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### Ellen White and Mental Health Therapeutics

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# Ellen White

## and mental health therapeutics

by Merlin D. Burt

Ellen G. White was no stranger to mental health issues. She personally wrestled with depression in her conversion process as a young person, and her family faced some challenges as well. Her husband experienced strokes during midlife that seemed to have altered his personality. A few of her siblings' children suffered from mental illness, and even her own son Edson may have had an attention deficient disorder. In her spiritual counseling work, Ellen White often addressed matters of the mind. As seen in the last issue of *Dialogue*, she frequently wrote and spoke to individuals who were affected by emotional and mental difficulties. She always extended hope and pointed to a loving heavenly Father and a tender Savior who can heal and deliver those who are wounded and broken by sin and life's adversities.

In dealing with mental illness and health issues, however, Ellen White wrote strongly against the use of drugs and against "psychology." From this, some have concluded that Ellen

White was against the modern application of these modalities in dealing with mental illness. Such a stand is far from accurate. In order to correctly understand Ellen White's views about a therapeutic approach to mental healing, one must understand the 19<sup>th</sup> century context of her writings.

Before we go into that, we must note two vital points. First, Ellen White frequently underscored the vital importance of mental health. "The mind controls the whole man. All our actions, good or bad, have their source in the mind. It is the mind that worships God and allies us to heavenly beings."<sup>1</sup> Second, she recognized the effect of physical health on the mind. "All the physical organs are the servants of the mind, and the nerves are the messengers that transmit its orders to every part of the body, guiding the motions of the living machinery."<sup>2</sup>

### Use of drugs in therapy

Because of the confused and problematic state of drug therapy during

most of Ellen White's lifetime, she had little or nothing to say about the medicinal treatment of mental illness. Her philosophical basis for healing and mental health therapy was more holistic, emphasizing spiritual, hydrotherapeutic, and natural remedies. She wrote:

"Pure air, sunlight, abstemiousness, rest, exercise, proper diet, the use of water, trust in divine power – these are the true remedies. Every person should have a knowledge of nature's remedial agencies and how to apply them. It is essential both to understand the principles involved in the treatment of the sick and to have a practical training that will enable one rightly to use this knowledge."<sup>3</sup>

The 19<sup>th</sup> century was a time of confused and fallacious philosophies of healing. The default treatment modality was the "traditional" heroic therapy advocated by Benjamin Rush. He advocated bloodletting, blistering, and the use of emetics to relieve "fevers" or "vascular tension" that he believed caused illness. This included the internal use of drugs such as calomel and the topical use of caustic chemicals. Calomel was a mercury compound used as a purgative. The poor person's alternative to "traditional" physicians was the Thompsonian approach. Samuel Thompson said that all disease was caused by cold. He therefore sought to increase the body's natural heat. He used lobelia, an American plant that had sedative and emetic characteristics. Other philosophies of healing included homeopathy, which purported that small doses of drugs that produced the symptoms of a disease in a healthy person could cure

This is the second of a two-part series on Ellen G. White and mental health. The first part, in the last issue, discussed how she understood mental health. This understanding came from her biblical view of humans, as God's created beings, and her understanding of sin and its effects upon human beings. Her views rose from her close relation with God, personal experience, mental health challenges within close circles, and her role as a spiritual counselor. In this second part, the author deals with why Ellen G. White opposed certain therapeutic methods used in her time to cure mental illness.

– Lisa Beardsley

the same disease. By the time of the American Civil War, homeopathy was the preferred method of treatment by physicians who had rejected “heroic therapy.” Beyond these therapies, there were many other treatments that had questionable philosophical bases and used drugs such as opiates, arsenic, and quinine, together with various plant and root products of often-unknown origin. These were usually suspended in alcohol.

Little wonder that Ellen White wrote against the use of drugs during her lifetime. In one of her classic statements, she said: “There are more who die from the use of drugs, than all who could have died of disease had nature been left to do her own work.”<sup>4</sup> She was not opposed to the use of drugs when they had lifesaving results, even when the drug was dangerous. For a time in the treatment of malaria, quinine was the only known drug. Ellen White indicated, “We are expected to do the best we can,” and “if quinine will save a life, use quinine.”<sup>5</sup>

The modern use of drugs in psychiatric treatment has a more physiological basis and would follow Ellen White’s position that doctors understand the “principles involved in the treatment of the sick.” Were she present today, she would probably still argue that natural methods are best where possible but that physiologically-based drug therapy has its place.

