

PRESSING ON...

"I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus." Philippians 3:14



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An Essential Process of Childhood

■ by Jessica Parks, MSW, LCSW

Mama, check this out! I made an ark like Noah!" I entered the living room the other day to find that my four-year-old had stripped the cushions off the couch and created a large 'boat' for her stuffed animals—two by two—to escape a flood. This seemingly silly, perhaps slightly irritating, activity is in fact the primary way through which children begin to learn about and understand the world. My daughter was learning about physical balance, sorting, engineering, weather, and scripture through play; she was doing so without direct intervention or guidance from any adult.

As Maria Montessori observed, "play is the child's work." Play is necessary for children's effective learning, developing physical strength, understanding language, developing problem-solving skills, connecting with caregivers and peers, processing and expressing emotions, and beginning to know their creator God, who is himself playful.

What Is Play?

The word play has many meanings. Children 'play' video games, they 'play' flute. The kind of play we will discuss here is activity in which children engage that is self-directed, intrinsically motivated, and imaginative (Cambridge Handbook of Play, 2019). Play, in its most beneficial forms, is chosen by, directed by, and created by the child. Play is a process that changes with the child through developmental stages, from the peek-a-boo of babyhood to the complex playground games of older children and beyond. All the while, play engages children in exploration of the world around them.

Children Learn Through Play

Play provides opportunities for skills development. A child learns about compromise

and cooperation when he attempts to build a block tower with his peers. A child learns to clearly communicate and effectively lead when she engages others in playground games. Children learn about the complex beauty of God's created world when digging in the mud or observing seashells. All of this is play. All of this is learning. These play experiences, and countless others, occur naturally when children have access to unstructured time.

Children Connect and Manage Stress Through Play

Play helps children manage stress. At a time where children experience increasing academic and social pressures, play is an essential tool for coping with difficult emotional experiences. Research indicates that play is related to reduced cortisol- the stress hormone- levels in children (Pediatrics, 2014). Play also facilitates healthy attachment between children and their parents. Parents experience increased bonding with their children through engaged interactions, specifically play. The American Academy of Pediatrics strongly recommends play for these reasons, stating that the "mutual joy and shared communication and attunement...that parents and children can experience during play regulate the body's stress response (Pediatrics, 2008).

How Parents Can Encourage Play

Many parents, especially busy parents of young children, struggle to find the energy or motivation to engage in play with their children. It certainly can be difficult to come home from work and jump right into an imaginary submarine or blow bubbles with your child when there is dinner to make and laundry to do. Here's the good news: while playing with your

child can be challenging, a little goes a long way.

Here are some strategies for encouraging play for your child:

- **Make time for play.** It is tempting to fill our children's schedules full of enriching activities. Although learning an instrument or exploring science are also beneficial, they do not replace unstructured play. Make room in your child's schedule for imaginative play.
- **Limit screen time.** Video games and

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Mental Illness & Stigma:

SUFFERING IN SILENCE

■ by Kim Pronoitis, MA, LCPC

Many people who live with a mental illness suffer in silence. Why? Because they are afraid of the stigma and being judged. Stigma is something that people are ashamed of that is beyond their control. Because of a lack of education, people think that a mental illness is something that one can “get over”.

What does the church say about mental health? There is a common misconception that anxiety and depression is something that we should be able to control. This is not always the case. Often times Christians can be judgmental and make implications that the struggling person has a lack of faith or trust in God. In our suffering we should be there to support one another. Throughout the Bible, God mentions that we are not to suffer alone. Galatians 6:2 states to “carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ.” People stay quiet and do not talk about the things that they do not understand. Sadly, this stigma and judgement of others can isolate those struggling with mental illness and keep them suffering in silence.

What does the church say about stigma and mental health?

It is important to remember that you and I are the church. We need to gain and promote new awareness about stigma and mental health. Thankfully today, some churches and Christians are starting to take mental health more seriously. Numerous churches and leaders are starting to equip pastors and congregations with new information. Some churches are even starting

mental health awareness groups.

Through the media, talk radio, and different publications, we are starting to educate and give our congregations and church communities a different perspective.

Despite these positive changes, the stigma behind mental illness remains common in churches and Christian circles. Mental health is not a common topic in the church, and so I encourage you, the church, to start speaking up.

