

Calming the Waters without Rocking the Boat

Understanding and dealing with difficult behaviors in
the church setting

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Difficult behavior can occur at church for different reasons

- Chronic mental illness
- Acute panic, stress, or unresolved grief
- Addiction to drugs or alcohol
- Strong but unstable personalities (Borderline)



- Those with limited resources and/or ability to cope with financial, emotional or social stress (i.e. intellectually disabled, Autism spectrum)
- Environmental triggers (PTSD)
- Medical condition



The church is responsible for...

- Being the physical manifestation of Jesus' presence on earth.
- Acting as the body of Christ. Eph. 1:23
- Taking tender care of the weak and being patient with everyone
Phil 2:1-11 and I Thess. 5:1



The church is also responsible for...



- Providing a natural healing place for the hurting.
- Providing safety for someone who is acting out
- Providing a haven for the desperate and those without hope

3 Questions to Ask Yourself

1. What is happening?
2. What are the underlying issues?
3. What is the best response?



Does this look like...



Developmental delay or intellectual impairment?

An event triggered their panic?

Mental illness?

Medical condition or drug reaction?

Mental Illness

What you need to know



Mental Illness



- According to US Surgeon general, 5-9% of children ages 9-19 have a “serious emotional disturbance.
- This means 3-7 million children are in serious trouble.
- According to NIMH, 25% of Americans over 18 are diagnosed with a mental disorder every year.

Mental Illness

1 in 17 adults have a serious and chronic condition, identified as either:

- Schizophrenia
- Bipolar disorder
- Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)
- Panic disorder
- Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Borderline personality disorder



If the church that
you will pastor is
typical, 1 in 4 adults
sitting in services
will have a serious
mental illness

This might also
include being under
the influence of
antipsychotic drugs
and their side
effects.



People suffering from mental illness...

- Are often stigmatized (particularly by Christians)
- Risk being seen as needy, unstable or dangerous if they “out”
- Carry a burden beyond measure. Studies have shown it to be more disabling than any medical problem other than coronary heart disease (JAMA, 1989).

People suffering from mental illness (cont.)...

- Are significantly impaired in their ability to think at their best.
- May erroneously interpret biblical truths.
- May be fearful to become involved at church
- May feel too worthless for his love
- May feel too anxious to trust Him



**What some mental
conditions might look like
in church**

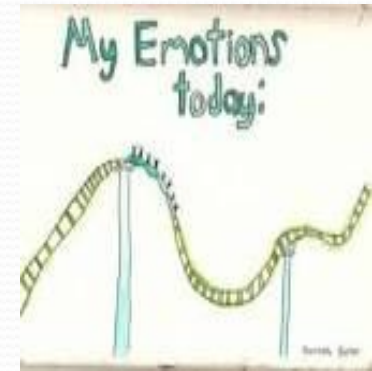
Bipolar Disorder (uncontrolled):

Typically well managed with medication

Extreme mood highs (mania)
followed by extreme mood lows (depression)

May have “over the top” appearance (makeup, clothes)

Can be argumentative, impatient, irritable, take unnecessary risks,
exhibit poor attention, have difficulty making good decisions



Schizophrenia (uncontrolled):

- Disorganized thought processes
- Poor reality testing/delusional
- Possible Hallucinations
- Unable to stay focused
- Poor self-care
- Word “salad”
- Responds well to antipsychotic medication



Borderline (Personality Disorder):

Borderline Personality Disorder

Correlated with past history of abuse

Damaged sense of self/poor boundaries with others

Emotionally dysregulated

Emptiness/fear of
abandonment

Signs/behaviors

Can behave erratically

Can misinterpret events

Depends on crisis to affirm self

Sends I hate you/don't leave me messages



Addictions

More prevalent
than you
would expect
in the church



Typical stages of heavy drug use:

High/Binge

Expansive mood – may be argumentative and interrupt others

Hyperactive

May be delusional

Intense focus on a certain topic/activity

Dilated pupils

Tweaking

Most dangerous during this phase – propensity to violence

Horrible feeling of emptiness and craving

Drug use no longer brings a high

Intense itching

Psychotic, delusional

Self-harm



Stages (cont.)

Crash/Hangover

Up to 2 weeks (absent from church)



Withdrawal

Depression, apathy

Suicidal

Intense craving for drug

Will appear highly anxious and paranoid



Other conditions can disrupt worship



Like Autism...

- ✓ Prefers routine, predictability
- ✓ May be easily overwhelmed by motion, noise, people, smells or an unexpected change
- ✓ May appear eccentric
- ✓ May have difficulty putting their thoughts into words, especially if upset
- ✓ May have a sudden, unexpected anger outburst without any obvious trigger (to others)
- ✓ Will benefit from personal space and the ability to withdraw



Or medical conditions

That can mimic mental illness



Medical conditions...

