

The Christian and Mental Health:

Part 1: Introduction

Mental illness is very common – a study conducted in 2014 identified that around 1 in 3 women and 1 in 5 men had received a formal diagnosis of mental illness by a health professional at some point in their lives. Mental illness is also devastating, and sufferers can feel hopelessly trapped in a conflict within their very selves. And mental illness is growing, as evidenced by a record 4.3 million referrals being made for mental health therapy through the NHS in 2021.

The growing incidence of mental illness provides the church of Jesus Christ with an opportunity to show compassion and love to those in need. Whilst most Christians may not be doctors or counsellors, the teaching of God's Word gives us some unique and important things to say on the topic. This series has been prepared so as to equip God's people to provide meaningful support and help to mental illness sufferers.

A) What is mental illness?

Professor of psychiatry, Alan Thomas, provides the following definition:

“Mental illness is a behavioural syndrome (a collection of signs and symptoms) that results from a response to some objective cause or causes (external or internal) which may be physical or psychological, and these signs and symptoms produce clinically significant impairment in everyday functioning.” As with all forms of illness, mental illness has a cause (which may or may not be known), and results in reduced capacity to function in everyday life.

Humans, uniquely created in God's image, are a psychosomatic whole – we are both physical and spiritual beings in every sphere of life. Hence mental illness has both physical and spiritual components – whenever one faculty of our human existence is affected, the others must also be. Just as a bad cold will affect a person's mood, so clinical depression will affect a person's physical health. Mental illness must therefore not be seen as some unusual experience, alien to normal people. Every human gets ill and due to various factors we are all prone to different types of illness. Some may be more prone

to heart disease, others to depression. As with other illnesses, mental illnesses vary in terms of severity, and consequently vary in terms of the extent and type of treatment required.

Most of the Bible is set in the context of life in a fallen world, and illness is a very present feature. This includes apparent symptoms of mental illness, such as in the case of Elijah following the contest on Mount Carmel ([1 Kings 19:4](#)), and in many of the Psalms of lament (e.g. [Psalm 13](#), [42](#), [88](#), etc.).

B) Why has mental illness grown?

This is a complex issue and a comprehensive answer is impossible. The following are not the only factors, but they are all clearly contributory.

1. Under-reporting before

The medical understanding of mental illness has grown significantly in the last 100 years, and we are much better at diagnosing and treating it today than a century ago. Mental illness has always been around but due to a lack of adequate understanding and treatment, as well as the consequent stigma of being labelled “mad”, it would have been hidden in previous generations.

2. Over-diagnosis today

There is little doubt that a diagnosis of “mental illness” is given very rapidly today, including in situations when it is not appropriate. Life in a [Genesis 3](#) world necessarily involves distress and disappointment, and these things are not mental illness.

3. Increasing family breakdowns

A decrease in the number of couples getting married along with an increase in the number of cohabiting couples separating has resulted in two consequences: greatly increased loneliness, and greatly increased incidence of children not living with both parents. Both of these consequences are known to be significant factors in higher rates of mental illness.

4. The rise of individualism

Over the last half century the success of “self-esteem philosophy” has been remarkable, producing a generation of individuals who take it for granted that they are highly important. However, studies consistently show that seeking to boost self-esteem has a negative impact upon mental wellbeing.

5. The overabundance of choice

In a world where “pursuing your dreams” is the key to a successful life, individual liberties become paramount. Coupled with a massive rise in wealth we find ourselves facing almost limitless choices in life, whether in career, marriage partner, location and so on. The consequent “fear of missing out” complex means that such choices create enormous anxiety.

6. High lifestyle expectations

As wealth has risen, so have lifestyle expectations. Often these can only be achieved through extremely stretched and draining schedules, with corresponding increase in stress levels.

7. The Smartphone

Smartphones are designed with brain chemistry in mind and quickly become addictive. Whilst they have many benefits, if not used in a wise and measured way, the constant stream of brief and varied information exhausts our minds, inhibits our ability to concentrate and makes sleep more difficult.

8. Social media

Along with the smartphone, social media is a mixed blessing. It can be a helpful tool for sharing news and keeping in touch. It can also be an ideal tool for cyber-bullying as well as breeding discontentment through envying the lives of others as represented through the media platform.

9. Covid-19

As well as the increased fear of death due to the pandemic, the lockdowns disrupted ordinary human life in significant ways, affecting our work, routines and relationships.

When the above is considered, it would not be a wrong conclusion to make that much of life in 21st century Britain is mentally unhealthy.

C) How can we respond?

We must acknowledge our limitations in this area. We cannot “fix” those with mental illness through a Bible verse or prayer, and we must be on guard against speaking confidently on areas in which we have no expertise. That said, there is still much of benefit that the church can bring. The following gives a general starting point for providing help to those with mental illness.

These are not intended to be an alternative to seeking professional help, but to act complementarily.

1. Think biblically. We must let God's Word guide our understanding. Items 3-8 in section B all feature some aspect of seeking to live in opposition to the way God designed for us.

2. Draw near. Mental illness can be incredibly isolating and it will require deliberate effort to draw near to those struggling with it. The kindness and sympathy of a good friend can bring enormous help, even in severe cases of mental illness.

3. Speak truth. It is a grave error to assume that all mental illness stems from underlying spiritual causes (such as hidden sins). It is also a grave error to forget that all sufferers (from whatever ills) are spiritual people who respond to everything in spiritual ways. Having drawn near to someone in distress, a friend has the opportunity to lovingly speak truth.

4. Be in it for the long haul. Mental illness is rarely cured quickly, and those who experience it are unlikely to do so only once. Steadfast and patient friendship is needed. This can be draining for carers; hence the church of Jesus Christ is ideally placed, as a loving community, to provide support.

It is again emphasised that the above points are not intended to replace the wise skill and care that a psychiatrist or counsellor could provide, but are ways by which every Christian can provide real and meaningful help to those in need.

D) Useful resources

For general statistics on mental health within the UK:

<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/fundamental-facts-about-mental-health-2016>

Alan Thomas, *Tackling mental illness together*

Paul David Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer's hands*