

ARE YOU REALLY

OK

**A PASTOR'S GUIDE TO
NAVIGATING MENTAL HEALTH**

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A Pastor's Guide to Navigating Mental Health

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According to [Lifeway Research](#), churchgoers and pastors alike experience grave mental health challenges, including an uptick in anxiety and depression, especially in light of the past year. Multiple studies from the institution conclude that many in the pews and the pulpit are struggling, much like the rest of America:

- 23% of pastors acknowledge they have personally struggled with a mental illness.
- 49% of pastors say they rarely or never speak to their congregation about mental illness.
- 65% of churchgoing family members of those with mental illness want their church to talk openly about mental illness.
- 59% of those actually suffering from mental illness say the same.

Historically, the church at large has not had the greatest reputation when it comes to responding to mental illness.

We often confuse mental health with spiritual health, but the two are not the same.

Often Christians hand out well-meaning advice such as “pray more” and “trust God” along with verses from the Bible to meditate on. Yet how can someone meditate when they can hardly string two thoughts together? How can someone pray when all they feel is emptiness inside?

We have a tendency to treat mental and emotional struggles with spiritual solutions.

Prayer is important, but so is counseling and medication. And understanding the role of these treatment methods is of vital importance for pastors and church leaders. It's what sets apart *pastors who make a difference* from *pastors who unintentionally cause more damage*.

HOW TO RECOGNIZE MENTAL ILLNESS

Depression and anxiety are two of the most commonly reported mental health struggles that are permeating the church at large.

As a pastor, it's important to have a healthy understanding of the how they present. Feeling "worry" is not the same as generalized anxiety. Feeling "sad" is not the same as major depressive disorder. It's not the feeling that defines the struggle; it's the presenting symptoms. Let's take a look at some of the most common symptoms that point to an underlying issue:

Clinical Depression

- Feelings of sadness (hopelessness, guilt, worthlessness, etc.) more days than not for two weeks or more
- Changes in appetite, weight, concentration, or energy levels
- Decrease in desire and motivation
- Thoughts or fears of death or suicide
- (For a more detailed list of signs and symptoms, see Table 1 at the end of this guide)

Clinical Anxiety

- Feelings of excessive worry about life in general (health, finances, job, etc.) for a period of six months or more
- Worry that is difficult to control and can move from one topic to another over time
- Worry that comes with physical symptoms such as irritability, muscle aches, difficulty sleeping, nausea, digestive issues, etc.
- (For a more detailed list of signs and symptoms see Table 2 at the end of this guide)

Panic Attacks

- Chest pain or discomfort and shortness of breath
- Feeling dizzy, faint, or light-headed
- Fear of dying or feeling as if you're "losing control"

(For a more detailed list of signs and symptoms see Table 3 at the end of this guide)

Questions to Ask

When you suspect a mental health struggle may be present, here are a few questions you can ask to help you dig deeper:

- Are you feeling sad/worried more than usual these days? How often?
- How are you sleeping and how has your appetite been lately?
- Has your sadness/worry impacted your daily life? Responsibilities? Work? Relationships?
- Do you ever have thoughts or fears of death or dying?
- Do you struggle with feelings of guilt or worthlessness?
- How is your concentration, and are you able to focus as usual?
- How are your energy levels these days?
- Do you feel that you're able to look forward to things as you usually do?
- Are you more tearful than usual these days?
- Are you having any physical symptoms as well? Tell me about them.

If they report struggles in response to any of the questions above, you may be dealing with a mental health issue. If these symptoms are present, it's crucial to understand that prayer, bible verses, and encouragement are helpful but must also be accompanied by the proper treatment methods in order for healing to begin.

HOW TO HELP MENTAL ILLNESS

Mental illness doesn't reflect a *character* issue, it reflects a *chemistry* issue.

Mental illness is caused by changes in the functioning of neurochemicals in the brain (primarily serotonin and dopamine) that begin to impact the rest of the body. In the same way we would prescribe insulin and lifestyle changes for a person with diabetes, we must also understand the role of proper medication and counseling for a person who is struggling with a mental health disorder.

A mental health struggle is not a reflection of a person's strength or faith, and it's important to reiterate that to the struggling individual. There is hope for healing!

The following treatment methods are most effective in battling depression and anxiety:

Therapy

Therapy is a profound experience, unlike anything else, guiding individuals through the difficult emotions and hard experiences in a hope-filled way. It helps them counter faulty thinking, gives them skills to process difficult past experiences, and offers renewed perspective and hope for the future. And not only that, but *it's proven to be effective as a primary treatment method for people struggling with mental illness*. In fact, it can be just as effective as medication when it comes to treating mild to moderate mental illness.

Every pastor should have a list of Christian licensed professional counselors (LPCs) to whom they can refer individuals who are struggling with signs and symptoms of a mental health disorder. There are online options now that make it more convenient than ever and offer an easier route for those who might be reluctant to see a therapist in person. If you do not have a trusted therapist or need a guide to help individuals find a good therapist, visit truelovedates.com/counseling.

Medication

Medication is a recommended treatment method for people struggling with moderate to severe symptoms of anxiety and depression. The role of these medications (commonly known as antidepressants or SSRIs) is to increase the neurochemicals in the body that are responsible for regulating mood. Not only can they be beneficial to someone who is struggling, but they can be life changing. These medications can be prescribed by a medical doctor, and we can encourage people to seek the proper treatment and have hope for alleviating their difficult symptoms with the help and understanding of the body of Christ.

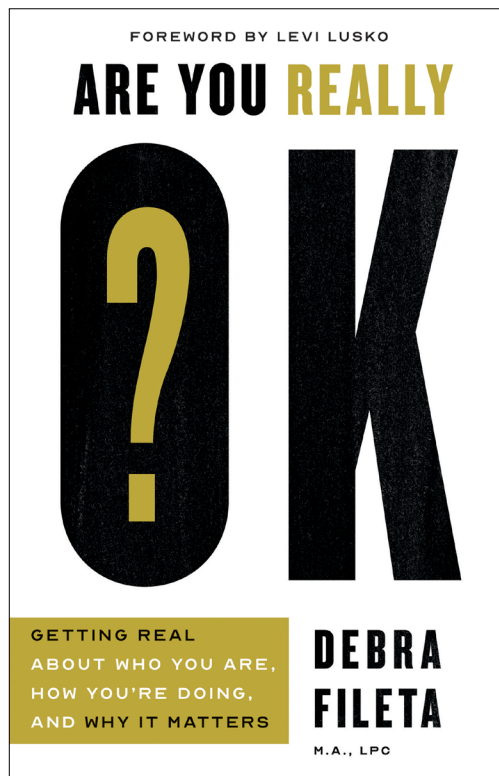
Heart, soul, mind, and strength

Because we are called to love the Lord our God with all our **heart, soul, mind, and strength**, it makes sense that the enemy—the father of lies and destruction—will do whatever He can to ensure that we face struggle in our heart, soul, mind, and strength (John 8:44).

The core areas in which we are to love God are the core areas that are susceptible to struggle.

We shouldn't be surprised by the struggle. Instead, we should be prepared!

The enemy is going to use whatever he can to get us down and out, but by God's power and through His strength, we have what it takes to face those struggles and come out stronger on the other side—mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and physically in Jesus's name.



For a practical, in-depth resource to check up on how you or someone you know is doing mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and physically, we invite you and the members of your congregation to pick up a copy of this new biblical resource: [*Are You Really OK?: Getting Real About Who You Are, How You're Doing, and Why It Matters.*](#) This book can serve as a handbook to help you or someone you know assess how they're doing, as well as offer practical next steps to help them move toward healing!

You'll learn to...

- Understand and express your emotions in healthy and helpful ways
- Get to the root of what you believe about yourself, others, and God
- Recognize the influences of past traumas and replace them with God's truth
- Deal with the impact of trauma, anxiety, depression and panic attacks
- Honestly assess your own mental health, and pursue help when it's needed
- Prioritize your physical wellbeing and see how it affects every other area of your life

Debra Fileta is also available to offer mental and emotional health seminars to your church leadership or congregation. For more information, reach out to her personal email at [**debra.k.fileta@gmail.com**](mailto:debra.k.fileta@gmail.com).

“A great book that invites the reader to delve into a more abundant life of spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical health. You’ll be challenged and equipped to grow, mature, and spiritually prosper. Marvelously done!”

—Gary Thomas, pastor and author of *Sacred Marriage*

*“Reading this book is like sitting on the couch with your own personal therapist. In *Are You Really OK?* Debra shows us that our spiritual, physical, emotional, and mental health are intertwined, weaving in her personal and professional experience. The book is full of wisdom, understanding, and practical tools that will make a difference in your life today.”*

—Christine Caine, founder of A21 and Propel Women

“I am thrilled Debra has written such a helpful resource that unpacks what it looks like to pursue emotional, spiritual, mental, and physical health. In a culture that often presents a skewed version of health, this topic has never been more important. If you want to grow, this is for you!”

—Ben Stuart, pastor of Passion City Church DC and author of *Single, Dating, Engaged, Married*

Debra Fileta will help you understand who you are—the full you: body, soul, mind, and heart. And like a chair that works only when all four legs are firmly planted on the ground, the truths she will share will help you figure out which of your “legs” is shorter than the others and needs to be propped up. I’m confident that greater joy and peace are on the other side.

—Levi Lusko, pastor of Fresh Life Church

*“Every one of us has been damaged by others, has damaged others, and has damaged ourselves by unwise words and unhealthy actions. As a result, we all have hurts, hang-ups, and bad habits. So where do we go to get help? In her newest book, *Are You Really OK?* Debra is your personal counselor and life coach who shares openly about her journey toward health and makes clear next steps for you to take toward personal healing.”*

—Chris Reed, pastor at Saddleback Church

“I cannot emphasize enough how important this book is. Debra is an excellent counselor, and in the pages ahead she will take you on a journey toward emotional, spiritual, mental, and physical health. You are going to learn new things, you are going to change in the best ways, and you are going to enjoy every word.”

—Jonathan Pokluda, bestselling author of *Welcome to Adulthood* and pastor of Harris Creek Baptist Church



DEBRA FILETA is a licensed professional counselor, national speaker, relationship expert, and author of [*Choosing Marriage*](#), [*True Love Dates*](#), [*Love in Every Season*](#), and [*Are You Really OK?*](#).

She's also the host of the hotline style [Love + Relationships Podcast](#). Her popular relationship advice blog, [TrueLoveDates.com](#), reaches millions of people with the message that healthy people make healthy relationships. Connect with her on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), or [Twitter](#), or [book an online session with her today!](#)

TABLE 1: Major Depressive Disorder (MDD)

This is a common yet serious mood disorder that impacts a person's daily life. It is also referred to as clinical depression. This disorder is above and beyond the feeling of "sadness"; it permeates many parts of the individual's life.

It can be diagnosed when a person exhibits *five or more* of the following symptoms in a two-week period:

- Depressed mood (most days, most of the day) including sadness, emptiness, hopelessness.
May present as tearful.
- Loss of interest/pleasure (this can present as a lack of excitement, joy, interest in relationships, etc.)
- Weight loss or gain and decrease or increase in appetite
- Insomnia or hypersomnia (the inability to sleep well or sleeping too much)
- Psychomotor retardation or agitation (slowed movements)
- Fatigue or lack of energy
- Feelings of worthlessness or excessive guilt
- Decreased concentration
- Thoughts of suicide or death

It's important to understand that the issue may be a depressive disorder if the above symptoms negatively impact other areas of the person's life including job, social life, relationships, etc., and are not related to another medical condition or medication.

TABLE 2: Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)

- The presence of excessive worry for a period of six months or more.
- The worry is experienced as very difficult to control and may move from one topic to another over time.
- The anxiety and worry are also accompanied by physical symptoms. In adults *three* of the following symptoms are necessary for a diagnosis. In children only *one* of the following is necessary:
 - Edginess or restlessness
 - Fatigue or consistent lack of energy
 - Difficulty concentrating
 - Irritability
 - Increased muscle aches or soreness
 - Difficulty sleeping (trouble falling asleep, staying asleep, restlessness at night or unsatisfying sleep)

The worry and anxiety displayed can revolve around a number of things, including health concerns for self or others, job responsibilities, financial concerns, or everyday matters. It's often accompanied by a need to seek reassurance from others.

It's important to note that sometimes, generalized anxiety can be accompanied by panic attacks. Because panic attacks often present as physical symptoms, they can be hard to identify and often confused with a medical condition.

TABLE 3: Panic Attacks/Disorder

- Chest pain or discomfort
- Shortness of breath
- Hot flashes or chills
- Excessive sweating
- Feeling of choking
- Fear of dying
- Fear of losing control or “going crazy”
- Feeling dizzy, faint, or light-headed
- Accelerated heart rate or palpitations
- Nausea or abdominal stress
- Numbness or tingling sensations
- Feelings of unreality or being detached from oneself (called depersonalization)
- Trembling or shaking

Symptoms of a panic attack usually happen suddenly and last about ten minutes and then subside. Some attacks may last longer or happen in succession. Panic disorder also causes the fear or worry that the episode may happen again. This sometimes causes the individual to avoid certain situations for fear of an episode.