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*"Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, saith the Lord of Hosts." ~ Zechariah 4:6*

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## A Delicate Dance:

### Writing About Mental Health

by Laura N. Farrar

**About the Author:**

*Laura N. Farrar writes about her experiences with mental illness for teens, kids, and adults. Her goal is to educate and inspire people to reach out to our hurting world and make a difference for God's glory. She can be reached through her website:*

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"A depressed Christian?" I once overheard a man saying. "How can that be? They must not be saved!"

A statement could not be farther from the truth. Today, many born again believers secretly suffer with mental health disorders, and the related stigma that is often attached to such illnesses. Albeit, in recent years, as more speakers have become open about struggles with mental illness, the stigma is slowly weakening, but it is not gone yet.

Neither are quick-fix solutions that fall short of real help. We hear "quick cures" from the pulpit—pray more, repent, be thankful—but while that can be helpful for a downcast emotion related to sinful actions, clinical depression will rarely respond to these spiritual practices alone. Can God heal? Absolutely! But usually He uses counselors, medication, and treatment to get us on the right track.

That's good news for mental health sufferers. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, over 57.7 million people over age eighteen suffer from a mental disorder. Among children and adolescents, NIMH reports that one in ten battle a mental illness severe enough to affect their development and daily life. Clearly, our nation has a problem.

For example, even though Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder is

increasingly common in children and adults, rarely are parents, teachers, and friends prepared to deal with the disorder in an appropriate manner. Anxiety, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, eating disorders, and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, are setting their imprint on our society, and we have the amazing opportunity to help people understand and accept previously stigmatized illnesses.

So where do writers fit into this charged issue?

## Making a Difference

James 1:27 (NIV) notes, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world." If we expand this verse, it can easily apply to looking after the ill, handicapped, and struggling. If we reach out to those with mental illnesses, we may be the only encouragement and hope that they receive after being accused and shattered by church members, relatives and friends.

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How can we help? First, we must care.

## Educating Ourselves

To write effectively, we have to know what we're talking about. Research is available everywhere. Libraries are stocked with books, magazines, and databases that we can use. Interviewing church members or relatives can also provide valuable information that we can't read in books. Chances are, we don't have to look far to find an insider's story. Knowledge allows us to care about those who experience a different realm of emotions.

## Affirming Justice

Proverbs 31:8-9 (NIV) advises, "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy." Presently, mental disorders are not accepted by a vast number of people. Because of this, sufferers need to know that they are not being judged because of a chemical imbalance. Indeed, acceptance is vitally important to their survival and recovery.

I know this fact well.

As a teen, I spent five years battling depression silently. During that time, I read tons of books, and yet, I found only one written about a depressed teen. There was drama, relationships, sports, and academia, but rarely illness, and almost never mental. The same holds true today. Think about it. How much material have you seen or read that deals with mental issues for teens? What about adult articles? Children's stories?

So, what is available to support the mentally ill? I found some self-help books and articles basically saying "think nice thoughts, exercise, and you'll be healed!" That's nice, but not empathetic for the sufferer after

she's read several of those books and remains psychologically troubled. Clearly, more material is needed.

That's where we come in.

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By writing fiction, nonfiction, books, articles, stories, poems, and songs that address mental health, we take a stand toward the recognition of mental illness as socially acceptable and treatable. Through our characters, themes, topics, research, and Biblical stance, we have the power to open the eyes of people clouded with opinions and judgments. By doing so, we help readers seeking information and/or empathy.

## Communicating Empathetically

As Christ loves us, so we must love each other! Showing that love involves writing with compassion. There is a fine line between creating a character and portraying mental illness as a normal part of life, or minimizing the effects. For instance, say we write a fiction story about Tina, a twenty-year old college student with clinical depression. If we have her treating her illness by eating chocolate, we are not being true to the reality—or severity—of mental illness. Be extremely careful when you write about illness of any kind, make sure you know the facts, what sufferers think, what they do and don't do, and what they face. Then write a compelling, emphatic piece of fiction or nonfiction that meets your audience's need for education, information, entertainment (i.e., fiction), etc.

The key? Get inside a survivor's mind:

- interview someone of your target population with a mental disorder
- include their story with quotes in your manuscript
- fictionalize their story (with their permission of course)
- ghostwrite a recovery story

Once familiar with the reality of mental health, we become advocates of justice, equality, and morality. Our role is so important in exposing the treatment of victimized individuals and the judgments they receive. Once we learn of the injustice, how can we write about parenting a rebellious teenager, without writing about parenting a depressed or self-injuring teen? Instead of just submitting solutions to a mid-life crisis by taking a vacation or working on hobbies, include a sidebar on how readers can evaluate whether they're depressed. As you brainstorm ideas, consider angles that will help you delve further into mental health issues. Then write your heart out.

As you do, keep in mind that we have the power to show empathy, compassion, and acceptance to people suffering from any kind of mental illness. We can do it with the power of our pens—and keyboards.

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