



Raising Awareness of Mental Health Issues on a College Campus

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Mark 5:1-20 (The Message)

6-8 *When he saw Jesus a long way off, he ran and bowed in worship before him—then bellowed in protest, “What business do you have, Jesus, Son of the High God, messing with me? I swear to God, don’t give me a hard time!” (Jesus had just commanded the tormenting evil spirit, “Out! Get out of the man!”)*

9-10 *Jesus asked him, “Tell me your name.” He replied, “My name is Mob. I’m a rioting mob.”*

It may seem specious for campus ministers, and chaplains too, to “raise awareness” of mental health issues on campus. Colleges and universities are all too aware, sometimes painfully so, of the mental health challenges on their campuses. There are staff and faculty at most colleges and universities who are seeking to love and support the whole person. For many, though, the response has primarily been from a risk-management standpoint. How can we mitigate the damage to the institution if there is a major crisis (i.e. suicide, destruction to property, etc.)?

Of course, campus ministers can help foster conversations around mental health support on campuses, especially in interactions with alumni, by being open about the needs of the campus and of your ministry. Supporting the work of the counseling center and student affairs goes a long way too. We can also engage in conversations with students about lightening their loads, not just in terms of coursework, but other commitments.

So, we ask the question, as those called to affirm the whole person, what is our role as those who minister to students during college years who find themselves, those they love or care for, or even just live with, struggling with mental health issues? We are living in a time when the suicide rate, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, is climbing and has become the second leading cause of death for adolescents and young adults, precisely the population that calls our campuses home.

The first challenge is stigma. For those coming from more evangelical or conservative traditions, all too often mental health struggles are seen as a personal failing, an indication that the believer is not faithful or prayerful enough. And bound up within that is a whole host of concerns about the use of medication for treating mental health concerns.

The second challenge is willingness on your part to be present, to be uncomfortable with what you may be hearing, and on the part of the member of your community - to come forward, to be vulnerable. We are called to a ministry of presence. Sometimes being present is the very best thing we can do, even when we have a thousand other things that ‘need’ to be done, even when (especially when) what we are hearing is hard and uncomfortable.

The third challenge is working counter to the culture at large. In being present to those we serve, we are also being vulnerable, and counter-cultural when we are present in a moment of great emotion. In the example of Jesus and the Geresene, Jesus stops on his way and asks the name - he gets the name of that which troubles the man, the demon, the illness, (a differential diagnosis, perhaps) he honors their request and then he spends time with the man.

As ministers of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we are regularly called to work counter to culture, whether it's to remind people that the reason for the season is not the shopping mall or online commerce, but the child born into a "mean estate" or that our call is to community and not the hyperindividualism of U.S. American culture. Often, though, we find ourselves driven by the same cultural factors of certainty and control, of product over process, of the mandate to pursue power and status. We are called to remind those we serve of the importance and power of vulnerability, a deity who submits to the fragileness of human life and a humiliating death seems an exemplar of vulnerability.

So, because most ministers serving in higher education are not licensed therapists, what can a campus minister or other staff person do when confronted with questions about mental health, no matter the source?

- Be VERY clear that you are not a therapist
- Know the resources of the campus you serve, and make connections with student affairs staff and the counseling staff, if possible
- Be a non-anxious presence - all too often we move into problem solving mode because we are not therapists and we want to DO something. Just be there and be present. Breathe and acknowledge, affirm.
- Know when it's important to do something, what the appropriate resources are, and how to access them. Have readily available information on counseling and emergency support in your area, as well as the number for the suicide prevention hotline 1-800-273-8255.
- Affirm and support therapy and if necessary, accompany to the counseling center to show your support.
- Affirm and support medication, if warranted and prescribed. You wouldn't tell someone not to take medication for an infection or other physical health challenge
- Seek to create spaces of true belonging (see Brené Brown, Braving the Wilderness)

Resources:

- NAMI Faith and Spirituality page
<https://www.nami.org/Find-Support/Living-with-a-Mental-Health-Condition/Faith-Spirituality>
- NPR Fresh Air Interview with the authors of The Stressed Years of Their Lives
<https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2019/05/28/727509438/college-studentsand-their-parents-face-a-campus-mental-health-epidemic>
- Vox Article from Winston-Salem, NC youth Pastor
<https://www.vox.com/first-person/2019/1/10/18174263/anxiety-kids-burnout>
- CXMHpodcast - intersection of Christianity and Mental Health episode featuring Dr. Gary Glass, long time director of college counseling centers (also includes a list of other resources)
<https://cxmhpodcast.com/show-notes/2018/9/24/49-college-university-students-garyglass>

Office of Christian Formation: <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/formation>

UKirk Collegiate Ministries: <https://ukirk.org/>



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