



Mental Illness and Painful Church Experiences: How Parents Can Heal from Well-Meaning Harm

By Kelly Rosati, JD

If you're a parent raising a child with a mental health condition, you're already well-acquainted with stress and exhaustion.

You know the sleepless nights, the calls to the psychiatrist, the hospital visits, and the constant undercurrent of worry that just won't go away. What you may not have expected is how much pain would come from *inside* the church. From people who love God and may mean well.

Painful church experiences don't typically come from malice. For parents navigating mental illness in their families, some of the deepest wounds come wrapped in Bible verses and delivered with a smile. "Be anxious for nothing." "Just pray harder." "Have you considered that this might be a spiritual attack?" These words often land like grenades in the soul of a parent who has already been fighting for their child's wellbeing for years.

Ann-Marie Covert is a social worker, psychotherapist, and founder of Mindjoy Counselling and Training in Ontario, Canada. She has spent her career helping Christians integrate clinically sound mental health practices with deep theological understanding.

In a recent conversation with Hope for Brighter Tomorrows, Covert offered perspective that parents of children with mental health challenges desperately need: one that honors both faith and feelings, and replaces shame with healing. Her wisdom and guidance are provided below in this summary.

The Two Ditches: Why the Church Gets Emotions Wrong

The relationship between mental health and the church has been complicated for a long time. Addressing mental health within faith communities requires understanding how well-meaning people cause harm, not through cruelty, but through ignorance and Scriptural misinterpretations.

Many believers understand the danger of being ruled by emotions, of living reactively and making decisions based purely on how you feel in the moment.

Sadly, the church has often overcorrected as a result. Instead of learning to feel emotions in a healthy way, many Christians have been taught that it is godly to suppress them entirely. As Covert describes it, the church has fallen into "the other ditch." Instead of feeling feelings and having a healthy place for them, believers learn to avoid, dismiss, and even demonize their emotions as a way to counteract reactivity.

Both extremes are harmful and dysregulate your nervous system. The narrow path, the one that leads to emotional health, involves neither being controlled by your emotions nor burying or fighting them in the name of being a good Christian. It means learning to feel, name, and process what's happening inside you.

For parents dealing with the relentless stress of a child's mental illness, this distinction is critical. You've been told that your sadness is a lack of faith. You've been told your anxiety means you aren't trusting God enough. And so you've stuffed it all down and applied Bible verses on top of genuine pain, and wondered why you feel worse instead of better.

Spiritual Bypassing: When Faith Becomes a Wall Against Healing

Many Christian parents navigating mental health will eventually run into something called **spiritual bypassing**. It sits at the heart of the tension between faith and mental health.

It's what happens when someone uses faith language to avoid dealing with real emotional pain. Instead of sitting with grief, they quote Romans 8:28. Instead of allowing themselves to feel anxious, they recite Philippians 4:6, which masks or attempts to make the feeling disappear. (Spoiler alert: it doesn't work. They don't disappear, they stay stuck in your body.)

In practice, this looks like intellectualizing your pain. Instead of sitting with the emotion, naming it, and riding it like a wave, you jump into your head. You add faith messages on top: "God works all things together for good, so I **shouldn't** be sad." "Be anxious for nothing, so I **shouldn't** feel anxious right now." But this isn't what the Bible actually demonstrates. This is why spiritually bypassing real emotion can keep you stuck in a trauma response.

This is where painful church experiences become deeply personal for parents of kids with mental health challenges. The people around you, your small group, your pastor, your

well-meaning aunt, genuinely believe they're helping when they offer a verse instead of a listening ear.

Scripture doesn't claim we won't feel painful emotions. It assures us God is near us in the pain. He's as close as our next breath. But when we're met with a Bible verse bandage, fellow Christians are inadvertently building a wall between you and the healing your body desperately needs.

When we live in our heads instead of allowing our hearts and nervous systems to tell the story they need to tell, we can't come back to rest, recovery, and healing.

Tears Are Not Weakness: They're God's Design

One of the most damaging messages parents in the church receive is that their sadness is somehow evidence of insufficient faith. "The tomb is empty. He is risen. Why are you still so sad?" As if the resurrection of Christ should act as a permanent anesthetic against all human grief.

The Bible tells a different story. From Genesis to Revelation, grief is treated as holy rather than shameful when expressed directly to God.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted" (Matthew 5:4 NIV). Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus, even though he knew he was about to raise him from the dead. He grieved over Jerusalem. He was moved with compassion, and compassion itself is an emotion. Roughly 40 percent of the Book of Psalms are lament psalms, raw and unfiltered expressions of pain directed straight at God.

