

It's OK not to be OK

As I type, we are in Mental Health Awareness Week 2021, and there has never been a time when we have been so aware of its importance. As a child, I would overhear whispered conversations about people who 'suffered with their nerves', but it was never something that was discussed openly, rather a source of shame or embarrassment. Men, traditionally the stronger sex, have often seen it as a sign of weakness to admit to feeling sad or in low spirits. Yet one in four of us will experience mental health problems each year, and rarely a day goes by without us hearing of someone suffering in this way, especially since Covid-19. Our young people seem particularly affected by the isolation from friends, lack of sense of purpose and disrupted education caused by the pandemic.

It can be difficult for those who have lived stoically through a war or other trauma, to empathise with those who have spent a year in a warm peacetime house with lots of free time and yet still feel depressed. There are also those whose personality types do not predispose them to anxiety, in the same way that others' genetic makeup means they are unlikely to suffer from, say, digestive symptoms. In a Christian context, those experiencing mental health difficulties in the past may have been advised to pray about it or read their bible more, tactics likely to add to the pressure and guilt. Thankfully, these attitudes are on their way out; the sooner the better.

Another attitude has been to treat mental ill-health as a medical problem, and it is true that for many, modern medication can literally be a life saver. The chemistry of the brain can be altered to alleviate extreme 'lows' for some, but for under-funded and over-stretched mental health services, prescribing drugs can be used as a sole line of defence, treating the symptoms but not the cause. Yet waiting lists for skilled practitioners of 'talking therapies' are long, and growing longer by the day.

Although Christians do not make any claims to be therapists, there is something we in the church can do to help. As followers of Jesus we do not subscribe to a system that values people primarily for their economic productivity, their race or their sex. We see that loneliness and isolation will wound people, whereas being in relationships of mutual valuing and nurturing will build them up. We recognise the vital importance of rest, forgiveness and being there however long we are needed.

Christians, including leaders, have their ups and downs as often as anyone, yet knowing that we belong to a large family, where we are valued simply as human beings, means that the love of God and each other can begin to smooth away some of the turmoil and distress. Being available, vulnerable, giving of our time to listen to each other without coming up with what we think is the answer is a gift we are learning, slowly, to give. For a wearied, worried and anxious culture, Jesus' voice in Matthew 11: 28 – 30 still beckons to us all;

"Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."

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