



Emotional Health: *How Churches Can Care for Kids and Families Impacted by COVID-19*

By Dr. Tim Clinton

What is MENTAL HEALTH?

Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make healthy choices.¹ Mental health is important at every stage of life, from childhood and adolescence through adulthood.

Strengthening Mental Health Promotion External.
Fact sheet no. 220. Geneva, Switzerland: World
Health Organization.

The coronavirus isn't just a threat to public health; it's also a challenge for families.

Even before the pandemic began, America was facing a mental health crisis. The CDC estimates that 50% of us will experience some sort of mental health illness or disorder at some point in our lives. But most people who suffer from poor mental health suffer in silence. Now, the coronavirus pandemic has only made things worse for more Americans.

Since the start of the lockdowns, families have struggled with dramatic increases in stress, tension, anger and frustration. Combined with the fear of getting sick and the danger, or even the reality, of losing a loved one, the stress of the coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated and worsened the mental health of so many individuals and families. And the situation is worst for the very young. Some doctors expect the mental health impact of the coronavirus to have lifelong consequences for teens and kids who have been separated from school and their friends and are fighting to come to grips with the tragic reality of a pandemic.

The reality is: this will likely be one of, if not the biggest challenge facing the church for months and years to come. Churches, pastors, coaches and Christian community leaders are now at a crossroads. As we plan to reopen our communities and restart our sports ministries, we can't go back to business as usual. We need to bring a renewed spirit of love to all that we do. The mental health crisis afflicting our church families is the greatest opportunity churches have to step into a space of pain and love on those who need love most. But to do that, church leaders need to be sensitive to mental health in new and heartfelt ways.

With that in mind, we invited Dr. Tim Clinton to speak on mental health and sports ministry in one of our Uplift webinars. Dr. Clinton shared his insights on trauma, youth mental health and how churches can best approach ministering to families and young people struggling psychologically in the aftermath of the coronavirus. Here are a few of the key points he raised.

Trauma

Everyone from church leaders to sports coaches needs to have a clear idea about what trauma is and how it impacts people. As Dr. Clinton laid out, one of the best ways to understand trauma is to think about the experience of war. In war, your frame of reference is shattered; You experience extreme circumstances that don't make normal sense to you. When people suffer trauma from war, their sense of safety, normalcy and order are permanently changed. Traumatic situations rewire the way we experience ourselves and forever haunt us with the feeling of getting lost in pain we don't understand.

Dr. Clinton shared his experience that COVID-19 is a source of trauma for many people today. They don't feel right in the world anymore after losing loved ones or suffering through a visit to the ER or after living in fear and frustration for months on end.

But trauma doesn't have to be the final word, and there is an antidote to trauma. In Dr. Clinton's opinion, that antidote is relationship.

On Dr. Clinton's view, there are many aspects to building the relationships that heal trauma, but six in particular stand out. He called them the "six little T's" of relationships that together tackle the "Big T" of trauma. These are: together, touch, talk, truth, time and triggers. That may sound like a lot, but they all amount to different ways of being present and attuned to people. By incorporating the six little T's into how we approach relationships, we can bring the healing power of loving kindness into our church ministry to those suffering from trauma.

Here's how Dr. Clinton proposes putting the six T's in action. Say there is a child suffering from heartache and they can't keep their mind focused on the activity or game. Coaches can practice the six T's by first making themselves present to the child, recognizing that something is off. A coach can empathize with the child by getting on their level, being open and connecting in conversation. The coach can put their hand on the child's shoulder to build trust through touch. Asking questions around what's happening and letting them be seen, taking time with them by making sure not to rush the process of healing, speak truth into their life, and being sensitive to their needs. Be aware of actions or words that seem to trigger emotions and responses by the child and patiently and gently walk with them through what is true to them and their situation. This focused time can be invaluable to the felt heartache of the child.

Dr. Clinton's message is that relationships built on the six T's can heal hurt people. Whether it's on or off the sports field, we can build relationships with each other that change the way we experience ourselves, healing trauma and reintroducing the peace of God into the hearts of the hurting.

Youth Mental Health

Dr. Clinton also highlighted the unique situation of young people during the coronavirus health crisis. We, as adults, might be tempted to believe that kids are resilient and that it's better not to address tough subjects, like the pandemic or racism. But the truth is: One of the most underserved populations in the mental health realm are kids. And right now, kids need us to be honest (appropriate for their age), engaged listeners, and to see and love them unconditionally.

Coming out of lockdown, kids are frustrated, bored, and lonely. They've lost time with their friends, they've lost access to their activities, and, in some cases, they've lost the opportunity to celebrate important lifetime milestones like graduation and birthdays.

Dr. Clinton shared that, in order to be sensitive to kids who are struggling, we have to recognize how important identity and belonging are to young people. Kids yearn for a place and an opportunity to grow and work and win and be recognized. That's where sports come into play.

Dr. Clinton emphasized how the core truth behind sports ministry is that playing can make us more Christlike. Sports teach us how to confront adversity, rise up to the challenge, and push through till we meet our goals. In this way, sports are some of the best ways to teach kids that they are strong, that they can accomplish their mission in life, and that the world is a place where adversity can be overcome.

Dr. Clinton raised the sad fact that 70% of kids stop playing organized sports by the age of 13. They get turned off by ultra-competitive leagues, insensitive coaches, and teams that don't give them the right chance to shine. On Dr. Clinton's view, however, there is a bright side. Coaches now have an extraordinary opportunity to lean in to a place of spiritual need and be the role models, relationship-builders and leaders that kids require to get through this mental health crisis stronger, more Christlike and happier. In making this point, Dr. Clinton shared this powerful quote by Billy Graham: "A coach will impact more people in one year than the average person will in an entire lifetime."

But it's not just coaches who can have an impact. As Dr.

Clinton said, much of the work starts with you – kids imitate what you radiate. If we let that be a heart anchored in the person and truth of Jesus, our kids will be healthier mentally because of it. Mental health begins in our spiritual lives first.

The struggle with mental health is no doubt a serious challenge, and it presents people with great adversity. But it also presents great opportunity –by being attuned to others, building relationships, and stepping in to care for one another, we can lay the foundation for a future of health and happiness. As you start to prepare to gather again and work through how mental health influences your ministry, we hope Dr. Clinton's wisdom and insights have helped shed light on some new ways to engage with your community.