

LOVING THOSE WHO ARE HURTING

WALKING ALONGSIDE THOSE WHO ARE MENTALLY ILL

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SOME DO's & DON'T's WHEN WALKING ALONGSIDE SOMEONE WHO IS MENTALLY ILL

DO give tangible, physical support

This may mean cooking, cleaning, helping with childcare, shopping. Depending on their circumstances, help with daily routines may enable the whole family to stay together. Being ill does not necessarily mean they are being lazy when things are left undone. Everyday activities like cleaning the house, paying bills, or feeding the dog may seem overwhelming to them. Just as if they had the flu, they simply don't feel up to it.

DO encourage self-care

Maybe give them the gift of a hair appointment or go with them for some cossetting beauty treatment. Accompany them to any appointments - medical, dental, therapeutic or any others - if you think they might otherwise not go or they would find it easier if you went with them. Sometimes it can be hard for someone who is mentally unwell to remember what has been said, you can help by reminding them.

DO acknowledge any achievements

However small and insignificant they may seem to you. A helpful suggestion, when in a more evident recovery stage, can be to keep a simple journal, perhaps setting out some goals for each day and then noting their achievement.

DO pray for the person's healing and well-being

That, after all, is what we want, whatever the means by which God chooses to bring this about. You can trust their welfare to the God of all compassion. Your very concern for them, expressed in prayer and support, are part of God's plans for their healing and their future well-being.

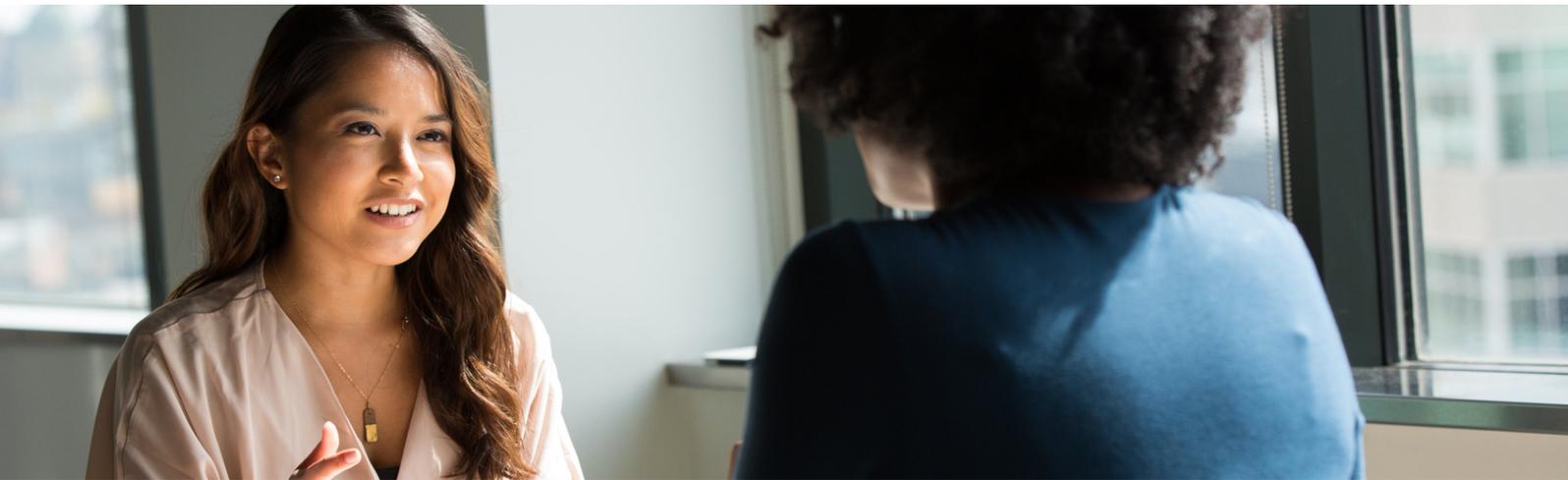
DO encourage them to get exercise

Perhaps by joining them for a walk, a jog, a swim or whatever takes their fancy and you feel up to doing!

DO be ready to offer alternative perspectives BUT primarily as a comfort rather than a challenge.

The most important thing is that they stick with life (remember that some mental illness can be life threatening) and stay around to experience the delight of getting better. They need your compassion and understanding. You do not have to collude with unhelpful thinking or necessarily always keep silent. Gentle reminders (without seeking their agreement) that you are confident that God does love them, that God is with them, can help over time to reawaken some sense of hope.

When confronted with mental illness, we may well feel inadequate and unsure, but we have a God who has chosen to use His people, frail and weak as they are, to bring His help, support, love and compassion to those whose paths we cross. He has also given us a Helper, the Spirit of Jesus – the Holy Spirit. Here are some hints and tips on how you can bless others by walking alongside them when they are mentally ill.



