

## Why Mental Illness Is Not A Sin

(in 1000 words or less)

*Do you think the brain is an organ like the other organs in the body?* Though obviously different, the brain is similar to the other organs of the body, such as the heart. Scientists and doctors affirm that the brain is the most complicated organ in our body:

- The brain is the most complex organ in the body<sup>i</sup>
- The is the most complex organ in the human body. It produces our every thought, action, memory, feeling and experience of the world. <sup>ii</sup>
- Here's something to wrap your mind around: The human brain is more complex than any other known structure in the universe<sup>iii</sup>

Therefore, just as any organ can get sick, be injured, or be damaged, so can the brain. The brain can have aneurisms or cancer. The brain can be injured and thereafter function abnormally. Faulty brain chemistry also greatly affects mental health. This is why people suffering from depression, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia can find relief and healing through medications that help the body restore necessary body chemicals.

It is a myth that personality weakness or character flaws are the causes of mental illness or that people with mental health problems can snap out of it if they try hard enough.

**Fact:** Mental health problems have nothing to do with being lazy or weak and many people need help to get better. Many factors contribute to mental health problems, including:

- Biological factors, such as genes, physical illness, injury, or brain chemistry
- Life experiences, such as trauma or a history of abuse
- Family history of mental health problems<sup>iv</sup>

### The Church, the Bible, and Mental Illness

Throughout history, faithful Christians have been a champion of the weak, sick, and dying. The church at large has been a faithful witness of Jesus Christ's love by building hospitals, caring for those with deadly contagious diseases, and risking their lives to bring hope and healing to some of the poorest and darkest corners of the world.

Today this same kind of compassion is needed by those suffering from mental illness. The church ought to be a safe place for the care of those with all forms of illnesses: physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual. Christians ought to give the same empathy and sympathy to someone with cancer as someone with major depressive disorder.

Unfortunately many Christians either through unintentional misunderstanding or unfortunate teaching believe that mental illnesses are a result of sin on the part of the afflicted. To these people, many or most who are well meaning, mental illness is either a result of sin or a punishment from God. Even in the Bible we see how people mistook illness for sin:

As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" John 9:1-2

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Jesus' own disciples assumed that blindness was a result of sin, either the afflicted or even his parents (maybe God punished them by giving them a blind child!). But Jesus quickly declared:

"Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life." John 9:3

Clearly, sin was not the issue for this illness. This did not mean that this man or his parents were sinless, for certainly they were as guilty of sin as we all are, but it was not any specific sin that caused the man to be born blind. Jesus says that there is indeed healing and hope for this family – and it will be seen in the gracious act of healing that will give God the glory.

In the Bible we see other instances where God's chosen saints suffered from some form of mental distress. Though none of these should be seen as mental illness, they can all be seen as mental distress. And as such, none of these people were noted as having sinned; and all of them had great faith:

- King David: Psalm 69:2-3  
I sink in the miry depths,  
where there is no foothold.  
I have come into the deep waters;  
the floods engulf me.  
I am worn out calling for help;  
my throat is parched.
- Elijah: 1 Kings 19:4  
He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, Lord," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors."
- Hannah: 1 Samuel 1:7–10  
"Hannah wept and would not eat . . . She was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord and wept bitterly"
- Paul: 2 Corinthians 1:8–10  
". . .we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again"

If all of these saints experienced intense emotional distress and mental anguish without their own sin being the cause, then it is realistic to believe that those suffering with mental health issues were not afflicted because of their sin. Even our Lord suffered the most intense mental distress that resulted in him sweating blood:

And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground" (Luke 22:44).

"My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death" (Matthew 26:38).

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Sin is very real, but to say that mental illness is a sin, or is solely caused by sin is not biblical. We will look at how sin certainly affects our mental health in our next article. (Note: not sure if this last sentence should be included in case they come to this article and don't know where the next article is.)

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/teaching-packets/power-science/section-i/2-brain-most-complex-organ-in-body>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.newscientist.com/article/dn7974-human-brains-enjoy-ongoing-evolution/>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/health-and-human-body/human-body/brain/>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.mentalhealth.gov/basics/mental-health-myths-facts>