Towards Erasing the Shame of Mental Illness

My name is DJ Chuang and thank you for being here for this workshop.

We'll get an overview of what mental health and mental illness is. We'll take a look at why shame is associated with mental illness. Then we'll look at how the church can play a vital role in helping people in their journey to mental health. And then we'll share available resources for mental health. After we've looked at this overview of mental illness and the church in America, we'll have time for discussion on how we can tackle this challenge in honor-shame cultures.

A quick introduction to myself and where I'm coming from. My name is DJ Chuang, I live in Orange County, California in the city of Aliso Viejo. I've been married 22 years and we have a son who is a junior in college. I'm just over 50 years old and I've had a variety of careers, including electrical engineering, pastoring, working at a private family foundation, parachurch ministry, and internet domain names. I have an affinity for new things that are developing and gravitate towards emerging topics like Asian American churches, multiethnic churches, social media, honor-shame, and mental health.

Let's get started.

First, a couple of definitions. MentalHealth.gov defines mental health as our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. Mental health is the ability to function effectively in daily activities, resulting in productivity at work and school, experiencing fulfilling relationships, and developing resilience to change and adversity.

Mental illness, then, is the condition when mental health is compromised and a person's thoughts, feelings, and/or mood are affected negatively and the person is unable to function effectively.

Mental illness affects a significant and sizeable portion of the population. 43.8 million Americans experience mental illness in a given year, that's 1 in 5 adults, or 20%. The Centers of Disease Control and Prevention report that **half** of all adults will suffer from mental illness in their lifetime. While many people experience mental illness for a shorter duration, an estimated 10 million adults live with serious mental illness in an on-going basis. (NAMI https://www.nami.org/Learn-More/Fact-Sheet-Library)

This means that you probably know someone who is struggling with mental illness; there may even be a few people here in this workshop that struggle too. Since we share in the human condition in a fallen and broken world, mental illness affects people of every nationality and every culture, even honor-shame cultures.

Mental illness is a serious problem that has to be addressed better than it is now because the consequences are dire. Depression is the leading cause of disability worldwide and is a major

contributor to the global burden of disease. Serious mental illness costs America $193 billion in lost earnings every year. 90% of those who die by suicide have an underlying mental illness. Mental illness is also a contributing factor to some people with substance addictions, homeless, and prisoners. And most dramatically, there are terrible tragedies like shootings caused by someone with an untreated mental illness.

There are many kinds of mental illnesses. Mental Health America has classified 200 forms of mental illness; the most common disorders are depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and anxiety disorder.

The definitive guide to defining various mental illnesses is the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) published by the American Psychiatric Association. DSM-5 is the authoritative volume that defines and classifies mental disorders in order to improve diagnoses, treatment, and research.

To clear up any misperceptions or misunderstandings about kinds of mental illnesses, let's take a moment to define some of the mental illnesses you may have heard of. Part of erasing shame around mental illness is to have correct information and good understanding.

Major Depressive Disorder (Clinical Depression) = characterized by an inescapable and ongoing low mood often accompanied by low self-esteem and loss of interest or pleasure in activities that a person used to find enjoyable. Symptoms must last at least two weeks for a diagnosis of depression. Depression affects 9.1% in any given year. And 1 in 6 people (16.6%) will experience depression at some time in their life.

Bipolar disorder = Bipolar disorder is a chronic mental illness that causes dramatic shifts in a person's mood, energy and ability to think clearly. People with bipolar have high and low moods, known as mania and depression. 2.6% of adults.

Anxiety disorder = "persistent, excessive fear or worry in situations that are not threatening" Anxiety disorders are the most common mental health concern in the United States. An estimated 40 million adults in the U.S., or 18%, have an anxiety disorder.

Borderline personality disorder (BPD) is a condition characterized by difficulties in regulating emotion. This difficulty leads to severe, unstable mood swings, impulsivity and instability, poor self-image and stormy personal relationships.

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder = During a traumatic event, a person's body fights for survival during that crisis, but experiences ongoing psychological symptoms due to damage to the brain's response system.

Schizophrenia is a serious mental illness that interferes with a person's ability to think clearly, manage emotions, make decisions and relate to others, sometimes characterized by hallucinations, hearing voices, seeing things, delusions, or disorganized thinking.

