

TAKING CARE OF YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

By Neil Smith, 19 July 2020

INTRODUCTION

Good morning church family! Welcome! And welcome to any guests joining us today as well :) I love this church so much. It's so good to be with you.

Today is a big day. It is the 1st Sunday that we are having a physical in-person gathering in our building since the start of the COVID-19 lockdown here in South Africa.

So for the 50 people who are gathered at King of Kings watching right now... And the many more who are gathered in your homes watching as well... Welcome! Wherever you are watching, know that you are a part of us! And we love you.

As a church - we believe that we are united in the Spirit through Jesus Christ ... and in the bond that we have as brothers and sisters through Him. We are family! Amen! And just like many families can't be together right now, so too ... we can't have the whole family come together right now. But it's okay, because it won't be forever. We will get through this!

It has been a rough week for our church family ... with the passing of a really dear woman of God in our church community ... and others ... who are struggling to recover from COVID at the moment. But we praise the Lord that we don't go through this alone. We have the Lord with us ... and we have each other.

So let's keep caring for each other! And let's keep our eyes fixed on Jesus!

TRANSITION INTO MESSAGE

Today I decided that I would like to speak on a rather challenging subject - Mental health. Now we have just finished our "By Faith" series in Hebrews, and it felt right to address mental health at this time. So I have called this message;

TAKING CARE OF YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

Taking care of your mental health ... Now ... there are probably some people asking - Why do we have to talk about this today?!

Well, while we are dealing with the very real threat of the COVID-19 pandemic to physical health, the virus is not the only invisible enemy we are fighting right now. Mental health is another issue.

Much like a 'perfect storm' where a number of factors come together to create a significant threat - we are at right now facing the combination of a health pandemic, a significant economic crisis, and all kinds of societal challenges in South Africa.

All this uncertainty has contributed to a mental and emotional strain on South African's from all backgrounds.

A recent survey conducted by the University of Pretoria has found that;

- 33% of South African's are depressed
- 45% of South African's are fearful
- 29% of South African's are lonely

Those are pretty scary stats. But they are more than just 'percentages' of people 'out there.' Because I know for a fact, that it is in-fact the 'real life' experience of some of you listening to me right now.

It's real for you. You're struggling right now. Maybe it's anxiety that feels like it is overwhelming you. Maybe you've experienced panic attacks. Perhaps you are on the verge of an emotional breakdown. Or maybe it's even full blown depression. Or, it could be something even more severe.

Here is the first thing I want to say today...

DON'T BE ASHAMED TO ADMIT YOU ARE STRUGGLING WITH MENTAL HEALTH

There was a time in my life, a few years ago, when I was I was struggling with depression. It was circumstantial, but it still a really difficult season for me.

It felt like a heavy dark fog had just settled over everything ... Here in the valley we know how fog can settle over the valley. Maybe you have driven over Ou Kaapse Weg on a day like that when the fog just hangs over everything.

Well, in much the same way, depression can feel like a 'emotional fog' that comes in slowly, and causes you not to be able to see things clearly for a while, only it does not just burn off quickly when the sun comes up. It sticks around.

It is way more than just having a 'blue Monday.'

One Psalmist put it like this ...

"Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God." (Psalm 42:5-6)

In this verse, the writer acknowledges both despair, and hope. And I guess that can be the honest truth about the human experience. We can be up and down emotionally, but praise God - He always remains the same.

But here is the next thing I want you to understand ...

BEING A BELIEVER DOES NOT EXCLUDE YOU FROM STRUGGLING WITH MENTAL HEALTH

One of the most famous preachers of history - Charles Spurgeon, suffered deep times of darkness, that even his desperate prayers to God brought no relief too. In his own words;

“There are dungeons beneath the castles of despair.” - Charles Spurgeon

A few months ago, the world was shocked by the suicide of a mega-church pastor in the US, Jarrid Wilson, known for his incredible mental health advocacy work. He led thousands to Christ, and he helped so many to feel like their weren't alone in facing their anxiety, suicidal thoughts and post traumatic stress. At the memorial, his wife said this;

“At the end of the day, pastors are just people who need to reach out to God for his help and strength, each and every day.” - Juli Wilson

According to the bible, some of the greatest men and women of faith, also battled at times with what we would term mental health struggles. I will mention one or two ...

