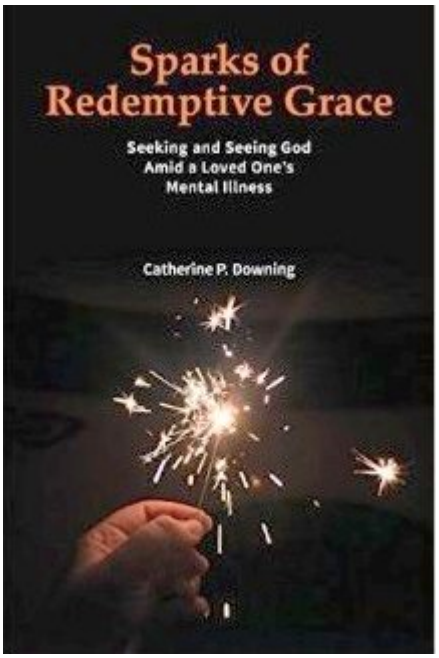
Mental Illness and the Family

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/engage/sue_bohlin/mental_illness_and_the_family on January 10, 2017.