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MENTAL ILLNESS IN SCRIPTURE

by Jamie Klemashevich, M.A.

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI, n.d.), “Approximately one in five adults in the U.S. (46.6 million) experiences mental illness in a given year.” While Christians have garnered a reputation for attributing mental illness to demonic activity or personal sin, this tendency appears to be changing. Christian counselors must develop a biblical understanding of mental illness to continue shifting perspectives regarding mental health.

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Biblical Foundations

Human beings are made in the image of God with physical and spiritual aspects (Genesis 1:27). Physical and spiritual components cannot be separated since the physical impacts the spiritual and vice versa. The mind has both physical and spiritual dimensions. When man sinned, death resulted (Genesis 2:16-17). This death did not merely affect the physical parts of man. Rather, spiritual death ensued along with physical and mental decay. The world no longer existed in *shalom*, and the world will not again experience *shalom* until Christ's return (Revelation 22).

Man is fallen, and the world is fallen (Romans 8:20-23). All people, including those with mental illness, are responsible for their own sin. All people are also capable of repentance and faith (1 John 1:9-10). However, because not all mental illness stems from personal sin, not all mental illness can be healed by repentance and faith alone. Some mental illness results from living in a fallen world. God is bringing redemption to the world through Jesus (Ephesians 1:7; Galatians 3:3; Romans 8:20-23). This redemption is currently occurring, but will not be complete until the return of Christ when He makes all things new (Revelation 21-22). Physical restoration (including mental renewal) will happen for believers when Christ returns, but Scripture places primary importance on spiritual renewal (2 Corinthians 4:16).

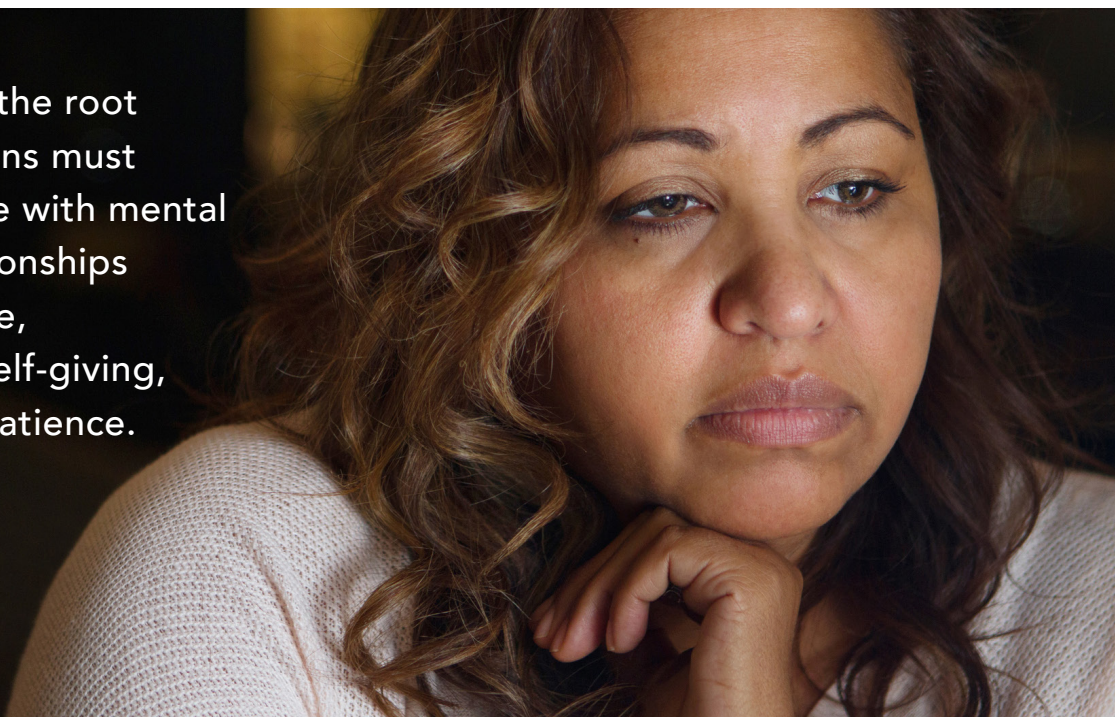
Where Does Mental Illness Originate?

