

## Mental Health Providers Guide to Working with Christian Patients

Sherri Hansen, MD  
Clinical Assistant Professor  
UW Medical School

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## Religious Demographics of Americans

- 76.5% of Americans identify selves as Christian
- 52% Protestant, 24% Catholic
- 35% Attend church weekly
- 80% Believe in heaven and the devil
- 34% believe the Bible is the actual word of God, 48% the inspired word of God, 15% a collections of ancient fables

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## Demographics of Psychiatrists

- Psychiatrists less likely to attend religious services frequently, believe in God or in the afterlife, or cope by looking to God as compared to other physicians (*September 2007 Psychiatric Services*)
- Historical tensions between psychoanalysis and religion possible explanation

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## Definitions

- Evangelical—"the gospel"—spreading it to nonbelievers
- Difficult to quantitate as there is a large range to what defines evangelicalism
- 25-35% of US population identifies self as "born-again" or 70-80 million people
  - Does NOT take into account African-American protestants who make up 8-9% of the US population, but 61% identify selves as evangelical

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## Definitions

- Evangelicalism—difficult to define
  - Embraces key Christian doctrines
    - Conversionism
    - Activism
    - Biblicism
    - The sacrifice of Jesus
    - Also, a personal relationship with God and Jesus Christ

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## Definitions

- Fundamentalism—more literal and conservative
- Pentacostalism—charismatic and conservative
- Largely Republican and embrace traditional marital roles and childrearing practices
- Comprise largest subset of home-schooled children

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## Growth of Evangelicalism

- Evangelical churches are growing while mainline protestant church membership is falling.
- Why?—
  - Marketing to unchurched “seekers” who are accepted on face-value
  - They are media and culturally savvy and utilize technology well (video, electronic music, internet, podcasts)
  - Emphasis on a loving God who desires a personal relationship with His people and who forgives them by grace, not by virtue social-economic standing or good works

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## “Be of the World but not of it.”

- Christian contemporary music is the fastest growing segment of the overall music market and Christian bands play to arena sized audiences even in Madison and top Billboard secular charts
- “Left Behind” series and books such as the “Purpose Driven Life,” have topped the NYT bestseller lists
- Movies such as “Facing the Giants,” “The Passion of the Christ,” and “Veggie Tales,” grossed huge box office ticket sales

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## Strengths of a Strong Christian Faith

- Sense that God cares and loves oneself and is there in times of trial
- A way to make sense of the struggles that life brings
- Power of prayer
- Sense that suicide is a sin and that committing would jeopardize eternal life in heaven
- Support of a religious community

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## Mistrust of Popular Culture and Mental Health Treatment

- Extends to mental health professionals—whom a greater percentage lean towards secular humanism
- Fear that religious beliefs will be devalued and/or dismissed
- Fear that religious world-view will be replaced by “pop psychology” and secular values pushed onto them
- Christians are likely to seek help first from the church and clergy—who may or may not be equipped to handle major psychiatric issues

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## Possible Perils of Christian Faith

- After the “honeymoon of conversion,” then what? Life problems don’t vanish instantly
- Danger of having a rigid world view that requires flexibility or a paradigm shift in the face of life’s challenges. May trigger a identity crisis
- Added stress and guilt of living up to one’s morals and values—especially in American culture that is perceived as devaluing
- Christian communities and leadership are predisposed to the same struggles and problems of any other organization and that sometimes result in less than Christian behavior

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## Beliefs that Christians may have

- Denial that depression has happened to me
  - Guilt that I am failing God
  - Belief that taking medication for depression is unspiritual
  - Concern that I am not relying entirely on God to get me through my problem
  - Shame that I am failing my church, family and friends
  - Worry that others will think I am weak or worthless
  - Fear of secrets being uncovered
  - Belief that I can handle this myself
- (From *New Light on Depression*, David B Biebel, D.Min. & Harold Koenig, MD, 2004, Zondervan)

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Some Common Myths and Misperceptions  
that Christians May Hold

- 1) You're depressed because you want to be depressed
- 2) You can beat depression with willpower
- 3) You're depressed because of unconfessed sins
- 4) Depressed believers have weak faith
- 5) It's easy to tell when you are depressed
- 6) Depression is just another word for grief
- 7) Christians will be understanding and supportive
- 8) If you are depressed, you are just feeling sorry for yourself
- 9) Depression is a waste of time
- 10) Depression arises from repressed anger

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Other issues that some Christians  
may have

- Prosperity gospel—Joel Osteen leading influence—newer take on the old protestant work ethic
  - God wants us to be prosperous and rich—we need only to ask and pray for guidance and He will grant our heart's desire
  - Obviously, this could generate false hopes and misperceptions, disappointments, and self-blame

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How any mental health provider may  
address specific concerns of  
Christian consumers

- Reassurance that faith and belief will not be devalued and values will be respected
- Encourage patient to talk about his or her own faith beliefs—ask for explanations if one is unclear about a particular belief
- Be willing to field questions about one's own convictions and that one's faith beliefs will not be forced upon a patient

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How any mental health provider may address specific concerns of Christian consumers

- Consider partnering with a patient’s pastor or spiritual leader within the faith community
- Encourage patients to utilize the spiritual resources within their faith community and the surrounding area
- Encourage Christian patients to process life experiences through a spiritual framework
- Don’t be afraid to refer to the Bible or even “what would Jesus do in this situation...,” in working with Christian patients

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Faith: Acknowledging Depression’s Gifts

- Greater sensitivity
- Change and growth
- Creativity
- Dependence
- Grace
- Deeper, more authentic faith

*(From New Light on Depression, David B Biebel, D.Min. & Harold Koenig, MD, 2004, Zondervan)*

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Resources

- Congregational Resource Guide—Carol J. Wills for faith communities  
[www.congregationalresources.org/mentalhealth.asp](http://www.congregationalresources.org/mentalhealth.asp)
- “New Light on Depression” David Biebel, D Min and Harold G Koenig, MD, Zondervan Press, 2004

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