### **Ellen White’s statement against psychology**

Three schools of healing prevalent in Ellen White’s time – mesmerism, phrenology, and rest cure – influenced her comments on psychological and mental health issues. White was strongly opposed to all three. In 1862, she wrote: “The sciences of phrenology, psychology, and mesmerism are the channel through which he [Satan] comes more directly to this generation and works with that power which is to characterize his

efforts near the close of probation.”<sup>6</sup>

**Mesmerism.** During her early ministry, Ellen White was forced to repeatedly confront mesmerism and its mind-manipulating methods. In the United States during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, animal magnetism was a popular philosophy of healing. Originated by Viennese physician Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815), it taught that an invisible magnetic fluid permeated the universe. Mesmer theorized that disease produced an imbalance of this fluid within the human body, which could be cured through the use of magnets and electrical current. He eventually abandoned the use of magnets and proposed that the “healer’s body” “permeated with animal magnetism, could redirect the patient’s magnetic fluid without the use of magnets.” The goal was to induce a “crisis” by altering the subject’s mental state through fever, delirium, convulsions, uncontrolled weeping, and nervous twitches. Mesmer saw these manifestations as healthy symptoms of healing. Suggestibility and dominance were used to produce a trance and thus realign the body.<sup>7</sup> James Braid later redefined the term “mesmerism” as hypnotism, and Mesmer became known as the father of modern hypnosis.<sup>8</sup>

During 1845, Ellen White was forced to confront Joseph Turner, a prominent Millerite Adventist minister in Maine. Turner was using mesmerism. He even tried to mesmerize or hypnotize White. On one occasion in Poland, Maine, she was at a meeting where he sought to manipulate her. She recollected: “He had his eyes looking right out of his fingers, and his eyes looked like snakes eyes, evil.”<sup>9</sup> Her experiences in confronting this man, together with her visionary guidance, placed her in opposition to hypnotic mind-controlling modalities that removed a person’s God-given mental independence and freedom. She wrote very directly and

specifically on this topic: “It is not God’s purpose that any human being should yield his mind and will to the control of another, becoming a passive instrument in his hands.... He is not to look to any human being as the source of healing. His dependence must be in God.”<sup>10</sup>

In a series of letters during 1901 and 1902 to A. J. Sanderson and his wife, who were the medical directors at St. Helena Sanitarium, Ellen White warned of the dangers of hypnotism. “Cut away from yourselves everything that savors of hypnotism, the science by which satanic agencies work.”<sup>11</sup> She identified the feature of hypnotism that most concerned her and revealed one of her core values in mental healing: “The theory of mind controlling mind is originated by Satan to introduce himself as the chief worker to put human philosophy where divine philosophy should be. ... The physician must educate the people to look from the human to the divine.”<sup>12</sup>

**Phrenology.** Phrenology was a theory popularized in America during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Popularized by Orson S. Fowler and his brother Lorenzo N. Fowler, phrenology held that the shape of a person’s head determined his or her character and personality. Though based on a fallacious premise, it was widely accepted as authentic during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Ellen White became settled in her opposition to this modality. In 1893 she wrote of phrenology as “vain philosophy, glorying in things they do not understand, assuming a knowledge of human nature which is false.”<sup>13</sup>

**Rest cure.** The “rest cure” modality was championed by Silas Weir Mitchell as the answer to nervous disorders. Mitchell advocated complete rest and an absence of any sensory stimuli. This method demanded that the subject have no visitors, letters, reading, writing, washing, exercise, or even the presence of light

or sound. Rest was to be enforced, uninterrupted, and prolonged. Ellen White contradicted this view: “[T]he sick should be taught that it is wrong to suspend all physical labor in order to regain health.”<sup>14</sup>

The philosophical basis of these three 19<sup>th</sup>-century modalities, though popular at the time, have been shown to be fallacious. When Ellen White used the terms “psychology” and “science,” she was speaking of these spurious and erroneous movements and not the modern definitions of these terms. On one occasion, she even wrote positively when using the term “psychology” in a more general sense: “The true principles of psychology are found in the Holy Scriptures. Man knows not his own value. He acts according to his unconverted temperament of character because he does not look unto Jesus, the Author and Finisher of his faith.”<sup>15</sup> For Ellen White, correct “psychology” had a high view of the value of human beings as understood in the light of the gift of Jesus and the love of God. For her the goal of psychological study was how to reconnect the person with God as the great healer of the mind and soul.