One viewpoint contends that mental illness results from personal sin. Similarly, in biblical times, physical disability was often attributed to personal sin; however, Jesus argues against this idea in John 9:1-3 when He heals a blind man. Jesus says that the man was not blind due to personal sin or the sin of his parents, but rather so the glory of God would be revealed. Job's friends also referenced personal sin when trying to make sense of his suffering, and God rebukes them for that response (Job 42:7-9). A common human fallacy asserts a direct cause-and-effect relationship between sin and suffering. Scripture clearly indicates that some sufferings are not directly related to personal sin, and that God even uses suffering to display His glory. However, Christians cannot be too quick to dismiss the idea of mental illness related to personal sin. In Deuteronomy 28:28 and Zechariah 12:4, Scripture speaks of madness as a punishment for sin. Putting these verses in context, Stanford (2017) contends that madness is listed among several other physical punishments—so to say that madness is always a punishment for personal sin would require one to say that physical afflictions are always a punishment for sin, a ridiculous notion (p. 76). Instead, a proper interpretation would acknowledge that mental illness *can* be a consequence of personal sin; however, mental illness is not *always* a consequence of personal sin.

Another viewpoint argues that mental illness results from demonic oppression. Scripture includes examples of this phenomenon. Matthew 17:14-18 shows Jesus casting the demon out of a boy suffering from seizures and suicide attempts. Matthew 9:32-33 reveals Jesus casting a demon out of a man who was mute. Mark 5:1-13 tells the story of a man possessed by many demons who collectively referred to themselves as Legion. This man lived among the tombs and demonstrated violence, erratic behavior, and self-harm. After Jesus casts out the demons, the man comes to his senses. Scripture clearly includes instances of mental illness symptoms resulting from demonic oppression; however, it also speaks of other occurrences when mental illness symptoms are actually God's doing.

The first book of Samuel (18:10-11) speaks of King Saul. In this passage, God sends a spirit to torment Saul so that he "raved within his house" and demonstrated violent behavior toward David. Daniel 4 tells the story of King Nebuchadnezzar losing his reason and having the mind of an animal for a time... a condition modern frameworks classify as clinical lycanthropy. Scripture says that God afflicted the king with this condition as punishment for his pride. When the king's senses returned, he repented and honored God. Thus, the Bible describes instances in which demons are actively afflicting people with symptoms of mental illness, but also describes examples when God Himself sends afflictions. Likewise, Scripture includes examples of people who are afflicted simply as a result of living in a fallen world.

Regardless of the root cause, Christians must engage people with mental illness in relationships marked by love, compassion, self-giving, respect, and patience.



A Christian Response

While many Christians are concerned about the etiology of mental illness, Scripture gives more attention to a Christian response to suffering. The Bible includes more than 50 “one another” commands, demonstrating the communal responsibility of believers to care for one another. First Corinthians 12 talks about the body of Christ and describes how vital each member of the body is to the whole, which includes members with mental illnesses. Galatians 6:2 calls Christians to bear one another’s burdens, which consists of the burdens of people with mental illness and their families. James 2:15-17 exhorts Christians to respond with actions, not just pleasant words. Being kind to people with mental illness, therefore, does not comprise a holistic Christian response. Romans 12:13 requires believers to “contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.” This verse particularly refers to financial needs, but hospitality includes more than financial provision. Financial contribution alone allows people to keep suffering individuals at arm’s length, whereas hospitality requires personal interaction. Many people with mental illness struggle with loneliness because few people want to maintain personal relationships with them. Much like Jesus became personal friends with broken people, Christians can reflect God by building personal friendships with those with mental illness (Welten, 2015). Only in the context of personal relationships can needs be adequately assessed and addressed.

All people with mental illness do not have the same needs. First Thessalonians 5:14 commands a number of different responses to people according to their struggles: “And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.” The word, “fainthearted,” is translated “small-souled, feeble-minded, despondent or depressed and discouraged” (Carlson, 1994). Certainly, some people with mental illness are depressed,

discouraged, and in need of encouragement. Some have been weakened by mental illness and need help. Some have grown idle, using their mental illness to excuse poor behavior; they are in need of admonishment. Knowing which response to give requires relationship. Regardless of the root cause, Christians must engage people with mental illness in relationships marked by love, compassion, self-giving, respect, and patience. Christian counselors must use Scripture to educate on not only a biblical view of the source of mental illness, but also a biblical response to mental illness.

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THE LOCAL CHURCH AND MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS

by Madz Deyzel, B.A.

If you were to ask a Christ-follower who Jesus is, he or she would probably easily explain the Gospel message. However, if you were to ask that same person how Jesus impacts his or her mental health needs, you might draw a blank stare. There is a big gap in understanding how our spiritual lives intertwine with the way we think, feel, and behave—psychology.

I envision the local church partnering with available counseling resources to become more effective in addressing mental health needs by offering a holistic care support structure within the local church.



