Mental Health Sunday
Chapel in the Park United Church
May 4, 2025
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Luke 8:26-39 and John 14:1-14

Today, we celebrate Mental Health Sunday. 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 as 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 we-being. We all have mental health. It's like physical health … except about our emotional and cognitive dimensions. 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. In common language, the terms are often used as if they are black and white, yes / no terms, which can be confusing and sometimes hurtful.

In reality, our own mental health is a lot like our physical health. None of us are 100% mentally healthy. None of us are 0% mentally healthy. We all exist somewhere in between. And if you do suffer from a specific mental illness, that does not define who you are. It is simply one aspect of who you are.

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 onto the radar of the United Church of Canada. 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 both simply wrong. People do not choose to have a mental illness. Imagine telling someone with a broken leg that they are just faking to get attention? Imagine telling someone with cancer that it can't be all that bad, really? We would never do those things. But we often do that with people who suffer from mental health.

These two misconceptions are exacerbated by two things. For one thing, in many cases, mental health issues are largely invisible. You can see a broken leg. At least you can certainly see a cast on a broken leg. But often, we cannot see a mental health issue. The other contributor to these misconceptions is … from the Bible. And we will come to that in a bit.

Another popular misconception is that mental health need to be extreme before people should consider taking it seriously. But even seemingly "minor" mental health issues can have a huge impact on people and society as a whole. In 2023 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]. Loneliness was called an ailment!

According to one source, mental health issues cost $200 billion in lost wages annually in the US[2]. And much of that is because of "minor" mental health issues like

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[1] ttps://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/may/02/us-surgeon-general-warning-loneliness

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

isolation and loneliness. With mental health, even seemingly small issues can be very important.

Another misconception is that people with mental illnesses are violent. This perception leads to fear and even greater isolation. But there is no real correlation between mental illness and violence.

Sadly, some violent crimes are caused by people experiencing mental illness, like the tragedy in Vancouver last weekend. In that case, a person struggling with mental illness intentionally drove though a Filipino Lapu-Lapu street celebration, killing 11 people and wounding dozens. These things do happen. But it is not generally true that mental illness leads to violent behaviour.

I attended the prayer vigil for the victims of that tragedy @ Nathan Philips Square on Tuesday. A number of the speakers spoke about mental health. Many of them said that "mental illness might be a reason, but it is never an excuse". Some of the speakers challenged our political leaders to invest more in helping people with mental illness, instead of what we do today which is - largely - to leave them to their own devices.

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.

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.

In the days when the Bible was written, what we now call mental illness was often attributed either to demon possession or to punishment for personal sin - both of which amounted to moral judgment. The message was clear: if you're suffering, it's your own fault, and you can fix it by "getting right with God." These ideas are not helpful today, yet the church adopted them uncritically, with tragic consequences. Many people over the centuries - especially during the witch hunts - were persecuted, even burned at the stake,

simply because their behavior was not understood. Mental illness was mistaken for evil, and the results were devastating. Today, we're called to do better - to meet mental illness not with blame, but with compassion, understanding, and care.

And there is a another hidden problem in the Bible for any serious discussion 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?

Well, I selected both readings today because they relate to mental health. Not that the authors would have understood it that way at the time.

Consider our story from Luke. We often call this story "Jesus heals the demoniac". In the story, a man who is possessed by demons has been rejected and ejected by his own community. They had decided that the man was not fit to live with them. This is of course very biblical, and the villagers were simply following the detailed and divisive so called "purity laws" found in the Old Testament and in other places. Since the people were raising pigs, the local community likely consisted of both Jewish people and non-Jewish people. But the very human ideas behind purity laws are much older than Judaism in any case.

Purity laws essentially said that any physical or mental defect was grounds for exclusion from the community. In this way, the community can remain "pure" by the simple expedient of kicking the "rejects" our of the village. And so the man with the demons was ejected from his village, and lived by himself in the tombs. And before we pass judgement on that practice, we should realize that Jesus uses the same approach himself in this story. Jesus does not fix the demons, or heal the demons, or invite the demons to consider turning over a new leaf. Jesus simply ejects them. Jesus heals the man - purifies him - by the simple expedient of kicking the demons out. Jesus does to the demons exactly what the villagers had done to the man. Because even Jesus did not understand mental health.

Well - that's human nature for you. It's very natural to believe that if we eliminate the bad, we will be left with the good. It's very easy to believe that if we get rid of the people who are not like us, we will be left with the perfect community. It's very natural to believe that if we eliminate the things we hate in other people (or eliminate the people

themselves), that we will have a perfect, loving, community.

The authors of the Bible did not understand mental health. But people have not really changed. Today, many people fear people who are struggling with mental health. And that is exactly what happened in our story in Luke.

Personally, I feel pity for the villagers. I feel pity for the villagers because they are living in fear. Before our story begins, the man with demons has been excluded - kicked out - of his village. The villagers kicked him out because they were afraid of him. Then, even while the man is living in the tombs, the villagers live in fear both for the man's own life and for his impact on the community. And after the man is healed, the villagers experience even greater fear - fear of Jesus and his actions, fear of Jesus for destroying the status quo. Fear of having their economy destroyed through the destruction of their livestock. Fear of Jesus's ability to restore the "unclean" to society, a violation of both the status quo and the "purity laws".

I pity anyone who lives in fear. And many people today still live in fear because of mental health. Their own, or someone else's.

Purity laws are based on the silly idea that we should all be similar to each other. People who are different, or strange should be excluded or at least shunned.

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 look like to you?

[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 these dwelling places are all unique. The dwellings are 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. 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. "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 sometimes 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 help is available. Here are some steps you can take to start taking care of your mental health:

[image: reach out]

- 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.

[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 or friends, or - in my dreams - it might be this church. In any case, find or create a space where you can be yourself. We all deserve that.

And remember. You are not alone.

Amen.