Be a part of stopping the stigma

Starting the conversation on mental illness can feel scary and intimidating, but it doesn’t have to be. Here are some simple things you can do to help stop the stigma behind mental illness:

Acknowledge and promote scientific truth about mental illness

- Mental illness is no different than any other physical illness.
- People with mental illness are no more violent or dangerous than the general population.¹
- Mental illness is more common than you may think. One in five Americans is affected by a mental illness each year.²
- Ignoring or denying mental illness delays treatment and a return to normal functioning – like any other illness the sooner it is treated, the better.
- Suicide is a complex issue and those who take their own life are suffering.

Acknowledge and promote spiritual truth about mental illness

- Having a mental illness is not a lack of faith or punishment from God.
- If God chooses not to heal a mental illness (or any other illness), it is not because we do not trust him enough.
- God does not say we should hide the pain in our lives. This includes our mental health. God tells us instead to carry each other’s burdens to fulfil the law of Christ.
- Jesus has compassion on those who are afflicted. His concern is always for their healing – body, mind, and spirit – regardless of what caused the illness.

Educate yourself and those around you

- As a society we need to talk about it more – we need to talk about our mental health as we talk about our physical health.
- There is nothing wrong with normalizing therapy, as it can be an empowering experience.
- It’s beneficial to be honest with who we are – choosing empowerment over shame.
- Be conscious of our language regarding mental illness. Many times we are not even aware of how our words can affect another. To someone who is suffering with mental illness, it is hurtful, for example, to hear someone casually say, “I’m so OCD!” just because they like an organized office.
- It is true that the media, movies, television, and society still portray a negative perception of mental illness. We need to correct that as the opportunity comes.
- In our education, we ought to encourage equality between physical and mental health.

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social media may have a role to play in a child’s life, but screen time is not unstructured play. Again, make time for play without distraction.

- **Focus on your child.** Put away any of your own distractions, like cell phones. Be as present as possible, setting aside thoughts of your ‘to do’ list. Set a timer for yourself if necessary, and communicate that your child has your full attention until the timer alarm sounds.
- **Allow your child to choose the activity.** Make suggestions only when necessary for safety or when requested. Attempt to enter your child’s frame of reference and engage with them there.
- **Observe and ask questions** about what your child is doing, such as “I see you put the red block on top. What will you do next?” Questions like this help facilitate language development and planning skills. Asking questions also communicates that you see your child’s play as worthwhile.
- **Allow your child to direct the play.** As difficult as it can be for adults to relinquish control to children, play is an appropriate time to do so. Allow your child to lead. Did her stacking blocks suddenly turn into a pack of lions? Roll with it. Your child is doing the work of play.
- **Follow up.** Say “I really enjoyed building blocks with you today. Thank you for showing me how you balance the blocks and sharing your toys with me.”

Adults often see a child’s play as loud and disruptive, but Jesus did not see it that way. He welcomed and encouraged children, instructing us all to “welcome...these little children in [my] name” (Mark 9:37). With or without parent encouragement, children play. As parents, grandparents, and other caregivers, we have an opportunity to protect and encourage children’s playful nature. They play to grow, to learn, to connect, and to cope. They play because God created them to play. ■



Jessica Parks is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and sees clients in our Lombard, Orland Park, & Plainfield, IL locations.



Jerrod Tillotson, MA, LAMFT
Licensed Associate Marriage & Family Therapist
Wheaton, IL location

We are pleased to announce that Jerrod has joined our professional staff. Jerrod works with individuals, couples, and families. He sees clients as young as age 12.

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New Staff



Facing Fear

■ by Kathy Krentkowski, MA, LCPC, LMHC

A few years ago I was faced with a decision: Do I stay in the place where I have been for years, waiting and hoping that change will come to me, or do I make a decision to step out in faith, not knowing what the results of my choice would be, but believing it would bring me closer to my goal?

What helped me make the decision was answering the following questions:

What is my hope?

What goal am I fixing my eyes upon?

What is God requiring of me?

The one thing that caused the greatest hesitancy in making this decision was fear. Fear is common to us all. Too often fear is what drives people's decisions and the result tends to be regret. There is a different way to live. What option is there if you eject fear from the driver's seat?

Faith

The bible describes faith as a shield that extinguishes fiery darts from the evil one (Ephesians 6:16). In this scripture, Paul is not referring to a "Captain America" sort of shield, but rather, a large shield that can cover most of the body, strong enough to survive direct blows from an enemy sword. This is the type of faith that is needed if you are going to not only face fear, but advance towards it.

