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Focus

There are many stories of Jesus as a healer. Healing of our bodies and often our hearts has long been understood as part of the hope of faith, but what about healing of our minds? Mental ill health has been shrouded in silence and stigma, with people affected by it made to feel rejected and dehumanised. Yet there is an increasing awareness that wellbeing and wholeness involve care for, and investment in, not just our physical & spiritual health but also our mental health.

This Holy Conversation offers an opportunity to explore what Good News and liberation Jesus is inviting us to discover and learn through the experiences of mental wellness and mental illness.

Some Centering Quotes about Mental Health

“When you are depressed you feel alone, and that no one is going through quite what you are going through. You are so scared of appearing in any way mad you internalise everything, and you are so scared that people will alienate you further you clam up and don’t speak about it, which is a shame, as speaking about it helps. Words are what connect us to the world, and so speaking about it to people, and writing about this stuff, helps connect us to each other, and to our true selves.”

(Matt Haig *Reasons to Stay Alive*, p 2)

“At times such as these (depression) the sustaining faith of others and their persistent caring presence is of fundamental importance. A person’s spirituality can sustain them in the midst of their depression and provide a significant source of meaning and hope. However, there are times when the darkness of depression is simply too dense to allow the person to access their spirituality directly. During these times it is the faith and the hope of others that sustains a person.”

(John Swinton *Spirituality and Mental Health Care*, p.118)

“Somewhat, to hope for,
Be it ne’er so far
Is Capital against Despair.”

(Emily Dickinson *Poem 1041* in T. H. Johnson p.476)

“A service needs to work with the service users to support their own story and values so that their resilience is strengthened, and that they, rather than the professions, retain control. ‘Personal recovery involves much more than losing symptoms. It involves becoming a person again, regaining a personal life that has some value and meaning.’”

(D. Whitwell, *Recovery Beyond Psychiatry* p.158 in Chris Cook et al *Spirituality and Psychiatry* p.54)

“The kinship and difference between mystical and psychotic states is captured in essence here by Jelaluddin Rumi, a 13th century Persian Sufi (Coleman Barks, *Rumi. Birdsong: Fifty Three Short Poems* p24 in Chris Cook et al *Spirituality and Psychiatry* p.49 - 50):

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The mystic dances in the sun,
Hearing music others don't
'Insanity', they say, those others.
If so, it's a very gentle,
Nourishing sort.

Rumi”

(Chris Cook et al *Spirituality and Psychiatry* pp.49-50)

The church is not called to become a community of psychiatrists; it is called to become a community of persistent, patient love. Psychiatry and the mental health professions have their place. But their tasks are different (although complementary) from the task of the church. The church's task is to give people back their names.”

(John Vanier and John Swinton *Mental Health –The Inclusive Church Resource* pp.94 – 99)

“Belonging is the true place of meeting. Only when we can come to realise that the church cannot be the church without each member of the body feeling that they belong can we truly be the church. Belonging is the enemy of stigma. Belonging destroys loneliness and fear. Belonging destroys loneliness and fear. Belonging is the heart of the gospel and the true basis for tending meeting. Belonging urges us to alter our hearts and change our minds in ways that enable the creation of new spaces of relating; places where all of us are missed when we are not there. When we offer Christ-shaped friendships within which we truly meet, listen and try to understand, we help to tear apart the bonds of loneliness, exclusion and isolation and open up places of belonging wherein people can reclaim and be proud of their names.”

(John Vanier and John Swinton *Mental Health –The Inclusive Church Resource* pp.100 - 102)

Some Testimonies About Mental Health

Contributed by Lewis Reay from Our Tribe MCC, Edinburgh

Throughout my life I have experienced mental ill health. I have had times when I have been ok and have been able to work and times when I have been unable to get out of bed and have been hospitalised. Faith has been another thread in my life. I have had times when God has been central to my life and times when God has taken a back seat. I have had my fair share of struggles with the church. As a gay transman, I have had experiences of rejection and betrayal. And I have also had times of acceptance and spiritual connection as a result of my sexuality and gender identity.

My first contact with psychiatric services was in 1987 when I was aged 22. I was very depressed and had been for a number of years. I had reached a real low and was suicidal. I was in a place of turmoil and crisis. My identity was in tatters. I had tried to come out (as a lesbian) in my last year of University but this had been thwarted by my involvement in the ultra-conservative Christian Union. I had the unpleasant experience of having a demon cast out of me as a means of curing my lesbian identity and self harming behaviour. I was led to believe that I had been cured, but in reality my sexuality has been pushed back under wraps. It would be two more years until I managed to come out.

