

# AN ADVENTIST APPROACH TO TEACHING PSYCHOLOGY



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**T**he teaching of psychology has an important place in Adventist higher education around the world. Most undergraduate programs include one or more introductory psychology courses as part of the general-education requirement for nearly every major. Both religion and education degrees require a number of psychology courses. Other fields, such as social work, nursing, and business, also include psychology in various ways within their curricula. A recent search of the Adventist Professional Network (APN) database indicates that 621 individuals had entered their names as Adventist professionals with at least one of three descriptors in psychology. Psychology instructors, counselors, and mental health professionals have a potentially profound influence on their students and clients.

Anyone who has taught psychology knows how rewarding and challenging the experience can be.

Teaching psychology in a Christian institution has an added dimension because, at its core, the subject deals with our relationship with God and other human beings made in His image.<sup>1</sup> Good mental health is important because our minds are the principal channel through which God communicates with us. The Book of Isaiah reads: “You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you” (26:3, NIV).<sup>2</sup> Ellen G. White stated that “The life of God in the soul is man’s only hope.”<sup>3</sup> This places a special responsibility on psychology teachers and practitioners.

The word *psychology* comes from two Greek words: *psyche* (soul) and *logos* (the word, or the study of). If the purpose of psychology is to study the soul, who would be in a better position to do this than teachers in a Christian institution?

Several important biblical principles underlie the Seventh-day Adventist approach to teach-

ing psychology. The ultimate goal is to help students develop a character that reflects the humility, kindness, and love of Jesus (Titus 2:14; 2 Peter 3:11). Therefore, this article will focus on a few of the principles that can guide in the teaching of psychology.

### **I. Unity of Mind and Body for Good Mental Health**

Adventist doctrine does not teach that human beings *have* a soul, but that each person is a living soul (Genesis 2:7), a wonderful wholistic organism created by God that combines the physical, mental, and spiritual. Good mental health requires the harmonious functioning of the mind, body and spirit. And conversely, lack of that balance in the human organism produces malfunction and disease.<sup>4</sup>

This concept of an integrated human

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organism, in which disease may be caused by physical and/or mental processes, is well accepted in psychology.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, students preparing for psychology careers, particularly in the area of neuroscience and biopsychology, need to be knowledgeable about the functioning of the human body as well as the mental and emotional aspects of the human condition.

Adventists have historically focused on living healthy lives (both mentally and physically), viewing the health message as a pivotal branch of their work. In the same way, psychology deals with the principles and practices leading to good mental health. The Apostle John says: "I pray that you may enjoy good *health* and that all may go well with you, even as *your soul is getting along well*" (3 John 2).

Teaching psychology in a Christian institution thus has implications far beyond helping students prepare for careers. It can help them improve their mental and physical health in order to

avoid illness and increase longevity. It also has the potential to directly influence their spiritual condition. "It should ever be kept prominent that the great object to be attained through this channel is not only health, but perfection and the spirit of holiness, which cannot be attained with diseased bodies and minds."<sup>6</sup>

The intimate relationship between mind and body and the nature of human beings as understood by Adventists offer a basis for deducing principles relating to prevention of physical and mental disease. Furthermore, applying these wholistic concepts should lead to enhanced spiritual well-being in the psychology classroom and throughout students' lives.

### **II. Power of the Will and Personality**

Current psychological literature tends to emphasize the role of genetics and natural predisposition to explain problems such as addictions, obesity, and violent behavior. Many psychologists consider negative early experiences as deterministic of subsequent abnormal behavior. Others believe that extreme personality characteristics are so fixed that they are practically impossible to change.

All of the above dismiss, to a greater or lesser extent, personal responsibility. People affected by these problems may lose interest in making lifestyle changes if they believe behavior is determined by circumstances outside their control. This attitude also rejects the idea that the Holy Spirit can intervene in the healing process.

By contrast, Christian psychologists and psychology teachers believe that the will, under divine influence, can bring about profound changes. This is a reality revealed by the Bible: "And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind. That ye may prove what is that good and acceptable, and perfect will of God" (Romans 12:2, KJV).

Another problem among certain schools of psychology is not the basic concepts but overemphasis on certain principles, forcing them to explain everything. For example, Freudian psychology makes sex the underlying source of per-

sonality adjustment. Seen in this context, sex becomes a basic drive that conditions and drives human behavior. The person has little choice because he or she is controlled by this powerful force. Christian psychologists acknowledge the power of sex upon human existence, but they also believe that divine power can transform natural inclinations, channeling these drives in positive directions. This principle becomes very useful when teaching child and adolescent psychology, marriage relationships, and the development of healthy personalities in families, since the Christian psychology teacher can encourage students to pray for divine power.

