Towards a Biblical View of Mental Illness

Responding to 5 Common Myths

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Our Goal Today

• Examine 5 Common Myths about Faith and MH.
  – 3 Common within Faith Communities
  – 2 Common within Mental Health Field

• Explore a Biblical Response
What we mean by mental illness

Mental illness refers to a wide range of mental health conditions - disorders that affect your mood, thinking and behavior. Examples of mental illness include depression, anxiety disorders, schizophrenia, eating disorders and addictive behaviors.

- Mayo Clinic
An ongoing conversation...

Experience
vs.
Extreme State
vs.
Mental Health Struggle
vs.
Mental Illness
Common Myth #1

All Mental Illness is just Demonic Possession
“I think that mental illness stuff – it’s just demonic possession.”

- my friend
THE SIMILARITIES
1 Samuel 16:14, 23

Now the Spirit of LORD departed from Saul, and a harmful spirit from the LORD tormented him...And whenever the harmful spirit from God was upon Saul, David took the lyre and played it with his hand. So Saul was refreshed and was well, and the harmful spirit departed from him.
“The way in which this spirit from Yahweh is described as ‘evil’ is ambiguous. Perhaps the narrator intends us to assume demonic forces, though this would be unusual in early Israelite literature. The term can also mean simply and ‘injurious’ or ‘bad’ spirit, as noted by the NIV translators and may well denote a ‘bad mood’ or ‘gloomy outlook.’ In this way, the spirit from Yahweh represents a foreboding sense that Saul is moving inescapably toward self-annihilation...In this context, the signs of mental illness appear only after Saul’s confrontation with Samuel, at which point Saul’s disobedience is exposed and condemned. (15:10-31)”

Bill T. Arnold, pg. 240
The NIV Application Commentary
1 and 2 Samuel
“For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones... When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons sitting there, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid.”
Many of them said, “He is demon possessed and raving mad. Why listen to him?”
“The charge that Jesus is demon-possessed and raving mad harks back to similar charges earlier in this Gospel (see 7:20; 8:48; 52). In ancient times, insanity and demon possession were frequently linked.”

Andreas J. Kostenberger, pg. 308
Baker Exegetical Commentary on the NT
THE DISTINCTIONS
And David took these words to heart and was much afraid of Achish the king of Gath. So he changed his behavior before them and pretended to be **insane** in their hands and made marks on the doors of the gate and let his spittle run down his beard. Then Achish said to his servants, “Behold, you see the man is **mad**. Why then have you brought him to me? Do I lack **madmen**, that you have brought this fellow to behave as a **madman** in my presence? Shall this fellow come into my house?”
“Not only was Achish gullible, but by his own admission, the city of Gath is so full of crazy men they have no use for any more.”

Bill T. Arnold, pg. 311
The NIV Application Commentary
1 and 2 Samuel
Mark 3:20-22

Mental Health Diagnosis
Then he went home, and the crowd gathered again, so that they could not even eat. And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, “He is out of his mind”

Demonic Possession Diagnosis
And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, “He is possessed by Beelzebul,” and “by the prince of demons he casts out the demons”
“If his family thought he was setting up a new regime, then from a certain point of view their conviction that he was out of his mind was understandable. What Jesus did went well beyond the boundaries of safe and socially acceptable behavior.”

Kernaghan, pg. 79
IVP NT Commentary Series
For such people are false apostles, Are deceitful workers, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants also masquerade as servants of righteousness. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham’s descendants? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.)
ATTACK DOESN’T EQUAL POSSESSION
I Peter 5:8-9

Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.
“Charles believed in an actual devil. This creature does not originate or cause depression. But like a lion drawn to the weakened zebra in the herd, this evil creature derives peculiar pleasure from devouring those who are lame, sick or debilitated.

Zack Eswine, pg. 48-49
Spurgeon’s Sorrows: Realistic Hope for those who Suffer From Depression
“For the past two-and-a-half decades and over several hundred consultations, I’ve helped clergy from multiple denominations and faiths to filter episodes of mental illness — which represent the overwhelming majority of cases — from, literally, the devil’s work. It’s an unlikely role for an academic physician, but I don’t see these two aspects of my career in conflict. The same habits that shape what I do as a professor and psychiatrist — open-mindedness, respect for evidence and compassion for suffering people — led me to aid in the work of discerning attacks by what I believe are evil spirits and, just as critically, differentiating these extremely rare events from medical conditions.”

Robert Gallagher
Board-certified psychiatrist
Professor of clinical psychiatry
New York Medical College
Washington Post, July 2016
What Scripture Reveals

Mental Illness and Demonic Possession, while at times linked by some due to certain similar characteristics, aren’t the same experience.
Compass Point #1

Similarity is Different from Sameness.
Question to Ponder

Q: What do you see as areas of overlap and distinction between mental illness and demonic possession?

Q: In what ways is mental illness connected with “spiritual warfare”?

Q: How do these texts shape how you think about diagnosing people?
Common Myth #2

All Mental Illness is just sin
“I don’t know that a Christian can really be in depression and have no joy. Just read Philippians 4:4.”

- my friend
Philippians 4:4

Rejoice in the Lord always;
again I will say rejoice.
YOU CAN REJOICE AND “KEEP IT REAL”
Psalm 13

How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart?
Psalm 88

I am overwhelmed with troubles and my life draws near to death....

