

How does God respond to Mental Health?

Depression is one of the leading causes of disability worldwide and a major contributor to suicide and coronary heart disease.

24% of women and 13% of men in England are diagnosed with depression in their lifetime.

1 in 4 people experience mental health issues each year.

At any given time, 1 in 6 working-age adults have symptoms associated with mental ill health.

Men aged 40-49 have the highest suicide rates in the UK

Excluding dementia, 75% of all mental illnesses starts before age 18, and 50% before of 15

13% of young people aged 5-19 meet the clinical criteria for a mental health disorder

6.4% of people in England have experienced eating disorder symptoms such as Anorexia and Bulimia; with the most common age of hospital admission for someone with an eating disorder being 15 years for both females and males

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Behind these statistics are many traumatised, hurting and disorientated people who have been torn apart inwardly and who are distanced socially from their families and communities. Mental ill health is a lived experience for those in this church, in our own families, our friendship groups and the wider communities we live in.

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Why have I started today's talk with a load of stats about mental health? Well the question asked by someone from St James, that I hope to answer is 'How does God respond to Mental Health?' It's a good question. Because mental health, as we've just heard, is a big issue, and we therefore need to be clear about what is God's response to it, and also, because there is a lot of unhelpful stuff out there, what it isn't. Also, when we better understand God's response, we know better how to respond.

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To answer the question 'How does God respond to mental health?' I am going to answer a number of related questions that often come up.

Q1. If I have a mental illness is it because I lack faith?

In a word 'no'.

If I break my arm, or get cancer, I don't think, 'oh it's because I lack faith'. No. It is no different with mental health.

Carlos Whittaker, is an American Christian musician. Whilst singing worship songs on stage in 2005 he suddenly felt like he was having a heart attack and that he would soon die. As audience of 2,000 people watched, and the band played on, Whittaker left the stage, not knowing that he was having a major panic attack. That was the beginning of his now 17 years of living with severe anxiety.

He said in a recent interview, "This has nothing to with whether I believe in Jesus. This does not have anything to do with whether or not I am reading my Bible or how hard I am praying. I can pray 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and I'm still going to have to take that little white pill every single day."

Sadly for generations Jesus' teachings on the Sermon on the mount – the 'Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life' bit and the 'you of little faith' bit – has been misused and abused in such a way as to make Christians feel guilty about being anxious and depressed.

Suppose you believe you're supposed to pray depression and anxiety away, and you do—you pray—and things don't change. What does that do to you? You're probably going to come to the conclusion that "God doesn't love me," "He's forgotten me," "He doesn't want me to feel better," or "Maybe I don't have enough faith." It's only a matter of time before you come to the conclusion that Christianity doesn't work. Whether or not it's true, it doesn't "work," because it hasn't actually changed my mood or given me a better outlook on life. Underestimating the impact of mental and emotional illness, or thinking it can be 'prayed away', is really, really dangerous.

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On the flip side, it's also important that we don't assume that if we have a mental health issue, that we should step away from our faith until we're sorted. We are still a child of God, still loved by him, still disciples, still witnesses, still called to seek God's will. It's tough, yes. But it is at such times

that we need faith the most; including, sometimes, the faith of others. Also, it could be, for some, a time when our growth as a disciple and witness to His faithfulness is greatest. Henri Nouwen, the Dutch Catholic Priest, wrote a brilliant book on this, called 'The Wounded Healer', which is subtitled 'In our own woundedness, we can become a source of life for others.'

Q2. If I have a mental illness is it because of sin?

In a few words, 'mostly no, but there are times when, what we might call sin, is a factor'.

To unpack this we first need to understand that there are a whole load of factors that can lead to mental ill health. Humans are complex and our mental health is complex.

For example, just looking at depression, the factors that can contribute to it include our genetics, our exposure to stress, adverse childhood experiences, poverty, poor education, recent trauma, isolation, long-term physical ill health, other mental illnesses, substance misuse, having a baby, the menopause, changes to hormone levels, being a full time carer, having a medical condition such as Huntington's, B12 deficiency, glandular fever, the side effect of a prescribed medication, Seasonal Affective Disorder.

On one level genetic disorders, Huntington's, glandular fever, as well as all medical conditions, exist because of human fallenness. But we are on v v v v dodgy ground, as followers of Jesus, if we think that an individual's mental ill health is due to their sin. Jesus is clear on this; sometimes bad stuff just happens to people, and it has nothing to do with their sin. (Luke 13:1-5) When Jesus and his disciples come across a man blind from birth, the disciples ask "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" And Jesus' answer is straight forward, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned" (John 9:1-7)

But in that list of factors I just read out, there are some things that we might consider as 'sins'; adverse childhood experiences, substance misuse.

30-50% of people with a severe mental illness also have problems with substance use, usually alcohol. But even here extreme caution is necessary. It is way too easy to judge and to label. The line between what is a contributing factor and what is symptom is very blurred. If I was suffering with clinical

depression and my life was upside down and I was feeling utterly miserable, a drink or 3 might feel like as good a way as any to get through the day.