Christians believe that humans are free moral agents who can make thoughtful, informed choices, rather than animals driven by uncontrollable urges and genetic predispositions. This concept underlies one of the most important attributes of human beings, a unique characteristic designed by the Creator. The will has been placed in each individual so that through partnership with God, humans can achieve His ideal for their lives. This is clearly stated by Ellen G. White: "The will is the governing nature of man. [God] calls upon us to make our choice on the right side, to connect with heavenly agencies, to adopt principles that will restore in us the divine image."<sup>7</sup>

### **III. Authentic Freedom**

Evolutionary and humanistic psychology have gained a strong foothold in contemporary psychology textbooks.<sup>8</sup> According to evolutionists, human beings are organisms descended from less-complex ancestors who have, through the Darwinian theory of survival of the fittest, adapted to the environment and thrived. Consequently, human beings are seen as evolving and improving over time. Progress results from the evolutionary process combined with correct environmental conditioning. This philosophy has provided a faulty context for character development, as it depends on uncertain conditions and false assumptions.

The Christian approach to psychology certainly emphasizes correct child training, but also choice and free will.

This is fundamentally different from the philosophical assumptions of evolutionary psychology, which leave people, to a great extent, helpless to change their behavior and controlled by their genes and environment. By contrast, a Bible-based understanding offers hope and the possibility for improvement. It views human beings as endowed by their Creator with the freedom of choice. They are able to draw on divine power to help them overcome cultivated and inherited tendencies to sin.

Take, for example, eating habits. Many people have a sweet tooth and consume more sugar than they need. And people

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often consume far more calories than they can burn, producing obesity, which can cause illness and even premature death.

Evolutionary psychology explains these behaviors as based on human development in the remote past. Sugar, in its natural state, would be a good source of energy to equip early humans for the rigors of work and inclement weather. Since food was often scarce, primitive humans overate to prepare for times of forced starvation. This behavior (adaptation for survival) shaped the early humans' genetic makeup and was passed on to future generations.<sup>9</sup> As a result, the human race inherited a strong tendency to like sugar (and high-calorie foods) and to overeat. This paradigm can be applied to nearly any addiction (chemical or psychological) or sociopathic tendency.

The Christian psychology teacher, however, will explain the above behavior in terms of sinful tendencies and the struggle between good and evil that has shaped human behavior since the Fall (Genesis 3:6). Because of sin, the apostle Paul said that he avoided what he knew to be good and ended up doing evil (Romans 7:19). And this is true for every human being. The Christian teacher will offer a hopeful perspective for human development based on free choice (Deuteronomy 30:19) in partnership with

divine power (1 Corinthians 15:57).

Not all psychological philosophies are deterministic. Some traditions, such as humanistic psychology, celebrate the idea of individual freedom. This branch has become quite popular, with multiple applications in business, education, and psychotherapy. However, humanistic psychology exalts human capabilities to the point of eliminating the need for or possibility of supernatural intervention. According to this theory, humans (hence, the term *humanistic*) are capable of attaining self-improvement and self-actualization through their own power and innate potential.

While there is some virtue in humanism's theories, the core problem is that selfishness and self-centered desires motivate the human heart—"The heart [is] deceitful above all [things], and desperately wicked: who can know it?" (Jeremiah 17:9).

### IV. Correct Thinking

How we think influences our emotions, which then produce actions that reflect our moral character. "As a man thinketh in his heart *so is he*" (Proverbs 23:7). Ellen White also emphasizes this, saying that "virtue of character depends upon the right action of the powers of the mind and body."<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps the most widely used recent approach to psychological intervention is Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT). Its procedures are built upon the idea that harboring adequate thoughts, rejecting unacceptable ideas, and changing the general way one thinks not only prevents emotional and behavioral disorders but also cures them.

Positive psychology, which focuses on the relationship between human thoughts and emotions, is the latest formal addition to the various branches of psychology.<sup>11</sup> Scripture teaches that thoughts do influence emotions: "A merry heart doeth good like a medicine" (Proverbs 17:22, KJV). And much accumulated scientific evidence shows the manifold effects of thoughts and states of mind upon physical and mental health.

Positive psychology appears to have much to offer, and is endorsed by many

contemporary writers of psychology textbooks. Seligman<sup>12</sup> has studied how people can achieve positive fulfillment, happiness, optimism, and hope in their lives. As a result of his work, positive psychology has found its way into the areas of social psychology, human development, intelligence, occupational psychology, and intimate relationships.