DO monitor possible suicidal gestures or threats and DON'T be afraid to talk with the person about his or her suicidal feelings.

You do need to keep a strong hold on your belief that it is entirely possible, indeed probable, that your friend or family member will get better, even if he or she does not believe it. However, statements such as "I wish I were dead," "The world would be better off without me," or "I want out" must be taken seriously. The belief that people who talk about suicide are only doing it for the attention is just plain wrong. If you have any reason to suppose that the person you care about is, or may be suicidal, make sure that you inform someone else so that together you can decide what other action, if any, needs to be taken.

DO give spiritual support but DON'T put them under spiritual pressure.

Let them know you are praying for them, gently remind them of Jesus and all He has done. Read the Bible with them and pray with them (without assuming they will pray) but DON'T put them under spiritual pressure. Be quietly confident in your own faith.

DO stick with them

In a society that wants everything instantly, we need to patiently walk alongside them, trusting in God's timing and plan; at times we need to be ready for a marathon rather than a sprint. When appropriate it may be that you can discretely form a 'team' and support each other as you seek to care and pray for the one who is ill.

We can all get discouraged at times especially when your walk alongside someone seems more like a marathon than a sprint, at such times **DO REMEMBER:**

1. While most of us are not medics, nurses or therapists, the support and comfort we can offer can be helpful.

We readily assume we can help someone who is physically ill even while medics and others also offer treatment and support. It is the same with mental illness – whatever the known or unknown biological reasons for mental illness, the impact on the many diverse aspects of daily living and a person's capacity to care for themselves (and others) can be profound; the friend walking alongside them can be a great help and support.

2. Illness¹ is the (clinical) term used to indicate the person's experience of being unwell whether that is a physical or mental illness

Illness as narrative offers us, as Christian friends, a real opportunity to help and support others as we can relate their story, just as we do ours, to the gospel narrative in its widest sense – the narrative of the Bible. Just as we know that our personal story relates to the bigger story of the Bible, we can have confidence that, as we hear their story, it will do so too. This allows us not just to bring help but also to encourage hope as we gently make connections².

1. Various terms are used in our health culture: 'disorder' describes symptoms and is summed up in a diagnosis, 'disease' is an understanding of actual or potential biological factors (dis-ease), while 'illness' captures a patient's experience or story behind their problems.

2. We can be intimidated by a diagnosis but using the term 'illness' also helps us recognise that even when people share the same diagnosis their experiences (their stories) will differ; their story has nuances that cannot be captured in a diagnosis, their story is more personal and unique than any diagnosis and easier to relate to.

3. Just as those who are physically unwell are blessed by the compassion of others, so too compassion can bring blessing to those that are mentally ill.

Sadly, while as Christians we are quick to show compassion to those who are physically ill, we can be much slower to show compassion to those who are mentally ill. We may feel uncomfortable with someone who seems to be acting oddly or not thinking straight and can easily become judgmental when there seems to be no clear biological reason for how the person is feeling and acting and assume that there is sin behind the illness.

Our Biblical belief is that there is more to reality than what we see (the subject of science including biology); truth and reality are also known by faith. The Bible tells us that we are created beings and in a place of dependence on God to provide us a guide to reality. As we get to know someone's story, we need to be wary of assuming that if there is no known biological cause then it must be a spiritual (if not sinful) problem. We need to take time to seek to understand, with humility, the complex interplay between apparent symptoms and the person's thinking, which will variably reflect gospel truth or their alternative beliefs (worldview).

4. The Holy Spirit (supreme counsellor) is with you

2 Peter 1:3-4 says: "His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness."

There are no exceptions to this: whatever our circumstances (or our diagnosis), God has given us everything we need to lead godly lives. We have Christ, and His Spirit is with us, He is the Word and we have His Word and by common grace we have access to medical knowledge and expertise.

Dependent on the Holy Spirit we need to affirm that:

- Behind the diagnosis (the problem) is a person and God is in control of who He brings to cross our path
- A psychiatric diagnosis reflects that someone is hurting badly
- Common grace may mean that a chemical therapy can help but it is unlikely to ever be the whole solution
- We are created as embodied souls
- We are always more like others, even those with a psychiatric diagnosis, than different from them – made in the image of God and sharing so much the Bible tells us is true of us all: fallen, helpless, pursued by God...

P.S. "A New Day" by Emma Scrivener really cleverly combines information about what mental health difficulties can feel like, official diagnoses, the gospel, and how you might offer support to someone going through these things.

CONTACT US

Members of the Pastoral Resource Group are ready to talk over any particular situations that you are engaged in, when you feel that would be helpful.

The group's email address is: pastoral.resource.group@widcombe.org