The science backs this up. Emotional tears can contain stress-related hormones like cortisol, and crying is associated with endorphin release and a calming parasympathetic response. Endorphins are your body's natural pain reliever and mood booster. God gave us tears as a built-in safety release valve. When life is too much, the body needs to let that pressure go.

When Your Body Shuts Down: Understanding the Freeze Response

Many parents of children with mental health challenges reach a point where they feel completely numb. The tears stop, motivation evaporates, and getting out of bed feels like an Olympic event. The shame of that numbness adds another layer of suffering, because now you feel guilty about not feeling anything at all.

This is what nervous system science calls the freeze response. When your body has been in fight-or-flight mode for too long, your nervous system eventually collapses. Instead of mobilizing

energy to fight or flee, it shuts down, similar to an animal playing dead in the wild. In real life, that looks like depression, numbness, chronic fatigue, and brain fog.

You shouldn't miscategorize this response as laziness or a lack of faith. It's your body protecting itself from chronic, toxic stress. Even the prophet Elijah experienced it. After years of famine and the Mount Carmel confrontation, his nervous system crashed. The angel validated him: "The journey is too much for you." God didn't rebuke him. Instead, He met him with food, rest, and a gentle whisper.

If you're in that frozen place right now, try a simple practice by putting your hand on your heart and saying, "I am frozen, and that's okay. I'm going through a lot." This kind of compassionate self-validation can actually begin to wake up the nervous system again. Fighting it, judging yourself, and shaming yourself won't get you where you want to go.

Wounds Need Healing, Not Exorcism

Perhaps the most painful form of church hurt for parents of children with mental illness is being told their child's condition is demonic. Schizophrenia is framed as demon possession. Depression is cast as a spiritual attack. Anxiety is presented as evidence that the enemy has a foothold.

Covert addresses this head-on: "Jesus didn't cast out wounds. In the church, we've mixed up warfare with wounds. Wounds need healing, not exorcism."

As we know from science, mental health conditions involve physical, chemical, and emotional components. They're related to trauma, brain chemistry, nervous system dysregulation, or some combination of all three. Trying to rebuke a medical condition is not only ineffective, it's harmful. It can add shame to suffering and isolation to an already lonely experience.

Biblically, deliverance simply means rescue and restoration. Knowing that God is present in your pain is a level of freedom and healing. Even if you or your child continues to live with a chronic illness or diagnosis, something is restored when you encounter God's presence.

Why Safe Community Is Where Healing Begins

God designed us for connection. Our brains associate isolation with physical pain and even threat. So, safe community is essential for healing. Even if we can't change our circumstances, having someone meet us in our pain is inherently restorative. We heal in relationship, not in isolation.

An emphasis on community does not equate to staying in toxic environments. Setting boundaries about who gets access to your story is wise and necessary. But **finding people who can sit with you in your pain, without trying to fix it, spiritualize it, or rush you through it, is one of the most powerful things you can do for your own wellbeing.**

Organizations like Hope for Brighter Tomorrows exist specifically for this purpose. We create spaces where parents of children who have suffered from mental illness never have to walk alone. Faith-based support groups, mental health professionals, and ministries built for families navigating mental illness can provide the kind of attuned community that the broader church sometimes fails to offer.

While the church is a local assembly, it also is the people of God carrying one another's burdens, mourning with those who mourn, and learning to be emotionally attuned, just like Jesus was. When we get mental health and the church right, we create space for people with mental illness to experience genuine belonging.

Moving Forward: What Healing Looks Like

Healing from church hurt while parenting a child with mental illness is not a one-time event. It's a daily practice. Here's what that can look like:

Feel your feelings. Name the emotions you are experiencing and then sit with them. Hold off on making any judgements on them. Let the wave move through you instead of fighting it or burying it under theology. This is how God designed your body to process pain.

Interpret Scripture through the lens of Jesus. If a verse is being used to shame you, it's being misapplied. God wept at funerals, agonized in Gethsemane, and met Elijah under a broom tree, and will not shame you for struggling.

Practice compassionate self-talk. Replace the "I should" voice with a more gentle truth. "I love my child. I'm doing the best I can. God is with me in this."

Direct your laments toward God. David did this well throughout the Psalms. God is not threatened by any of your feelings. He knows we live in a broken world and meets us with deep compassion.

Receive from others. Build your support system by identifying and reaching out to safe people. It can be one or two others. It can be a therapist, friend, support group, or online prayer and support call at Hope for Brighter Tomorrows. You were not meant to travel this road alone.

If your loved one is in immediate danger or you're concerned about their safety, contact the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline by calling or texting 988. If there is an emergency, call 911 and let the operator know your loved one is experiencing a mental health crisis.

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