

Andrews University

Digital Commons @ Andrews University

Faculty Publications

2008

Ellen G. White and Mental Health

Merlin D. Burt

Andrews University, burt@andrews.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pubs>

Recommended Citation

Burt, Merlin D., "Ellen G. White and Mental Health" (2008). *Faculty Publications*. 1740.
<https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pubs/1740>

This Popular Press is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Andrews University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Andrews University. For more information, please contact repository@andrews.edu.

Ellen G. White and mental health

by Merlin D. Burt

Ellen G. White was one of the three principal founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. She held a unique leadership role in the emerging church: she had the gift of prophecy. In her public ministry of more than 70 years, she received hundreds of visions and dreams with messages ranging from personal counsel to issues pressing upon the newly-founded church – in such areas as faith and doctrine, organization and mission, health and education, etc. Although she wrote prolifically and with authority, she never understood her writings to be additional scripture. Throughout her life and ministry, she pointed to the Bible as the Christian's rule of faith and practice. One of her major roles was to help individuals and the church organization to understand and follow God's will. Though she had no formal mental-health training, she often served as a spiritual counselor for people who had various emotional and psychological needs. She touched the lives of thousands of people and gave them new hope with a healthy spiritual, mental, and emotional focus. Her extensive writings demonstrate sympathy for mental health issues. Among other material, she wrote an important chapter titled "Mind Cure" in her book *The Ministry of Healing*. In 1977, the Ellen G. White Estate published a two-volume compilation titled *Mind, Character, and Personality: Guidelines for Mental and Spiritual Health*.

This article will present briefly Ellen White's understanding of mental health, her personal and family experiences, and her role as a counselor on issues affecting mental health.

How White understood mental health

When Ellen White used the term "mental health," she associated it with "mental clearness, calm nerves,

a quiet, peaceful spirit like Jesus."¹ In order to understand her observations on mental-health issues, it is necessary to understand her use of 19th-century language. For example, she used the words "diseased imagination" to refer to delusional thinking or emotional imbalance and "despondency, which increases to despair" when speaking of depression.² She also used the term "mind cure" to describe mental health issues.

Ellen White's understanding of human nature was based on the biblical view that human nature is inherently sinful and needs external help from God. To her, Jesus was the great healer of the sin-damaged human mind. "It is impossible for us, of ourselves," she wrote, "to escape from the pit in which we are sunken. Our hearts are evil, and we can not change them." She then quoted Job 14:4 and Romans 8:7 to support this view. She continued: "Education, culture, the exercise of the will, human effort, all have their proper sphere, but here

they are powerless. They may produce an outward correctness of behavior, but they cannot change the heart; they cannot purify the springs of life. There must be a power working from within, a new life from above, before [men and women] can be changed from sin to holiness."³

For Ellen White, there was a convergence of psychology and theology. The two must interplay and, when correctly integrated, provide the most help for the human mind and emotions. For her the true source of mental and emotional health was God the loving Father, Jesus the "Great Physician," and the Holy Spirit the "Counselor."

Ellen White strongly advocated a proper connection between the physical, mental, and spiritual in the human experience. "The spiritual life is built up from the food given to the mind; and if we eat the food provided in the Word of God, spiritual and mental health will be the result."⁴ True mental health was dependent

This article is based on a presentation made at the **Symposium on Christian Worldview and Mental Health: Seventh-day Adventist Perspectives**, held in Rancho Palos Verdes, California, August 28-September 2, 2008.

The symposium brought leading Adventist scholars and mental health professionals to explore mental-health issues from a Christian worldview, as informed by the Seventh-day Adventist biblical perspective. Participants represented a wide range of disciplines: history, sociology, theology, philosophy, and mental-health practice, including psychotherapy, counseling, spirituality, and Christian ministry. Presentations and the ensuing discussions focused on the nature of mental health, psychopathology, mental-health interventions, and models of education and clinical training derived from a biblical worldview. The conference also undertook the revision of "Adventist Concepts of Psychology," a statement voted by the church in 1977. The proceedings of the symposium are expected to be published shortly.

– Lisa Beardsley

upon establishing a proper balance between the body and the mind. "We cannot afford to dwarf or cripple a single function of the mind or body, by overwork or abuse of any part of the living machinery."⁵ She used the phrase "physical and mental health" to show the link between the two: the physical and mental dimensions are closely connected and require proper balance and care. She believed that a right environment, right actions, and a proper diet facilitated mental health. She was also a strong advocate of the healing benefits of nature, a right attitude, and acts of service for others.⁶

Personal experience

Ellen White's philosophy on mental health, while informed by her study of the Bible and her visions, was connected to her own experience. Through her long life, she was no stranger to emotional pain and psychological challenges. As a child she was introverted, shy, and emotionally sensitive. To this was added the complication of a physical disability. During her younger years, she experienced fearfulness and hopelessness that brought about protracted periods of depression. In addition to her personal struggles, her immediate family was touched with mental disability issues.