Self-care

This structure begins with self-care, offering pathways for growing self-awareness through courses or sermon series that specifically focus on integrating theology and psychology. To empower members with knowing how Jesus fits into their everyday thinking, feelings, and choices is essential to their spiritual wholeness journey. This approach becomes proactive toward the base level of mental health needs and dealing with potential problems in their infancy stage. If people would learn to understand their emotional triggers—like anger or anxiety—and apply biblical truths to them, they may potentially prevent the need for therapy for depression or an anxiety disorder within three years. This method is no different from teaching people in rural communities the importance of disinfecting a wound to prevent a more serious infection from developing.

In an age of entitlement, we must empower people to own their spiritual wholeness journeys. We live in a culture where no one wants to own themselves; it is far easier to get someone else to fix it for us. I remember attending a renowned Dallas, Texas, church a few years ago. At the end of the sermon, the preacher never officially closed in prayer. Instead, he said to his congregation, “*I want you to ask God what He wants you to do with what you have just heard.*” He then paused and gave time for the congregation to pray to God. It was so empowering and counter-cultural to the entitlement epidemic.

James 5:13 says, “Are any of you suffering hardships? You should pray...” Learning to hear God’s voice is vital for our spiritual growth and healing. We need to empower God’s people to learn to discern His voice, especially when suffering hardships. This is what Philippians 2:12 means when suggesting “working out your own salvation.” I have yet to find a personal trainer who will do the workout for me while I get the results.

Community Care

When it comes to the needs of church members, most churches invest in some form of pastoral care structure. This can be a volunteer team that offers prayer after each service, or a staff member who makes hospital visitations, organizes

care meals, and performs family visits when there has been trauma in the family. However, it is the “small group or connect leaders” who are actually at the forefront of dealing with the mental health needs of the congregation. The small group leaders are the ones who are, weekly, meeting with members in their homes; however, they are generally only trained to press a button to start playing a DVD, facilitate a discussion, and serve good coffee. The reality is, they encounter people experiencing severe life events such as a woman going through a messy divorce, a man who recently got retrenched, or a couple who cannot conceive... and most of these group leaders have no idea what to say or do to help.

Investing in offering effective community care is done through training up small group leaders with good coffee cup conversational skills so they can have more effective pastoral conversations with the members of their groups who are struggling. First Thessalonians 5:11 calls us to encourage each other and build each other up. Some translations use the term “edify” instead of “build.” To edify is to promote growth in spiritual wisdom, build up, repair from the foundation, and rebuild. When the storms of life hit, the foundations of the building are tested. For those who have built their houses on the sand, the storm will cause cracks in those homes. Small group leaders can be trained for pastoral coffee cup conversations that engage the edification process. This is effective community care!

Pastoral Care

Additionally, there is also a more formal pastoral care type of teaching, which is achieved through the training of a volunteer lay counseling team with mature members who have a natural ability for counseling and possess necessary helping skills. This approach assists in reducing the pressure put on pastors who generally find themselves in these consultative situations. This is a lifeline, especially for those who need counseling but cannot afford to see a professional.

When lay counseling ministries partner with local Christian professionals, significant cases can be referred to professionals, while less difficult circumstances can be processed by the local church. The vision is that the local church becomes more intentional about offering care and support structures to the massive base of mental health needs in our communities. It is crucial that they invest in counseling resources to address self-care, community care, and lay counseling care to the best of their abilities. This way the local church truly does become the hope of the world.



Madz Deyzel, B.A., is the founder and director of Edify – Building the Soul, a ministry that seeks to equip local churches with counseling resources for addressing mental health needs in South Africa. She also founded Grace Counseling, a ministry of Grace Family Church, where she developed the Wholeness Counselling Framework and the Wholeness Course. Madz holds a B.A. Hons. Degree in Theology and Counselling through the London School of Theology and the Waverley Counselling Centre.



SCRIPTURE AND NEUROSCIENCE: AN INVITATION TO RENEW THE MIND

by Melissa Carlisle, Ph.D.

*"[...] present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, **but be transformed by the renewal of your mind**, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect"*
(Romans 12:1-2, ESV).

Be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Doesn't that sound refreshing? The renewing of a mind that is broken by sin, running on fear, that often confuses the taunting of the enemy for the voice of God, and that chooses unhealthy coping skills when pain strikes. For many of us, as well as those we serve, this may sound like wishful thinking or a process of which we have no active part.

