isn't a holding tank or a detention center where we impatiently wait out our time until we're given a "green light" to die and go to heaven. (I know, it's easy to think of it this way, particularly for sensitive people who really hate living in a fallen world.) God's purpose in leaving us on earth once we are saved is to grow holiness and maturity and strength in us, a process that would be short-circuited by an early death. It would mean we enter heaven in a state of "arrested development," so to speak. Since the scriptures speak of being given power, authority and responsibilities in heaven, the only place and time we have to develop our stewardship is here on earth.

I understand your feelings of not being sure if the suffering is worth it, but that's because of not having an adequate view of God and of heaven and of your future, not to mention not understanding the value of suffering. (If I may be so bold as

to recommend my own article on that subject. . . it's the best thing I've ever written: "The Value of Suffering.")

Yes, it would be a lot easier to be in heaven than to continue to live in a fallen world and a fallen body on earth, but God isn't into "easy," God is passionately committed to fashioning us into the image of His Son. I'm afraid there are no shortcuts, but you can be assured that every difficult day you endure, every trial and every heartache, is being used to achieve that "weight of glory" in you (2 Cor. 4:17). God never wastes suffering, not a scrap of it. He redeems all of it for His glory and our blessing. Every single tear you have shed is so precious to your heavenly Father that He has them stored in a heavenly bottle. He hasn't turned away or forgotten you.

_____, I pray you will know His comfort and peace like a warm blanket enveloping your soul.

Sue Bohlin

Probe Ministries

(Follow-up e-mail from Sue)

I have continued to think about your question and my answer, and the Lord put it on my heart to send you a P.S.

I have a young friend (early 20's) who attempted suicide several years ago but survived. She couldn't understand why God didn't just take her to heaven, either. Why wouldn't He honor her (seemingly) reasonable request to be with Him in glory?

Well, not too long after her suicide attempt she met a wonderful man, got married, and just had a precious little baby. On both her wedding day and then especially when she first held her newborn infant in her arms, she was overwhelmed with thanksgiving that God DIDN'T take her home to be with Him when she wanted it. She realized that God still had blessings

to lavish on her that couldn’t come in heaven. As a cystic fibrosis patient, she understands that she also has certain trials and pain ahead of her, but the joy far outshines the darkness.

This brings up one of answers to the question, What is the purpose of life? —For God to bring glory to Himself by lavishing His love and grace on us. All of creation, including the unseen realities in the heavenlies, is given the opportunity to see evidence of God’s character and heart as He pours out His blessings on the people He made in His image. And that’s one of the reasons why so many people who have been tempted to kill themselves are prevented from doing so—because God still has blessings in store and we need to be HERE on earth to receive them.

Warmly,

Sue