

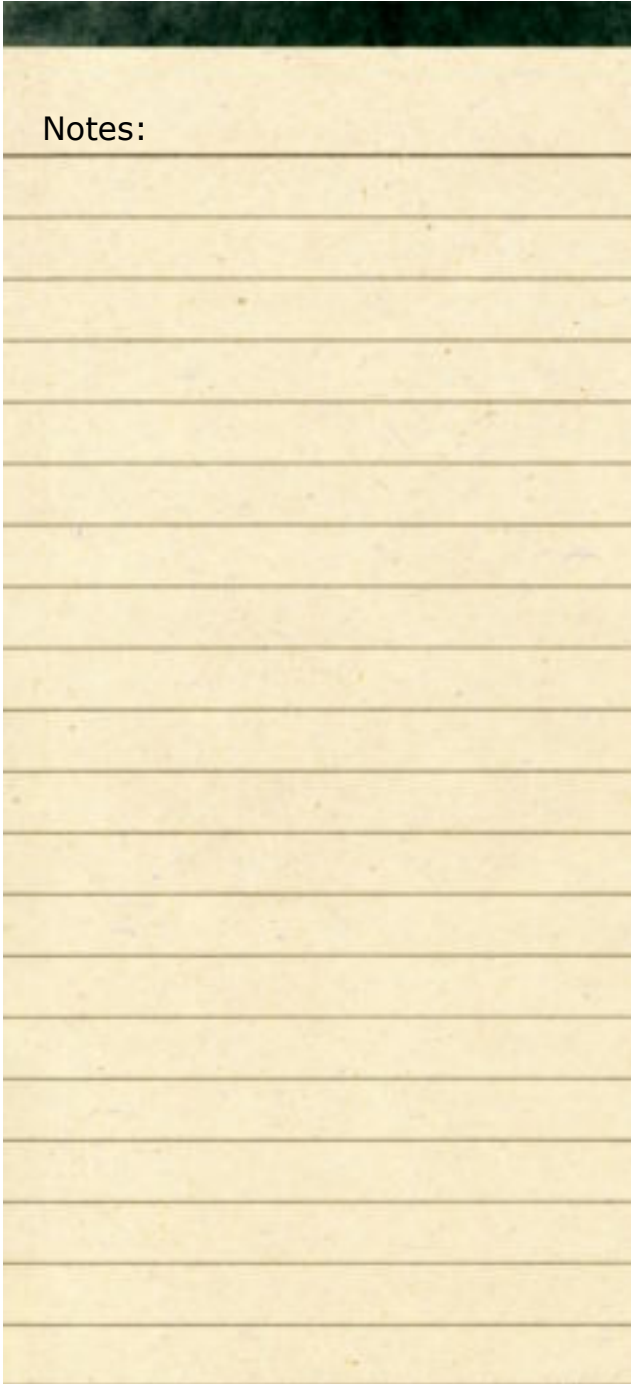
Mental Health

For all the emphasis on health and fitness in our world today, mental health remains a category that most people don't want to talk about. It's easier to focus on health issues that are more externally visible than those internally hidden and disruptive. Physical health and fitness can be measurably improved by modifying one's diet, getting more sleep, exercising regularly, and when needed, medical treatment that can include prescribed medications, surgeries, and interventions to deal with diseases of the body. However, diagnosing and treating mental health issues is far more complex and elusive. But ignoring them doesn't help. In fact, ignoring issues is a sure sign of unhealthiness.

So why are mental health issues often overlooked or ignored? We are reluctant to discuss our own or a family member's state of mind for fear of what we might reveal about ourselves. For people of faith, thinking and talking about mental health is even more challenging because of the stigma that mental illness still carries for many. The assumption is that if it's not a physical problem, then the disorder must be due to some spiritual deficiency. This misguided assumption has led many well-intentioned Christians spiraling down a path of guilt and shame for not "having it all together" spiritually, when in reality, other factors are involved.

We often overlook the fact that the brain is an organ of

Notes:

A large rectangular area of yellow lined paper with horizontal lines, intended for taking notes. The word 'Notes:' is written at the top left of this area.

the body that can become sick and diseased like a heart, lung, or kidney. Few will deny that tumors, strokes, or closed head injuries can change brain functioning. We don't look down on or think poorly of those whose motor skills, speech, or otherwise normal functioning has been altered by this form of brain trauma. However, many overlook the delicate balance that brain chemistry plays in normal functioning. If the balance of brain chemistry is off, the abilities to think, feel, and choose can be radically altered, and that changes how we behave.

One of the simplest ways to explain how the brain functions is to compare it to a chemistry set. When you alter the chemistry, everything changes. That is true for any of us, no matter how well-adjusted we are or how strong our faith is.

This hit home for me when a friend came to me for counsel who was undergoing chemotherapy treatment for cancer. When she began describing her depressive moods, the nights filled with anxiety even to the point of night terrors and panic attacks, and overwhelming feelings of ineffectiveness, worthlessness, and lack of confidence—all of which were totally out of character for her—it was clear that something had radically changed. This normally competent and confident professional woman was shaken to the point that she was questioning her significance and worth.

What she'd overlooked and was totally unprepared for

Notes:

was the impact of the powerful medications used to treat her cancer.

The chemicals the doctors had injected into her body were not only having the desired effect of hunting down and killing the cancer cells, they were also having the undesired side effect of altering her brain chemistry, causing her to feel and respond in a totally different manner. This response wasn't a conscious choice, and no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't talk her way out of it. She no longer felt in control of her thoughts and feelings.

She felt totally defeated as a Christian. No amount of prayer, meditation, Bible study, or encouragement from family or friends was helping. Her conclusion was that her faith must be deficient. She felt that somehow she must have done something wrong and that God wasn't pleased with her.

It wasn't her faith that was deficient; it was her brain chemistry. Helping her understand how the chemicals in her brain were altered by the medications used to treat her cancer allowed her to relax, knowing that she wasn't failing God or her family as she faced one of the most difficult challenges of her life. She discovered that chemistry makes a difference.

We must remember that mental health struggles have been classically defined as functional or organic. Those that are functional provide some type of "function" for the individual

Notes:

that they benefit from. In other words, they have a purpose, even though their purpose may not be readily recognized. Those kinds of struggles need to be explored in counseling with a trained professional who can help the person unpack the story underneath the observable dysfunction.

The organic kinds of disorders are the result of physical malfunctions in the brain that have a negative impact on mental processing, feelings, personality, and behaviors. These are not functional or conscious in nature but have a fundamental root cause in unbalanced brain chemistry, injury, disease, or genetics that impact the brain's ability to function normally. This is where medical treatment is necessary to restore some level of stability and normalcy.

The ancient wisdom of Proverbs 15:22 refers to the importance of seeking the help of multiple counselors when trying to determine a wise course of action. Nowhere is this advice more needed than when dealing with the inner mysteries of mental health. When exploring the dysfunctional activities of the heart and mind, it's imperative that we seek balanced counsel from spiritual, medical, and psychiatric perspectives to assist us in determining a course of action that is not simplistic but comprehensive and compassionate.

Notes: