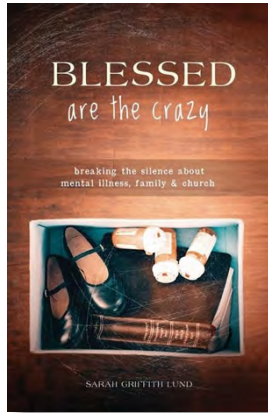


Embarking Upon a Mental Health Book Study

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Talking about mental health can be a daunting and complicated task to accomplish in the church. We all have such varied attitudes toward mental health, and diverse histories of mental illness, that it's often hard to start the conversation without running into the social stigmas that surround it. As the NBA works to create meaningful ways to acknowledge mental health in the life of the church, we didn't want to ask Disciples organizations and congregations to begin this work without starting it ourselves.

So, in an effort to “practice what we preach,” the NBA staff participated in a six-week Lenten book study focused on mental health, faith, and inclusion. Using Rev. Dr. Sarah Griffith Lund's book, *Blessed Are the Crazy*, I facilitated weekly conversations and contemplative activities exploring themes of abandonment, surrender, authentic testimony, radical acceptance, and God's unconditional love for those with “crazy in our blood.” (View the book trailer here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=anAW2ZqsejE>.)

Format: Time, Place, and Interactivity

Having a virtual office—meaning most of our staff live in cities across the country and connect online—posed a unique opportunity to be creative with the format of the book study. We used FUZE video conferencing to meet for 45 minutes at 1pm CST, so staff from East to West coasts could join in during the work day. An interactive Basecamp project was created for additional devotionals and group share exercises related to the text that helped continue the conversation throughout the week.

“I think it was important that this was part of the usual work day, and that people were allowed to take that time during their work schedule,” said Mark Anderson, NBA president and CEO. Prioritizing the book study for staff not only set a precedent for participation, but also modeled the way for inclusion by ensuring as many staff could experience the gathering as possible.

Conversation: Tone, Vulnerability, and Boundaries

Being able to talk about such a universal, yet widely unaddressed, topic like mental health amongst colleagues was a unique experience for most of us. One staff member expressed, “It was healing and affirming to share about my family's struggles with mental illness, and I appreciated hearing my colleagues' sacred stories as well. We all have different entry points and perspectives that relate to these issues, and hearing where other people are coming from helped me get to know colleagues better and on a deeper level.”

As clergy and denominational leaders, we typically talk about issues like mental health theoretically, or as a means to figure out how to help others. Yet, there was something incredibly nurturing about discussing mental health for our own growth and consumption.

Sarah Griffith Lund's raw and relatable vulnerability set the tone for transparent conversation amongst the group. After opening up about her own family's struggles with mental health, one of our staff members offered her perspective as a daughter of parents with severe mental health issues and expanded who we consider when we talk about those affected by mental health.

"This book study would have been personally enriching to me at any time," she shared, "but the fact that it was held during Lent, and leading up to the 10th anniversary of my mother's death by suicide, made the experience incredibly meaningful and even more healing/affirming for me. I had already read the book but appreciated the time to re-read and dive deeper into it, adding in our colleagues' personal and theological perspectives to my initial interpretation. I'm really grateful for the experience and feel it was exactly what I needed, and right on time!"

As powerful as it was, there were some challenges to hosting a book study for staff about mental health. One colleague mentioned, "On a few occasions, it was a little difficult to jump right back into work responsibilities when it would have been nice to have more processing/reflecting time." Another staff member felt the need to opt out of the book study all together, after appropriately considering their own emotional boundaries, and concluding it wasn't the best time in their life to engage such a topic in a group setting.

This type of awareness is key to addressing mental health in our congregations. The issue of safety in communal sharing is a natural and healthy concern to address with mental health being such a deeply personal experience. As the facilitator, it was important to encourage participants to self-disclose as they felt comfortable, and to manage and flow with whatever tone the conversation took while staying mindful of the various comfort levels amongst the group.

Facilitation: Agenda, Resources, and Helpful Hints

With mental health having such diverse elements, I also found it easy to exclude certain perspectives, get sucked into rabbit holes of thought about one aspect, or immediately jump to solving problems that come about when discussing it. So to ensure the spontaneous flow of conversation remained focused and edifying, we used a prepared agenda for structure and guidance. You can use this prepared guide created by Lund for *Blessed Are the Crazy* in your own congregation: <http://www.chalicepress.com/assets/PDFs/BlessedArestudy.pdf>

A formal book study about mental health will take on its own form, depending on your participants, structure, and setting. However, there are a few things to keep in mind when considering moving forward with this idea:

1. **Have an overall goal of vision for the group dialogue.** For example, do you want to explore mental health to promote awareness and educate, as opposed to help participants process and evaluate their own mental health? There are ways to do both, but the questions and conversation the facilitator initiates will set the tone for the direction of the conversation.
2. **Study general group facilitation skills.** Aside from content, tips for facilitating group discussion and dialogue are key when taking on such a sensitive and personal topic like mental health in a church setting. Although this video is a training for a different bible study program, I find this resource helpful when considering basic group facilitation skills: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pyUB2hsvSgc>

3. **Be open to having your own theological beliefs transformed when discussing mental health.** Those of us working in the mental health field know that we often find ourselves operating in “the gray.” Because human psyches don’t fit neatly into any boxes, issues of mental health and mental illness don’t either. So try to avoid the need to stick to a theological agenda. Be prepared to have your own theological limits stretched, and be open to what God might want to reveal through the discussion.
4. Fight the urge to “do something” too fast. It is incredible tempting to start a new ministry, develop an initiative, and or just respond to a thought with a solution as soon as you start learning about mental health. However, the process toward mental health often begins with...you guessed it—process. Sitting with thoughts, emotions, questions, experience, and testimonies is just as important as fixing or doing something.

The Power of Sharing Our Stories

“I would encourage folks to go in with an open mind and an open heart and really listen to the others’ stories without a need to problem solve any issues that may come up,” said Anderson. “The goal is to hear the stories and the struggles that people go through. I think doing the study allows you to do that. And then after the study, there may be a time to ask, ‘What is God calling us to do now, to respond to our congregation?’ But I would encourage folks not to jump to solving or providing immediate healing for folks. Sometimes the power is there in telling the story.”

As congregations across the country begin thinking about ways to address mental health in the church, it is worth considering a book study as a means to break the ice, and set the tone for transparent and meaningful dialogue about the subject.

If this blog was helpful to you, please join us for our upcoming webinar, “Speaking into the Silence: Storytelling as a Path to Healing,” featuring Sarah Griffith Lund and *Blessed Are the Crazy*. For those who cannot attend on April 21, we will be sharing the video recording and presentation slides online after the webinar.

The NBA Mental Health and Congregational Care Affinity Group is a shared effort with Disciples Home Missions (DHM) and in response to the passing of GA-1523 “Becoming a People of Welcome and Support to People with Mental Illness and/or Mental Health Issues” by the 2015 General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). For more information, visit www.nbacares.org/mental-health.