

Spirituality and Emotional Wellness Go Hand in Hand

By Bryan Harness

“If I had enough faith, I would not be depressed. I should not feel this way. Good Christians never have reason to be depressed. The answers are all in the Bible. Why would I need therapy?”

The expectation that a person of faith will not suffer or feel overwhelmed is in fact a worldly contaminant. It rings truer to Madison Avenue theology than the values of Scripture. Madison Avenue teaches us that suffering is neither natural nor human. These values are nowhere to be found in scripture. The Bible anticipates that we will continue to be hurt and wounded. The difference is that we will also be loved.

Thus, crises will come. The presence of an acute stressor and an uncertain response does not mean that we are not faithful to God or that God is not faithful to us. It simply means that we are momentarily overwhelmed beyond our problem-solving skills and life experience. It may also mean that community support is perhaps inadequate to help us with the difficulty, and it often indicates that we may be in need of a sympathetic guide to lead us into a deeper place of understanding, healing, and spiritual and emotional significance. It does not mean that our faith is lacking, or that God has forsaken us.

Life has not remained static since biblical times. While biblical truth remains timeless, the times, alas, have changed. On average, people live to be at least twice the age of their biblical forbears. Ruth could once care for Naomi; now Ruth might live a continent away. David could seek atonement for his transgressions; now David might face endless litigation. A child could work alongside a parent and learn important values and traditions; now a child learns values from the wider culture. Communication was slow and oral; now we have the Internet. Issues

Offering Hope:
The Church's Role
with Mental Illness



were concrete, often with life and death ramifications. Today, issues are often abstract. We require new skills for solving problems that did not exist in times of old. Therapy can help one solve the problems of living in a culture that is often bewildering and confusing.

Furthermore, there are times when one needs the help of a sympathetic professional due to biological complexities that are beyond one's spiritual or emotional control. While spiritual and emotional resources can be useful in coping with these difficulties, they are not sufficient to prevent them in the first instance. Illnesses such as schizophrenia, bipolar and depression, for example, appear to have a biological origin that has little or nothing to do with one's faith stance.

It is also true, however, that spirituality and emotional well being often go hand in hand, so much so that it is rare to see an emotional or behavioral struggle that is not accompanied to some degree by a spiritual dimension. It is not unusual for one who is confronted with emotional or behavioral challenges to also report an awareness of a spiritual crisis and a deepening of spiritual needs. Addressing these needs is an important part of a good emotional health plan. This is especially true for those who receive mental and behavioral health services.

The spiritual nature of an emotional struggle may take many forms, but they are often a version of the same need, mainly appropriate self-love as opposed to self-rejection. For example, those who have experienced emotional or physical trauma, abandonment, and other forms of rejection by those who were best in a position to care for them and love them often find it difficult to experience a God who can be committed to them. In such circumstances the ability to trust others and to trust God is often limited. Rather, what emerges is a sense

that life is not trustworthy and that God is not helpful. This is a significant spiritual matter, because it robs one of a sense of meaning and purpose and potentially leads to despair. The spiritual task becomes to restore a sense that while one has suffered, their hurt has meaning and their life still matters. The path from meaningless to meaningful suffering is one that is helpful in restoring a sense of dignity and hope. Walking this path often involves acknowledging anger and frustration with God and developing a more appropriate image of God, one that sees God not as a human parent or Santa Claus, but as a caring, healing and transforming presence. It is often reassuring in these moments to know that Christ also experienced pain and brokenness, and identifies with our suffering.

Those struggling with depression sometimes report a sense of feeling forsaken by God, or worry that they might have somehow done something to permanently alienate God. These are normal feelings that are often symptoms of major depression. Just as a battery-powered radio cannot receive signals when the batteries are “worn down,” it is unlikely that one will experience the fullness of God when the emotional and spiritual batteries are raw. Mental illness affects all relationships — one’s relationship with self, others, family, strangers and, most certainly, God. Thankfully, with treatment and time, almost all patients report a sense of God’s return!

Other issues often involve forgiving another or ourselves, and the challenges of the wilderness experience.

All of us are capable of doing things that hurt others or ourselves. It is often much more difficult to forgive ourselves than to forgive others. Regret and remorse can be quite helpful in bringing about change in our behaviors. The risk, however, is that they can harden into increased self-hatred, rigid shame, and self-rejection. It is important for one who has violated their own values to know that God’s forgiveness is available to them. It is also

important to know that forgiveness of one’s self or of another is often a process that takes time and patience.

Forgiving one who has caused a deep hurt is difficult even under the best of circumstances. While such forgiveness need not be cheaply given, holding onto the hurt often leads to resentment and cynicism, both of which can paralyze our spiritual lives.

At some point it becomes important to accept that holding onto past wounds only hurts us, and not necessarily the one who has caused the pain. The resentments can harden into a spirit of grimness that makes joy impossible. Working with a spiritually sensitive companion on ways to release the pain (while not denying the past) can be an important step toward leading an emotionally rich life. Our lives will be lived in the present and in the future, and that is also where we will encounter God.

Lastly, those who experience a major loss or life transition often find themselves in the wilderness. The wilderness is the place where one’s sense of identity and purpose is remade. Those who face a major change such as losing a loved one, experiencing a divorce or changing employment or employment status, or even beginning retirement often find themselves going through the experience of being “betwixt and between.” The things that gave them meaning and identity in the past are replaced by an uncertainty that can sometimes feel terrifying. In such cases it is helpful to know that God is present and “tenting” with us, just as God tented with Moses and the Israelites in their transition from Egypt to the Promised Land. When life brings about a major change, it is good to know that the one who is unchanging is still with us, to bless and join our journey!

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