### Receiving psychological guidance

While it has been shown that Ellen White centered her philosophy of mental health and healing on God, she did not exclude the role of humans in cooperating with God. She is clear that God can use counselors to assist in bringing those with mental and emotional illness to healing: “Christ’s servants are His representatives, the channels for His working. He desires through them to exercise His healing powers.”<sup>16</sup> In another similar statement, she wrote: “God designs that the sick, the unfortunate, those possessed of evil spirits, shall hear His voice through us. Through His human agents He desires to be a comforter, such as the world has

never before seen.”<sup>17</sup> She even gave an imperative for counseling. “When a crisis comes in the life of any soul. . . . It is the consistent life, the revelation of a sincere, Christlike interest for the soul in peril, that will make counsel effectual to persuade and win into safe paths.” Those who neglect this work “will have to give an account for their neglect of those whom they might have blessed, strengthened, upheld, and healed.”<sup>18</sup>

Ellen White’s own experience as a counselor is an application of this statement. Though not trained in psychology, she helped many to better emotional and mental health during her lifetime. To this day, her writings provide a helpful philosophical and theological framework that supports “medical missionary” activity, as she called it, in the fields of psychiatry and psychology.

Some well-meaning Christians have been unwilling to speak to mental health professionals out of fear that God does not want them to tell another human of their sins or weaknesses. They think that by seeking psychological help they betray their faith because they are looking to humans for help rather than to God. But Ellen White is clear that there are places where it is correct and proper to confide in others.<sup>19</sup> She was a frequent listener and counselor to those with sorrows and perplexities. She wrote the following words of comfort to a man in Australia: “If the human agents from whom we might be led to expect help fail to do their part, let us be comforted in the thought that the heavenly intelligences will not fail to do their part. They will pass by those whose hearts are not tender and pitiful, kind and thoughtful, and ready to relieve the woes of others, and will use any human agent that will be touched with the infirmities, the necessities, the troubles, the perplexities, of people for whom Christ died.”<sup>20</sup> A review of her many statements on the role

of human counselors show that Ellen White remained confident that Jesus was the ultimate helper and healer. Yet human counselors, whether friend, parent, pastor, physician, or psychologist, are to help the person to Jesus as the “never-failing Friend in whom we can confide all the secrets of the soul.”<sup>21</sup>

Mental and emotional healing, like physical healing, is a process that takes time. A reading of Ellen White’s writings reveals a remarkable degree of sensitivity to the sometimes-lengthy process psychological help requires.

### Conclusion

Ellen White’s approach to therapeutic treatment of the mentally ill focused on an application of principles. She supported counseling and natural healing methods. Her sweeping rejection of drugs is based on the erroneous philosophies of healing that were current in her day and the dangerous chemicals and drugs that were used. Her statements against “psychology” and “science” are related to her opposition to mesmerism, phrenology, and the “rest cure.”

As a counselor, Ellen White had extensive interactions with people throughout her lifetime and dealt with various types of psychological dysfunction. She remained sympathetic and redemptive even when the condition was particularly objectionable. She had no formal mental health training and lived at a time when mental health science was still rudimentary. Nevertheless she was able to be remarkably effective in helping many people. She understood that emotional and mental brokenness was not cured instantly and that a person could be walking with God but still need support and guidance. She believed in the necessity of direct intervention by others who were able to counsel and guide. Though she did not write about the role of psychiatrists and psychologists, she

did write positively of the type of help that can be provided by these disciplines. We cannot precisely say what her reaction would be to the modern practice of these disciplines, but a study of her life, writings, and activities suggests that she would be supportive of Christian psychological practice that was in harmony with a biblical philosophy of healing.

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