Ellen White's fundamental touchstone for mental and emotional health was an understanding of the loving character of God. As a child she viewed God as a "stern tyrant compelling men to a blind obedience."⁷ When preachers would describe the fires of an eternally burning hell, she personalized the horror of that experience. She wrote: "While listening to these terrible descriptions, my imagination would be so wrought upon that the perspiration would start, and it was difficult to suppress a cry of anguish, for I seemed already to feel the pains of perdition."⁸ This led her to doubt her acceptance by God and caused periods of depression. She recalled one occasion: "Despair

overwhelmed me, and . . . no ray of light pierced the gloom that encompassed me."⁹ Her "feelings were very sensitive" and at one point she feared she would "lose" her "reason." Ellen White recollected that "sometimes for a whole night" she would not dare to close her eyes but "kneel upon the floor, praying silently with a dumb agony that cannot be described."¹⁰

Her pre-teen and early-teen years were burdened by physical disability. She was severely injured through an accident at about age 9. A broken nose with other complicating damage caused equilibrium problems and prevented her from continuing her education. She also developed a chronic pulmonary disorder that was diagnosed at the time as "dropsical consumption," or in modern terms, "tuberculosis with complicating congestive heart failure." Her fears were exacerbated by the thought that she could bleed out at any time from an arterial rupture in her lungs.¹¹ Her physical and emotional trauma combined with her introverted personality prevented her from seeking help.

Finally, at about age 15, she talked with someone who helped her to better understand the loving character of God. She pointed to her interview with Levi Stockman, a Millerite Methodist minister, as providing her with the most help. Stockman was sympathetic to Ellen's emotional pain and even shared her tears. She wrote that she "obtained" from Stockman "more knowledge on the subject of God's love and pitying tenderness, than from all the sermons and exhortations to which I had ever listened."¹² She specifically identified what helped her most: "My views of the Father were changed. I now looked upon Him as a kind and tender parent. . . . My heart went out toward Him in a deep and fervent love."¹³ The love of God became Ellen White's favorite theme throughout her life. She also believed that "Christ's favorite theme was the paternal tenderness and abun-

dant grace of God."¹⁴ Her five-volume masterpiece series on the cosmic conflict between Christ and Satan begins and ends with this theme.¹⁵ Her most popular book, published in scores of languages with millions of copies, has as its first chapter "God's Love for Man."¹⁶

Ellen White's own visions and dreams confirmed her conviction of a loving God and compassionate Savior. An early personal dream that occurred before her first prophetic vision brought her into the presence of Jesus, where she realized He knew all her "inner thoughts and feelings." Yet, even with this knowledge He "drew near with a smile," laid His hand on her head, and said, "Fear not."¹⁷ In an interview in the last year of her life, Ellen White said, "I find tears running down my cheeks when I think of what the Lord is to His children, and when I contemplate His goodness, His mercy, [and] His tender compassion."¹⁸

Mental health challenges in White's family

Besides her own emotional struggles during childhood and at times during adulthood, Ellen White faced mental-health challenges within her family. Her second son, James Edson, evidenced some of the characteristics of attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder. Her niece, Louisa Walling, became so mentally unstable that she was admitted to a mental facility. Out of concern for Louisa's two children, James and Ellen White brought them into their home. Ellen White ended up raising the girls, and they called her mother.¹⁹ Even James White suffered from a series of strokes during the 1860s and 1870s that altered his mental state and brought marital conflict. In 1879 Ellen White realized her husband did not "have sufficient physical and mental health" to give counsel and advice.²⁰ At one point she wondered if he was a "sane man."²¹

Ellen White's personal experience,

combined with her visionary guidance, helped her to provide a unique ministry to individuals who also suffered with mental and emotional brokenness. Her writings reveal a consistent compassion for people who sometimes had serious life dysfunction. She engaged to a remarkable degree in close personal work with many such people.

Ellen White as a counselor

Throughout her life, Ellen White addressed mental health and social dysfunction issues. Her scope of interaction with people was varied and diverse. Below are four examples that show how she addressed serious mental health issues, such as obsessive behavior, emotional abuse, alcohol addiction, and sexual dysfunction.

