
Mental Health Sunday
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
May 7, 2023
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on 1 Peter 2:2-10 and John 14:1-14

Today, we celebrate Mental Health Sunday. And I'm sure you all came today because of that topic, not because we have a lasagna party after service. Am I right?

But before we even begin, what does the term "mental health" mean. Because I notice that there are a few terms that we throw around as if they are the same thing.

Consider these terms:

[image: terms below]

- Mental Health
- Mental Illness
- Mental Wellness

"Mental Health" refers to a person's general state of psychological and emotional well-being. We all have mental health. It's like physical health ... except about our emotions and intellect. Our mental health may be great, or it may be fragile, but we all have mental health.

Mental Illness is a condition diagnosed by a qualified healthcare professional.

Mental wellness means that our mental health is generally good.

In reality of course, mental illness and mental wellness are not black and white terms. We all have a certain amount of mental illness. All of us. And we all have a certain amount of mental wellness. All of us. And if you do suffer from mental illness, that does not define who you are. It is simply one aspect of who you are. But in common language, the terms are often used as if they are black and white, yes / no terms, which can be confusing and hurtful.

We often mix those words up too. The United Church of Canada suggests that this

Sunday is “Mental Health Sunday”, but many of the UCC resources I read for this week would fit better in a Sunday that celebrates “Mental Illness” Sunday. And in our society, I often see the words used in mixed ways. And perhaps that is because at some level we do not want to talk about mental health at all.

[image: mental health]

And that is perhaps the most obvious and largest stigma around mental health. That in conversation we often completely fail to talk about mental health when it matters. It took a pandemic before mental health came seriously on the radar of the United Church of Canada. But better late than never, right? And there is no doubt that the pandemic changed our whole landscape when it comes to mental health.

Many people believe a number of misconceptions about mental health. And our failure to talk about mental health as a society only contributes to making this worse. Therefore in this service where we will speak freely about mental health, mental illness and mental wellness. And I hope that the conversation continues over coffee time and throughout the coming weeks.

There are two very popular misconceptions about mental illness that go hand in hand. One is that mental illness is the fault of the person who is suffering. And two, that since it is the person’s fault, they should just “get over it”. Those ideas are simply wrong. People do not choose to have mental illness. Imagine telling someone with a broken leg that it’s all in their mind? Imagine telling someone with cancer that they should just get over it? We would never do that. But we often do that with people who suffer from mental illness.

These two misconceptions are exacerbated by 2 things. For one thing, in most cases, mental illnesses are largely invisible. You can see a broken leg. At least you can certainly see a cast on a broken leg. But usually you cannot see mental illness. The other contributor to these misconceptions is ... from the Bible. And we will come to that a bit later.

Another popular misconception is that mental illnesses need to be extreme before people should consider treatment. But even seemingly “minor” mental illnesses have a huge impact on people and society. This week the US surgeon general said, “There is an

ailment linked to increased heart attacks, depression, diabetes, crime and premature death in the US, and it's affecting people no matter where they live or who they are:

loneliness".¹ According to one source, mental illness costs \$200 billion in lost wages annually in the US². And much of that is because of "minor" mental illnesses like isolation, and loneliness. With mental health, even small issues are important.

Another misconception is that people with mental illness are often violent. This perception leads to fear and even greater isolation. But there is no real correlation between mental illness and violence. This misconception seems to come from the fact that news headlines often connect mental illness with violent crimes. Headlines are designed to shock us of course. Certainly, some violent crimes are caused by people experiencing mental illness. But as a rule it is simply not the case.

These misconceptions of mental illness - along with other factors - allow stigmas to be invented. Which create needless barriers between people that only increase our sense of separation and isolation. In other words, stigmas around mental illness contribute to even greater mental illness.

Here's a fun social experiment you can try on your friends and loved ones. If you tell someone that they look sad and you will likely get a warm response. But try telling someone that they look like a narcissist and they will probably reply with open hostility. They may even say, "don't diagnose me!". But even saying that a person looks sad is a diagnosis. Mental health is a tough subject to talk about.

So we should at least be grateful that the United Church is trying to raise awareness about mental health. For one thing - as I've said - the topic is too often ignored in our society. But I am very pleased that the church is talking about this because Christianity and the church have not historically been very considerate to people who suffer with mental illness. Part of that springs directly from the Bible of course.

In the days when the Bible was written, what today we would call mental illness was attributed to one of 2 things: either the person was inhabited by a demon, or else the person was being punished because of a sin they had committed. Either explanation was a

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/may/02/us-surgeon-general-warning-loneliness>

² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gy1iH_Gxn0Q

moral judgment on the person. So in short, the Bible affirms that if a person has a mental illness, it is their own fault. And moreover, that they can solve the problem themselves by “getting right with God”. Those ideas are simply not helpful today. The church blindly adopted these attitudes, with tragic results. I wonder how many people over the centuries were burned at the stake because they suffered from mental illness?

Seeing mental illness as a moral judgment is an overt problem in the Bible. But there is another hidden problem in the Bible for any serious discussions about mental health. Did you notice anything in our readings this morning that relates to mental health? You didn't think I forgot about those readings, did you?

