

# My Friend is Struggling With... - Mental illness is not a sin

**Key Takeaway:** Your identity is found in Christ, not your mental health.

**Scripture:** John 9:1-3

## INTRO

Your brain is the most complex structure in the known universe according to The National Geographic. The human brain only weighs three pounds on average, but it is responsible for housing billions of cells.

According to Northwestern Medicine, our brain's storage capacity is considered virtually unlimited. Our brain is truly a powerful structure. Although it might not seem like it, our brain is an organ. Just like any other organ, our brains can become sick, damaged, or injured.

The reasoning for the injury or sickness of the brain can come from several different areas. It can come from a past traumatic experience, genetic vulnerability, medications, chemical imbalances, etc. No matter how the brain became damaged or ill, the result is the brain functions differently than we expected.

## TENSION - MENTAL HEALTH/ILLNESS VS. FAITH

Often when we hear about mental health, we usually hear several lies that go along with it. Maybe you have believed the lie that you are the only person who is going through whatever you are going through. Maybe you have heard the lie that you are too broken to be used by God. Maybe you have heard or believed the lie that your mental illness is a sin.

It is important as we get into this topic to look at the differences between mental illness and health. Mental illness is something that is a permanent situation. Mental health is the way that it affects the way you think and act on your emotions. You can have a mental illness and be mentally healthy. When we hear about mental disorders, we usually think of the big two. Anxiety and depression. However, we know that there are a lot more mental health issues than just those two. The top ten common mental illnesses according to Nexus Recovery are as follows:

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Bipolar Disorder
- Substance use disorders
- Eating Disorder
- Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)
- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- Dementia

When you or someone you know is living with one of these diagnoses, it can feel frustrating. It can feel like other people are moving at a speed that you or they are unable to match. Some of you have probably wished that you could just be normal, and view the diagnosis as a curse. You may have even prayed to God and asked Him to take it away and to give you a new brain. Living with one of those diagnoses can be hard if we are honest.

Of course, there are even more mental illnesses than that, but those ten are probably ten illnesses that a lot of us in this very room battle or know someone who does.

Notice that when I was listing the reasonings of injuries and illnesses to the brain earlier, I did not mention sin as a reason. Someone's sin is not the reason for their personal mental illness. We live in a broken world where we have illness and sickness because of the result of sin. However, you would never look at someone who has a broken arm and assume that they sinned, resulting in a broken bone. Neither should we look at someone who has a mental illness and believe that they struggle with their mental illness because of the sin in their life. There are illnesses and sickness in this world because of sin in general. However, illness' are not directly to sin that they have committed.

## **TRUTH - ILLNESS DOES NOT EQUAL SIN**

The Bible is not a book filled with perfect people who lived perfect lives. It shows us messy people that you and I would never pick to lead the way. It shows us the human condition on display. It shows us that it is okay to be "not okay." It also shows us that God doesn't leave us that way. When we read the Bible, we never see deep sadness and pain automatically prevent someone from leading, being a hero of faith, or being described as a Godly person. The Bible never condemns or looks down upon someone who is struggling with a mental illness. The Bible never says that someone had a physical or mental illness because of their sin.

### *John 9:1-3 pg. 522*

*1 As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. 2 And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" 3 Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him."*

In these verses, we see the disciples assume that since this man was blind, he or his parents must have sinned. This would not have been a foreign idea to the disciples at all. Believing that someone had sickness because of their sin was a traditional view of religious Jewish people in that day. Unfortunately, that has also crept into the church today. We also can assume punishment where there isn't any. Jesus responded to them by saying it was not the result of sin that this man was blind.

When we struggle with mental health or health issues in general, God doesn't see us as sinners. He sees His children struggling.

Another interesting thing in this passage that Jesus said is, "but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him." Think through what it could look like for the works of God to be displayed in mental health. It could be through healing. It could also be shown as we develop a supernatural compassion for the people around us.

People with ADHD can be some of the most creative/curious people in the world. Some of the most empathetic people have anxiety and depression. They often know what it feels like to struggle, and they are more sensitive to the struggles of others.

We know that this world is broken. God did not design it this way. The good news is that God can take the things that make us different and make them life giving. Mental health doesn't have to equate to brokenness. When God enters the picture, they can become superpowers.

## **APPLICATION**

There is a group of students and leaders here who have struggled with mental illness and will more than likely continue to battle them. The other group of you might not struggle with a mental illness but I almost guarantee that you know someone who does. Here are three points of encouragement to each group tonight.