Moses struggled with his mental health trying to lead a nation. He cried out to God ...

“I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. If this is how you are going to treat me, please go ahead and kill me.” (Num 11:14-15)

Moses was the depressed leader of the grumpy people of Israel. Every time he turned around - they moaned about something; “*We need water. We are starved. We want food, but we hate manna!*”

If we were surrounded by that bunch of chronic complainers - it would be hard not to get depressed too!

Job hit an incredibly low point in his life - perhaps something like a complete emotional breakdown. He lost everyone he cared about, he lost everything he owned. He then cursed the day he was born, he said;

“Why did I not perish at birth, and die as I came from the womb? ... I have no peace, no quietness; I have no rest, but only turmoil.” (Job 3:11; 3:26)

King David went through a time of deep anguish and depression. At one point this was his prayer;

“Have mercy on me, Lord, for I am faint; heal me, Lord, for my bones are in agony. My soul is in anguish ... How long, Lord, how long? I am worn out from my groaning. All night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears.” (Psalm 6:2-3; 6)

Hannah is another example... She experienced deep loss and grief over the loss of a child, she was stressed out about her husbands 'other' wife, she stopped eating, and she did lots of crying as well.

One of my favourite men of God in the bible is Elijah! He was a man of incredible faith, incredible courage, he experienced God doing incredible miracles ... and, yet, at one point in his life ... he struggled with suicidal thoughts.

The bible records this in 1 Kings;

³ Elijah was afraid and ran for his life ... He came to a broom bush, 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." ⁵ Then he lay down under the bush and fell asleep.

All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat." ⁶ He looked around, and there by his head was some bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again.

⁷ The angel of the LORD came back a second time and touched him and said, "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you." ⁸ So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. (1 Kings 19:3-8)

This story is filled with so many mental health struggles here;

FEAR - Elijah was afraid and ran for his life ...

SUICIDAL THOUGHTS - Elijah prayed that he might die ...

EXCESSIVE TIREDNESS - Elijah lay down under a tree and slept for a couple of days.

FEELINGS OF REJECTION - Elijah felt that everyone had abandoned him.

DEPRESSION - for a long time, perhaps nearly 2 months.

And interestingly, this all happened straight after one of the greatest victories of his ministry when together with God they defeated the prophets of baal. CS Lewis has said;

"The times I find myself most vulnerable to the attacks of depression, is after defending Christianity most brilliantly." - CS Lewis

We could talk of many others. Jeremiah - the weeping prophet. Jonah - the evangelist who just wanted to run away and die under a bush.

Perhaps even Jesus - in the dark night before his crucifixion. He is quoted in the bible as saying to his closest friends;

"My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death." (Mat 26:38)

So my friends, if you are struggling with mental health - don't be ashamed - count yourself among some of the best men & women of God ever to have lived. You are not 'crazy' ... You're just human.

According to world health organisations ... at some point in our lives, we will all be affected by some kind of mental health struggle, either through personal experience, or through the struggle of a relative or friend. ^{b)}

So research suggests that almost almost anyone can be impacted. Struggles like anxiety and depression can 'hit' anyone. Even Christians.

So that's huge! This fact alone should cause the church to pay attention. If we are called to demonstrate God's love through the way we care for people in need - and so many are struggling with mental health - it should be something we care about.

I think you would be personally shocked to find out how many people attending our church are silently suffering from depression, anxiety, or some other mental health struggle. Here is my question - Do they feel seen, understood, and supported by us?

Now technically, the term 'mental health' is very broad. It can refer to a diagnosed mental illness; or it can refer to symptoms that are not severe enough to be classified as an illness, or ... it can even refer to general poor mental health and the absence of positive life experiences.

