

“Empowered to Heal”

[Acts 5:12-16](#)

Since 1949, the month of May has been designated as Mental Health Awareness Month in the United States. During this month, the Mental Health America, National Alliance on Mental Illness, or NAMI, and other affiliated organizations across the country raise awareness on the importance of mental health through the media and by hosting local events and screenings. The goal through these activities is to reaffirm our commitment to increasing our understanding of mental illness, improving access to treatment, and reassuring those who are struggling that they are not alone.

However, despite almost 80 years of efforts to raise awareness, mental illness remains one of the least-talked-about topics in our society. Millions of Americans are affected by mental health issues every year. Yet, we are still not fully comfortable talking about it. Unfortunately, in our image obsessed culture, there are still attitudes that view mental illness as a character flaw and perceive its symptoms as threatening and discomforting. And these negative attitudes and beliefs often foster stigma and discrimination towards people suffering from mental health conditions.

So, out of fear of being embarrassed, judged, rejected, or abused, we stay silent about our mental health struggles or that of our loved ones. And, honestly, for too long, the church has also been silent in the face of this social stigma. Some churches still view mental illness as the result of sin and subsequent punishment from God.

Here are some important facts and numbers about mental illness in the United States that I found on the NAMI website:

1. One in four adults, approximately 57.7 million Americans, experience a mental health disorder in a given year, and about 1 in 17 lives with a serious mental illness, such as schizophrenia, major depression, or bipolar disorder.
2. About 10 percent of American children and adolescents suffer from serious emotional and mental disorders that cause significant functional impairment in their day-to-day lives at home, in school, and with peers.
3. About 4 of the 10 leading causes of disability in the United States and other developed countries are mental disorders. By 2020, major depressive illness will be the leading cause of disability in women and children.
4. Fifty percent of all chronic mental illness begins by age 14, and seventy-five percent by age 24.
5. Mood disorders, including major depression, dysthymic disorder and bipolar disorder, are the 3rd most common cause of hospitalization in the U.S. for both youth and adults aged 18-44.
6. Among the 20.2 million adults in the U.S who experienced a substance use disorder, 51% of them had a co-occurring mental illness.
7. Suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the United States, the 3rd for children aged 10-14, and the 2nd for young people between 15-24. And, more than 90% of those who die by suicide have an underlying mental illness.

8. Veterans represent about 20% of all suicides nationally, and an estimated 18-22 veterans die by suicide each day. By the way, May is Mental Health Awareness Month because there are more suicides and psychiatric hospitalizations in this month by far than in any other month.

In the face of these facts and figures, who can say mental illness is someone else's problem? No, this is a collective concern and a collective issue. People with mental health problems are our friends and our neighbors. They are members of our church and our family. They are right here in our midst!

Just in case anyone is wondering what mental illness is exactly, here is a definition. Mental illness is a medical condition that disrupts a person's thinking, feeling, mood, ability to relate to others and daily functioning. You can have mental health concerns from time to time. But, a mental health concern becomes a mental illness when ongoing signs and symptoms cause frequent stress to you, affecting your ability to cope with the ordinary demands of life and resulting in diminished capability to function in your daily life.

While there are many different signs and symptoms of mental illness, they can appear as physical problems, such as stomach pain, back pain, headache, or other unexplained pains. And, mental illness can affect persons of any age, race, religion, education, job and income. Many people believe that mental illness is caused partially by personal weakness or failing, lack of character or poor upbringing. But, this is not true. There are many different factors that can contribute to mental health problems, such as genetics, physical illness, injury, brain chemistry, a traumatic event, a history of abuse, and family history of mental health issues.

The good news is that mental illnesses are treatable! Yes, persons with mental health problems can get better through treatment and, in fact, many recover completely! The treatments can involve psychological therapy, medication, and community support programs. These support mechanisms along with the individual's commitment to participate in the healing process can lead to restoration.

