

A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE OF MENTAL HEALTH AND MENTAL ILLNESS

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Outline

- Secular concept of the human being
- Christian concept of body, soul and spirit
- Religion and mental health
- How do Christians view mental health and mental illness?

1. SECULAR CONCEPT OF THE HUMAN BEING

“Psychiatry, like every branch of western medicine, takes a mechanistic view of the human being. The human body is simply a wonderful piece of machine, working under the direction of the brain. It is the neural activity of the brain which generates consciousness, while emotional stresses have their impact by indirectly influencing brain chemistry. Since all mental function is considered to be a product of brain chemistry, it follows that what we call the mind is produced by the brain. Before each of us was born, there was nothing; when we die, consciousness disappears forever. There is no place for the metaphysical soul. This does not preclude a spirituality based on the desire to do good and to act with compassion.” *Dr. Andrew Powell*

Metaphysics: the branch of philosophy that deals with the first principles of things, including abstract concepts such as being, knowing, identity, time, and space. *Oxford Dictionary*

2. CHRISTIAN CONCEPT OF BODY, SOUL, AND SPIRIT

i. Theologians argue over whether man consists of body and soul (dichotomy) or body, soul and spirit (trichotomy). In parts of the Bible, the soul and spirit are used interchangeably, but elsewhere, there is a distinction between the body, soul and spirit, for example:

May God Himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thessalonians 5:23).

For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart (Hebrews 4:12, NIV).

ii. The threefold nature of man might be illustrated using three circles (Clarence Lakin):

- The outer circle stands for the **body** of man: this relates to our sense of the material world – sight, smell, hearing, taste, touch
- The middle circle for the **soul**: this relates to such concrete, but non-physical, things like imagination, conscience, memory, reason, affections
- The inner circle for the **spirit**: this relates to our spiritual faculties - faith, hope, reverence, prayer, worship. In short, the sphere of God-consciousness

The material body ceases to survive death; the spirit and soul are eternal.

iii. The word 'mind' is not used in the same pathological terms as in modern medicine. In the New Testament, the Greek word for mind is used in a range of contexts, including talking about moral inclination, the means of understanding and the means of determining action. The mind is seen in a number of places as being critical in aiding or hindering our relationship with God.

iv. The Christian focus is clear with respect to mental health and welfare:

- The Bible focuses on relationships:
 - human beings reach their fullness of being only in relationship with God and other human beings
 - beneath the difficulties relating to parents, families, children and the workplace, there is often a painful lack of, and searching for, core spiritual values
- There needs to be a significant focus on the spiritual as well as the physical element of human existence. To deny the reality of this is to fail to understand mental health and, therefore, fail to treat or heal the whole person

3. RELIGION AND MENTAL HEALTH

i. Religion and Wellbeing: Assessing the Evidence (2016)

The report examined nearly 140 academic studies to analyse the underlying relationship between religion and wellbeing. The conclusions:

- Religion is good for people's mental (and physical) wellbeing
- In particular, ***“the more serious, genuinely held and practically-evidenced a religious commitment is, then the greater the positive impact it is likely to have on wellbeing”***
- There is a particularly strong correlation between good mental health and participation in group religious activities (i.e. those who are not only religious but take those beliefs seriously).

ii. There is a biological and immunological basis to the positive outcome from religious beliefs and practices (e.g. prayer) (*Andrew Powell, 2002*).

iii. Religious belief aids resilience in responding to traumatic events and leads to faster recovery from mental health problems (*Theos, 2017*).

Discord ('spirituality gap') between secular healthcare workers and patients

- Many people going through acute mental distress turn to their spiritual and religious beliefs to help them cope
- Patients with mental health issues want their spiritual and religious needs addressed within the medical and care sectors, but secular bodies appear to be wary, hesitant, or even hostile about embracing such opportunities
- Many healthcare professionals have difficulty in taking religion, as opposed to simply spirituality, seriously

4. HOW DO CHRISTIANS VIEW MENTAL HEALTH AND MENTAL ILLNESS?

Discussion (10 minutes): How do you, and your church, view mental health and mental health problems?

Generally, mental illness is viewed in different ways:

i. Chemical, genetic and biological in nature

Many Christians take a largely mechanistic view, very much in line with secular thinking on illness. They accept that human beings are spiritual as well as physical. However, mental illness should be treated as a medical problem. In this view, we need to avoid ascribing anything or everything to spiritual causes when other medical ones may exist.

Some Christians view the accounts of demonic possession in the New Testament as simply examples of mental illness. In fact, this is by no means clear cut, and the symptoms of those possessed in the New Testament (e.g. Mark 5:4-5) do not necessarily match up well with what we know of mental illness (*Theos, 2017*). Further, we cannot deny Jesus' teaching on demonic possession nor His casting them out by His supernatural power, without seriously denying the trustworthiness of the Bible. He also commanded his disciples to cast out demons.

ii. Of Satanic origin – demonic possession or spiritual oppression

In this view, the person is thought to have been taken over by a demon (or demons) which need to be cast out (or exorcised) by God's power; this often require the services of a religious person specially gifted by God or empowered in the Holy Spirit. Even if not actual demonic possession, there may be spiritual oppression by either dark forces or inner forces which enslave the sufferer. This requires release by supernatural power.

C S Lewis in 'The Screwtape Letters':

'There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves (the devils) are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight.'

There is a third error – excessive fear of the devil and evil spirits. You see this in non-Western continents, especially in animistic cultures.

iii. Spiritual cause

There is a common perception that mental health problems are a sign of personal weakness or due to some spiritual discord (lack of faith, sinful disobedience, poor commitment, lack of Biblical understanding). In this view, if we can get a person right spiritually, these problems will disappear. Interestingly, many studies indicate that mental health in the clergy is a major concern – e.g. stress, depression, anxiety.

There is the danger of over-spiritualizing, and ascribing anything and everything to spiritual causes; there may be a good physical reason. On the other hand, we must not discount the possibility. What we need to be careful of is the danger of people with mental health problems being advised to go off their medication because they've been told that prayer is enough, and relapsing as a result. Non-compliance with medicines is extremely common with mental health patients.

Final thoughts

- Need wisdom from the Lord. 'Give to Caesar what is Caesar's; give to God what is God's'. A medical and physical check is always worth it, to discount any other obvious physical cause (which can be treated or managed medically).
- Spiritual alienation from God does lead to inward discord
- Ultimately, full healing - physical, emotional and spiritual, can only come from God the other side of eternity.

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