



# Demon or Disorder:

## Perceptions of Serious Mental Illness in the Local Church

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*“The church we were involved with at the onset of my son’s [mental] illness did not respond to us when we requested that a team come out and pray over him. . . . We were looking for support and comfort, and the churches we encountered were not equipped to give that to us because they did not seem to have a complete handle on what we were dealing with. We have fallen away from the church, but not from God.”*

**Laurie, Mother of a son diagnosed with Schizophrenia**

*“I have bipolar [disorder] and was counseled by a pastor who suggested that I was possessed by demons.”*

**Sherry, Diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder**



# *Definition and Diagnosis*

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- Mental illness can be defined as a disorder of the brain resulting in the disruption of a person's *thoughts, feelings, moods*, and *ability to relate to others* that is severe enough to require treatment or intervention.
- For the purposes of diagnosis and treatment, mental disorders have been categorized into groups according to their common symptoms in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition, Text Revision* (DSM-IV-TR), published by the American Psychiatric Association.



# *Mental Disorder Statistics*

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- An estimated 26.2% of Americans (57.7 million people) ages eighteen and older (one in four adults) suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder in a given year.
- Mental disorders are the leading cause of disability in the United States and Canada for ages 15-44.
- The economic costs of mental illnesses are significant as well: recent figures indicate that the indirect cost of mental illnesses in the U.S. (due primarily to lost productivity and early morbidity) exceeds \$72 billion annually.



# *Mental Illness and the Religious Community*

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- Individuals experiencing psychological distress are more likely to seek help from clergy before any other professional group (Chalfant et al., 1990).
- Religious support offers the psychologically distressed individual resources that are unavailable through more general social support (Fiala et al., 2002).
- Research has shown that religious social support can play a key role in recovery from psychiatric illness (Fitchett et al., 1997; Lindgren & Coursey, 1995; Yangarber-Hick, 2004).



# Christian Anti-Psychology Literature

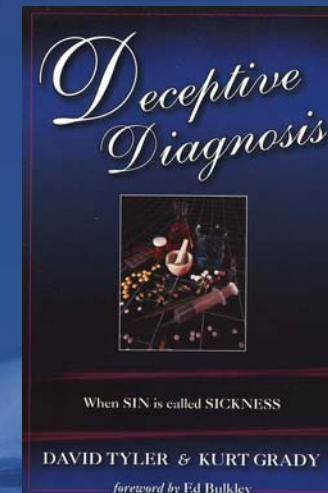
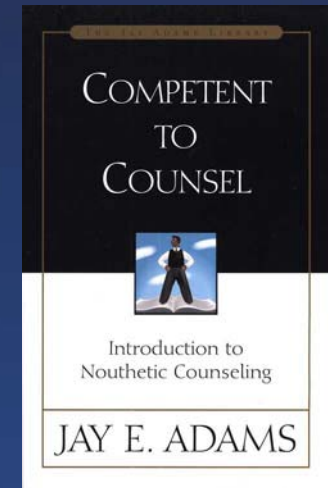
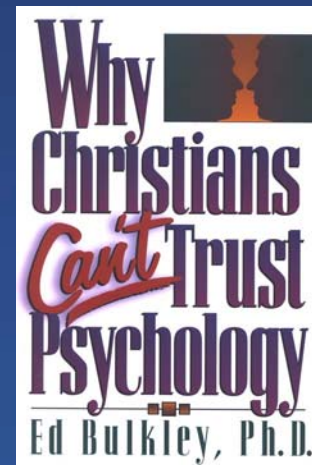
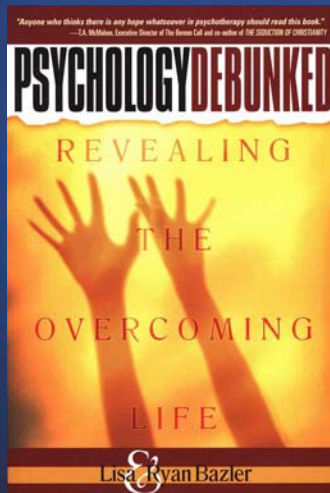


## PsychoBabble

THE FAILURE  
of  
MODERN  
PSYCHOLOGY—  
and the  
BIBLICAL  
ALTERNATIVE

Foreword by  
JOHN F. MACARTHUR, JR.

