What does the Bible say about dealing with mental illness? – Session 2

In general, mental illness is considered to be a disorder affecting one's mood, thinking, and behavior. The term *mental illness* covers a broad range of disorders from mild depression to schizophrenia, but for the purposes of this lesson, we will define *mental illness* as a condition that impairs a person's ability to think, feel, process, and respond to life situations in appropriate ways. Our brains are physical organs like lungs and kidneys and are subject to illness and damage just as other organs are. However, because our brains control everything we do, their malfunction can distort our perceptions, leading to hurtful or harmful thoughts and actions. Mental illnesses can distort our view of God and others. Sometimes mental illnesses contribute to our sinful behavior. God has compassion for our struggles. He can help us learn to manage mental illness and even bring healing.

Mental illness is still not fully understood by medical professionals and may have a variety of contributing factors. Some factors are physical, such as brain abnormalities, hormonal imbalances, and neurotransmitter impairments. Even things like nutrition, exercise, and sleep affect mental health. Proper medication and competent therapy can help alleviate those symptoms. Other mental illnesses are brought on by traumatic events or abuse in childhood. Sometimes a "coping mechanism" that was helpful in one situation gets carried into later life where it is no longer useful or

adaptive. Also consider the way our behavior feeds into our physical health and our physical health feeds back into our behavior. Sometimes unhealthy behavior causes our bodies to be unhealthy, which in turn leads to more unhealthy behavior; the cycle is difficult to break. Sometimes our own sin contributes to mental illness. When we obey Scripture's commands, we can bypass some aspects of mental illnesses and know better how to respond when we do encounter mental illness in ourselves or in someone else (Romans 12:2). Often, multi-layered treatment is best because multiple factors are contributing to a mental illness.

Mental illness has another factor that is not often considered in designing treatment programs. Much of what we call mental illness has a spiritual component that, if left unaddressed, keeps a person in bondage. Human beings have a spirit. To be created in God's image means we have life that is unlike the life of animals or plants. Our lives are directly connected to God's life. Acts 17:28 says, "In him we live and move and have our being." When we are disconnected from God, we cannot live as whole beings. We sense the void and try to fill it with other things. But those things ultimately fail us, and that can contribute to mental illness. Of course, the first step in becoming spiritually whole is to receive eternal life through Jesus Christ. But even for those people who have a relationship with God through Jesus, we still sometimes have misperceptions about who God really is that can negatively affect our view of ourselves, others, and the world and contribute to mental illness. Sin can also get in the way of our fellowship with God and negatively affect our mental health. We are better equipped to handle mental illness when we are steeped in God's truth and in active relationship with Him.

Spiritual sickness is often a big part of mental illness. When our spirits are healed and whole, our minds can think clearly. Psalm 23:3 says that our Good Shepherd "restores my soul." While many mental illnesses are directly caused by brain abnormalities, many others are due to souls that need restoration. Unforgiveness (2 Corinthians 2:10–11), bitterness (Hebrews 12:15), fear and anxiety (Philippians 4:6–7), and low self-worth can all cripple our souls. When our souls are wounded, we cannot think clearly. We see every life event through a distorted filter. A sunny day only reminds us of the day we were hurt. The sight of a happy couple walking down the street brings a surge of fury due to an unhealed wound. Casual remarks, normal life stresses, and inconsiderate treatment can all cause a person with an unhealed soul to react like a person with mental illness. When we continually give in to those wrong thoughts, we perpetuate our own struggles.

While Jesus directly healed people who were considered mentally ill, He also recognized demonic control in others and cast the demons out (e.g., Mark 1:34; Luke 11:14). The demoniac of the Gerasenes was a man psychiatrists would call mentally ill (see Mark 5:1–20). He was out of control, behaving in unacceptable ways, and today we would confine this man to an institution. But Jesus went directly to the real problem. He ordered the legion of demons to come out of the man. After they did, the man was "in his right mind" (verse 15). While not all mental illness is due to demonic involvement, there may be people diagnosed with mental illness today who are experiencing some sort of demonic influence. Such people need, first and foremost, the spiritual deliverance that surrender to Jesus would offer them.

Just as we have compassion on those who are physically ill, we must also have compassion on those who are mentally ill (Matthew 14:14). Just as we seek help when we are physically ill, we should also seek help when we are struggling with our thoughts, emotions, or behaviors. We need not judge the specific cause of mental illnesses in others; rather, we are to pray for them and offer support (James 5:14). We cannot assume that a mental illness is a result of sin or demonic influence; however, we should not ignore those possibilities when trying to help someone or when seeking help ourselves. We have many tools to help with treatment of mental illness, including medicine, psychiatry, community support, and education. We need to be careful not to neglect the spiritual aspect of mental illness. We can share the truth of God with those struggling with mental illness, encourage them as we are able, and support them in prayer. When we're struggling with mental illness, we need to be vigilant to continue to seek out God's truth, to come to Him in prayer, and to allow other believers to support us in our time of need (2 Corinthians 1:3–5; Romans 12:9–21; Galatians 6:2–10; John 13:34–35).

Mental Health

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