

Mental health crisis: challenges and opportunities for the Church

By Andrew Symes, Anglican Mainstream.

There appears to be a steep rise in the incidence of 'mental health problems', especially clinical treatments for various forms of anxiety and depression among young people¹.

As well as being a health problem, this is also an economic problem (as increasing numbers of days are lost to sick leave), and a political problem (as accusations about 'lack of funding' take on political currency²), and as we shall see, an educational problem. For the church it is a pastoral problem, but also an evangelistic opportunity, a time to pray that we would see God at work in people's lives, turning despair to hope as the whole Gospel is shared through the supportive community of the local church, and as sufferers learn, grow and are transformed as disciples of Christ.

The Government's responsibility?

Human history has always recorded various experiences of unhappiness, and recent advances in medical research have uncovered genetic and neurochemical causes affecting certain people, as well as general stressors common to everyone. But one would expect that the massive improvements in material standards of living and medical advances in the West over recent years would result in less depression and anxiety, not more. The fact that Christians experiencing extreme poverty and violent persecution in parts of the developing world have better 'mental health' than many 'free' and affluent people in the West suggests that the answer to the question "why an increase in depression?" cannot be "cuts in funding" (it's especially disappointing to hear Christians lazily jump on this bandwagon). We need rather to look at some of the uncomfortable issues that demand a response from all of us, especially the Church, rather than simply loading responsibility for the happiness of the population on the Government and health professionals.

A biblical perspective

Is there a conflict between the Bible and modern medicine? In Matthew 6:25,31 Jesus issues a command: "do not worry". He explains why: "your heavenly Father knows what you need". The clear implication is that to worry is a form of

¹ For example <http://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/rising-number-girls-concerned-mental-9920813>

² <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-34032097>

disobedience. Perhaps also to be depressed, for example with feelings of low self esteem, is a sinful failure to grasp that God loves us?

The NHS tells me that anxiety and depression are not my fault. It's to do with circumstances and chemistry. I'm ill, and need help. Jesus seems to suggest that there could be a third cause – my sin – I need to repent and believe! Which is true? Or maybe both are? Certainly, it would be wrong to suggest that all anxiety and depression is a result of sinful lack of faith³. Jesus himself was called “man of sorrows”, and notable Christians down the ages have been honest about depression (for example Reformation leader Martin Luther, and hymn writers George Matheson and William Cowper). Christians have bodies and minds that are prone to illness like anyone else, and attempting to live a godly life can bring persecution from unseen powers in the form of mental distress as well as visible persecution. However it would be equally wrong to deny the possibility that sin, and wrong worldview, can bring about depression or make it worse.

It would not be surprising if there were a connection between the increase in mental illness, and the loss of Christian teaching in society. If it's really true, as the Bible says, that those who have not trusted in Jesus as Saviour, who are confused and/or ignorant of their value in creation and their ultimate destiny are “lost”, then we should expect this spiritual and psychological ‘lostness’ to produce stress that exponentially increases the normal pressures of life: money, relationships, bereavements etc.

What can the Church offer?

Here are three areas where the church can make a contribution to promote better mental health in the population:

Education

Do we believe that faith in Christ can lead to better mental health? Church of England schools have a wonderful evangelistic mission statement – to introduce children to Jesus Christ⁴, but it's not clear how effectively this is being implemented, or how it fits in with the conflicting agendas of Government and lobby groups. Secularists have seen RE as a form of indoctrination – many see even a dispassionate outlining of information about what religions believe and teach to be dangerous to young minds. As a result they have campaigned for it to be replaced with versions of “philosophy and ethics” which is now being reflected in curricula and taken up by more and more schools.

Meanwhile the Government, desperate to combat Muslim extremism and at the same time not wanting to be seen to favour Christianity, are also wanting to

3

<http://www.christiantoday.com/article/ten.myths.about.emotional.health.we.need.to.eradicate.from.churches/62505.htm>

⁴ <https://www.churchofengland.org/education/children-young-people.aspx>

promote a form of RE that is more about 'citizenship', and very superficial instruction about what different faiths believe (rather than critical and participatory engagement with the issues that religion deals with⁵). Also, Muslim campaigners have been much more active in ensuring that where students are learning about other faiths, the textbooks on Islam reflect a conservative version, whereas textbooks on Christianity are often liberal and insipid. The result is that whereas most of my generation would have looked at the Bible in school (my O Level RE was based on the Gospel of Mark), the majority of today's school leavers have not engaged with Scripture or learned, even in an objective way, what orthodox Christians believe.

