

# A Look at Faith and Spirituality in Mental Health

*An Interview with Jena Morrow*

BY CHRISTY MATTA, M.A. | MARCH 30, 2011

For many who suffer from a mental illness or have experienced trauma, one of the greatest struggles is a loss of meaning or purpose in life. This loss can manifest in a weakening of religious faith and spirituality. However, it is often faith and spirituality that present potential psychological benefits, in such forms as an acceptance of suffering, discovering meaning after trauma and social support.

I recently had the opportunity to ask author and speaker Jena Morrow some questions about her work, Dialectical Behavior Therapy, her personal struggle with anorexia and her faith. I'm happy to share with you, today, her experience.

**CHRISTY:** You work with women in residential treatment for eating disorders, substance abuse, and mood disorders. How does your faith influence your work?

**JENA:** My Christian faith influences everything I do, so it naturally informs and empowers my work—not always in an overt way one-on-one with residents, but foremost in where I draw my own strength, patience, and compassion for others, especially those whose presenting issues may be particularly challenging. The work I do is very rewarding, but can certainly be both mentally and emotionally taxing, and I find the strength I need in the Word of God and in grounding moments of prayer throughout my day—even if it's just a fleeting “Lord, give me wisdom in how I interact with this person” or “give me Your heart for this one,” etc.

**CHRISTY:** Do you find that Dialectical Behavior Therapy is compatible with living a spiritual life?

**JENA:** Absolutely. The skills taught in DBT—mindfulness, distress tolerance, emotion regulation, and interpersonal effectiveness—are essential to leading a life of balance, which is entirely Biblical. When I search the Scriptures, it is easy to see these skills at work in the life of Christ; Jesus was exceptionally mindful in all that He did, He is the ultimate example

of distress tolerance in action, He was certainly able to regulate His emotions (which are gifts from God, by the way), and all of His relationships were interpersonally effective. If it is our goal as followers of Christ to grow in maturity to become more like Him and bear His image, then certainly the DBT skills can be an effective tool in helping us to live a Godly life.

**CHRISTY:** Are there challenges to working with people who aren't particularly spiritual?

**JENA:** There are challenges to working with people, period! But in my experience, even those who may not immediately identify themselves as particularly spiritual do eventually come to a place in their recovery journey when they recognize their need to tap into a power greater than themselves—a “higher power,” to borrow the terminology of the Twelve Step model. The fact is that human beings are more than just mind and body—we are mind, body, and spirit, and it is imperative to treat the whole person. I am grateful that the field of psychology as a whole seems to be moving more in a direction that is accepting and validating of the whole-person approach.

When, though, a person does not identify with their need for a God, I do see the patient herself becoming very easily and quickly frustrated with the treatment process. A person may, for example, believe that she is entering treatment with a desire to empower herself to overcome her problems—and then she may become endlessly frustrated as she falls short of that goal time and time again, until she ultimately embraces the fact that human beings were never intended to empower themselves. Where does the power come from? We are not our own source, and were never designed to be such. Walking alongside a person as she makes that freeing discovery is quite a rewarding and beautiful process. I consider it a great privilege.

**CHRISTY:** Your memoir, *Hollow*, chronicles your own struggle with an eating disorder and your journey toward recovery. How did spirituality and faith impact your recovery?



**JENA:** In my own recovery, I have discovered that my need for God was—and remains—absolutely paramount. The idea of surrender is something that is tossed around rather casually in recovery circles—but I have learned firsthand what it means to take my hands off the wheel and to discover that the God I serve will never leave me or forsake me—not ever, not for a second. When I have been tempted to give up—and there have been many, many times—His strength has overcome my weakness each and every time. Christ is my hope, and in the journey of recovery from something as all-consuming as an eating disorder, hope is a must. More than religion, my relationship with God has been the very thing that has sustained me when I have exhausted every last drop of my own strength.

**CHRISTY:** In a recent blog post, you talk about fear and how the experience of that emotion conflicts with some of the teachings of the bible (the concept of “fear not”). Are there times when your beliefs conflict with your understanding of mental health?

**JENA:** That was an interesting blog, in that I wasn't really sure what I was trying to say when I started writing the piece; it sort of worked itself out as I wrote. What I learned in the process was that God is the creator of our emotions (it was His plan that we should be emotional beings as well as intellectual ones) and that the emotion of fear is something He desires us to experience, and then give to Him in exchange for His peace. So, no, my beliefs do not conflict with my understanding of mental health. To say that would be to assert that faith is in opposition to psychology, which would be absurd. God's Word trumps psychology because God is the Creator of all things, including the human brain. Don't get me wrong; I love psychology. I love people; I love my work. But what I find is that my faith informs what I do—not the other way around. So if modern psychology ever seems to oppose the Bible, I have to believe God's Word is right and the rest of us are only guessing.

**CHRISTY:** You contributed a chapter to the book *Tending the Soul: 90 Days of Spiritual Nourishment*. How did your own experiences inform that chapter?

**JENA:** The devotion writing that I've contributed to that book (which is releasing from Moody Publishers on April 1) has to do

with self-image, which is certainly an area that has been a challenge in my own life. As I've spoken out about this struggle with eating disorders, specifically with body image, I have been overwhelmed by how many women have approached me, either in person after I speak somewhere or via email and Facebook, and said, “Oh my gosh, that's me. That's my battle, too.” So what I've written for *Tending the Soul* is a daily reading that reminds women of our value in the eyes of God, and challenges us to speak to ourselves in a way that aligns itself with Biblical Truth. God calls us His masterpiece. His Word tells us that we are fearfully and wonderfully made; what does that mean? How should that impact us as we go about our lives as women in a world where the outside of a person is valued so much more than the heart? It's a passion of mine to pass on to other women what I learn as I continue to grow in this area. And I am grateful to Moody Publishers for giving me another opportunity to do that.

#### ABOUT JENA MORROW

Jena shares her testimony of her recovery from Anorexia Nervosa in *Hollow: An Unpolished Tale*, from Moody Publishers. Jena travels around the U.S. sharing her recovery story and delivering a message of hope and freedom from disordered eating and distorted self image, made possible through the abundant life Christ offers to those who follow Him. In addition to her public speaking, Jena works as a Behavioral Health Specialist at Timberline Knolls, a residential treatment center in Lemont, Illinois for women struggling with eating disorders and other addictive illnesses.



Jena lives with her son Jaden in suburban Chicago, where on a good day she can be found typing away at her laptop, surrounded by cats and coffee. To learn more about Jena, visit [www.jenamorrow.com](http://www.jenamorrow.com) or become a fan of “Hollow the Book” on Facebook. Jena's blog, *I'm Just Sayin'*, can be found at [www.jenamorrow.blogspot.com](http://www.jenamorrow.blogspot.com).



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Timberline Knolls is a residential treatment center located on 43 beautiful acres just outside Chicago, offering a nurturing environment of recovery for women ages 12 and older struggling to overcome eating disorders, substance abuse, mood disorders and co-occurring disorders. By serving with uncompromising care, relentless compassion and an unconditional joyful spirit, we help our residents help themselves in their recovery.