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a condition in which characterized by inattention, hyperactivity and impulsivity. 4% of adults.

You might be wondering what are the causes for mental illness. The causes are a reaction to environmental stresses (triggering events), genetic factors, lifestyle choices, biochemical imbalances, or a combination of these. And, most mental illnesses knows no boundaries. It will come and go as it pleases in our lives, even if we've successfully treated one episode of it. There seems to be little rhyme nor reason to when a mental disorder strikes, who it will strike (outside of genetic predispositions for some), and how deep or long the episode will last.

The good news is that treatment is available. With advancements in medicine and psychology during the past two decades, people can be treated for mental illness. 70% - 90% of individuals with mental illness saw improvement in their symptoms and quality of life after participating in some form of treatment. Via http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/12/01/mental-illness-statistics_n_6193660.html

However, nearly 60% of adults with mental illness didn't receive mental health services. People are needlessly suffering, hurting themselves and others, having to deal with all kinds of consequences, and having a diminished quality of life.

There are many reasons why people don't get help with their mental illness. Here are eight of them: shame, lack of insight, unaware, inadequacy, distrust, hopelessness, unavailability, affordability.

We're going to focus our time in addressing the topic of shame. Let's take some time to look at the reasons behind why there is stigma and shame about mental illness.

It really is unfortunate that stigma and shame prevent people that struggle with mental illness from getting help, as if the struggle itself wasn't hard enough. "Social stigma refers to extreme disapproval of a person or group on socially characteristic grounds that are perceived.." (wikipedia) And here at this conference, we've learned a lot about the meaning of shame, as well as the aspects of culturally-contextualizing shame.

I'll be using the terms stigma and shame somewhat interchangeably.

Why is there so much stigma and shame around mental illness?

To be fair, throughout human history, mental illness has met with confusion, misunderstanding and mistreatment — even horror, persecution and torture.

What perpetuates negative stereotypes about mental illness are movies and news.

First, there's movies and media. Movies sometimes portray people with mental illness as a heighten the intensity of drama with its characters. But for every sensitive and sympathetic portrayal of real-life conditions, there's another horror movie featuring a serial killer with a split personality to unreasonably scare people.

Second, there's the impact of news stories. When the news provides coverage about another mass shooting, we often hear the cause being attributed to the shooter having mental illness. It's too easy to label these murderers as mentally ill and sick in the head. Yet the overwhelming majority of the mentally ill don't murder. In fact, studies have shown that the contribution of mental illness to violence is extremely small – mental illness in and of itself does not make people more violent than the rest of the population.

Third, some people assume that a mental illness implies instability and unreliability. Whether in the workplace or in relationships, knowing or suspecting someone has a mental illness can cause some people to keep a distance. The truth is that mental illnesses can be managed and treated, and many go on to have productive and meaningful lives.

It can be uncomfortable to be around those with mental illness, because they may occasionally have behaviors that are different or unpredictable.

My most vivid experience with encountering someone having an episode with mental illness was back in the summer of 2000. I was part of a summer missions team and we were having a training session in one of our teammate's apartment. There were 4 of us sitting around the living room going through our worksheets. Then 1 of our team members started to behave strangely. She started to speak with a growly lower voice unintelligibly, talked about using a sword.. then she took a squat posture like a sumo wrestler. We had no idea what was going on or what might happen next. This went on for like 30 minutes, while we tried to calm her down. Our team is praying and looking at each other, discerning what to do. Finally, we got in touch with her dad and when he arrived, she was finally able to calm down. Her dad explained that she had been off of her medication that she needed for what used to be called multiple personality disorder that is now called dissociative identity disorder.

There's the basic root causes of fear and ignorance. People are naturally afraid of things they don't understand. The lack of understanding perpetuates because stigma around the mental illness makes it harder to talk about, leading to more misunderstanding. This is a vicious cycle.