Our reading from 1 Peter encapsulates it perfectly. However, the defective thinking is found in other places in the Bible too. In 1 Peter 2 we read, “Others stumble because they disobey the word ... but you are a chosen race ... God's own people.” Well, that sounds innocuous, right?

The idea that God has “chosen people” is littered throughout the Bible. Today of course, the idea of “chosen people” is called racism. And the God that I believe in is not racist.

Now - I hear you saying - what does that have to do with mental illness? This might be a bridge too far, but here is the connection that I see.

Humans are very good at “othering” people who are different. Whether it's racism, sexism, classism, ageism, or our ability to isolate people we think of as different. We are good at othering those suffering from mental illness, those who are incarcerated, and other distinctions that we pretend matter.

That desire to “other” people who are different is what drives the childish idea of “chosen people” in the first place. It's not just racist. It's a reinforcement of the idea that my in-group is right, and everyone else is wrong.

You might think that I'm overstating the case. And maybe I am. I'm not sure at this point - which is why I want to continue this discussion over coffee time. But I have met many people who won't come into this church because they think they are not “normal” enough. That they will not be accepted here. That they will not be seen as “good enough”. That they will be seen as outsiders even if they come in. And that is not

just in their imaginations.

[image: abby normal]

Our society - and our church - tries to force people to fit into “normal” or “abnormal”. The idea of “chosen people” reinforces the false believe what WE are normal and everyone else is ... well, let’s just say that they do not go to the good place.

[image: good place]

I reject the idea of normal. And I think that Jesus did too.

In our reading from John 14 today, what do you think of the line, “In my father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also”.

What do you think of the idea that “In my father’s house there are many dwelling places”. What does that make you think of?

[image: suburbs]

Do you think of a cookie-cutter suburban landscape where there are many dwellings, and they are all identical to each other?

[image: different houses]

Or do you think that there are many dwelling places because they are all as radically different as each of us are?

I like to use that reading at funerals. Particularly at funerals for people in the community who were not connected to any church at all. Because when I read those words, the image in my mind is that there are many different types of dwelling places.

And the dwellings are different because we are all different. And I like to emphasize during those funerals that we do not all have to fit the same mould in order to be loved by God. Because different is ok. Even if your difference is that you suffer from mental illness. Different is ok. You are ok here.

[image: mental health]

So what strategies can we use to reduce stigma about mental illness? Great question. Here is what ChatGPT has to say on the subject:

“Reducing stigma about mental illness requires a combination of individual and societal efforts. Here are some suggestions:

[image: educate yourself]

- Educate yourself and others: Learn about mental illnesses and their impact on individuals and society. Share this knowledge with others to help them understand the realities of mental health.

[image: talk openly]

- Talk openly about mental health: Encourage open and honest conversations about mental health to reduce stigma and raise awareness. By talking about mental health, you can help others feel more comfortable seeking help and reduce the shame associated with mental illness.

[image: use positive language]

- Use positive language: Use positive, respectful language when discussing mental health and avoid using negative or stigmatizing language.

[image: challenge stereotypes]

- Challenge stereotypes: Challenge stereotypes about mental illness by sharing positive stories of recovery and resilience. This can help combat negative stereotypes and myths that contribute to stigma.

[image: support people]

- Support people with mental illness: Show support and empathy for people with mental illness. Offer to listen and provide practical support, such as helping someone find mental health resources or accompanying them to appointments.

[image: advocate for change]

- Advocate for change: Advocate for policies and practices that support mental health and reduce stigma. This could include supporting mental health services and funding research into mental illness.

Remember that reducing stigma around mental illness is an ongoing process and requires sustained effort from individuals and society as a whole.

[image: mental health]

And what should you do if you yourself struggle with mental health?

If you're struggling with your mental health, it's important to know that you are not alone, and that there is help available to you. Here are some steps you can take to start taking care of your mental health:

[image: reach out]

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- Reach out for support: This can be to a trusted friend or family member, a mental health professional such as a therapist or counsellor, or a support group. Sometimes just talking to someone can make a huge difference.

[image: take care of physical]

- Take care of your physical health: Your mental health is closely tied to your physical health, so taking care of your body can have a positive impact on your mind. This includes eating a healthy diet, getting regular exercise, and getting enough sleep.

[image: practice self-care]

- Practice self-care: Make time for activities that bring you joy and relaxation, such as reading, meditating, or taking a warm bath. It's important to prioritize your own needs and take time to recharge.

[image: use coping strategies]

- Develop coping strategies: Learn healthy ways to manage stress and difficult emotions. This can include deep breathing, mindfulness, or journaling.

[image: consider medication]

- Consider medication: In some cases, medication can be helpful in treating mental health conditions. Talk to a mental health professional about whether medication may be right for you.

Remember, taking care of your mental health is a journey, and it's okay to ask for help along the way. Don't hesitate to reach out for support, and know that with time and effort,

things can get better.” And never hesitate to reach out to me if you have concerns about mental health. I provide direct support to people and also help people find professional help if needed.

[image: mental health]

Find a safe community where you can be yourself and where you can be honest. That community might be a small circle of friends, or - in my dreams - it might be this church. In any case, find or create a space where you can be yourself.

And remember. You are not alone. Now, let’s see how we can extend this discussion over coffee time today.

Amen.