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I believe, when we think about the influence of sin on our mental health, we put ourselves in a far more Biblical, honest, and challenging place, when we think of how wider societal sins impact on our mental health and our ability to recover from them.

In England mental ill health disproportionately affects the homeless, prisoners, victims of abuse, and children and adults living in the poorest income bracket. That is a sin.

The suicide rate among prisoners is almost 15 times that of the general population, and more than 70% of prisoners have two or more mental health disorders. That is a sin.

In England 70-75% of people with diagnosable mental illness receive no treatment at all. That is a sin.

Here we come back to the Mission series we did before Christmas, and the 4th Mark of Mission that challenges us to seek to transform the unjust structures of society. There are unjust structures of society that impact negatively on our nations mental health that are sins, that we are called to transform as part of our mission.

Q3. Could I be demon-possessed?

This is perhaps the most contentious aspect of thinking about Christian attitudes to mental ill health.

In the Bible there are clear warnings about the dangers of demonic forces, and Jesus' great commission to the disciples includes the explicit command to "cast out demons". However, there is again a need for extreme caution here.

For one thing, there is a danger of "Christian over-spiritualising"; the tendency to ascribe anything and everything to spiritual causes that are caused by other factors.

And we have to acknowledge that it is difficult to have certainty over whether what the Bible describes as demonic possession and what we would see as mental health issues have any overlap. For some Christians, when Jesus heals

the man from the Gerasenes region possessed by a legion of demons, they see a man cured of a legion of mental health disorders. (Luke 8:26-39)

And for some Christians, Jesus' call to cast out demons includes such societal demons as poverty, poor education, a prison system that locks up the mentally ill without access to treatment or hope of recovery. I would want to say 'yes' and 'amen' to that. But not exclusively.

I recently read an interview with mental-health chaplain who described himself as a 'Bible-believing evangelical who takes the biblical accounts of demonic possession seriously'. He said that in all his years working in a mental health trust he had 'never seen anything I would say that looked like demonic possession, but I've seen plenty of people who have been told that's what they're experiencing by other Christians. If Christians start treating people with mental health issues as if they are possessed when they are not, they run the risk of doing very serious harm.'

I think a healthier, more holistic, way to look at this is to, instead of asking the question, 'Could I be demon-possessed?' is to ask the question 'Am I being Christ-blessed?' And here, I am thankful to Anthony Rose for this insight. When we went to visit a house recently, on the request of the owner, who was experiencing strange, unaccountable, seemingly very real and very scary stuff happening in their home. Anthony said something along the lines that 'regardless of the causes, demonic or otherwise, the best way to counter darkness is by pray for God's light to replace it. And we prayed, very simply, very ordinarily, Christ's blessing into the home and to surround the family.'

I think we can take the same approach with mental ill health. There is no harm done, and everything to be gained, regardless of the factors contributing to a person's mental ill health, by praying Christ's blessing into their situation and on to the person.

Q4 (our final question). Will God abandon me in my mental illness?

In two words, 'No, but...'

For the 'no' bit of that answer listen to Bethany's excellent talk last week answering the question 'Is God Always With me' when she spoke of how Psalm 23 had pointed her to God's presence at a dark time in her life:

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.

For the 'but' bit, I think I have seen times where the grip of mental illness has been so tight that for the person suffering, that everything that once was - their identity, their memory, their personhood and their sense of God - has abandoned them. This was hardest to observe in a woman with a deep and life-long faith called Jo who suffered from years of dementia before she died. She appeared to have robbed her of everything. I want to believe that God was with her, and that she knew His presence, but honestly, I am not sure she did, regardless of whether he was there or wasn't.

During those final years, her Christian friends faithfully visited. And I want to believe that in some way their faith helped her. But often she wasn't even aware of their presence, let alone the faith that they had.

I think, just as much as it grieved Jo's friends that they had lost her to dementia, it also grieved God. Relationship is everything to God. Our relationship with Him, our relationship with one another and our relationship with ourselves. And sometimes, severe mental illness can appear to rob us of all three.

When Jesus healed the demon possessed man from the Gerasenes, the man wanted to go with Jesus, but Jesus told him to 'go home.' This man had been stigmatised, marginalised and caste out. He was living naked outside of his town, away from friends and family, living amongst the tombs. And Jesus said 'Go home'. What had Jesus done? He had healed a man, and in doing so had, 1. restored his relationship with himself, with the demons gone he knew himself once again, 2. restored his relationship with God, Jesus was stood there in front of him, and 3. Jesus' final act was to restore his relationship with his friends and family. 'Go home'

We, the church, even when the grip of mental illness seems to have robbed a person of everything, need to always be a welcome home. Where the possibility of restored relationships is kept alive. Where the possibility of restored relationship with ourselves, with one another and with God is always available. Always hoped for. Always prayed for. Always made available and accessible to any person, by the openness of our welcome, the practical help we offer, the interest we take, the time we give.