Now I am not a psychologist... So I am not qualified to define all the specific differences between 'mental health' and 'mental illness' which includes the whole range from anxiety, to depressive disorders, through to schizophrenia and bipolar disorders, that affect behaviours, thoughts and emotions.

But I am a pastor ... and for me, I just know this... I know our mental health is important to God. Which brings me to my next point ...

OUR MINDS & MENTAL HEALTH ARE IMPORTANT TO GOD

How do we know this - very simply, because God created us body, mind & spirit. If you are a regular in our church family - This is what Jesus taught us, and you should know this verse well by now!

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind”; and “Love your neighbour as yourself.” (Luke 10:27)

To God - clearly, the whole person is important ... body, mind & spirit.

This is why when it comes to helping a person find healing, we have to think holistically. Not just spiritually. If all you are eating is slap chips and ice-cream, that is going to affect all of you at some point. If all you do all day is sink deep into the world of social media and negative news, that is going to affect you. If you are not spending time in prayer, in God's word, nourishing your spirit. That is going to affect you too.

Our mental health is therefore important to God. This is why he teaches us to...

- RENEW YOUR MIND

The Apostle Paul tight us this in Romans;

Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Romans 12:2)

So how is your mind? How is your mental health?

As a church - this is something I believe we need to care about in our life, and in others lives.

THE CHURCH MUST TAKE A LEAD IN DEALING WITH MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

I can say this with confidence, because when I look to Jesus, I see that;

Jesus cared about mental health - he healed the whole person. Jesus never just healed the surface issue. He healed the deeper issue - sin. He healed their bodies and he healed their spirits.

And as His church, we have taken after our master. As a global church, we have a 2000 year history of caring for the sick - we invented the hospital!

Sadly in many ways, the church is not leading the way we used to. Rather than get all condemning though - lets just say this - We've got a lot more loving to do church! Amen.

Another reason why we have to lead the way with this, is because many people will call the church before asking for help from others. This is changing in some places. But some people still come to the church for help before they go elsewhere. I wonder if we have listened, and helped the way we should be.

It's also important for us to admit, that although the global church has done some great work - we have also not always had a great track record when it comes to dealing with mental health.

Sometimes, well-meaning believers, who have not experienced the struggle of mental health personally, we just can't understand why people can't 'get over it.' Some still think that all mental health struggles are simply the result of demonic activity. Some still question if Christians should even take medication. So we have got a lot of learning to do still.

May the Lord teach us to live in BOLD faith, where we contend for healing, deliverance and victory in peoples lives, yet also know how to walk humbly. Not thinking we know it all.

So, the church has to take more of a lead in dealing with mental health issues. Helping communities to understand it. Challenging stigma. And helping people in their journey of recovery and healing in Christ.

My final point today is ...

HOW DO YOU TAKE CARE OF YOUR MENTAL HEALTH?

I want to get practical here. Here is the first thing I would say to you;

- CRY OUT TO GOD FOR HELP

My friends - never forget, God cares for you, even when you are down. Ps 34 says;

The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit (Psalm 34:18)

So cry out to him my friends! I hope you will have seen, that all the individuals I mentioned a few minutes ago did just that. They called out to God - and he helped them.

God should always be the first person we turn to, not the last!

God responded to the cries of his people in the past - and he still responds to the cries of his people today. Moses was in a leadership mess, and God put Aaron & Joshua in his life. David was depressed, and later he said that God had heard his cry, and lifted him out of the slimy pit!

Job was in a world of mess and pain. Yet the Lord turned it all around and blessed the end part of Job's life far more than the first! Hannah was blessed with a child and was able to rejoice in the goodness of the Lord once again.

Elijah just wanted to kill himself. But God cared for him. Enabled him to rest. Fed him. Looked after him. Dealt with the bad attitudes and false beliefs he had, and when he was ready, sent him back to serve him once again ...

and for me ... after the fog 'rolled in' ... God made a way to help 'roll it out' of my life again.

I am not saying that God will always fix it all - Loving Jesus doesn't cure everything we struggle with. But Jesus does guarantee us companionship and comfort. He always does that.