Healing was an important part of Jesus' ministry. The gospel writers all tell us many stories of healing miracles that Jesus performed. He healed all kinds of diseases and sickness among the people, including that of mental illness. In the ancient world, persons suffering from mental health issues were thought to be possessed by evil spirits. So we hear how Jesus healed them by casting the demons out of them. Those with mental illness were individuals who had been separated from their family and shunned by their society. They were alone, marginalized and isolated. With compassion, Jesus reached out to them. He made his way to those who were considered outcasts in the eyes of society and brought them back into the community. He made his way to those who were broken and helped them find their way to wholeness.

Jesus' healing ministry continued in the early church through his disciples. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, they performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people, as Jesus did. What Jesus promised Phillip in the Gospel of John when he said, "Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father," was being fulfilled.

Today's scripture from the 5th chapter in the book of Acts says people brought their sick and those tormented by unclean spirits to the Apostles. The ministry of healing in the early church was a community affair. As word spread about the healing done in Jesus' name, people came from not just Jerusalem, but the towns around Jerusalem. So great was the healing ministry taking place that even being in the shadow that Peter cast was power enough to cure the sick.

Jesus' healing ministry continues today in the community of believers who are empowered by the Holy Spirit. As I mentioned earlier, we know that mental illnesses are treatable. With the right combination of treatments, persons with mental health issues can get better and recover, even completely.

But, their successful healing and recovery does not only depend on therapy and medication. It also depends on community support. As much as they need help from the community of professionals, they need help from the community of family and friends who are willing to be present in their struggles. This means meeting them where they are, sitting with them as they struggle with the darkness caused by hopelessness and helplessness.

About helping persons with mental illness, the former first lady, Rosalynn Carter, says this: People with mental problems are our neighbors. They are members of our congregations, members of our families; they are everywhere in this country. If we ignore their cries for help, we will be continuing to participate in the anguish from which those cries for help come. A problem of this magnitude will not go away. Because it will not go away, and because of our spiritual commitments, we are compelled to take action."

How can you help? Here are several things you can do to make the world a better place for people with mental illness & their families.

1. Educate yourself about the various mental illnesses through books, workshops, and internet resources such as websites like NAMI, so you can better understand what they are. And then, educate your family and friends about them.
2. Pay attention to the words you use and avoid stigmatizing labels. Do not refer to people as "crazy," "psycho," "lunatic," or "mental."
3. Challenge negative attitudes toward mental illness among your family members, friends and acquaintances as well as in the media.
4. Help your friend or family member by recognizing signs of mental health problems and connecting them to professional help.
5. Share your own story of struggling with mental illness if you have been there. Your story may empower others to seek treatment or have hope.
6. To the person with mental illness and their family, offer empathy and support, not advice and solutions. Treat them with compassion and respect.
7. Check out support groups for them.
8. Instead of guessing what helps, ask them how you can support and help.
9. Maintain contact with them and include them in your plans. They might decline your invitations. But, do not give up. Keep asking them to join in your social gatherings.

NAMI says, "People with mental illness need help and hope: they need a community that supports them, their families and their recovery."

Brothers and Sisters, the scriptural witness tells us that even the shadow that was cast by Peter had the power to cure sickness and bring healing to the afflicted. But before this could happen, those who were suffering had to be brought to the source of healing. There were people who heard the good news and were led by the Spirit to reach out to those who were marginalized, isolated, and alone in their society. And they were so committed to getting them the help they needed that even when a face to face meeting with Peter was impossible, they would carry them to the street so that the shadow cast as he passed by might strike them.

There is power in our faith in Jesus Christ to heal. And the first stage of that healing manifests in love. It is a love that draws near. It is a love that takes people to the source of healing. It is a love that does anything and everything possible to get them the help they need. May we commit to being a community of individuals who support those with mental illness!

Let us pray. O Lord, you have searched us and known us. You know our innermost thoughts. You searched out our paths and know all our ways. Before we speak, you know our words. So, guide us along the pathways to hope, that night becomes bright as day. So, lead us on our walk together, that darkness is lifted from our hearts. So, encourage us that our sisters and brothers who have mental illness shall know that they never walk alone. So, empower us to heal. In Christ, the healer, we pray.

Amen.