

Physical Illness & Biblical Counseling

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INTRODUCTION

I. THE BODY, THE BIBLE AND COUNSELING

How does the Bible think about the body?

- Created by God (Genesis 2:7) in the “image of God (Gen. 1:27-28)—material and immaterial; body/soul; inner/outer; root/fruit. We’re not animals! We are bipartite not monistic and it is all interwoven.
- 2 Cor. 5:1-9 (implications of these verses)

- “The Fall” is significant for the body (Gen. 2:17, “...You shall surely die...”). We have the most realistic worldview! The secular psychologies don’t believe in Gen 3. Our worldview explains pain, illness, suffering.
Rom 8: 22-23 (all creation groans, including us!)
Ecc. 2:23

Principle: We’re all experiencing a Genesis 3 hang over

- The body becomes the “temple of the Holy Spirit” at conversion (I Cor. 6:19).
- The inner person(heart/soul) expresses itself through the body (Prov. 4:23).
- The body will be glorified (I Cor. 15:49-58) and in heaven all pain/suffering will be gone (Revelation 21:4; 22:3). This is all part of Christ’s redemption!

II. CURRENT ISSUES AND QUESTIONS (The importance of our worldview)

A. Does the brain (part of the body) make you sin? Can the brain make you sin?

The biblical principle that the brain cannot make us sin may seem harsh and unsympathetic at first, but it actually is humanizing. It shows respect. It leads us to treat each other as people created in God’s image. It also offers hope. True, there are some symptoms of PMS and other problems that are distinctly physical and may not

improve. However, if these symptoms are accompanied by spiritual problems, then, by God's grace, we can expect that these spiritual problems will change (Ed Welch, *Blame it on the Brain?*, page 51).

B. How do the body and the soul impact each other?

Monism--The world would (generally speaking) see everything as a physical.

Ps 32:1-4 as an example of the psychosomatic (see also Psalm 38: 3-8).

Placebo effect and antidepressants

C. What about genetic issues?

Principle: Everyone is genetically flawed because of Gen. 3. We all have handicaps.

D. What is "mental illness?"

E. What about faith healing?

- Principle: Our Lord's miracles were ALWAYS permanent and total (not partial).

III. HOW TO COUNSEL/MINISTER TO THOSE WITH PHYSICAL ISSUES

A. Compassionately minister the doctrine of the sovereignty of God and trusting Him (Psalm 24:1-2; Rom. 11:36).

Trust is not a passive state of mind. It is a vigorous act of the soul by which we choose to lay hold on the promises of God and cling to them despite the adversity that at times seeks to overwhelm us (Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God*, page 200).

"Don't let your experience dictate to you what is true about God and his character. Instead let what is true about God and his purposes, as laid out in the Bible, reframe and reinterpret your painful experience" (Mike Emlet, *Chronic Pain*, page 10).

B. Warn about letting illness dictate how they respond to others (I Cor. 9:27).

Can a person who is physically ill exhibit self control?

“by God’s grace we can have strong spirits even if we have decrepit bodies” (Ed Welch, *Blame it on the Brain*, page 51).

What is this illness revealing about the heart (inner motives, drives and desires)?

- Cf. tea bag illustration

C. Teach the sufferer how to properly express suffering to the LORD (Ps. 42-43).

- Cf. the genre of Psalms called “Lament Psalms”

D. Remind him or her that his or her Lord can relate to a broken body (Hebrews 4:14-16).

E. All trials/circumstances of life are OPPORTUNITIES to grow in Christlikeness (Rom. 8:28-29; 2 Cor. 4:16-18).

F. Teach and encourage sufferers to still minister to others (Matt. 22:34-40).

Chronic pain, like all suffering, tempts us to withdraw, to turn inward, and to place our needs above the needs of others. Even as a chronic pain sufferer, the second great commandment—“Love your neighbor as yourself”—still applies to you (Matthew 22:39; Mark 12:31). God still calls you (and equips you!) to be an instrument of his truth, grace, and love in the lives of people around you. The actions prompted by this love will be different for you as you deal with chronic pain, but that doesn’t mean you can’t love others. Ask God to give you a vision for loving those around you in specific ways, even if the acts of love seem like small steps (Mike Emlet, *Chronic Pain, Living by Faith When Your Body Hurts*, pages 16-17).

G. Physical illness reminds us that this world is not ultimate. We are really eternal people, pilgrims passing through (Phil. 3:18-21).

H. Everything in life is to be done/handled as an act of worship (I Cor. 10:31; Rom. 11:36).

I. Remember the inherent power of the Word of God (Hebrews 4:12) even with mental handicaps or those in a coma.

IV. Don't miss these great opportunities to minister the Word and love of Christ!

Principle: Counseling is not restricted to an office in a well-rounded local church ministry.

- A. Do minister to the family also. Develop a shepherding plan.
- B. Do minister to those with physical handicaps.
- C. Do minister to body and soul (Matt. 25:34-40).
- D. Hospital visits as counseling opportunities—minister the Word!
 - A few simple questions can change the way you do visitation. For example, “what is your greatest fear related to this upcoming surgery?”
- E. Shut-ins/nursing homes (James 1:27).
 - Same principle as above
 - Have communion

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Joni Eareckson Tada and Steve Estes, *When God Weeps: Why Our Sufferings Matter to the Almighty* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000). ISBN 9780310238355.

Joni and Friends website: <http://www.joniandfriends.org/>

James Halla, *Pain: The Plight of Fallen Man* (Stanley, NC: Timeless Texts, 2004). ISBN 9781889032313.

Edward T. Welch, *Blame It on the Brain? Distinguishing Chemical Imbalances, Brain Disorders, and Disobedience*, Resources for Changing Lives (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1998). ISBN 9780875526027.

Michael R. Emler, *Chronic Pain: Living by Faith When Your Body Hurts* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2010). ISBN 9781935273646.