

# **Mental Illness**

by Steve Higginbotham

You finish the sentence. "I was sick and you \_\_\_\_\_."

Now, if we're talking about heart disease, diabetes, or cancer, I'm pretty sure we could fill in the blank with "visited me." But what if we're talking about mental illness? Might the sentence more truthfully be completed as follows: "I was sick and you avoided and talked about me?"

I'm convinced that Christians (individually) and churches (collectively) have room for improvement in the way we minister to those who suffer from mental illness. I'm afraid that there is a "whisper factor" involved with mental illness, and those who suffer from it live in fear of being discovered. Consequently, they suffer alone, in silence, with little to no support.

But why should there be a stigma attached to those who suffer from mental illness? Are chemical imbalances in the brain any less real than clogged arteries in the heart? Would we stigmatize a person whose body doesn't produce the right amounts of insulin, and therefore has to be medicated to regulate his levels of insulin? Of course we wouldn't. Then why would we stigmatize a person whose body doesn't produce the proper balance of chemicals to keep the brain functioning properly?

The National Institute of Health estimates that 26.2% of Americans, ages 18 and older suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder. That's one in every four adult Americans. That also means our churches are filled with people who are suffering with mental illness. So the question begs to be answered, and answered Scripturally. "I was sick and you \_\_\_\_\_."

May God help us to create a community of compassion and understanding. May we create an environment in which people feel safe seeking help and support. And may our response to those who suffer from mental illness be no less compassionate, loving, and Christ-like than those who suffer with other illnesses.