

Let's Talk About It; Putting Away Stigmas in the Church

Text: Psalm 42:1-11

Topic: Mental Health

Big Idea: God cares about your mental health.

Application Point: Having a mental health issue is not related to a failure of faith. There is help and hope.

Talking Points:

1. While the study of mental health may have increased over the years, mental and emotional anguish is not a new experience. The psalmist's lament in Psalm 42 resonates for many of us because we too have felt such discouragement and depression. The Psalms—even the sad ones—were written to be sung. The author paints a picture of a deep need for God's life-giving presence (vv. 1–2). He is being sustained only by his sorrow (v. 3). He remembers the good times (v.4) and looks inward, wondering why he is in such turmoil (v. 4). He tries to pep-talk his own heart, telling it to “hope in God” (vv. 5–8) but is left wondering why God seems absent (vv. 9–10). Again, he fights for the hope found in God and his salvation (v. 11). This psalm is just one passage among many (Psalm 25:16; 34:18; 88:3; Matthew 5:3) that assure the believer that God hears, understands, and cares about our mental health.
2. NAMI reports that one in five adults experience mental illness in a year. It makes sense that the fall and corruption of God's perfect creation would affect both our spiritual and physical health. A number of biblical characters experienced deep feelings: David (Psalm 38:4), Job (Job 3:26), Elijah (1 Kings 19:4), and Jonah (Jonah 4:3). Though sometimes our sin is a direct cause of mental and emotional distress (Psalm 51; 1 Samuel 16:14), it would be overly simplistic to say that all mental health issues are the result of a spiritual issue. In Psalm 42, the psalmist asks why he feels this way, but no answer is given. Sometimes we don't know why we are afflicted, and it's okay to communicate that to God.
3. If we decide to use our happiness and health as a measure of how spiritual we are, we are destined for disappointment. Jesus told us, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3). He entered into our suffering and validated it. Having a mental health issue is not a failure. The church is made up of many, each with an important role to play (1 Corinthians 12:12–27). The church needs to be proactive in saying, “You're welcome here. You're wanted here. You're loved here.” The church should be leading the charge to overcome the stigma that is attached to certain mental health issues, not reinforcing it with bad theology.
4. How many of you have received classic “dad advice” when you've fallen off your bike or had some other scuffle? Things like, “Rub some dirt in it, you'll be fine!” or “Suck it up, buttercup!” Tough love comes in lots of clichéd phrases. While parents may use this to reduce the number of Band-Aids wasted on bloodless boo-boos, it isn't always the best course of treatment.
5. Certain things need professional help. We see early medicinal advice recorded in Scripture (Isaiah 38:21; Ezekiel 47:12; 1 Timothy 5:23). Medicine is not our enemy. There's nothing wrong with praying for recovery from a mental health condition, but we still have to be proactive. We can't “pray away” a mental health condition. We have to get help. And I am living proof of that.
6. When the Little League player breaks an arm sliding into home plate, we don't tell them to go home and just pray about it. We take them to the doctor. When someone is curious about the gospel, we don't send them to the ER. Both doctors and prayer are means of God's work among us, and God uses them in different ways in our lives. We can trust him to guide our health through modern means like therapy and prescription medicine, while also praying for his intervention and strength to sustain us. It doesn't have to be one or the other—it can be both.