You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths...

I am confined and cannot escape; my eyes are dim with grief...

From my youth I have suffered and been close to death; I have borne your terrors and am in despair...

Darkness is my closest friend.
Charles Spurgeon

“...my spirits were sunken so low that I could weep by the hour like a child, and yet I knew not what I wept for...a kind friend was telling me of some poor old soul living near, who was suffering very great pain, and yet she was full of joy and rejoicing. I was so distressed by the hearing of that story, and felt so ashamed of myself.”

- Sermon – “The Christian’s Heaviness and Rejoicing”
Matthew 26:36-38

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, “Sit here, while I go over there and pray.” And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here and watch with me.”
A PRECONDITION ISN’T ALWAYS A SIN PROBLEM
Deuteronomy 28:28

The LORD will strike you with madness and blindness and confusion of mind...
“Quite involuntarily, unhappiness of mind, depression of spirit, and sorrow of heart will come upon you. You may be without any real reason for grief, and yet may become among the most unhappy of men because, for the time, your body has conquered your soul.”

- “The Saddest Cry from the Cross”
“I find it ironic that any of the rest of us should judge [those with anxiety] for their involuntary symptoms while failing to identify the voluntary habit of worry in our lives.”

Amy Simpson

Anxious: Choosing Faith in a World of Worry
WATCH OUT FOR “CAUSALITY CRAVINGS”
I Corinthians 4:3-5a

“I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore, judge nothing before the appointed time; wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart.”
Job 2:13

Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was.
Job 8:6; 36:11

If you are pure and upright, even now he will rouse himself on your behalf and restore you to your prosperous estate. - Bildad

If they obey and serve him, they will spend the rest of their days in prosperity and their years in contentment. - Elihu
Job 42:7

After the LORD had said these things to Job, he said to Eliphaz the Temanite, “I am angry with you and your two friends because you have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has.”
“Ah!” says one, ‘I used to laugh at Mrs. So-and-so for being nervous; now that I feel the torture myself, I am sorry that I was ever hard on her.’ ‘Ah!’ says another, ‘I used to think of such-and-such a person that he must be a fool to be always in so gloomy a state of mind; but now I cannot help sinking into the same desponding frames, and oh! I would to God that I had been more kind to him!’ Yes, we should feel more for the prisoner if we knew more about his prison.”

- “A Troubled Prayer”
John 9:1-3

As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.”
What Scripture Reveals

One can struggle with their mental health without it being caused by their sin.
Compass Point #2

When all you have is a hammer,
everything is a nail.
Questions to Ponder

Q: When have you been most tempted to call a mental health struggle a sin?

Q: How do you tell the difference between a involuntary pre-condition and a sinful choice?

Q: How do we help our congregations avoid acting like Job’s friends towards those with mental health struggles?
Common Myth #3

Those with Mental Illness ONLY need spiritual help
“I’m taking my daughter to a psychiatrist tomorrow...I didn’t know I could talk about that here.”

- A congregant in my church
I Timothy 5:23

Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses.
Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings.
Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?
“I need medication
AND scripture memorization”.

- Josh
What Scripture Reveals

People with mental illness need spiritual AND physical help.
Compass Point #3

Choose the BOTH/AND over the EITHER/OR.
Question to Ponder

Q: How does our stewardship of our God-given bodies relate to our experience as spiritual beings?

Q: What are the dangers of only paying attention to the spiritual needs of someone with mental health struggles while ignoring their physical needs?
Common Myth #4

People with mental illness ONLY struggle with sickness, not sin
Albert Ellis

“religiosity, to a large degree, essentially is masochism; and both are forms of mental sickness.”
Romans 3:23

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.
I John 1:8

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.
What Scripture Reveals

People with mental illness [like all of us] have spiritual needs and struggles.
Compass Point #4

The Answer is Often...Yes
Question to Ponder

Q: What are the negative consequences of framing people’s behavior only through the lens of sickness?

Q: How do you respond to a person when it seems that both mental health struggles AND sinful patterns are impacting their decisions?
Common Myth #5

Those with mental illness need treatment, not a faith community.
“I’ve never been part of a conversation like this before”.

- Co-Occurring Treatment Provider
Recovery Principles

COMMUNITY

EMPOWERMENT

HOPE
And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.
Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good...All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.
“Going to small group was the last thing I wanted to do...and the thing I needed most”.

- Congregant with Depression
I Peter 5:7

Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.
Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.
Matthew 9:35

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness.
What Scripture Reveals

Faith communities can play a unique role in the lives of people with mental illness.
Compass Point #5

Concrete Community Is Hard to Come By.
Questions to Ponder

Q: What can your faith community do to help people experiencing mental illness inside or outside your congregation?

Q: How can churches and mental health professionals provide complementary support?
Resources

Grace for the Afflicted: A Clinical and Biblical Perspective on Mental Illness by Matthew S. Stanford.

Descriptions and Prescriptions: A Biblical Perspective on Psychiatric Diagnoses and Medications by Michael R. Emlet

Troubled Minds by Amy Simpson

Spurgeon’s Sorrows: Realistic Hope for those who Suffer from Depression by Zack Eswine
Q/A

What questions do you have?