*Richard Ganz*



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*“Although I still suffer from depression and even suicidal thoughts, I have come to understand that God is not disgusted by me for it ...”*

**Chris, Diagnosed with Major Depressive Disorder**

*“Why did God allow this disease to happen? Why didn't he stop it?”*

**Michael, Diagnosed with Schizophrenia**



# *Mental Illness and the Religious Community*

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Stanford, M. S. (2007). Demon or Disorder: A Survey of Attitudes Toward Mental Illness in the Christian Church. *Mental Health, Religion and Culture*, 10, 445-449.

“Did the church ever suggest that you or your loved one did not really have a mental illness, even though a mental health professional said that you did?” (No, 67.6%; **Yes, 32.4%**)

“What was the church’s position on psychiatric medication?” (It can be useful in some situations, 78.8%; **It was discouraged or forbidden, 21.2%**)

“Did the church make you feel like the mental illness was the result of personal sin?” (No, 68.6%; **Yes, 31.4%**)

“How has this interaction with the church affected your faith?” (Not affected it, 36.5%; Strengthened it, 36.2%; **Weakened it, 14.7%; I am no longer involved in the faith because of this incident, 12.6%**)





# *Mental Illness and the Religious Community*

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Stanford, M. S. and McAlister, K. R. (in press). Perceptions of Serious Mental Illness in the Local Church *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health*.

“Did anyone at your church ever suggest that you did not really have a mental illness even though a mental health professional had diagnosed you with one?” (No, 58.8%; **Yes, 41.2%**)

“Did anyone at your church ever suggest that you stop taking psychiatric medication for the treatment of your mental illness?” (No, 71.8%; **Yes, 28.2%**)

“Did anyone at your church ever suggest that your mental illness was the result of personal sin?” (No, 63.5%; **Yes, 36.5%**)

“Did anyone at your church ever suggest that your mental illness was the result of demonic involvement?” (No, 65.9%; **Yes, 34.1%**)

“In your specific case, how much has the church been involved with this problem?”  
(**57.6% not at all**, 18.8% a little, 17.6% somewhat, 5.9% a great deal)



# *Mental Illness and the Religious Community*

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	Dismissed	Not Dismissed
Age	36.6 (15.2)	40.5 (14.7)
Psychological Distress	19.1 (6.2)	17.9 (6.5)
Strength of Faith	29.8 (8.2)	30.2 (8.7)



# *Mental Illness and the Religious Community*

		Dismissed	Not Dismissed
Doctrine / Interpretation of Scripture	Conservative	57.1%	26.0%
	Sw Conservative	20.0%	38.0%
	Moderate	8.6%	20.0%
	Sw Liberal	5.7%	4.0%
	Liberal	8.6%	12.0%
Charismatic (Spirit-filled)	Yes	60.0%	34.0%
	No	40.0%	66.0%



# *Mental Illness and the Religious Community*

		Dismissed	Not Dismissed
Personal Sin	Yes	60.0%	20.0%
	No	40.0%	80.0%
Demonic Involvement	Yes	62.9%	14.0%
	No	37.1%	86.0%
Stop Medication	Yes	57.1%	8.0%
	No	42.9%	92.0%



# Summary

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- The Christian community is denying or dismissing the mental disorders of a significantly large number of congregants (approximately 30-40% of those who seek assistance).
- There appears to be no difference in the severity of disorder or strength of faith between individuals whose mental illness is dismissed and those whose illness is not dismissed. In fact, individuals whose disorder was dismissed attended church significantly more often.
- Conservative and/or charismatic (Spirit-filled) churches are more likely to attribute the cause of a mental or behavioral problem to spiritual factors (e.g., sin, personal faith, demonic activity) and are thus more likely to dismiss the diagnosis of a mental disorder.
- The mental disorders of women are more frequently dismissed by the church when compared to the same diagnoses in men.