In the meantime, I got involved in a charismatic house church which became my whole life. But under this, my depression was bubbling along. I was seeing a psychiatrist and psychologist during this period and first disclosed sexual abuse during this period. I was secretly self harming and life was a series of locked rooms that

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did not interact with each other. In the spring of 1989, my life came to a crisis point. I had been seeing a counsellor to talk about my sexual abuse and this has led to the disclosure of further sexual abuse. My sexuality had once again become an issue.

Finally, I came out, much to the displeasure of my church. I was told I could not take communion and effectively thrown out. This brought me to a crisis point, I took an overdose that nearly killed me – also to the disapproval of the church. My faith was connected with rule keeping and I had most certainly broken them.

For the next few years my faith took a back seat, I began volunteering for an HIV charity. This was to become pivotal in my formation as a young adult. This became a new place to call home and was where I found meaning and purpose. I lived as a lesbian but I felt rather peripheral and not entirely ‘the answer’, but there did not seem to be any other options. During this time my mental health was better and I was enjoying life. I was studying again, for a Masters degree in Gender and Social Policy. This led to my first proper job working in academic research. At the same time, I had started therapy in an attempt to resolve my experiences of childhood sexual abuse. I was drinking heavily to cope with the pain that I was experiencing.

In the spring of 1992, things once more came to a head. I was actively suicidal and experienced my first hospital admission. This was a place of sanctuary. On the outskirts of the city on a rural campus it was a place to escape from the pressures of life and to take time to recover. After this, I attended day services for the next couple of years. This was a time of great spiritual growth and I began to find meaning in creativity and art. Making objects became a way of expressing the turmoil I experienced rather than turning this inside and taking it out on myself. I had gone into recovery and was using the twelve-step programme.

Life was improving and I felt able to reconnect with life. I began to study fine art. Studying was my solution to getting out of a mental health crisis. It gave me a place to find meaning and reconnect with the world in a safe environment. Creativity was my new spirituality. It was through this that I experienced a connection to the Divine, without really realising it. I had a new found confidence. I finally had a safe place to live and could stop the nomad wandering of the previous few years. All this put me in the right place to meet my current partner and everything was about to change.

Starting a new relationship felt like the culmination of the hard work of the previous few years. I was in love for the first time. The connection that I experienced was not just sexual, but also deeply spiritual. It was a time of spiritual awakening. It was then that I came into MCC as he was the pastor of the local church. I had never experienced a connection between faith, sexuality and spirituality. I had found a safe place to be me. And a new journey was beginning. This was the first time I heard about transgender people. Over the next few years there were little trigger moments that led me to come out as a gay transman in the autumn of 1997. Once I was able to find role models of transmen I almost immediately realised that that was me. I felt a sense of completion that I had not experienced before. This was a profoundly spiritual experience. My sexuality and my gender identity were connected to my faith and spirituality in a new way.

During this time, I was working and felt productive. Life felt good. I felt a kind of invincibility. But life was not going to stay that way. The stress of changes in my workplace and being bullied at work began to take its toll. I was unable to work and was sinking into a deep depression. The stress of transitioning at work and the challenges of my hormone regime also took their toll. I was under the care of a psychiatrist, but they did not do very much and failed to really help. Services were under resourced. I should have been in hospital but I was unable to communicate this.

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The next few years were difficult and I was receiving mental health services again. During this time, we moved house, out of London to Edinburgh, where we still live. Although life was challenging I was also experiencing a new awakening in my sexual identity and a deepening in my spirituality. I was writing more. I had always written poetry but this was a period of increased productivity. With help I managed to get myself out of the dark hole and the following few years were more stable.

I picked up my art and design studies and was flourishing. Around this time my father died, which was actually a great relief to me, but it necessitated contact with my brother, which was not so good. The stress of this and the perfectionism that I experience began to undermine me. It was not long until I was suicidal again and under the care of a psychiatrist and the community mental health team. I was fortunate that the people working with me were wise and seemed to genuinely care about me. I was hospitalised for 6 weeks in the summer of 2012 and again for three months in January 2013. Life felt as if it had fallen apart and I felt spiritually lost. I was experiencing voices and intrusive thoughts for the first time.