Well, those are some of the reasons for why the society in general perpetuates social stigma and shame about mental illness. But, there's are also reasons for why many churches aren't a safe place for those struggling with mental illness. One journalist (Michelle Boorstein from the Washington Post) was interviewing a Christian leader and asked why Christians might struggle with the issue of mental illness more than, perhaps, mainstream society. There's several reasons for this:

First, it's an unspoken topic. 66% of pastors rarely ever speak about mental illness. And when it's not talked about, it results in fear and ignorance. This makes it hard to bring up the subject in the open and perpetuates the shame and stigma. When people feel like they can't talk about their problems, it makes it that much harder to deal with the suffering. There are writers in church history that have struggled with "dark times" and have persevered in trusting the Lord during those trials. Christian leaders that have struggled with depression include Augustine, Charles Spurgeon, and C.S. Lewis. Even prominent pastors today have shared about their episodes of depression, like Rick Warren and John Piper.

Second, there could be a spiritual component to someone's struggle. Could it be a struggle with understanding the love and forgiveness of God? Could there be sin in one's life? Make no mistake, all suffering is a result of sin and brokenness in a fallen world. The presence of suffering doesn't condemn the sufferer as much as it points to the condemnation of humanity. This isn't to say that mental illness doesn't have a spiritual component, but mental illness has multiple levels of complexity: physical, mental, spiritual, emotional, dietary, etc. As a human being, we are psychosomatic - both body and soul. The parts are intricately connected and cannot be separated like egg yolk from egg white.

Thirdly, there are those that use the Bible against science. Some people say that suffering should go away just by reading the Bible, praying more, and doing diligently on spiritual disciplines. According to a LifeWay Research study, about half of evangelical Christians believe that prayer and Bible study alone can heal mental illness. This is unfortunate. Science and medicine can be a revelation of God's creation and His orderly design and laws for how the world works. Sometimes medication is needed to treat a chemical imbalance and there should be no shame in that.

Of course, God can certainly miraculously intervene and heal a chemical imbalance that's causing mental illness; and God could miraculously heal diabetes too. But most everyone think there is nothing wrong with going to the doctor for the latter.

While Christians, churches, and pastors are either tentative or antagonistic in their approach to dealing with mental health, many churches remain an unsafe place for people to come and experience support, acceptance, and healing.

(Pause for audience interaction) Would anyone like to share something else about the stigma and shame around mental illness?

The main question: **how do we erase stigma and shame?**

At the heart of shame and stigma is perception. How do you change a society's or a faith community's perception to be more accepting and sympathetic with the truth about mental illness? And for most people, one's perception is their truth and reality.

We can learn some things from history and how previous stigmas got diminished: like divorce and HIV/AIDS.

Here are a couple factors that reduced the stigma around divorce: the divorce rates increased in the 1970s and 1980s after the sexual revolution and feminist movement, so it was becoming more common to know people that were divorced. The social pressure for people to get married and stay married changed in modern times as the value for self-actualization and individual expression became a higher priority.

How many of you remember how strong the stigma was around HIV/AIDS? When HIV/AIDS began to spread rapidly in the early 1980s, it was considered a "gay disease" and a disease that drug addicts got. A few even said the disease was punishment from God. There were rumors about how HIV/AIDS could be contracted through a handshake. Over time, we had good research, education, better healthcare, public awareness was raised, and the stigma was reduced.

When it comes to mental illness, American society is beginning to chip away at the stigma through awareness-raising campaigns like Mental Health Awareness Month in the month of May. This has been observed since 1949. Even though it's been around for longer than I've been alive, I've only become aware of it a couple years ago. So that might be an indicator that this awareness campaign isn't reaching enough people in mainstream society.

Pop culture is starting to help reduce the stigma around mental illness with celebrities speaking out about their struggles, like Jim Carrey, Carrie Fisher, Wayne Brady, Lady Gaga, and many others. Actress Glenn Close launched an organization (http://bringchange2mind.org) to end stigma and discrimination around mental illness.

And in the Christian evangelical world, there is a growing awareness about mental illness that's helping to erase shame.

Saddleback Church's Pastor Rick Warren and wife Kay launched "The Gathering on Mental Health and the Church" in March 2014, after the tragic death of their son Matthew who took his own life in April 2013 after a lifetime of struggle with mental illness. Arguably the most influential pastor in America, and perhaps the world, Rick Warren's openness in sharing his grief over his son's death and talking about mental illness is helping to reduce its stigma, along with his church's effort to equip other churches to care for people's mental health.

