If you're depressed, is Jesus the answer? More and

when it comes to mental

"I was a mess," recalls Katherine Howard.* She and her husband couldn't seem to stop fighting. She so obsessed over their little boy that she kept a baby monitor on in his room. (He was five at the time.) Her job as a corporate meeting planner was a constant source of stress; she was so miserable at work that she couldn't even put on her game face anymore. She could feel herself collapsing deeper into depression.

She knew she needed counseling. "I had no idea how to go about finding someone," she says. So she sent an email to eight trusted friends, confessing her misery and asking if they could recommend a therapist.

A couple of people sent phone numbers, but one friend's response particularly stung Howard. "She said I didn't need a therapist—I needed Jesus. She even proceeded to write a prayer in the email," Howard recalls four years later.

Howard didn't resent the prayer. As a devout Catholic, her connection with God was important. But that was the point: She had Jesus. She went to church. She prayed. And, still, she was depressed. She did need Jesus. She was asking Him to send her someone who could help her emerge from her blues.

Jesus Will Fix It?

Written By
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For people of God—and 79 percent of black folks say they're believers—suffering from depression often feels like a test of faith at best, or a spiritual failure at worst. First of all, we don't think God's people are supposed to be depressed. When folks ask, "How are you?" we're supposed to say "Blessed"—and mean it. And if we do find ourselves feeling down, we're taught that if we go to church (or mosque or temple) and pray hard enough, God will fix it.

"That's how we were taught to survive," Howard says. "We got through the Middle Passage and slavery through deep faith and prayer—nothing else." If prayer could bring us through those mean times, certainly it should be able to bring us out of a bad case of the blues.

So we carry our emotional burdens to the altar. And when they follow us home again, we figure our faith isn't strong enough, our prayers aren't potent or God has found us unworthy of healing. Some people feel that they are "somehow failing God by being depressed or bipolar," says Natasha Stewart, director of counseling at the Center for Counseling and Behavioral Health at T.D. Jakes' Potter's House in Dallas.

That idea can be difficult to shake if folks like Howard's well-meaning friend are telling you you'd be fine—if you would just get right with the Lord.

more churches are telling parishioners that, health, **the Lord helps** those who help themselves.

Ministers mean well; they just aren't always equipped to recognize or treat depression.

The result: depressed people steeped in faith but drowning in despair.

"He will wipe every tear from their eyes..."

It's not that we shouldn't turn to our faith communities for comfort and wise counsel. In fact, for decades, that's all the mental-health care black folks had. In the book *Lay My Burden Down*, noted psychiatrist Alvin Pouissant, M.D., and co-author Amy Alexander write that black clergy assumed the role of counselors when there were none in our community. (Even today there are still woefully few.)

And current research indicates having a spiritual life serves as an important buffer between us and the stresses that can trigger or exacerbate depression. For example, research shows a connection between church attendance and lower levels of depression. Staying in touch with your church community provides social support that keeps you from feeling so isolated and alone. And when you're blue, sometimes just going through the motions of your religious practice—lighting a candle, singing a hymn or saying a novena—helps keep you buoyed until you can heal fully.

Science also shows that religious practice literally may change your mind. Some research indicates the sense of hope, love, forgiveness that most religions encourage can actually affect the brain's neural pathways in positive ways, while the "sins" of anger, hatred and fear have the opposite effect.

But science also recognizes depression as a medical condition—an illness just like diabetes or hypertension. And when it takes hold of us deeply or becomes chronic, faith can help us cope, but it may not be the cure.

When it comes to depression, "we think, 'I should be strong enough to get through this with prayer,'" Stewart says. "But along with prayer there are other things that are effective. Sometimes it's medication or counseling."

Just as we would go to a specialist if we had a serious physical health problem, our mental-health problems deserve specialized treatment as well.

Combining Faith and Works

Unfortunately, mental illness has too long been associated with "a myth about not being right with God or being punished," says Tracee Bryant, executive director of the Black Mental Alliance for Education and Consultation based in Baltimore. That belief can get in the way of admitting a mental-health problem or seeking care for it.