It was through creativity that I began to reconnect with my spirituality. I joined a writing group and this inspired me to write poetry again. I took part in a variety of creative projects that helped me find meaning. And, for the first time, I stopped studying as a way of getting well. I am now three years away from my last hospital admission and I hope that there will not be any more in the future. I feel that my spirituality is more about finding meaning and purpose rather than just being mentally well. I still struggle on a daily basis and I think it might always be this way. I try to keep busy and have structure in my life. I try to remember to do the things that help me stay well. Mental health recovery is not about being 100% well, rather it is about feeling the best you can in whatever circumstances you find yourself. I know that my spirituality is inexorably mixed up with my wellness. Keeping things in balance helps me deal with whatever life throws at me. Finding peace is a precious gift and sometimes in amidst it all I glimpse those moments.

Anonymous

It was a bright sunny day in 1989 when I realised I was going to have to take my own life. In a late afternoon at the age of ten I was filled with such fear and trembling that I could see no way out. So I fashioned a noose from my school tie and tried to hang myself in the school playground. It was wholly unsuccessful and as I lay under the tree winded but otherwise unharmed I begged my loving Father God to do something to both take the pain away and fix me but also to fix the situation that had led me to taking such action. The pain, emotional pain, was unbearable and another thought occurred to me, that afternoon was the beginning of a lifelong battle with self-harm. I didn't know it at the time - neither did anyone, but I was suffering from juvenile onset mental illness which would plague me through my tortured teenage years and into adulthood.

Over the years I have been given a variety of official diagnostic labels and treatments that ought to have helped alleviate various symptoms. Some of these treatments have been successful and I have been able to hold down quite responsible positions at work before a relapse has seen me losing employment while other treatments have been completely unsuccessful leading to some significant physical health implications. One thing I have learned is that trial and error features heavily in my life and I just have to roll with it. A degree of patience is required when one is mentally unwell, patience with oneself first and foremost but also patience with the health system and with the treatments that are currently available. Drug therapy can take numerous weeks to work, if indeed it works at all. Drugs affect different people in different ways so there is the negotiation of unwanted effects plus the epiphany that comes with a successful treatment and regaining of health.

In all of my life I have been fortunate with a range of professionals who have been involved in my care. Aside from one or two, my Doctors and other staff members have been positive, affirming and respectful, not only

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of my health situation but of my Christian faith. At the moment, I am blessed with a consultant who listens to me, a community psychiatric nurse [CPN] who is switched on, open-minded and incredibly affirming. Recently I have lost my faith and it has been my CPN who has been most concerned about this, wondering if it could be a symptom of underlying potential for another mental health crisis. She takes the time to listen to what this loss feels like for me in the context of my faith story and my mental health journey.

Where do I go from here? I take one day at a time, live quietly and carefully interacting with people as and when I feel I have the ability. I am always carefully mindful of how my mental health is and walk a line of being observant without obsession. I believe I will always have a degree of mental illness but I equally believe that it does not define me. I am me first, illness second. I have learned that life can be fulfilling even in the midst of adversity, it is all about how I react to the situations I am presented with.

Anonymous

I was first diagnosed with depression nearly twenty years ago when I was living in a religious community. At the time the last thing I would have expected was to be suffering with depression.

I would go to my room and cry not necessarily about what was said but sometimes it was just the way things were said that upset me. I was seeing my doctor regularly and concluded that I needed to move away from the community and “come out” as gay. I did and that really helped lift me out of the depression. Even when a new relationship I embarked on ended things were still fine.

I tend to be quite an emotional person anyway but to get into the state I did was worrying in itself. My faith has always been great help and comfort to me in times of difficulty. Some people within the Church community have been hugely helpful and have encouraged me to talk about things when I am struggling. I still have periods of stress and depression and I'm on medication at the moment.

However, I know things would be a lot worse if I didn't have my faith to call upon and supportive friends within the Church. Although it is sometimes quite hard to reach out and talk about what's bothering me it is always better to say what it is no matter how trivial it seems.

Holy Conversations: Exploring My and Our Understanding of Mental Health

Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion):

- How do you relate or connect to the three mental health testimonies?
- What parts do you relate or connect to and why?

- What messages (positive and negative) did you grow up with about mental illness?
- Describe the impact these messages have had on your spiritual journey and wellbeing.

Point of Reflection (Large Group Discussion):

- Explore the connection between mental wellbeing and spiritual health.
- On an individual and collective basis, what steps could be taken to challenge the stigma of mental illness?
- What role could the church community play in developing good mental health and well being?

Additional Thoughts about Mental Health: Biblical Passages about Mental Health

Since the time in which the texts of our Bible were written there have been many developments in physical and mental health care. If doctors from today had appeared in Jesus' time with antibiotics to heal infections or heart by-pass surgery, they would surely have been considered gods or magicians. As the 21st century has begun there has been an ever increasing understanding of mental health which is rooted in both our bodies and our experiences. We understand that in Jesus' time many conditions which we would today understand as mental or neurological illnesses were believed to be the result of demon possession.