Christians also believe that the study of how to achieve optimum psychological health and happiness through positive thinking can have enormous consequences. "Sow a thought and reap an act, sow an act and reap a habit, sow a habit and reap a character, sow a character and reap a destiny," says a traditional adage.

But, from a biblical perspective, the Adventist teacher of psychology can take a further step. According to Seligman,<sup>13</sup> authentic happiness is achieved by examining our inner self for meaning and purpose—a solution very similar to the philosophies of Eastern religions. However, according to the Bible, authentic happiness is gained by divine intervention, which produces a transformation of the mind ("Let this mind be in you as it was with Christ Jesus" [Philippians 2:5]). A deep change of this type was called *metanoia* by the Greeks, a change of mind that leads to a spiritual conversion.<sup>14</sup>

Thought control is, therefore, of upmost importance not only to preserve mental health, but also to attain higher levels of character development, as emphasized by Scripture: "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things" (Philippians 4:8, KJV).

The Adventist professor of psychology should thus emphasize the importance of the way we think. Students should be encouraged to develop healthy habits of mind and to acquire skills that will enable them to help others, both in their personal lives and as professionals. But the Christian psychologist knows that divine aid is available (and necessary) to overcome both negative thoughts and

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uncontrolled emotions. Ultimately, we need to recognize that “God alone can renew the heart.”<sup>15</sup>

### V. Social Interactions

Research indicates that the development of a healthy personality is strongly influenced by early childhood interactions and the social feedback received from significant people in one’s environment.<sup>16</sup> Because humans were created as social beings, they have a deep psychological need for meaningful social relationships.<sup>17</sup> Many developmental psychologists believe that the ability to develop such relationships is influenced by the quality of the parent-child interaction during the first two years of life.<sup>18</sup>

**S**eventh-day Adventism has been consistently committed to promoting optimal social interaction within a Christian context. The Bible is full of advice to create, develop, and maintain excellent social ties.

Below are 10 basic relational principles based on Stan Hatkoff’s workshops and seminars.<sup>19</sup> These Bible-based statements will be very useful in psychology and counseling courses when covering such topics as relationship enhancement, social influence, friendship, intimacy, dating, and marriage.

1. *Accept others as persons just like you with feelings, cares, desires, and fears.* People sense how you feel about them and whether you like them. By adopting an attitude of acceptance, you put others at ease. When you treat them as you would like to be treated (Matthew 7:12), you improve their worth as persons as well as your own self-image.

2. *When you have an opportunity to do something helpful for someone, do so if it is within your power.* By doing this, not only will you be following biblical injunctions, but also enhancing your relationship with that person.

3. *Take responsibility for your own behavior (actions) and feelings. Do not blame others for what happens to you.* Changing your own attitudes about an obstacle or problem you are facing will bring positive results. Attempting to change others or blaming them for your problems will only lead to frustration and bitterness.

4. *Accept others as your equals.* This is a condition for optimal communication, which is among the most important qualities of good relationships. A loving and non-condemning attitude will allow you to engage the other person in an honest discussion and help you mend broken relationships.

5. *Forgive others for their indiscretions, whether intentional or unintentional.* Forgiveness is not only required by God, but is also essential for spiritual, emotional, and physical health. This attitude will allow you to repair and enhance your relationships.

6. *All relationships require time and energy to work effectively.* If you are not intentionally working to enhance a relationship, you may actually be hindering it. Having a humble and teachable attitude is necessary to promote harmony in human relationships and to achieve peace with God.

7. *Successful relationships are necessary for a happy life.* Emotional, physical, and spiritual problems are often the result of poor relationships. Healthy relationships, combined with trust in God, will enable you to cope with the disappointments and failures of life.

8. *Recognize that conflicts, quarrels, and disagreements are normal in any relation-*

