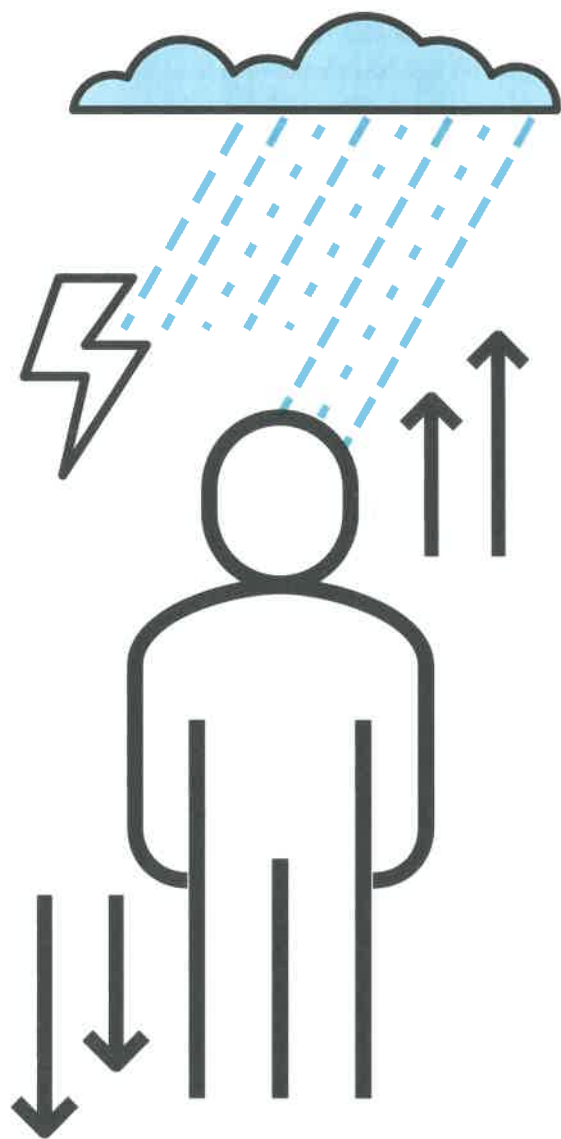




LOSS OF IDENTITY

Mental Health, Depression, and Suicide

MISDIRECTED IDENTITY

Life is hard and full of disappointment. From not making the team, to losing a treasured possession, to being passed over for a part in the play, or just failing to fit in, our children are guaranteed to experience heartache and disappointment as they grow up. Life doesn't always meet our expectations.

Loneliness is a major difficulty in the lives of young people. Our kids want to be known and to have an identity in this world. The desire to fit in exhibits enormous pressure from their earliest years. The need to belong can override logic, knowledge, belief, and even their sense of self. And the unfortunate result of looking to others for validation and approval is that you inevitably lose sight of your identity in Christ.

Deeper issues like anxiety, depression, and thoughts of suicide are also related to the problem of misdirected identity. As Christ-centered parents, we must be aware of these dangers and be prepared to point our kids back to Christ.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

God created us to be truly and fully human (John 10:10). The breadth and depth of the emotions we experience are one of the most important aspects of our humanity. Our emotions are not a result of sin or the fall. The emotions we feel—such as wonder,

anger, happiness, peace, and sorrow—are not only essential to our lives, they are also seen in the life and ministry of Jesus (Matt. 8:10; John 11:33-35; Heb. 5:7).

Unfortunately, because of the fall our emotions are sometimes misdirected by sin. This shows up in various ways, but often sin attempts to direct our affections toward idols (Col. 3:5). Our kids may struggle with feelings of loneliness or depression. Sin will drive them to seek relief from these feelings through false gods like sex, drugs, or the approval of others, instead of seeking comfort and validation in Jesus.

The fall has brought sin and brokenness, even to our emotions. The hope of the gospel is that the people of God are awaiting a future kingdom where there will be no more “grief, crying, and pain” (Rev. 21:4). So we wait for the day when we will be like Jesus, fully human in every way, but free from sin and hurt and pain.

WHAT IS NORMAL?

As we think through issues related to identity and mental health, it is important to develop a realistic picture of what *normal* is. “The ‘normal’ human life isn’t what is marketed to us by the pharmaceutical industry or by the lives we see projected on movie screens, or, frankly, by a lot of Christian sermons and praise songs.”⁴ Sadly, many of our churches have taught children to mask emotion rather than express it in a healthy manner by projecting superficial happiness in our sermons and worship songs and diminishing the role of lament.

Far from triumphalism—placing too much emphasis on the joys of life while diminishing the effects of sin—“*the normal*

human life is the life of Jesus of Nazareth, who sums up in himself everything it means to be human (Eph. 1:10). And the life of Christ presented to us in the Gospels is a life of joy, fellowship and celebration, but also of loneliness, profound sadness, lament, grief, anger and suffering, all without sin.”⁵

Perfectionism robs our kids of joy. The gospel message should free our kids from the prison of perfectionism. In His earthly ministry, Jesus welcomed sinners to the dinner table (Mark 2:15). He didn’t check their sin registry or happiness levels at the door. He knew their failures and He invited them in to experience Him.

