

A BRIEF THEOLOGY OF MENTAL HEALTH

Words by Will Van Der Hart



I realised that Christians suffering from mental health problems were often subject to what I'd call the theology of unbelonging. This wasn't a Biblical theology, it was built upon superstition and misunderstanding around mental health. The extent the theology of unbelonging continues to be espoused in contemporary Christian texts is alarming. Some suggest still that depression is a decision, anxiety is a sin, psychosis is clearly demonic, positivity is a virtue, and all mental health problems can be resolved through prayer. But a true Biblical theology of mental health is of course far from these things. A true theology of mental health is a theology of poverty. A theology of mental health is one that acknowledges that material poverty, homelessness, exclusion, the plight of the UK's 87,000 prisoners, are all inextricably linked to mental health conditions. When Jesus said in Matthew 5:3, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.' He meant these poor.

In 1 Kings 19 verse 4 we see the beginnings of an outworking of a theology of mental health. Elijah is suicidal. He's been chased around the block by Jezebel who's been saying all sorts of things about him. He is physically exhausted, no doubt, and he's certainly psychologically disturbed. He cries out to God, 'I've had enough, Lord. Take my life.' God did not condemn Elijah. God does not exclude Elijah. God didn't punish Elijah. God didn't say that Elijah's theology was out of whack. Instead, God responds in the most Godly biopsychosocial manner you could ever anticipate. 'Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you.', says God. So we see God respond to Elijah with gentility and compassion, celebrating the whole of Elijah, not just his mental faculties, his physical ones too, his sense of exhaustion and desolation. The God of love, present in the desert with the broken.

Hence, a theology of mental health is an integrated biopsychosocial one. One that integrates mind, body, spirit, community, and family. Jesus himself expressed a full range of emotions -as it says in Isaiah 53:3, he was a man of sorrows, familiar with sufferings. A theology of mental health sees people not as mental health problems to be fixed, but as children of God waiting to be loved.

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Pope John Paul II, in his important 1997 piece of work, *The Image Of God In The People With Mental Health*, says, 'Whoever suffers from mental illness always bears God's image and likeness in himself, as does every human being.' So a true theology of mental health celebrates the whole person and stands with them in their suffering.

A theology of mental health is a theology of the victorious Christ who is suffering. The suffering Christ and the victorious Christ are one and the same. Our church will only be a valiant church if it's a suffering church, a church that does not segregate love and suffering, but loves in suffering.

This is taken from an 8 minute talk by Will Van Der Hart called the Theology of Mental Health which can be found on Youtube.

TOP 10 TIPS IF YOU'RE STRUGGLING WITH SLEEP

Words by Will Van Der Hart

Eat early

If you are struggling with sleep it can be comforting to eat sugary foods like chocolate late in the evening. Digesting and sleeping aren't a great combination and can keep you awake. The best principle is to eat a minimum of 3 hrs before you lie down to sleep. Whilst it's also important to stay hydrated, don't drink too much in the last hour before lying down otherwise you can keep sensing the urgency to go to the loo which again interrupts the wind down process.

Get your bedroom ready

The optimal temperature to sleep is 18 degrees C and if a bedroom is too hot or too cold it can interfere with both getting to sleep and staying asleep. Try adjusting your heating, ventilation and bedclothes to get the right combination for you. It can also help to use black out curtains or blinds in the summer if light is an issue to you. Try to make your room as fresh, fragrant and comfortable as possible so that you feel really comfortable and relaxed in the space.

Keep all screens outside of the bedroom

The blue light that phones and tablets create actually suppress the creation of the hormone melatonin which we need to sleep. If you are struggling to sleep the first thing people reach for is their phone, to start scrolling the news feeds. This invariably creates the problem; it doesn't solve it. If you want to sleep well it is essential to change your relationship with your phone, including turning off all ringtones and notifications before you go to bed.

Create a sleep routine

Going to sleep should start well before you lie down. The winddown routine is a process that give your body clues to relax into sleep mode. The key principle is to begin the routine at around the same time every night. Many people find that a hot bath with lavender oil or bath salts is a good way to begin, others do a bit of gentle stretching on the bedroom floor before they actually get into bed. This is also a good time it includes your evening prayers.

Use a Sleep Primer

Once you are in bed lie on your back, close your eyes. Take a deep inbreath and then let it out slowly to a count of 14. Repeat this once more before opening your eyes and pick up a book to read. My reading rule is that you choose books that don't get your pulse racing. In fact, I regularly suggest that you choose sedentary, travel or exploration books that evoke neutral but appealing images. Think 'Walking the foothills of Nepal' or 'Trout fishing in Montana.' Stick with the book to the point at which you feel like you cannot keep your eyes open.

Begin the 'Progressive Tense and Release Muscle Relaxation Exercise

Lie on your back with hands by your sides. Take a long inbreath and release slowly. Beginning with your toes, scrunch up/tense, hold for 4 seconds and then release. Progress all the way up your body; calves, thighs, tummy, shoulders etc, all the way to your face. Once you have tensed and released every muscle you can manage take a final deep inbreath and release slowly.

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Visualise

It is really important to enter into visualisation exercised fully, not half observing whether you are asleep yet. It is actually much more helpful to give up all thoughts of sleep, just trust the process. Before you begin, adopt your preferred sleeping position. There are two different sorts of visualisations that people find helpful: scene visualisations and journey visualisations. I suggest you begin with two scenes and if you lose focus begin a journey. Examples are below but it's always best to choose your own. Try to keep using the same visualisations for best effect.

Scene 1: You are lying on an inflatable li-lo floating on a blue pool. It is a sunny day you are dipping your toes in the water. You feel relaxed and can hear the buzz of insects on the dry grass.

Scene 2: You are enveloped in a deep, soft hammock, swinging between two apple trees. You can smell the vague scent of the apple blossom. It is dark but you feel warm and comfortable in the evening light.

Journey 1: You are walking in a sandy path between gently swaying pine trees in a wood. As you walk you look around you, noticing your environment and enjoying the cool breeze.

Journey 2: You are skiing along a gentle slope; it is quiet, and you can just hear the sound of your skis sliding in the snow. You keep looking up at the sunny mountain peaks.

If you continue to struggle or if you wake again:

If you wake again or have been visualising for more than 30 minutes and feel more awake or frustrated, turn the light back on and go back to Step 7. Begin the routine again but exchange the bath for a milky drink or light stretch. Once you have reset and got back into bed and begin to read your book until you feel unable to continue. Skip Step 9 and go straight back into visualisation again until you drop off.