Living By Faith

Faith is a word often talked about in Christian circles. Talking about faith is not the same as having faith.

What does it look like to live by faith, and put action to it? When I was faced with that difficult decision, I considered my hope and the related goal. My desire was not one that was directly addressed in God's word (such as whether or not I steal that SUV, or cheat on my spouse), and so I talked with trusted friends, prayed and sought godly counsel in regards to what I was considering, and then came time to take action. The bible says that faith without works is dead (James 2:17). It wasn't enough for me to "have faith that it will all work out". I had to have faith AND make a decision, without evidence that it would work out in the end. I would be required to trust God.

Fear tried to intimidate me, saying that if I made the wrong choice, I'd regret it. However, I knew that if I lived my life with ME as the sole conductor of things working out, I'd be led astray and gravely disappointed. My faith told me I was not alone in this life (Ezekiel 36:27). I believed the Holy Spirit was with me and that I could seek him and trust the leading that followed (Proverbs 3:5). My faith told me that God has a purpose and a plan for me and that it was a good one (Jeremiah 29:11). My faith said, "Do not fear" (Isaiah 41:10).



So, with my eye set on the goal, I picked up my shield of faith and I stepped out. That shield of faith covered me as I advanced, even in the face of fear.

The bible says that faith is the evidence of things hoped for (Hebrews 11:1). What are you hoping for? What decisions are you considering? Is fear playing a role in how you are considering your options? I've been told that courage is decisive and deliberate action in the face of fear. Faith says God will keep his promises. What would it look like if you lived like you believed that?

P.S. In the end, I made the decision to make a life altering change. Weeks later, the opportunity I was longing for came to me, and I was already well into the preparation stages of what saying "yes" would entail. It's one of my favorite life moments. I wonder what yours will be. ■



If you would like to explore the role of faith on a deeper level, consider *The Armor of God* bible study by Priscilla Shier.

Kathy Krentkowski is a Licensed Mental Health Counselor, Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor, and sees clients in our Evergreen Park, IL & Schererville, IN locations.



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- Chicago (3 neighborhood locations)
 - Edgewater
 - Grand Crossing
 - South Loop
- Evergreen Park
- Lombard
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- Orland Park
- Plainfield
- River Forest
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Our Mission Statement

Promoting health and wholeness through professional counseling, consultation and education from a Christian perspective.

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Choosing empowerment over stigma

When we have not experienced something, it is easy to come to our own understanding and assumptions, which fuel fear, judgment, stigma, and even hatred. Therapy (counseling) gives insight and empowerment - there is nothing wrong with normalizing therapy. Life's issues are not always easy, and one does not have to have a mental illness to seek out therapy.

Honesty is the first step to healing - how can we be who God intends us to be without taking an honest look at ourselves first? We have to be honest. There are many of us - even Christians - who live in denial about our mental health. It is only through our own journey that we gain wisdom and insight. This empowers us to move past the stigma towards personal healing and helping others. Taking ownership of our mental health allows us to gain a confidence to our being. We don't need to stigmatize ourselves or others who struggle. We need to be able to stick up for all who are suffering so that they do not do so in silence. It's important for us to remember that it isn't the illness that defines an individual. God has a purpose for us all. ■



Kim Pronoitis is a Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor and sees clients in our Tinley Park, IL location.

¹MentalHealth.gov. Mental Health Myths and Facts. <https://www.mentalhealth.gov/basics/mental-health-myths-facts>

²NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness). Mental Health by the Numbers. <https://www.nami.org/learn-more/mental-health-by-the-numbers>

New Locations!

Our Chicago (South Loop) location has moved!
The new address is in Roosevelt Collection shops.

**1136 S. Delano Court West, Suite B201
Chicago, IL 60605**

Therapists at this location are:
Daniella Appiagyei, PhD, LCPC
Kelsee Costanza, MS, LPC
Anne Mirza, MSW, LCSW
Cicely Silva, MA, LPC



We have also opened up a new location in
Wheaton Christian Reformed Church,
Wheaton, IL

**711 E. Harrison Avenue
Wheaton, IL 60187**

The therapist at this location is:
Jerrod Tillotson, MA, LAMFT

We offer daytime and evening appointments for children, adolescents, and adults seeking individual, couple, and family therapy.

To make an appointment, call 708.845.5500