But don't be afraid to trust God for complete healing! Don't allow past experiences to be your barometer for truth. Take Gods word as your truth, and cry out to him! Call on him for healing.

Norman Wright describes depression as being like a person in a deep pool of water, holding onto a large heavy rock. The rock will pull us down. If we refuse to let it go, it can destroy us. The thing is, it is not so much the rock that destroys - but it is our decision to hold onto it. So we must decide to let it go - and we do that by giving it to God.

Cry out to God. Prayer is essential in dealing with all struggles in life. Share it with Him. Let Him in. Give him that rock. Trust him to help you.

- LIMIT YOUR EXPOSURE TO SOCIAL MEDIA & NEWS & INCREASE YOUR EXPOSURE TO GOD'S WORD

I am convinced that one of the reasons we are so anxious and stressed out these days, is because we have access to so much information all the time. Sure, stay informed by setting a time for that. But be discerning. Don't get sucked into the rot - because it will affect your mind.

Danny Slavich said;

"The world is trying to disciple you. Your favoured news source is trying to disciple you. Your social media feed is trying to disciple you. For hours every day, you are being disciplined by these voices. Let the Word disciple you. Let the Word be louder than the world." - Danny Slavich

- CONNECT WITH A COUNSELLOR

If you have never tried counselling, now is a perfect time. I know some people whose pride prevents them from finding healing. Don't be that person. We have a great team of counsellors here at the church. We call this ministry 'Living Well.' Michelle Wanless, a Christian Psychologist heads this up. Living Well offers a great team of counsellors to help people for with all kinds of struggles. You can contact them on 072 753 21 55 and they will return the call, or email them on counselling@kingofkings.org.za.

- WRITE DOWN WHAT IS TROUBLING YOU

This one might sound strange, but I cannot tell you how important a part of my life journaling is. I don't write to "dear diary" or 'myself' but I write out my prayers and share my concerns with God. It becomes so helpful for me as I can frame what I am facing, and deal with it head on with God. It helps me to right-size the issues I am facing.

- GET ORGANISED

This is another very important thing in my life. Just like a climber has to first see the route up the mountain before they tackle it, so we need to see the route through the day, and the week, and the month, or we will just fall prey to wasting time, becoming unproductive, and allowing ourselves to become overwhelmed by the drama of each new day. Organise your life. Make sure you are spending time with God. Eat well. Rest well. Work well. Manage your money well. Play well. And finally;

- GET IN SHAPE

Previously I never thought I would include something like this in a sermon. But working on your physical health has a huge impact on your mental health. I believe exercise is a massive thing in life that we often neglect. We think we can do it if time allows. That's a bad idea. Exercise releases all those good chemicals and endorphins our body needs. Think of a swimming pool. Just like long term depression can occur as the chemistry in the brain get's out of shape, with the right balance of chemicals, a pool stays clear and clean. But when the chemistry get's out of balance, the pool becomes cloudy and algae filled.

So get in shape! Don't let the fact that the gym is closed at the moment become an excuse. Go for a walk... Run if that's your thing. Buy a bike! Buy an exercise matt.

Get your body in shape, get your mind in shape, and get your spirit in shape! Amen!.

Let's pray together.

Father, I want to thank you for the good news of Jesus Christ. That you came to heal the sick and the hurting. You came to save the lost. You came to bind up the brokenhearted... and to heal minds.

Thank you that you care about our whole lives. Including our mental health. I know that there are many who are struggling in various different ways with this, but you are able to meet us just where we are.

And you understand what we are going through. Thank you that we don't need to struggle alone. You are a mighty God who cares for us, and wants to help us.

Holy Spirit, please move right now, to bring healing, restoration, sound minds, and healthy habits. In Jesus name, Amen!

That's it from me today my friends - If you need prayer or ministry, or you would like to talk to a counsellor, please reach out to us. We will put the contact info in the description and the chat. Don't struggle alone! God can help you - and our team would love help in that process. God bless you!

ENDNOTES

- a) <https://www.recklesslyalive.com/30-mental-health-tips-for-covid-19/>
- b) www.sactuarymentalhealth.org