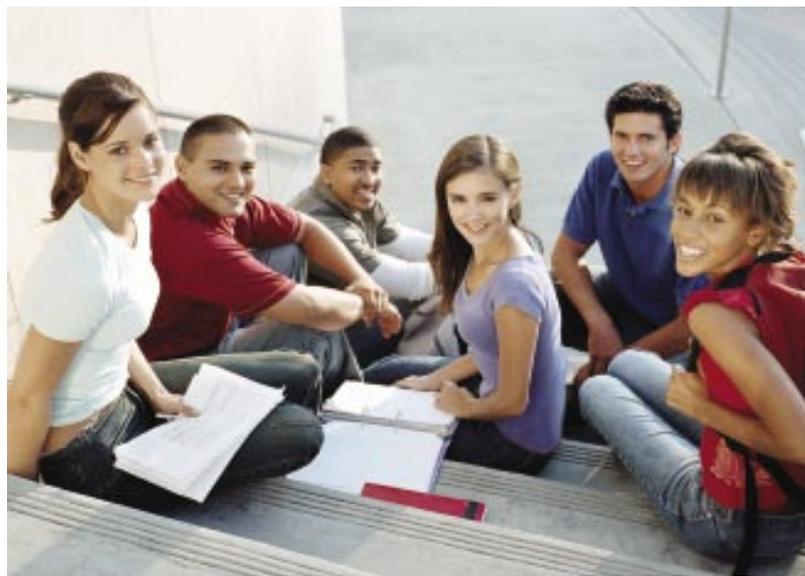
*ship.* Although points of disagreement will always exist, it is how you handle them that determines the success of the relationship. Being willing to compromise, to give and take, will aid greatly in the conflict resolution.

9. *Having a positive self-image is important to forming positive relationships.* Recognizing your value in God’s eyes will enable you to build positive relationships with others. If you are not happy with who you are, it will be difficult for your relationships to improve.

10. *Acquiring new attitudes requires a new mind and a new heart.* Surrendering to Jesus brings about the renewal of one’s entire being. This produces a vitalizing force that generates new attitudes, new ways of thinking, and a fresh way to deal with people.

### Conclusion

Because psychology is about people—how they relate, think, and act—the psychology professor has a unique op-



portunity to relate with and influence students. Furthermore, many topics in psychology have an intimate relationship with biblical themes. Thus, the way a Seventh-day Adventist teacher deals with psychological topics is of crucial importance.

Correctly understood, there are many areas of psychology that are compatible with Adventist theology. Professional meetings and conferences today include discussions on hope, happiness, spiri-

tuality, and prayer. Positive psychology is growing significantly, and many of its concepts are compatible with Christian thought. CBT connects with the Pauline doctrine of the transformation of the mind. These and other biblically based principles provide the psychology instructor with the opportunity to develop and teach an Adventist perspective in the field.

The Adventist psychology professor needs to keep in mind, however, that concepts such as prayer and spirituality, which we believe are based on scriptural principles, are not always understood in the same way by secular psychologists. We should therefore make sure that we are clear about our definitions before we try to use these ideas as useful bridges between psychology and religion.

On the other hand, some psychological topics and theories are incompatible with Adventist tenets. Concepts such as hypnosis, psychoanalysis, interpretation of dreams, or unconscious forces put most Adventist psychologists on guard. Yet, even those philosophies that clearly conflict with Adventist beliefs may contain useful concepts. We must not forget that Freud's ideas provided hope to the mentally ill, who until then faced lockup as the only form of treatment. Also, the importance of the early years (always highly regarded by Adventists) in the development of personality and future mental disease was presented by Freud to a scientific community that did not value infants, children, or adolescents. Due to his ideas, the importance of early influences has never since been questioned.

The most important task for the Adventist psychology professor is to approach the subject from a Christian perspective. The psychology teacher needs to have a clear understanding of the nature of human beings as presented in Scripture. He or she should study and reflect on the reality of good and evil, and on their effects upon physical and mental health. The psychology professor should teach students to optimize social relationships using proven principles from humanistic psychology and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy; while recognizing that being able to forgive and to empathize are traits of divine origin. If

humans possess them, it is because they are created in God's image.

In summary, we need to understand that psychology is an integral part of the gospel (since all truth is God's truth). Psychology helps us understand how to apply the redemptive and transformational power of God. Sin (a concept not usually recognized by psychology) is the ultimate root of all bad things, including mental illness, behavioral disorders, and unhealthy relationships. Human beings are responsible for the moral choices they make, and the sum total of their choices constitutes their character.

In closing, we would like to emphasize the desperate need for Christian psychologists who can counsel people suffering from depression, low self-esteem, loneliness, abusive relationships, addictions, delinquency, personality disorders, and other mental health problems. Many people are specifically looking for help from professionally trained Christian psychologists because they would prefer to obtain counseling from someone who shares their biblical values and beliefs. Fear of being ridiculed for their faith has kept many Christians from receiving help they need. Consequently, there is a definite need for Christian young people to enter the mental health field. Opportunities exist for clinical social workers, pastoral counselors, and school psychologists. ✍



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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Because of space constraints, this article cannot deal with all aspects of teaching psychology.
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