



# Suffering, healing and mental health

Most church communities differ in their understanding of the theology of suffering and healing. Even when they subscribe to a particular doctrinal view, their specific experience of suffering and healing will affect this direction. As a result, there are some churches that belong to a denomination with a very strong faith healing model and others that are much more cautious about what they anticipate will happen this side of heaven.

Whilst we may look to the Bible to solve these particular tensions, we see a very mixed picture there, too. Some verses appear to offer us the power to pronounce complete healing, while others suggest that suffering and pain will continue to be our reality. Leaders typically tend to focus on the verses that support their experience, rather than living in the tension of uncertainty.

## Some faith considerations

### Weakness and illness

Many mental health issues are spiritualised rather than simply acknowledged. Anxiety becomes 'fear', depression becomes a 'lack of faith', eating disorders are 'thanklessness' and psychotic illnesses 'demonic attacks'. Of course this is paradoxical when we look at physical illness, which the Bible often links to spiritual sources and yet we approach without sinister assumptions. Many mental health conditions have organic origins; that is they are actually structural, or chemically orientated. It is essential that we lay down prejudices based on the symptoms we see, rather than the causes we do not see.

### Timing and cycling

Many mental health issues persist long term (chronic illnesses). Others cycle through seasons of wellness and illness with regularity. When we are considering healing and suffering, we need to be very sensitive about what healing looks like. Is there a place in our communities for people who do not 'get better' and is there a place for people who appear to have been healed, before suffering in the same way all over again?

### Isolation and participation

Spiritual maturity in many churches is graded on levels of involvement (often termed commitment). However, there are many people within our churches suffering from mental health issues for whom only the lightest level of involvement is possible. This does not denote a lack of faith or commitment, and any involvement at all should be fully celebrated.



# Suffering, healing and mental health

Inversely, there are people who suffer from mental health issues in our churches who are actively discouraged from participation because their illness is attributed to spiritual deficiency, or simply misunderstood. As a result, many can find their suffering compounded either through enforced isolation or barriers to their participation.

## Medication and therapy

Many individuals with mental health issues require drug based treatments and psychological therapies. Prejudices against these sorts of interventions in some church settings mean that people can be dissuaded from receiving the appropriate treatment for them. In the worst examples, this can lead to significant relapse and even pose a threat to life. We have no objection to using paracetamol which masks our pain by turning off receptors in our brains, yet we disallow others appropriate treatments on exactly the same basis.

We would encourage all leaders to be fully supportive of the recommendations of NHS doctors and psychiatrists and give general endorsement of the use of such treatments to the wider church community.

## Seeing the biblical mandate for suffering

Acknowledging the breadth of the biblical picture on the issue of emotional and mental health can revolutionise the spiritual experience of those who are currently suffering. It is helpful, for example, to recognise that biblical heroes Moses, Elijah and Paul were so distressed that they considered suicide (Numbers 11:15, 1 Kings 19:4, Philippians 1:20-26). Jacob, Job and David all experienced what we would describe as depression (Genesis 37:35, Job 3:11 and Psalm 38:6). Even Jesus expressed the full spectrum of human emotion, including anger, distress and sorrow – just think of his cry of desolation on the cross. And as we know from Paul, healing was not always available to even the most faith filled saint (2 Corinthians 12).

## Living in the valley of shadows

What about us today? Despite all the biblical examples to the contrary, sometimes we are given the impression that a good Christian is a happy Christian.

Have a look at what happened after Elijah's amazing victory on Mount Carmel. In 1 Kings 19, Elijah runs for his life, hides away and is so low that he asks God to let him die. He's had enough. God deals with his practical needs, treats him gently and provides someone else (Elisha) to serve and support him, and ultimately carry on his work. Many of us empathise with that part of Elijah's character. God speaks to Elijah in a whisper – he treats this fragile man gently.



# Suffering, healing and mental health



## BE CAUTIOUS

Think through the implications of simplistic ideas behind a lack of mental healing:

- You say: 'It's God's will not to heal you.'  
**They hear: 'God actually delights in my suffering and pain: God must be evil.'**
- You say: 'It's your lack of faith.'  
**They hear: 'It is my fault I'm unwell; now I'm also a spiritual failure.'**
- You say: 'There may be hidden sin in your life.'  
**They hear: 'I am completely worthless and flawed.'**

If it doesn't sound like grace, it probably isn't grace.

## Healing

Healing is a controversial subject. After all, what can we expect from God when we pray for healing?

Some Christians believe that God would not allow people to remain with chronic or permanent conditions, or ill health, if he is a good God (in which case he wouldn't want their predicament to continue) or if he is a powerful God (in which case he could do what he wanted to).

## A normal life?

Sometimes we have an idea of what a normal person should be and we try to restore them to our view of what is normal, rather than accepting them for who they are. In fact, praying for them to be healed might be seen as our rejecting them.

Praying for someone to be healed takes wisdom and sensitivity. God works in his own time, in his own way. Just because we are praying for somebody in a Sunday service doesn't mean that God has to respond or do what we are asking for.

This world is not the world God wants for us. What God wants for us is the new world that lies ahead, where there will be no suffering: a world whose very existence owes itself to the suffering and resurrection of Christ. In our current world, even Jesus himself experienced suffering.

## Praying for a cure

When we pray for somebody who is very depressed or is experiencing other trauma, we want his or her depression to go away. If we pray and it doesn't, it means that more might be expected of us than the prayer - for instance in friendship or practical support. Instead, sadly, the opposite sometimes happens. People are burdened with the impression that if they are not healed, it could be due to:

- sin in their life that is blocking the healing
- not having enough faith to enable the healing
- lack of desire to be healed.

But is healing the same as cure? In the Bible, the word often used for healing is the same word as for salvation (*soteria*), which is why Jesus forgave sins on many occasions when he healed people. Jesus was showing that there is a greater salvation than just restoration of the body.



# Suffering, healing and mental health

Even when we suffer, we do so knowing that the new world is coming. We look forward in hope to a new society and a new body.

In John 9, the man 'born blind' refused to be defined by his blindness. Others wanted to see him as a sinner, asking: 'Who sinned, this man or his parents?' Jesus did not accept the view that there was a link between sin and impairment but said that God wanted to do something wonderful through this man.

## God wants to use us and be seen in us

When we pray for healing, we need to remember that healing is always on offer by God as he seeks to draw us deeper into his salvation, but that cure may not be the answer to our prayers. This is not the failure of our prayers; it means that just as God used a fragile man like Elijah, he uses all of us, whatever our impairment, to bring about his glory. Perhaps we need to be more imaginative in how we pray and in what we look for as an answer.

We also need to remember that prayer is not magic and that the Christian life is not about always being 'happy'. The suffering Christ comes close to us when we suffer as the one with the wounds still in his hands.

## ⇒ Helpful links

To find out what to say/not say:

⇒ <http://tinyurl.com/16-things-article>

Watch good intentions gone wrong:

⇒ <http://tinyurl.com/the-clots-guide-video>

Understand long term suffering:

⇒ <http://tinyurl.com/long-term-suffering-mp3>

Read about hope in chronic suffering:

⇒ <http://tinyurl.com/finding-hope-article>