When your kid is hurting, the aim is not to fix him or return him to some illusive state of normal. Point him to Jesus:

Let us run with endurance the race that lies before us, keeping our eyes on Jesus, the source and perfecter of our faith. For the joy that lay before him, he endured the cross, despising the shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

HEBREWS 12:1a-2

Turning to Christ to find our value and self-worth requires us to reject the temptation to pursue significance by chasing after idols. We should count it all joy as we destroy those idols and grow into completeness in Christ (Jas. 1:2-4).

MENTAL HEALTH

Thinking about our own children suffering with mental health issues is scary. There are two common mistakes parents make. One mistake is to assume these issues will never affect our children. The second mistake is to

assume that there is nothing you can do if they should suffer in this way. Don't be afraid. The hope of the gospel is stronger than your fear.

These are real issues. More than six million teens in the U.S. have been diagnosed with an anxiety disorder, which is twenty-five percent of the teen population. In 2015, 12.5 percent of adolescents ages twelve to seventeen had at least one major depressive episode. That number was up from 4.6 percent in 2006.⁶

While Christians have a wide range of views on addressing mental health issues, we all agree that prayer is essential. This does not exclude taking advantage of modern medicine when appropriate. If depression and anxiety are brought on by physiological reasons, medicine may help to alleviate negative symptoms. But in every case, we pray for God to comfort our spirits and remind ourselves that Jesus is our peace:

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

PHILIPPIANS 4:7

It is especially important for Christian parents to be mindful that the purpose of many anti-depressants is merely to suppress symptoms—not to rid the body of the source of depression.

Your child may be walking through a period of grief or guilt caused by sin. In this case, medicine will not resolve the issue. Be in tune to your child's circumstances. Determine the cause of depression before determining treatment.

WARNING SIGNS

How do you know when your child is suffering from anxiety or depression? Emotions and social behavior can help clue you in to your child's state of mind. Watch for these warning signs:

- Extreme sadness or withdrawal from friends and activities
- Having intense worries or fears that affect daily activities
- Out-of-character aggressive behavior—getting into fights, hurting others, or hurting self
- Not eating or throwing up after eating; rapid weight loss
- Substance abuse

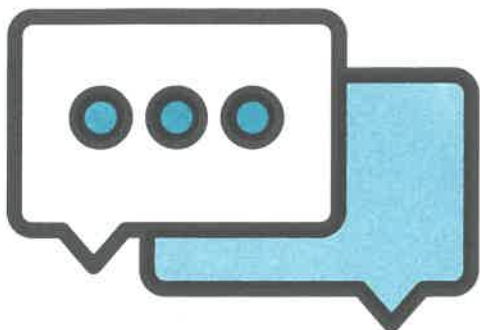
Anxiety and depression often come as a result of life situations that are difficult for children to process. This might include the death of a loved one, divorce or separation of parents, or major transitions (new home or school). Also be on guard if your child is experiencing teasing or bullying at school or is having problems fitting in.⁷

Even young children are not immune to loneliness and anxiety. Pay attention to symptoms to determine if your child's sadness is a passing mood or something more severe that might require your involvement.

SUICIDE

Approximately forty-four thousand people die by suicide each year and almost five hundred thousand people are estimated to attempt suicide each year.⁸ As of 2015, suicide was the second leading cause of death for people ages ten to twenty-four.⁹

Suicide is tragic. It disregards the image of God and the sanctity of human life. It denies God's sovereignty over one's body and leaves behind a trail of loss, grief, and guilt. And it



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almost always occurs in response to suffering or the anticipation of suffering. Suicide is an attempt to escape the pain that comes from living in a broken world. Purposely ending one's life through suicide fails to recognize the hope and comfort that is offered to us in Jesus.

How do you help your child when they confess thoughts of suicide? First, pray for God's mercy and help. Thank them for reaching out. Asking for help is an act of courage. Try to ask questions in order to understand the situation. Gently and lovingly attempt to discern the severity and duration of these thoughts. And seek to determine if they have the means to commit suicide or have attempted suicide in the past.

Remind them of the presence of Christ that gives us hope in our darkest moments. Finally, connect them to help. Find a trusted pastor or biblical counselor who can give loving care that will lead to restored health.

TAKE ACTION

Ultimately, we want the feelings of loneliness, worthlessness, and despair to be replaced with hope in Jesus Christ, "a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul" (Heb. 6:19). We want to help our kids to overcome the effects of sin and feel whole and complete in Christ.

As parents we should pray, study God's Word, seek godly counsel, and lean on the power of the Holy Spirit. You are not in this

parenting journey alone. While you tell your children that they are loved and intimately known by the Creator God, believe it for yourself. God is with you, guiding you to raise up the kids He gave you.

Don't shy away from difficult topics like identity and mental health with your kids. These conversations must happen. You want the answers they are seeking to come from you, not social media, television, or even their peers. They need the hope of the gospel. They need to know the story of the One who gave His life "so that they may have life and have it in abundance" (John 10:10).

Pray for your children and prepare yourself to walk with them through all the challenges of life.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How have you seen your child deal with disappointment?
2. Are you pushing your child toward perfectionism or helping him or her be free from it?
3. What are you currently doing to prepare yourself to help your child deal with any mental health issues?
4. What is one thing that stood out to you from this article?