What looks like depression or anxiety might be...

- Cancer of the pancreas
- A brain tumor
- Thyroid condition
- Cardiopulmonary disease
- Medication side effects

What looks like schizophrenia might be...

- Partial complex seizures
- HIV encephalopathy
- Dementia



Examples of medical conditions

DT's (delirium tremens)



Drug withdrawal from alcohol or other sedative hypnotics.

Symptoms include elevated autonomic signs, agitation, visual and tactile hallucinations

Onset is usually three to four days after reduction or discontinuation of alcohol.

Wernickes-Korsakoff's

Acute thiamine (vitamin B₁) deficiency so severe that it can cause rapid brain damage

Usually found in alcoholics

Nystagmus (rapid small jerking movements of eyes), cerebellar ataxia (person moves as if drunk), ocular palsies (inability to move both eyes together in all directions)



Other examples...



Hypoglycemia (low blood sugar):

- Delirium, palpitations, sweating, anxiety, tremor, vomiting.
- Give candy or orange juice sweetened with sugar.

Diabetic shock:

- Fast breathing
- “Alcohol” breath
- Dehydration
- Decreased blood pressure

Still more...

*Subarachnoid hemorrhage
(rapid arterial bleeding
into the brain):*

- Stiff neck
- Drowsiness
- Headache



*Encephalitis (viral infection
of the brain):*

- Fever
- Seizures
- Confusion
- Fading in and out

How to Respond

What is happening?

What are the underlying issues?

What is the best response?

- Placement
- Know when you are in over your head.
- Stay with the person until security and/or emergency rescue is on the scene



Use “best guess”

“It sounds like you’re (state the feeling)”

“You’re saying that....”

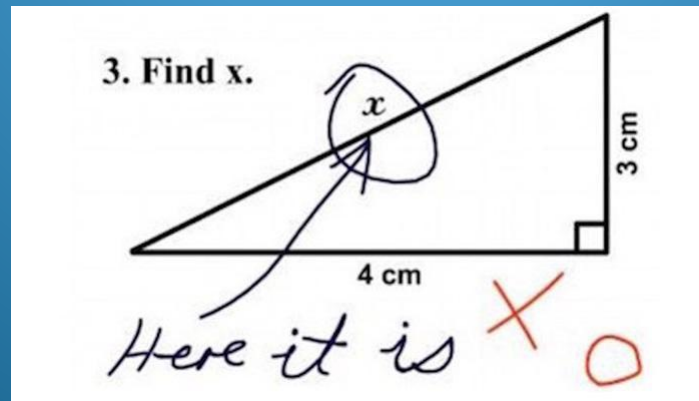
“It must seem to you that...”

“It seems to be that you are very (angry/disappointed)”

“You’re (afraid) of....”

“You’re (angry) at....”

“You don’t like....”



Don't Rock the Boat



- Keep calm
 - Build Trust
 - Actively listen/Best Guess
 - Communicate acceptance and non-judgment
 - Put yourself in their shoes
“If I....I would feel....too”
 - Resist resolving – cut the
“but”
- If time lags, fill gaps of time by showing an interest in them personally. Asking basic questions such as Where do you live? Do you have family in the area? How long have you been at Mission? Do you have any children? can be calming and also helpful to know.

Continue to:

- Keep calm
- Build Trust
- Actively listen/Best Guess
- Communicate acceptance and non-judgment
- Put yourself in their shoes “If I....I would feel....too”
- Resist resolving – cut the “but”



Say this:



- “hmmm”
- “oh”
- “really?”
- “tell me more”
- “wow”
- “uh-huh”
- “I see”
- “I’m interested in hearing how you feel about that.”
- “Would you like to say more about that?”

Important Resources

Celebrate Recovery

Support groups

Small groups (to support the entire family)

Prayer support through Bridge

Hospital visitation volunteers

Volunteer opportunities for the individual (Service to others encourages spiritual growth and healing)



Conclusion

“I wish that when they show up at church, they could meet with love and concern that maintains their dignity as people made in God’s image.” (A.S., Troubled Minds)



Conclusion

Recognizing your own brokenness and how mercy has been extended to you will equip you with more mercy. Jesus said, “Healthy people don’t need a doctor, sick people do. I have come to call those who know they are sinners.” (Mk. 2:17)



Conclusion

“God will honor our efforts to help those who are weak as if we are personally ministering to Him (Matt. 25:40)





Resources

Why do Christians Shoot Their Wounded?, by Dwight Carlson, M.D.

Troubled Minds, Mental Illness and the Church's Mission, by Amy Simpson

Ministry with Persons with Mental Illness and Their Families, Albers, Meller and Thurber, eds.

Questions?