Obsessive behavior. Ellen White's letter to "Brother Morrell" shows her perception of his mental condition. She described this man as having "large conscientiousness" and "small self-esteem." It seems that Morrell was obsessive and pathologically perfectionist about his conduct. He felt guilty for the smallest perceived mistake, to the point of mental instability. White wrote of this man's condition thus: "Brother Morrell's nervous system is greatly affected and he ponders over these things [his perceived sins and failings], dwelling upon them. His imagination is diseased.... The mind has suffered beyond expression. Sleep was driven from him." She wrote directly: "I saw, Brother Morrell, you must cast away your fears. Leave consequences with the Lord and let go. You try too hard to save yourself, to do some great thing yourself which will commend you to God.... Jesus loves you, and if you will consecrate yourself and all you have to Him, He will accept you and will be your Burden-bearer, your never-failing Friend.... Believe Jesus loves you and in your efforts to obey the truth, if you err, don't feel that you must worry and worry, give up

your confidence in God and think that God is your enemy. We are erring mortals." As a complement to her spiritual and emotional related counsel, she urged this man to adopt health reform and avoid stimulants. "Then," she wrote, "can the brain think more calmly, sleep will not be so uncertain."²²

Emotional abuse. Ellen White wrote several letters of counsel to women who were either emotionally or physically controlled by their husbands. In December 1867, she visited the Washington, New Hampshire, Seventh-day Adventist Church with her husband and J. N. Andrews. She first gave oral counsel and followed up with a written "testimony" based on a vision she had received. She provided pointed counsel to Harriet Stowell. After the death of her first husband, Harriet married Freeman S. Stowell, who was 12 years younger and was not practicing his faith.²³ Ellen White's words are clear and explain the situation: "She [Harriet] is beloved of God, but held in servile bondage, fearing, trembling, desponding, doubting, very nervous. Now this sister should not feel that she must yield her will to a godless youth who has less years upon his head than herself. She should remember that her marriage does not destroy her individuality. God has claims upon her higher than any earthly claim. Christ has bought her with His own blood, she is not her own. She fails to put her entire trust in God, and submits to yield her convictions, her conscience to an overbearing, tyrannical man, fired up by Satan when his Satanic majesty can make effectual to intimidate the trembling, shrinking soul who has so many times been thrown into agitation that her nervous system is torn to pieces and she [is] nearly a wreck."²⁴

Ellen White supported individuality in marriage and rejected the idea that a spouse must give up his or her personality and self-identity. This

testimony was a help to this woman who was driven almost to emotional collapse.

Alcohol addiction. In a letter to a troubled young man in England, Ellen White recognized the effect of alcohol addiction. Henri Frey worked as a translator for the European mission in Basel, Switzerland. He had a drinking problem. Because of his actions, he was removed from his position as translator. He then wrote Ellen White that he was being persecuted. She supported the decision of the mission but personally appealed to Frey. "I feel the tenderest feeling of pity, and of love for your soul; but false words of sympathy... shall never be traced by my pen." She cogently described his condition: "You find your emotional nature untrue to your best resolutions, untrue to your solemn pledges. Nothing seems real. Your own inefficiencies lead you to doubt the sincerity of those who would do you good. The more you struggle in doubt, the more unreal

Dialogue for you, free!

If you are a Seventh-day Adventist student attending a non-Adventist college or university, the church has a plan that will allow you to receive *Dialogue* free while you remain a student. (Those who are no longer students can subscribe to *Dialogue*, using the order form on page 6.) Contact the director of the Education Department or the Youth Department in your union and request that you be placed in their distribution network for the journal. Include your full name, address, college or university you are attending, the degree you are pursuing, and the name of the local church of which you are a member. You may also write to our regional representatives at the addresses provided on page 2. If these communications fail to produce results, contact us via e-mail: schulzs@gc.adventist.org.

everything looks to you, until it seems that there is no solid ground for you anywhere. Your promises are nothing, they are like ropes of sand, and you regard the words and works of those whom you should trust in the same unreal light.”²⁵

She continued by emphasizing the power of the will in meeting emotional dysfunction. “You may believe and promise all things, but I would not give a straw for your promises or your faith until you put your will over on the believing and doing side.” Her letter of counsel was interwoven with appeals for this young man to see the help Jesus can give. “I tell you that you need not despair. You must choose to believe, although nothing seems true and real to you.” She concluded with words of hope. “A life of usefulness is before you, if your will becomes God’s will.... Will you try Henri, will you now change square about? You are the object of Christ’s love and intercession.”²⁶

