

LEADER CONVERSATION GUIDE

How to Talk About Mental Health (with Pastor Rick Atchley) - Episode 343

How to Talk About the Tough Stuff

We're kicking off a special new series packed with practical wisdom *from* senior pastors to senior/teaching pastors to challenge and encourage them to equip their congregations to talk about tough topics in our world today.

In this episode, Pastor Rick Atchley shares how [The Hills Church](#) developed a [sermon series around mental health](#) and provides encouragement for other pastors looking to address this topic.

Interview with Rick Atchley

What prompted you to focus on mental health for this teaching series?

- During a summer study break, I began to be burdened for what I would call the soul-health of my church. It just seemed like, since Covid especially, people are anxious. People are fearful. People are angry. So I began to do some study and prepare a series on soul care.
- As I was wrapping up my study for that soul care series, God began to prompt me to realize the primary way that our unhealthy souls are being manifested is in mental health challenges. So during that four-week series in January, we surveyed our church on: How are you doing in terms of your mental health?
- We had over 2,500 responses, and 90% reported in the last 12 months they'd had a struggle with some type of a mental health challenge. The top three challenges were 70% anxiety, 60% depression, 58% burnout and stress. And 6% even reported thoughts of self-harm. I knew at that point it would be pastorally irresponsible for me to know this information and not address it.
- When God prompted me, my first response was to say no. I was afraid because this is not my lane and I knew it would require me a tremendous amount of homework and research. I was concerned that in my ignorance, I might say something that might cause someone in pain to suffer even more. But God got me through that because, as I said over and over in our series: The mental health crisis is real, and not talking is not working.

What were some of the specific topics that you addressed in this series?

- The first week, I walked through the survey and laid out three goals for our church: Could we de-stigmatize mental health challenges? Could we become a safer place for people to say, “*I’m not doing okay*”? And could we have strategies that help people in the direction of health and healing?
- The second week we talked some about the importance of our thoughts related to mental health. I address some of the lies that people believe around mental health and Christians.
- The third week we brought in a Christian counselor to speak.
- From there, we addressed the four challenges that we thought were most pertinent to our church: a lesson on anxiety, a lesson on depression, a lesson on burnout or stress, and a lesson on suicide.
- No series has ever been shared as much as this series. Because everybody either deals with a mental health challenge or has someone they love who does.

Pastors might be hesitant to do a series that long for fear it might actually negatively impact attendance. But that wasn’t your experience, was it?

- No, it wasn’t. In fact, if anything, our attendance improved. We averaged about 1,000 more people in attendance than the previous year.
- It was an extremely important series to our people. They wanted to come. They wanted to tell their friends.
- As a pastor, I felt like I was obligated before God to serve my people whether it improved attendance or not. But I can tell you, it helped our attendance. It did not hurt it.
- The comment I got more than any other was, “*Thank you. I’ve never been at a church that talks about this.*”
- I think you’re gonna be surprised at the amount of appreciation and even affection you’ll receive if you choose to address the mental health challenges our people are dealing with.

How did your team prepare to respond to people who needed more help?

- In my own preparation, I had to do a lot of reading from Christian and non-Christian sources just to educate myself more on mental health, different diagnoses, and different treatment plans. There were a number of Christian counselors that I talked to.
- I also went to some people at my church who I know deal with mental health challenges: depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, etc. and I asked, “*Tell me what it’s like to be you.*”
- We put together a resource page on our website with Bible studies, books, playlists, etc. and a place where you could connect to our counseling ministry.
- We had to train and educate our people who are our “first responders,” like our prayer team members. And at every service, we had mental health professionals available.

Do you have any sense of how this series changed you and your church?

- I think the single greatest benefit is that we're becoming more empathetic and more willing to say, *"It's okay not to say I'm okay today."* In fact, I said, *"It is no longer fine to tell people you're fine if that's not the truth."*
- It has raised awareness for me that there are many people in my church who have experienced deep trauma, great pain, and they've never processed it. They've never known how to, or they've never felt safe to do so. And I think this series has helped them trust their pastor and their leaders.
- I am absolutely persuaded that we have normalized a way of doing life that is toxic to ourselves. Our rush, our hurry, our addiction to screens—we are doing life in a way that is toxic to ourselves. So part of my responsibility is to call that out and to equip my people with the disciplines necessary to live a life more in-line with the way Jesus lived.

What encouragement would you give to other pastors who might be considering teaching on topics like mental health in the future?

- Overcome your fear. Trust that if God has prompted you, God is going to equip you and bless you.
- Make sure you have a team and a plan ready so that if people do come, you're not promising something that you can't deliver.
- The church can offer many things that people can get other places: medicines, therapies, community, etc. But there's one thing only the church can offer, and that's the Gospel. Don't ever underestimate the power of the good news. It is good news for those with all kinds of challenges, including those with mental health challenges.

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