At that conference, Pastor Rick talked about 3 reasons churches should care about mental illness and I'd like to share them with you: (a word of disclosure, Saddleback Church has been my home church for the past 5 years)

First, it is biblical. Jesus modeled it when he dealt with the mentally ill in Matthew 8:16-17, Mark 5, Luke 8. These passages refer to the story of the demon-possessed man, who was mentally ill. Notice the dynamics of the man that Jesus meets in Mark 5. That man was afflicted with spiritual forces and mental illness. "Jesus responds to this man with compassion his community and family did not have for him. He treated him as a human being, and not simply as a collection of demons." This interaction with Jesus radically changed the man, and he became a witness to the power of the Gospel: "And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him, and everyone marveled" (Mark 5:20).

Matthew 9:35 says: "Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness." Jesus went preaching, teaching, and healing - 1/3 of his ministry was health care.

There are examples in the Bible of people that struggled with mental illness: David, Hannah, Jeremiah, Paul. There are also 3 Bible characters that asked God to kill them: Jonah, Moses, Elijah. They had to be pretty depressed to ask God to take their lives.

Second, is a historical reason. The church has cared for the sick for 2000 years, hospitals and schools were started by churches and missionaries.

Third, is a practical reason. Churches are typically the first organization contacted when people experience a crisis. Pastors have a reputation for being there for people and caring for every stage of life. With over 300,000 congregations in the United States, churches can make a significant dent in helping people that struggle with mental illness.

We don't know all of the answers to mental illness, but we do know one of the answers is community. And the church's important role as a faith community is a uniquely distinctive and valuable contribution to helping people that struggle with mental illness.

Studies show that when people are struggling with mental illness, the first place they call is the church. One study found that among people who sought treatment, 25% went first to a member of the clergy. This is a higher percentage than those who have gone to psychiatrists, general medical doctors, or anyone else. That means churches are historically the number one place people go for help with mental illness.

It's a good thing that one of the first thing that pastors do when starting their ministry is to gather a referral list of Christian counselors, psychiatrists, and community resources to complement their work in pastoral counseling. But, statistically, the number of people that struggle with mental illness can easily overload the office hours of the pastoral staff, and there are other things that the church congregation can do to care for people.

For churches and pastors, there is a growing list of resources available to make your church a safe place for people that struggle with mental illness. Saddleback Church has a dedicated website for mental health ministry at http://hope4mentalhealth.com where you can access a resource guide and watch very informative videos. They've also got a Hope for Mental Health Ministry Starter Kit that equips churches with 3 phases of ministry development: crawl, walk, and run. And on your handout, I've listed many useful resources about mental health.

For everyone of us here in this room, you can be helpful to people that struggle with mental illness by learning how to identify, showing acceptance, giving hope, being genuine, caring, and showing respect. Encourage people to do the right and healthy thing for themselves and get help when needed. You can support people so they feel no shame in getting help.

It's one thing to work on erasing shame about mental illness in American culture, but what about honor-shame cultures? It's even harder and more challenging. If there's already stigma in America's guilt-based culture, what hope is there in an honor-shame culture to help people who struggle with mental illness? We're all part of the human race, and there's most likely similar proportions of the population in other cultures that struggle with mental illness. The World Health Organization (WHO) has identified stigma and discrimination towards mentally ill individuals as "the single most important barrier to overcome in the community."

For example, the shame around mental illness is ingrained into the very languages spoken in Asian cultures. The Chinese phrase for mental illness (shénjīngbìng) is synonymous in many minds with violent psychosis. For Korean families, preserving family honor sometimes meant sequestering mentally ill members from society—one in which the term for a mentally ill patient (jungshinbyungja) can be used insultingly.

Japan has the highest suicide rate among Asian countries with more than 30,000 Japanese killing themselves each year. (according to the World Health Organization) Japan has more suicides than the United States, yet less than half the population. Taking your life is seen as an honorable way of atoning for public disgrace and expression of one's deep sense of shame. While there is an increasing public concern about suicide, that has not translated into development of mental health services.

I don't have an answer to erasing shame and stigma in honor-shame cultures on the topic of mental illness. But perhaps we can take some first steps to explore and learn together. There's a concept called "wisdom of the crowd" that describes how there's more knowledge in the room among you attendees than I alone would have as a presenter.

Now we're transitioning the workshop to be an open and interactive discussion about mental illness. Let's learn together by gleaning from the wisdom of the crowd. There's more knowledge in this room collectively than any one of us has alone.