

Sermon outline: mental health

Topic: A Christian response to mental health issues

Main passage: Mark 14:34-36

Other passages: Psalm 34:18, 1 Kings 19:4, Job 3:26, Isaiah 53:3.

[Note: Consider including a trigger warning for people who have experienced suicidal thoughts or are struggling with significant mental illness and give them the opportunity to leave, or give them the heads up the week before.]

Introduction – mental health in Australia

Mental illness is something we don't discuss much in church.

Yet two in five Australians will experience some form of mental illness this year and 44% of us will experience it at some point in our lives.¹ And almost two in five young Australians aged 16-24 had a 12-month mental disorder.²

It's a big issue in our society and it's also something that many people in our church struggle with.

The most common mental illness is anxiety, followed by depression. It also includes things like bi-polar disorder and at its worst can lead to suicide.

Sadly, on average about nine Australians die from suicide every day.³ In fact, suicide is now the leading cause of death for people aged 15-44.⁴

The 18,800 young Australians who completed Mission Australia's 2022 Youth Survey identified mental health as the third-highest issue of national concern among young people.⁵

So what does our loving God have to say about mental illness?

- **Psalm 34:18** - "The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."

This sounds like the sort of issue that God cares about, don't you think? I can't imagine He'd want us just standing idly by either. So let's dig a little deeper to see what the Bible says about it.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2023). National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing: Summary of Results, 2020-22

² Australian Bureau of Statistics (2020-2021). National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing

³ AIHW (2023), Suicide and Self-harm Monitoring Project. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/suicide-self-harm-monitoring/overview/summary>

⁴ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2023) *Deaths in Australia*, AIHW, Australian Government

⁵ Mission Australia Youth Survey 2022. <https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/youthsurvey>

Mental illness has always been part of a fallen world

We live in a fallen world, where sin wages war on our bodies and minds. So it shouldn't come as a surprise that the Bible contains many examples of people suffering from mental anguish.

Even heroes of the faith like Elijah - who wins a tremendous victory over the prophets of Baal, only to fall into a deep depression shortly afterwards – are not immune.

- "I have had enough Lord", he says. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." - **1 Kings 19:4**

Then there is Job, who refuses to turn from God even though he is in great mental suffering over the loss of his livestock, home and family and then being covered in painful sores.

- He says "I have no peace, no quietness; I have no rest, but only turmoil." - **Job 3:26**

Their illness didn't destroy their purpose

If you're someone who thinks that people with mental illness are doomed to unproductive lives and can't contribute in church or society, you couldn't be further from the truth.

Each of these biblical figures continued on with their life purpose, under God.

Even Jesus was tormented by mental anguish as he approached the cross. In the Garden of Gethsemane, he tells his disciples that his "soul is deeply grieved to the point of death". - **Mark 14:34**

This is actually a unique and powerful element of the Christian message - that in Jesus, we have a saviour who completely understands our suffering.

In fact, **Isaiah 53:3** prophesies that Christ would be "a man of suffering, and familiar with pain."

Even though Jesus is overcome by grief, and would prefer to avoid the suffering, he acknowledges that God is in control. Jesus maintains his resolve, praying to God:

- "Abba, Father...everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will." – **Mark 14:36**

Whatever we face in terms of mental illness, Jesus understands our suffering. The Bible tells us that He too travelled this path, yet He did not sin (Hebrews 4:15).

Whether it was Elijah, Job, Naomi, Moses, Daniel or Jesus ... the truth is that despite how they may have felt at the time, God remained close to all of them during their suffering.

Likewise, He is near to all of us today!

How can we help someone we know with mental illness?

Have you ever felt paralysed by anxiety or experienced the depths of despair? Or maybe you know someone else who has? Then you'll also know that it's almost impossible for someone who's in the thick of it to view their circumstances objectively. It's easy for them to lose perspective. God's forgiveness and love can seem totally out of reach to them at such a time.

Mental illness can be a very lonely, isolating experience. Many people feel like they don't have anyone to talk to about these things, or choose to keep it all inside, so taking the step to make yourself available can be really helpful. The very act of spending time with someone can be healing for them.

If they are struggling to speak about it, regularly following up with them and asking them how they're going keeps the door open for them to share. In fact, this is something many of us could be much better at – simply checking in with each other. It can be incredibly valuable, especially for people who may not show any outward signs, but are really struggling on the inside. You may have heard of RU OK day⁶ – it's the same kind of idea.

And when someone does decide to share how they're feeling with you, it's important to patiently listen to what they have to say. Sensitively acknowledge how they are feeling. Even if they describe a total lack of feeling or numbness, it is very real for them!