### **To those of you who struggle with a mental illness:**

#### **1. You are not alone.**

- Ever since the fall of Adam and Eve, God's people have been suffering. Of course, we know that people suffer emotionally, physically, and mentally as well.
  - We also see time and time again in Scripture of people crying out to God.
    - *Psalm 130:1-2 says, "Out of the depths I cry to you, LORD; Lord, hear my voice."*
    - *Psalm 6:3 says, "My soul is in deep anguish. How long, Lord, how long?"*
- According to the National Institute of Mental Health, an estimated 49.5% of adolescents (age 13-18) struggle with a mental illness.
- You are not alone in struggling with your mental illness. What if we began to be open and honest about the things that we struggle with? Our friends can provide strength where we feel weak. We are not alone, because there are others that struggle too. Loneliness can only exist if we stay silent.
- One very practical step to take after tonight is to find someone you trust to talk about it. Talk to a friend, parent, small group leader, or teacher. Another avenue that we would love to encourage any student who is struggling is to seek counseling. You often go to get checkups for your body and overall health. Why not get a checkup for your brain?

#### **2. Your diagnosis is not your identity.**

- Your diagnosis, whether it be OCD, anxiety, or an eating disorder is NOT your identity. Those things may be something that you struggle with, but that does not mean that it is who you are.
- God has created you all in His image. (Genesis 1:27) Your identity is not found in your diagnosis. It is found in Christ.
- The Bible also says that you are wonderfully and fearfully made. That means that when God created you, He carefully and perfectly created you. (Psalm 139:14)

### **3. God sees you.**

- Thankfully for us, we serve a Savior who has emotions. Our God is not just a God who demands things from us and does not care about our being. God cares deeply about you. There is nothing too small. He cares when you feel different, broken, and alone. His heart breaks when He see you suffering.
- Jesus is a very compassionate person. We see that compassion when His friend Lazarus died. Jesus sat with Lazarus' family and wept with them. Jesus is always willing to sit and weep with you.
  - *1 Peter 5:7 - Cast all your anxieties on him because he cares for you.*
  - *James 4:8 - Come near to God and he will come near to you.*
- Jesus cares for you. You can bring all your worries and anxieties. Jesus is a compassionate friend.

### **To those who do not struggle with a mental illness but that have friends who do:**

#### **1. Be present with your friends.**

- There is truly a lot of power in just being present for your friends.
- It is important for us to simply listen to our friends. If we have a friend who is battling anxiety, we need to be willing to sit and listen. We need to practice listening to truly listen and not to respond. We need to hear and love that person without thinking about what the next thing we are going to say is. We need to listen.

#### **2. Reaffirm their identity in Christ.**

- When you begin to hear lies that other people or even your friend telling themselves you need to step in and reaffirm their identity. Remind them that they are fearfully and wonderfully made. God is so proud of them and is cheering them on.

#### **3. Intercede on their behalf by praying for them.**

- As believers in Christ, we have the ability to intercede for our friends and pray for them.
- We are called as believers of Christ to carry each other's burdens.
  - *Galatians 6:2 - Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.*
- We are also called to pray for our friends as believers. The Bible does not just suggest us to but commands us to pray.
  - *1 John 5:14 - This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.*

## **LANDING**

Remember that you are not defined by your mental illness. You are a daughter or son of the Most High King. The Bible tells us that you are wonderfully and fearfully made. That does not mean that you won't experience troubles in this world, because you will. However, remember to put your trust and hope in God.

Walk within the light that God has called you to. God does not look down and see your identity as your mental illness. He looks down and sees a child that He loves dearly.

# Small Group Questions

## Leader Note:

If a student shares something painful or intense, our gut reaction is to fix them or clean up the situation. We are not here to fix them; we are here for them. We can do much by listening and showing them that they are known and seen. Don't freak out or overreact. Thank them for having the courage to share and empathize with them. We don't have the time or qualifications to fix people. But when people know we are for them, we can create an ongoing dialogue that goes beyond Wednesday night.

Make it clear to your group that if someone shares a struggle, we don't share someone else's struggle outside the group to our friends. It's okay for students to process what is shared in small group with their parents. The only time we share someone's struggle is when it involves someone being harmed or in danger.

**Helpful Responses:** The following are some key phrases that are helpful in response to what a student shares that show empathy and security: "Thank you for sharing," "What can we do to help?," "I'm sorry you are dealing with that," "How can we pray for you about that?," "Do you have anyone that you can talk to when you struggle?," "Can we be the people you talk to when you struggle?"

## Questions:

- Why is it sometimes hard to talk about mental illness?
  - What can we do to make it easier?
- What are ways that you think God might want to display His works through your mental illness?
- What are some ways a diagnosis can become our identity? (Examples: not feeling normal, guilt, shame.)
- Who has the right to label you or give you an identity?
- What is something that God says about your identity that resonates with you? Why is it important?
- When our friends are struggling with a mental illness, how can we be there for them?
- When we struggle with mental illness, what can we do?
- In James 4:8, we read, "come near to God and he will come near to you." What are ways that we can come near to God?