By God's grace and His intimate design of each person, we have the ability and responsibility to be an active part of this renewal process. These are not just words on a page to form some abstract concept. The Word of God is living and active. This God-given process is something we can use our five finite senses to examine, engage, and enjoy. Let's take a more in-depth look into Scripture, as well as the fields of science and psychology, to better understand this process and our part in it all.

When we take an honest, spiritual inventory of our thoughts, we discover how deceptively the enemy has worked to thwart God's design of our minds.

God's Word has much to say about our minds. Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, strength, and mind (Deuteronomy 6:4, Matthew 22:37, Mark 12:30, Luke 10:27). "Take every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5, ESV). "God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind" (2 Timothy 1:7, NKJV). "God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" (Genesis 1:27, ESV). This is simply a sneak peek at the intentional way God intimately designed our minds.

Many writers, both Christian and non-Christian, have written extensively on scientific findings related to the mind. These findings can help us better understand how to engage with the Scriptures and the mind-renewing process. A biblical worldview must be the spectacles we use to view everything, including science and psychology, and this kind of work is being done by some exceptional researchers in our field.

Schwartz (1996) has written a useful secular text on the clinical pathology of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). Clinically defined, OCD involves obsessions of disturbing, intrusive thoughts and mental images. These thoughts and images play over and over, causing great distress. These obsessions are often accompanied by compulsions, the resulting behaviors fruitlessly aimed at ending the fixations.

As believers, it is a short jump to recognize that our broken, sinful minds mirror these OCD symptoms. If our minds and biological brains were designed for love, to live in perfect harmony with God and His Word, can we see how sin redirects our thoughts onto spiritually-distracting obsessions such as money, power, intelligence, and fame? Our minds, then, answer these obsessions with compulsions such as addictions, abuse, isolation, or self-harm.

Schwartz (1996) offers a four-step process for relief from OCD, which can also be helpful for those dealing with these types of symptoms. As believers, we can dive deeper with these steps from a spiritual perspective. Step one is to "re-label." Schwartz invites his readers to consider that their identities are not defined by the intrusive thoughts which burden them. This step helps readers discriminate between the deception and truth of the notions which enter the mind. Step two is to "re-attribute." This step guides readers to understand the neurological process of the brain involved in OCD. Step three is to "re-focus." Schwartz directs his readers to re-focus their attention to something useful, constructive, and enjoyable. Finally, step four is to "re-value." In this final step toward relief, Schwartz reminds readers that the obsessions and compulsions are not worth the reader's time or distress. Thoughts and behaviors which contradict God's design can be renewed using these four steps when placed on a foundation of Scripture.

For a more explicitly Christian approach to the mind-renewing process, Caroline Leaf (2013) provides extensive information on the mind and the believer's transformation from her cognitive neuroscience research. In her book, *Switch On Your Brain: The Key to Peak Happiness, Thinking, and Health*, Leaf presents Scripture and linked scientific facts to help readers understand various topics of the mind, brain, thoughts, choices, and rest. Leaf's scientific research paints a beautifully intricate picture of how God designed

our brains, how sin creatively distorts that design, and how God, in His compassionate provision, is making all things new.

Leaf presents four steps which make up a "21-day detox plan" for her readers to practice as they work to spiritually renew their minds and biologically rewire their brains. The first step is to "gather." In this step, readers use their five senses to become aware of all the signals coming into the mind from the external environment. The second step involves a focused reflection. Leaf guides readers to engage in deep, intellectual, disciplined thinking that positively changes the brain. The third step includes writing. Leaf encourages her readers to keep a creative thought journal. The final step is to "revisit." This step guides readers in moving forward to reflect on the toxic thoughts and design new, healthy ones to rewire the brain. This step is about redesigning the specific thought(s) being targeted. Leaf explains how to biologically take those toxic thoughts that are contrary to God's design, shift them into a more "plastic" state, and modify them according to the truth we find in God's Word.

When we take an honest, spiritual inventory of our thoughts, we discover how deceptively the enemy has worked to thwart God's design of our minds. Fortunately, God's provision for His beloved created ones has provided countless means of transformation and renewal. The fact that we are fallen, but do not have to remain in our sinful death apart from God, is the message we preach. Christ did not come to leave us with a "get out of hell free card." He came that we may have life and have it to the full (John 10:10).

Therefore, I urge us, co-laborers, to be active participants in our mind renewal and transformational processes. Langberg (2014) reminds us we cannot take our clients where we have not been ourselves. I urge us to intentionally practice these steps and the holistic biblical instruction God has given us for our good and His glory. Next, I urge us as ministers of the living and active Gospel to be sacrificial vessels in the renewal process of those we serve. Co-laborers, may we commit our lives to sending out transformed people to influence our world for Christ.

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