For some people experiencing mental illness the language of demonology can feel very tangible and chaplains in mental health environments can spend much time talking with people about demons. It is important not to dismiss people's experience but to listen beyond the dark voices and images to the forces which are shaping them.

Demons represent destructive forces which are beyond our grasp and control. Much of our mental picture of demonology comes from medieval art and mythology in which we have reduced the idea of demons to grotesque creatures of another dimension. In doing so we often distract ourselves from the real issues which demons represent.

Some of the destructive forces which demons represent today are the demons of fear, self-loathing, poverty, bigotry, de-humanisation, stigma – these forces sit at the root of war and violence in its many forms. Whether these forces are generated by humanity or by powers beyond us, or both, leads to an interesting theological discussion which results in mystery.

Practically, when engaging with these forces, when living with violence, illness, oppression (in their many different forms) these forces destroy the abundant life Jesus came to bring and can feel overwhelmingly beyond our grasp and control.

The good news is that Jesus shows us how and works with us to overcome them.

All of the stories of Jesus' healing acts are about more than physical cure. In Jesus' time, physical and mental illnesses and conditions, in many forms, carried stigma which meant folk were excluded from common life. In healing people, Jesus did not only transform bodies and minds but he also transformed their relationship to society.

Stigma is still a huge issue for people today who experience and live with mental illness. The effects of stigma which manifest in fear, suspicion and rejection can often worsen mental illness.

The readings below sit in 2 sections.

The first section are stories of healing, some of which involve demons and all of which involve the transformation of relationships within society / community. The object of these readings is to invite us to consider the transformative power of Jesus' healing and to discern how we can experience it in our lives and world today.

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The second set of readings is directed toward the experience of mental ill health. In coping with physical illness it is often to the strength of our minds which we turn to in order to keep us going. When experiencing mental ill health one of our key resources in coping with illness (our mind) can be severely weakened as a coping resource. Even when we sleep (often a refuge in physical healing) mental ill health can reach into our dreams, hurting and exhausting us. It can be hard to keep hoping and to keep going. These readings hold hope and offer us strength for when we cannot hope for ourselves. They pass on a light of faith in God's love and salvation, for when we feel trapped in a deep, lightless and un-scalable pit of exhausted despair. The object of these readings is to offer comfort and hope to people who are experiencing mental ill health, to enable us all to consider what that experience may be like (noting that it is different for each individual) and for all of us to consider how we can lovingly and appropriately hold hope in faith for each other.

It is hoped that through these readings you will be able to think of many more Bible stories and verses which deepen your understanding of Jesus' healing and which hold hope of faith for us all.

Section 1

- Mark 5.1-34
- Luke 13.11-35
- Luke 9:37-43
- John 4:7-29

Section 2

- Psalm 43
- Psalm 46
- John 14:27
- Philippians 4:4-7
- Jeremiah 1:4-8
- Matthew 6:25-34

Holy Conversations: Seeking, Sharing and Stretching

Section One

Mark 5.1-34

Luke 13.11-35

Luke 9:37-43

John 4:7-29

Point of Reflection (Small Group Discussion):

- In these stories Jesus' healing involves more than physical cure; it involves the transformation of the people's relationships with society to be accepted, to be able to earn, to live with whom they choose, to worship, i.e. to be able to take a full role in society again. Consider the broad range of destructive forces present in the stories which are contributing to the ill health of the individual.

Point of Reflection (Large Group Discussion):

- Can you draw parallels with these destructive forces in our world today?

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- How can we work with Jesus to discover the transformative healing he brings?

Section Two

Psalm 43

Psalm 46

John 14:27

Philippians 4:4-7

Jeremiah 1:4-8

Matthew 6:25-34

Point of Reflection (Small Group Discussion):

- These words were crafted thousands of years ago by people who needed to express them and for people who needed to hear them. From reading the texts, what could have been the experiences and context which the word crafters were trying to express or respond to?

Point of Reflection (Large Group Discussion):

- Consider if there are parallel experiences and contexts in our lives and world today?
- Consider the hope, assurance and comfort which these words offer.
- Consider what hope, assurance and comfort they can offer to our lives and world today?