Sexual dysfunction. Ellen White often dealt with sensitive issues. In 1896, she wrote to a leading minister in South Africa. He was guilty of sexually abusing young girls and perhaps boys. This man had written to Ellen White of his struggles but believed he was not guilty of adultery. She began her letter with a prayer: “May the Lord help me to write you the very words that will be for your restoration and not for your destruction.” She then wrote most directly to him: “I feel sorry, very sorry for you. Sin, my brother, *is sin*; it is the transgression of the *Law*, and should I try to lessen the sin before you, I would not be doing you any good.... Your mind and heart are polluted else all such actions would be loathsome.” She described for this man the long-term effect of sexual abuse on children, including generational effect. She cited several cases and described how psychological damage was often lifelong. “How can I present it in such a manner that you will no longer look

upon it, as you have done, as no great wrong?” After a lengthy direct and sometimes painfully graphic description of his conduct, she appealed to him: “You are a free moral agent. If you will repent of your sins, and be converted, the Lord will blot out your transgressions and impute unto you His righteousness.... He will undertake your case, and angels will guard you. But you must resist the devil. You must educate yourself to a different train of thought. Put no confidence in yourself. Never seek the companionship of women or girls. Keep away from them. Your moral taste is so perverted, that you will ruin yourself and ruin many souls if you do not turn square about.... Everlasting life is worth a life-long, persevering, untiring effort.”

Finally she urged him to make himself accountable to “brethren who know this terrible chapter in your experience.”²⁷

These four examples illustrate the level of involvement Ellen White had in the lives of many people who had emotional and mental-health difficulties. One of the remarkable characteristics of her work is her consistent optimism that people can recover, no matter how broken they may be. Ellen White always pointed them to God as the great healer of mind and soul.

Ellen White was wholistic in her approach to healing. She realized that the mind was linked to the body and that God intended humans to have restored social relationships. For her, the most important connection was with a loving and holy heavenly Father.

Merlin D. Burt (Ph.D., Andrews University) is director of the Center for Adventist Research, Ellen G. White Estate Branch Office, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, U.S.A. E-mail: Burt@Andrews.edu.

REFERENCES

1. Ellen G. White to D. T. Bourdeau, February 10, 1895, Letter 7, 1885, Ellen G. White Estate, Silver Spring, Maryland (EGWE); see also Ellen G. White to D. T. Bourdeau, Letter 39, 1887, EGWE. Unless otherwise stated, all references below are from the writings of Ellen G. White.
2. *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1948) vol.1 p.305.
3. *Steps to Christ* (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1948), p. 18.
4. “Search the Scriptures,” *Review and Herald* (March 22, 1906), p. 8.
5. “The Primal Cause of Intemperance,” *Signs of the Times* (April 20), 1882, p. 181.
6. See *Medical Ministry* (Mountain View, Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1963), pp. 105-117.
7. “Life Sketches” manuscript, p. 43, EGWE.
8. *Life Sketches of Ellen G. White* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1915), pp. 29, 30.
9. *Ibid.*, 32.
10. James White and EGW, *Life Sketches of James White and Ellen G. White* (Battle Creek, Michigan: Seventh-day Adventists, 1880), pp. 152-154.
11. J. N. Loughborough, *Rise and Progress of the Seventh-day Adventists with Tokens of God’s Hand in the Movement and a Brief Sketch of the Advent Cause from 1831 to 1844* (Battle Creek: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1892), p. 92.
12. *Life Sketches* (1915 ed.), p. 37.
13. “Life Sketches” manuscript, p. 43, EGWE.
14. *Christ’s Object Lessons* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1941), p. 40; idem, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6, p. 55; idem, “The New Zealand Camp Meeting,” *Review and Herald* (June 6, 1893), pp. 354, 355.
15. *Patriarch and Prophets* (Mountain View: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1958), pp. 33, 34; *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1939), p. 678.
16. *Steps to Christ*, pp. 9-16.
17. *Life Sketches* (1915), p. 35.
18. EGW interview with C. C. Crisler (July 21, 1914), EGWE.
19. See Merlin D. Burt, “Caroline True Clough Family and Ellen White,” Ellen G. White Estate Branch Office, Loma Linda, California.
20. *The Judgment* (Battle Creek: p. 29, 1879).
21. EGW to Lucinda Hall (May 16, 1876), Letter 66, 1876, EGWE.
22. EGW to “Brother Morrell” (December 28, 1867), Letter 20, 1867, EGWE.
23. Identities confirmed by 1850, 1860, and 1870 Federal Census records for Washington, NH; *History of Washington, New Hampshire, From the First Settlement to the Present Time, 1768-1886* (Claremont: Claremont Manufacturing, 1886), pp. 535, 630.
24. Manuscript 2, 1868, EGWE.
25. EGW to Henri Frey (July 21, 1887), Letter 49, 1887, EGWE.
26. *Ibid.*
27. EGW to a Prominent Minister (June 1, 1896), Letter 106a, 1896, EGWE.