Think about it: If you're in a religious environment that equates mental illness with sin or evil, are you going to confess that you're suffering from depression? Not likely. And if you do, people telling you that you're "not right with God" can make you feel worse. Even talking to a pastoral counselor who insists that prayer alone is the answer to your troubles can keep you from seeking more immediate help.

Ministers mean well; they just aren't always equipped to recognize or treat depression—especially if they come to the job without formal instruction. But "if the pastor has a college degree from a divinity school, it's likely that he received formal mental-health training," according to William Lawson, M.D., chair of the department of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Howard University.

Ideally that training teaches the minister how to differentiate between a spiritual crisis and a diagnosable mental-health issue such as depression. It can be a tricky business when depression symptoms—loss of hope, meaning and purpose—can look so similar to a crisis of faith. But if they can identify the signs of clinical depression, they'll know to send a congregant to more formal counseling.

That's what happens at the Potter's House, Stewart says. "Pastors use their judgment. 'Is this a spiritual issue or a mental-health issue?'" she says. "If they run into something they think a counselor should handle, they send them to us."

But when a spiritual person turns to clinical counseling, she shouldn't expect to leave her faith behind. "We have been misinformed as a religious community that if you seek mental health it negates your spiritual health," Stewart says.

With growing evidence of the importance of spirituality to mental well-being, counselors and religious leaders now understand the two don't have to be in competition, Stewart says. More and more, you can find trained, licensed counselors who will incorporate a spiritual component as part of their therapy.

Culturally sensitive therapists will ask questions about your spiritual life and religious practices, so they better understand the effect of faith beliefs on your mental state. But they shouldn't overstep by imposing their beliefs on you or judging yours.

Expanding Communities of Care

Ideally medical mental-health care and spiritual mental-health care can work together, and some mental-health organizations and spiritual communities are creating counseling models that incorporate the best of the clinical care model into the trusted church environment. The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) created Faithnet to help black religious organizations better understand the

Getting your head together can open your heart.

connection between spirituality and mental-health recovery. Their mission is to educate clergy about mental illness and help faith communities become more supportive environments for people with mental illness.

Likewise, the Center for the Integration of Spirituality and Mental Health has partnered with churches near its Baltimore base to do mental-health outreach and education, according to Bryant. They encourage pastors to talk about mental and emotional health issues from the pulpit. Congregants receive information about mental health, complete questionnaires to assess their own mental-health status and are directed to mental-health resources if they need them.

The counseling center at Potter's House may offer the most comprehensive marriage of mental- and spiritual-health care. Now 12 years old, the center employs six licensed, master's degree-level counselors. They treat more than 100 patients a month—both from the 30,000-member congregation and the surrounding community.

"Bishop Jakes realized sometimes transformation begins at the altar, but people need support to make the rest of the journey," Stewart says. "At the altar you get healed and you make that spiritual transformation. But there may be things you have been dealing with for years that you need help walking through. For the majority of people, it's a process."

Seeing the Light

"I think the most important aspect of talking about mental health in the church, is that it gives one permission to take off that mask and seek help," Bryant says. It's important for people of faith to realize God may send that help in any number of forms—a sensitive therapist, the right medication or a treatment method that works.

Depression is no less devastating for God's people than it is for other folks. The blessing is that we have access to more than one route to healing—a faith we can lean on to give us hope and the blessing of wise counsel to help us cope.

A bonus: Getting your head together can open your heart as well, Stewart says. People who heal from their mental-health problems find themselves more open spiritually.

In her book *Black Pain: It Just Looks Like We're Not Hurting*, Terrie M. Williams writes, "After my last bout of crippling depression led me to take medication and throw myself into the hard but rewarding work of therapy, I discovered that I 'suddenly' had time for church every week."

Katherine Howard eventually found a black, female psychiatrist who has helped her manage her anxiety and depression. And her connection to her church is stronger than ever. She always attended church faithfully, but she's now become a Eucharistic minister, and she teaches weekly religious education classes to second graders.

She still struggles with depression sometimes. But when she does, she goes to confession. She lights a candle at the altar. She says her prayers. And she calls her psychiatrist, grateful to God that she has one. ♥

**Names have been changed to protect privacy.*

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