

Rob Waller shares his experiences of working with Christians struggling with mental health issues

MIND & SOUL

key points

As a trainee psychiatrist the author became increasingly frustrated with the failure of the Church to deal sensitively with issues of mental health and began to blog about his learning and questions.

Through networking with others, stories of stigma towards mental-health problems within Christian circles began to emerge showing that many Christians were suffering in silence, unsure if psychological solutions were appropriate. This was highlighted further when a close friend experienced post-traumatic depression and found himself completely unprepared for the experience.

Through the Mind & Soul initiative much good has been done to bring mental health issues onto the agenda for churches and to encourage mental health friendly churches. In conclusion the mental health benefits of Christianity are affirmed.

The division between sacred and secular is felt keenly in our understanding of the mind and the soul. Until a few hundred years ago mental illness was in the domain of the Church, then Carl Gustav Jung proclaimed that 'psychiatrists were the new priests'.¹ However this is not a role that many of my colleagues desire, and the Church is still heavily involved in the care of souls.²

Over the last five years, I have been exploring this division as both a Christian and a psychiatrist; I don't think one comes first, as both have different values. Networks have been invaluable, made up of professionals, pastors, people with their own illness and those who are just interested.

Torn in two

As a higher trainee in psychiatry, increasingly I was finding my Sunday and Monday did not join up: the two worlds were separated as if the other did not exist. Clearly, this could not continue and (as it was the '90s) I started a blog to share my learning and questions. More people than I expected read it and many who were struggling with mental health issues came out of the woodwork in Leeds where I was living.

At the same time an old university friend, Will Van Der Hart, had trained for the Anglican ministry and was a curate in Marylebone; the London bombings of 2005 impacted him greatly:

'I heard a noise like a bomb... I donned my largely unworn dog collar and proceeded under the cordon, as if this outfit of black and white were some sort of superhero licence to action that would protect me from danger... "Would your officers like to base themselves in our hall, use the loo and have some refreshments?"... I had little comprehension of how powerfully I would be affected by this encounter... Looking back, I'm not surprised by my panic attacks, although I was surprised at the time. I was refusing to give credence to my feelings...³

Will found that his journey into depression and taking antidepressants was not something that his training had prepared him for. The Church was focused on reaching the 'lost' and this was not meant to happen to the 'found' – instead the 'found' were supposed to be prayed for, keep calm and carry on!

Both of us had started informal groups which we later found were forming across the country – a coming together of professionals, pastors and others who wanted to understand how their faith and mental health related; who were not content with the standard answers of either the sacred or the secular camp; people who wanted to have the best of psychology as well as the full expression of faith.

Stories of stigma also emerged. We have all read of the challenges of faith in the NHS but, to its credit, the NHS knows this is an issue and has

a commitment (on paper at least) to change. However, this also seems to be a huge issue in the Church: people who take antidepressants in silence, people with schizophrenia who are patronised and seen as scary, people who are painfully thin yet no-one seems to care enough to ask...

'As a very keen Christian, I felt very guilty about being depressed as it appeared to me as a great spiritual failure... I went to see my minister, told him that I was being treated for depression. I had become quite distant from things... so I hoped he might be able to help me get more involved again. Instead of this, he told me that I must have no contact with anyone else in the church in case they caught the depression from me... We must not consider people to be 'backsliders' if they can't regularly attend services. They may be uneasy being in large groups, which always made me feel very lonely and vulnerable.'⁴

Building a bridge

As we began to write about this area, many people expressed an interest, including Premier Christian Radio, which asked us to help their phone-in and email service.⁵ They were getting many requests for help with mental health problems and they wanted a resource to recommend. The result was a website (see box) where information was available freely and comments and 'service-user' perspectives were encouraged.

People have engaged with amazing honesty and a willingness to encourage others. We have also run a handful of major conferences, working alongside organisations like the Association of Christian Counsellors, the British Association of Christians in Psychology and, of course, CMF. Amazingly, 500-1000 people have come to each of these. We have been very blessed to partner with some of the better-known churches in the UK, and celebrate the fact that those who shape much of current Christian thinking are also willing to host an event about mental health. It is such an encouragement to those who attend.

We involve the local NHS bodies where we can and have included some multi-faith seminars that were of great interest. One aim is not only to put the issue of mental health firmly on the Christian map, but to interest secular care providers too. Being fully compliant with NHS policies on spirituality, yet remaining distinctively Christian, is quite a challenge, but one I believe is achievable with grace and mutually respectful relationships.

The last few months have seen a move into print media, starting with *The Worry Book*, reviewed in this issue of *Triple Helix* (see p21). We have also tried to move beyond the 'old chestnuts' (such as whether demons cause schizophrenia, whether Jeremiah was depressed, whether the mind is part of the body or the soul – the website covers all of these) and instead project a strong message of 'both and' when it comes to faith and mental health.

We have encouraged churches to go beyond a vague awareness of mental health issues to being genuinely 'mental health friendly', in the same way that putting in an access ramp does not mean you are inclusive to those in wheelchairs. This is about encouraging belonging, having a variety of environments, being locally informed and seeing all as on a journey.⁶

We believe it is possible to be full of faith, struggling with illness, finding joy in the Lord, taking time out and serving out of suffering all at the same time! Of course, this applies to the professionals as well – not just those we call patients...

Fully linked together?

Many people ask whether Christianity is good for your mental health, and I typically reply that there are thousands of scientific papers that suggest this is the case. This link has been reviewed for health in general in a recent *CMF File*,⁷ and also more specifically for mental health by Harold Koenig.⁸

A more subtle reply is to ask people to think in three levels, and this works well with secular colleagues for all these have scientific proof. Behaviourally, there is a benefit to getting out of the house to church once a week. Cognitively, there are Christian beliefs that increase self-esteem (though there can also be excessive guilt). Existentially, there is a benefit to an externalizing faith where we are not alone and not powerless to influence change.⁹

But behaviours, beliefs and a general spirituality are not the same as Christianity and I pray that we can be both compassionate citizens and also distinctive disciples. As people are more open about their mental health (both in society and in church) there is a huge opportunity for Christians to shine hope where none can be seen and offer helpful answers to questions people are asking every day. The Good News can be shared naturally, relevantly and powerfully.

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Premier Mind and Soul

This is a growing website containing hundreds of articles from experts, a growing set of book reviews, a podcast, forums and a directory of helpful organisations around the UK and online. It also contains lots of audio from events we have run, all freely available to download. www.mindandsoul.info



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9. See also Martinez P. Existential Anxiety: Between Faith and Despair on p7 of this issue of *Triple Helix*