# *Psychology, Psychiatry and Faith*

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## **Common Reasons Christians Give for Denying the Legitimacy of Mental Disorders**

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1. No specific medical tests exist to diagnose an individual with a given mental disorder.
  2. No “chemical imbalances” or brain abnormalities have ever been shown in psychiatric patients.
  3. There does not seem to be consistency in diagnoses across people.
  4. Psychiatric medications are not always effective in treating mental disorders.
  5. Not all abnormal behavior is the result of a brain disorder.
  6. Psychiatry and psychology promote sinful behavior.
  7. Mental Illness is not in the Bible.
  8. Psychological problems such as anxiety and depression are sins (Phil 4:4-6; 2 Peter 1:3).
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*“My pastor has been very supportive. ...when I was looking to God to heal me, my pastor explained that healing from God can come in the form of doctors and medication. She has taken me to the hospital when I required inpatient care, and has been there to support me and remind me of God's enduring love and lasting grace when I was feeling poorly.”*

**Janet, Diagnosed with Schizophrenia**



# *The Role of the Church in Mental Illness*

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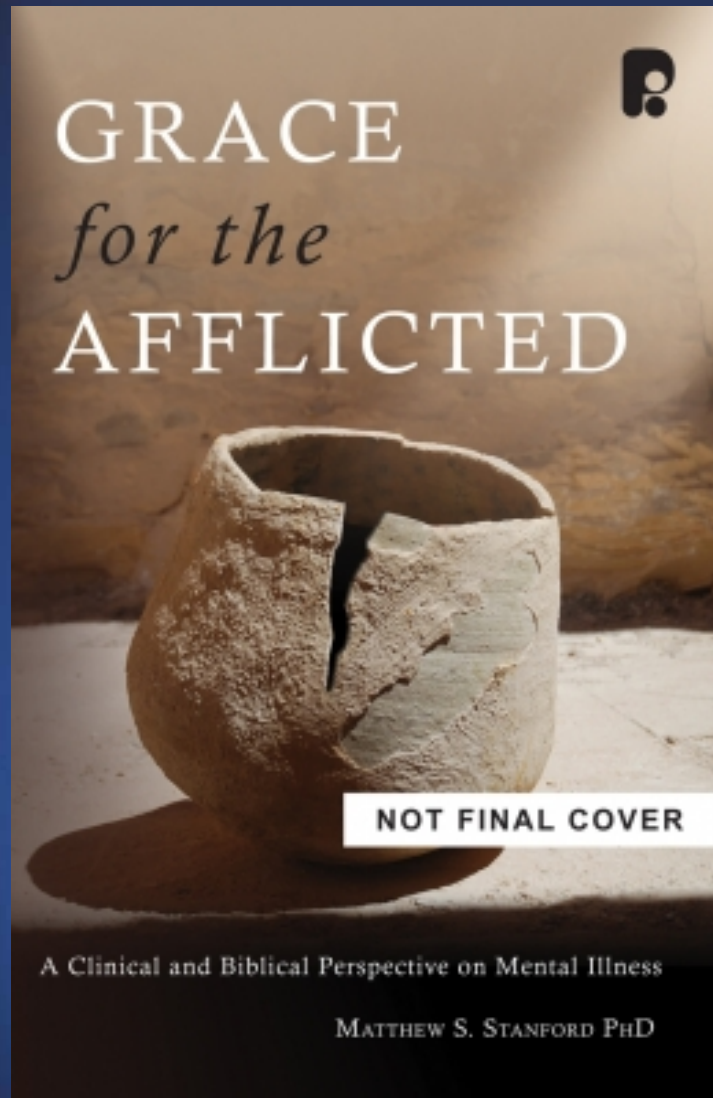
## A Holistic Approach to Healing and Recovery

- Body, mind and spirit
  - Medical treatment (body)
    - Encourage and be supportive of medical intervention
    - Help meet their physical needs (nutrition, shelter, finances, family)
  - Psychological / Pastoral counseling (mind)
    - Provide an appropriate biblical context
    - Listen (Job 2:11-13)
  - Spiritual support (spirit)
    - Pray for them and with them
    - Be present with them before the Lord
- Focusing solely on a single area (e.g., body) can bring only limited relief.





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