No matter how well-intentioned, quoting Bible verses like "Do not be anxious about anything" (Philippians 4:6) or "Do not worry about your life" (Luke 12:22) are probably not going to be helpful at this point in time. They can sound like throwaway lines – not much better than saying 'snap out of it'! And the reality is that, failing divine intervention, there are no quick fixes when it comes to mental illness – particularly persistent mental illness or clinical depression. You're not going to be able to solve it for them.

Instead, you could gently remind them of God's amazing love for us. Despite all our flaws – whatever we've thought, said or done – his love never leaves us. Even though we may not feel God's presence or we feel as though we have failed, God loves us with an everlasting love (Jeremiah 31:3).

The right support for your friend will involve much more than you can offer yourself, so let them know that you're here for them, but encourage them to seek help, starting with their GP. A GP can develop a Mental Health Treatment Plan, that may include referrals to a psychologist or other specialists with access to Medicare rebates. You could of course also pray with them and if they feel unable to pray, offer to pray for them.

Mental illness is complex and the recovery process can be long and unpredictable. So you also need to look after yourself. Amy Simpson, author of 'Troubled Minds: Mental Illness and the Church's Mission', gives 3 tips for people wanting to help a loved one struggling with mental illness:

- 1. Firstly, don't try and do it on your own.** Supporting someone with mental illness can be much more emotionally draining than you initially realise, especially in situations of serious, prolonged illness. Pray and be honest with God about your own suffering, ask him for strength and wisdom to persevere.
- 2. Secondly, find other people to help you.** This can be tricky because the person you are supporting may not want their condition to be known and may not be ready to seek help. Speak to [the person/team responsible for pastoral care] for pastoral care

⁶ <https://www.ruok.org.au/how-to-ask>

support and consider reaching out to local support groups or online forums for carers.

- 3. Thirdly, stay spiritually strong yourself.** For many people, mental illness doesn't fit what they thought the Christian life should be. They feel that God doesn't have answers for them - but He does. Your own spiritual health and strength gives you the patience and confidence to lovingly walk alongside someone who is suffering.

(INSERT PERSONAL STORY OR USE KELLY'S STORY BELOW)

Kelly's* life was turned upside down as a teenager when her father died. Her mother took it very hard. In time she found a new partner, but within two years he also passed away suddenly. This broke Kelly's mother, and tragically she poured out all her pain and anger on Kelly.

Life at home became worse and worse. Kelly was eventually kicked out of home by her mother, who became increasingly abusive. Kelly was 18 at the time and had nowhere to go.

She ended up living in an old caravan in the front yard of a friend's house. The van was in bad shape, with a hole in the floor that Kelly covered over with a rug. After a few weeks she was asked to move on from her friend's yard, so Kelly had the caravan moved out onto the street.

Eventually Kelly reached out for help, and Mission Australia provided her with crisis accommodation immediately. At the beginning, Kelly was frightened, depressed and very upset. Early on she would throw child-like tantrums, but in time grew to trust and respect the people helping her. She said our case workers were the first people who had listened to her in years.

Her attitude continued to improve. With our support, Kelly completed a series of education and employment workshops and secured a part-time job at a supermarket. She's since moved into transitional accommodation and has started a new full-time job.

Incredibly, Kelly has also reached out to her mother to try to rebuild their relationship, and the early stages of this have been promising.

*Name changed to protect the identity of the person Mission Australia helped.

Three ways you can support people with mental illness more generally

- 1. PRAY:** pray for those suffering with mental illness and for those working actively to help them. Pray for organisations such as Mission Australia that worked with over 4,021 people in 2021-22 through 33 mental health services.

Sign up to receive Mission Australia's prayer diary at missionaustralia.com.au/prayer

2. **VOLUNTEER:** There are many ways to help, from simply offering a smile and warm conversation to giving of your time and talents to bless others. You could offer to read the Bible, pray, and encourage someone suffering from mental illness. Or your church could serve alongside a Christian service organisation like Mission Australia.

For ideas, go to missionaustralia.com.au/churches

3. **GIVE:** Give of your finances to support the work of God in this area. As Jesus said in **Matthew 25:35** *For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in.*

This could be through your local church's ministries or you can donate to Mission Australia securely online at missionaustralia.com.au or by phoning 1800 88 88 68.

Know someone who needs help?

In an immediate crisis, call the relevant number below:

- If their life is in danger, they should call 000
- Lifeline (for 24 hr counselling call 13 11 14 or chat overnight at lifeline.org.au)
- Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people in crisis can call **13YARN** on **13 92 76**. This service is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
- Suicide Call Back Service (for 24 hr phone and online counselling call 1300 659 467 or suicidecallbackservice.org.au).

Otherwise the best starting point is their GP, who can develop a Mental Health Treatment Plan and provide referrals to specialist support services.

General information and helpful links to other mental health support services are available at: healthdirect.gov.au/mental-health-where-to-get-help

Mission Australia's mental health services are available at missionaustralia.com.au/find-support.