The new Director of the Church of England Board of Education, Dr Nigel Genders, complains about the downgrading of RE in the curriculum⁶. Hopefully he will be addressing not just the matter of status but also the more important issue of content – it is no good having more students studying RE to GCSE and A level (as they are currently doing), or RE being part of a core curriculum, if young people leave school without having had the chance to explore real Christianity in the process.

Sex and relationships

Secondly, the Church has sadly contributed to the confusion about sexual ethics by itself not being united in its approach to the sexual revolution and the ideas underpinning it. A worry about appearing out of touch and judgemental, wanting to present the Gospel as liberating not restrictive, and a revisionist approach to biblical sexual ethics ("we know better") has meant that church leaders have often failed to teach biblical wisdom on sex, singleness and marriage within the church, and at best have sent mixed messages in public⁷. As issues of sex, sexual identity and relationships take up a large amount of the self-reflection of the population, and sexual immorality (according to the Bible) corrupts the heart⁸ and is a form of self-harm⁹, its not surprising to hear that these things are mentioned most often in the secular world in discussion of the causes of problems of anxiety and depression, amplified as they are by the effect of social media, especially among young people. Positive narratives about celibate singleness and faithful heterosexual marriage are essential not just for discipleship within the Christian community but an antidote to stress-inducing confusion in society at large.

Pastoral counselling: correct foundations?

Thirdly, the increasing uncritical embracing of 'Mindfulness' by some sections of the church has to be a concern. Katherine Ecclestone, Professor of Education at

⁵ <http://www.churchnewspaper.com/42052/archives>

⁶ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/secondaryeducation/11817018/Religious-education-is-being-watered-down-argues-Church-of-England.html>

⁷ see for example here

<http://anglicanmainstream.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Our-children-as-gay-champions.pdf>

⁸ Mark 7:20-21

⁹ 1 Corinthians 6:18

Sheffield University, has suggested¹⁰ that one of the reasons for the rise of mental health problems is that people are increasingly encouraged to think of themselves as fragile, vulnerable victims needing therapy, and that this is affecting education and the church as well as health services.

“The therapeutic ethos...has given rise to a number of cultural orthodoxies which it is very difficult to challenge or counter...

Some university counselling services staff are now finding that they have become victims of their own success in that they have created such a sense of need among students that they are unable to meet the demand.”

Mindfulness techniques, which are largely derived from Buddhist foundations and adapted for secular use like Yoga, can be “highly introspective” and can result in a person focussing on his or her response to feelings and experiences, rather than engaging real-world problems with faith. In other words, Mindfulness is not the same as Christian discipleship, and may in some cases give different answers to the problem of mental anguish.

So, Christian leaders, churches and schools can continue with excellent provision of pastoral care, understanding and empathy in the face of increasing cases of anxiety and depression. But there must be a bold recommitment to the teaching of Scripture and the clear explanation of Christian belief, life and faith in congregations and schools, particularly as it applies to sexual ethics. And while we can learn some useful things from modern therapeutic techniques, an understanding of Jesus’ work in the past, our future destiny with him, and his walk with us and call to us in the present is surely better for all than encouraging a narcissistic focus on me, now.

You might like to also look at:

Easter: challenge to the self righteous, balm for the self-harming, by Andrew Symes
<http://anglicanmainstream.org/easter-challenge-to-the-self-righteous-balm-for-the-self-harming/>

¹⁰ Here is a summary of a paper delivered at a conference of Family Education Trust
http://familyeducationtrust.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=210:bulletin-159-july-2015&catid=121:bulletins-2015&Itemid=73#mindfulness

Mental health crisis: challenges and opportunities for the Church

By Andrew Symes, Anglican Mainstream.

There appears to be a steep rise in the incidence of 'mental health problems', especially clinical treatments for various forms of anxiety and depression among young people¹¹.

As well as being a health problem, this is also an economic problem (as increasing numbers of days are lost to sick leave), and a political problem (as accusations about 'lack of funding' take on political currency¹²), and as we shall see, an educational problem. For the church it is a pastoral problem, but also an evangelistic opportunity, a time to pray that we would see God at work in people's lives, turning despair to hope as the whole Gospel is shared through the supportive community of the local church, and as sufferers learn, grow and are transformed as disciples of Christ.

[...]Christian leaders, churches and schools can continue with excellent provision of pastoral care, understanding and empathy in the face of increasing cases of anxiety and depression. But there must be a bold recommitment to the teaching of Scripture and the clear explanation of Christian belief, life and faith in congregations and schools, particularly as it applies to sexual ethics. And while we can learn some useful things from modern therapeutic techniques, an understanding of Jesus' work in the past, our future destiny with him, and his walk with us and call to us in the present is surely better for all than encouraging a narcissistic focus on me, now.

¹¹ For example <http://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/rising-number-girls-concerned-mental-9920813>

¹² <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-34032097>