Pulling it All Together: Ritual of Blessing

The three poems offered here are by a Scottish artist, Lorraine Nicholson (1962 - 2015). They are from her book "The Journey Home" which used art and poetry to reflect on her experience of living with a long term mental health condition. <http://www.hope4recovery.co.uk>

The two songs offered are suggestions for listening to between the reading of the poetry. You can find them on YouTube or other music web sites.

You may like to allow space for the lighting of candles by participants at some point between the poetry and songs.

Poem: A Sense of Belonging

Everyone belongs somewhere.
Everyone deserves support and encouragement in their lives
A feeling that your presence matters
Makes a difference to others' days
A need to know that you can still contribute something of yourself
A cradling community, an extended family
A hand on a shoulder to cushion the blows
An ear to listen, to console
A shared voice of human experience
A regaining of respect from a root of worthlessness
A blossoming flower, allowing myself to be me
The person I was born to be
Feeling I belong in myself is important to me

Song: The Fray, "Be Still"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5nUuBjz4Vhc>

Be still and know that I'm with you
Be still and know that I am here
Be still and know that I'm with you
Be still, be still, and know

When darkness comes upon you
And covers you with fear and shame
Be still and know that I'm with you
And I will say your name

If terror falls upon your bed
And sleep no longer comes
Remember all the words I said
Be still, be still, and know

And when you go through the valley

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And the shadow comes down from the hill
If morning never comes to be
Be still, be still, be still

If you forget the way to go
And lose where you came from
If no one is standing beside you
Be still and know I am

Be still and know that I'm with you
Be still and know I am

Poem: Cradle Our Flames

Hallow, fallow, shell-like, fragile,
No living substance except a trace of breath,
A concave existence in hedgehog's bristle of defence.
Inert pillar of stone with etched blank stare.
All communication channels blocked until further notice.
Feelings vanished, taste buds bland, response deadened.
Waiting for something to re-emerge
Out of this blizzard of the brain
Even a shadow would be a start
Something to focus our healing on
Outstretched hands, anger, any emotion
Would be a flicker, a glimmer of the hope others cradle
As in the light of a flame
It will rekindle in time
But healing finds its own pace,
Nurtured by others remaining positive.

NEVER GIVE UP ON US

Song: Birdy, "Keeping Your Head Up"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m8AXUq5uA0Y>

Times that I've seen you lose your way
You're not in control and you won't be told
All I can do to keep you safe is hold you close
Hold you close til you can breathe on your own
Til you can breathe on your own

Hold tight; you're slowly coming back to life
I'll be keeping your head up
I'll be keeping your head up, darling
Let go of all your haunted dreams tonight
I'll be keeping your head up
I'll be keeping your head up, darling

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Hold tight; you're slowly coming back to life
I'll be keeping your head up
I'll be keeping your head up, darling
Let go of all your haunted dreams tonight
I'll be keeping your head up
I'll be keeping your head up
And I won't let you down

Everyone keeps a darker place
To lose control, you're not alone
And when you come looking for embrace
I know your soul; I'll be your home
Til you can breathe on your own
Til you can breathe on your own

Hold tight; you're slowly coming back to life
I'll be keeping your head up
I'll be keeping your head up, darling
Let go of all your haunted dreams tonight
I'll be keeping your head up
I'll be keeping your head up, darling
Hold tight; you're slowly coming back to life
I'll be keeping your head up
I'll be keeping your head up, darling
Let go of all your haunted dreams tonight
I'll be keeping your head up
I'll be keeping your head up
And I won't let you down

You never think that you can fly
You'll always swim against the tide
Don't you know your pain is mine?
And I would die a thousand times to ease your mind
To ease your mind

Hold tight; you're slowly coming back to life
I'll be keeping your head up
I'll be keeping your head up, darling
Let go of all your haunted dreams tonight
I'll be keeping your head up
I'll be keeping your head up, darling
Hold tight; you're slowly coming back to life
I'll be keeping your head up
I'll be keeping your head up, darling
Let go of all your haunted dreams tonight
I'll be keeping your head up
I'll be keeping your head up
And I won't let you down.

Poem: Offering Up the Gift of Hope

Hope is on the horizon now.
There is a future, a moving on in life,
Leaving all negativity behind,
A surge of creativity, positivity.
Indeed, a full recovery a very real possibility.
Keep the faith. Don't let it out of your grasp.
Hope is too precious a gift to take lightly.
It is the light at the end of the tunnel.
Grow towards it, let it guide you on your way.
It's a new life now. Don't look back.
Don't let the memory of darkness eclipse your new-found sunlight.
Instead bask in it.
Everyone deserves a place in the sun.....

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