

# A Sound Mind

## Mental health/illness from God's point of view (pt 1)

Does Scripture offer any positive, practical help in the massive problem of mental illness that's plaguing so many people today? Is God concerned about mental health and mental illness too?

Yes, he is. In the old King James Version of **2 Timothy 1:7**, mental health is top priority on the Holy Spirit's agenda, "For God has not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and **of a sound mind.**" It is God's clear desire that we humans have healthy, sound minds.

For 'sound mind' Paul uses the Greek word that means curbing one's desires and impulses, doing all things in moderation, and being modest and discreet. It's a mind, in other words, that's under control. Other Bible translations use the English words 'sensible' and 'self-disciplined'.

An example would be **1 Timothy 3:2**, in the qualities looked for in a church leader. Taking words and phrases from several Bible translations for this verse it sounds like this: "A leader must have impeccable character, a blameless reputation, and be well thought of. He must be fair, wise, dignified, skillful in judgment, cool-calm-and-collected, shrewd in the management of his affairs, respectful, courteous and welcoming. He's kind and thoughtful, not hurtful, hot-tempered or quarrelsome, and he never acts rashly, hastily, or foolishly." And in **verse 11**, "No exceptions are made for women either - same qualifications, serious, dependable, worthy of respect, and not malicious gossips. They are discreet and can be thoroughly trusted" (The Message).

That's a lot to consider, but Paul boils it down in **Titus 1:8** to "having a good grip on oneself" (The Message). A healthy mind, simply put, isn't ruled by, or even motivated by, emotion. Runaway emotions, by comparison, are a classic sign of a mind that's jumped the rails.

Does that mean, then, that Christians should be totally sane at all times, and be totally free from nervous breakdowns or any other mental illnesses?

That's not what Paul is saying, because all sorts of mental illnesses can be traced back to physical causes, like inherited weaknesses, prenatal damage, brain injuries, infections, accidents, impaired brain chemistry, alcohol and drug abuse, poor nutrition, exposure to environmental toxins (like mercury and lead), and physical abuse and injury caused by other people (like sexual abuse during childhood), all of which can affect a person's mental state for life, and cause all sorts of mental problems, no matter how 'Christian' a person is.

But in answer to all that, Paul says, "Don't panic, help is available," and it's help from a very powerful source too, the Holy Spirit. And what the Spirit has to offer is **self-mastery**, no matter how handicapped we are by our weaknesses.

Self-mastery is a marvelous gift, because, as one quote states: "God-given discipline (or self-mastery, or having a good grip on oneself) allows believers **to control every element of their lives**, whether positive or negative. It allows them to experience success without becoming proud, and to suffer failure without becoming bitter or hopeless." Our emotions, including the dreadful ogre of discouragement, don't have to blow us to pieces, or lead us around by the nose.

But in saying the **Holy Spirit** is the source of such control, Paul is also saying that self-mastery over our emotions **does not come naturally**. We're not born with self-mastery. It can't be inherited, or learned in a classroom, or honed by experience. But not to worry, Paul says, we've all got access to the God-given gift of a sound mind to stop us becoming loose cannons emotionally, no matter what our circumstances or personality. It's all part of the Father "blessing us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ" (Ephesians 1:3).

But if it's all Spirit-given, does that mean we cannot help ourselves?

Paul touched on that in Romans 7 and 8. In **Romans 7** he talks very candidly about his own state of mind. He wanted to be a good person, like so many people today who have high morals, work hard, raise funds for needy causes, pay fair wages, sacrifice dearly for their families, help neighbours, and win Civic Awards for outstanding service to the community.

But Paul also admitted in **Romans 7:21**, that "When I want to good, **evil** is right there with me...waging war against the law of my mind" - and there was nothing he could do to stop it. He **couldn't** help himself, in other words.

So, if meditation, therapy, medication, and endless sessions with a psychiatrist were available in Paul's day, none of them would have worked, because in Paul's experience what was happening to him was **beyond** human control. How could mere humans and human aids combat the ever-present and overwhelming power of evil? Even the heartiest believer in God's law (like Paul) had no control over the evil thoughts in his head. It was Paul's conclusion, therefore, that we live in a body of death, and only God can rescue us from it (verses 24-25).

Modern-day mental health experts would roll their eyes at Paul's diagnosis, of course, because they believe the mind and emotions **are** within the realm of human help, and **can** be corrected and balanced by medication and techniques for self-control. And the idea that evil is involved in mental illness is just typical of nutty religion trying to scare people.

But if they are right and there's nothing spiritual at the root of mental illness, or anything spiritual needed to cure it, and we can all have our minds kept under control by pills and therapy, etc., why is there so much incurable mental illness still? Why are jails full of people with mental problems, that no counseling or medication can cure? And why are so many young people self-injuring and committing suicide if it's within our expert control to stop them?

Paul answers that in Romans 7, but what secular psychiatrist today would accept Paul's diagnosis that **evil** was messing up his mind? A psychiatrist would say that Paul was more likely suffering from a mix of one or more diagnosable mental imbalances like Split Personality Disorder, or Schizoid Personality Disorder. Maybe Paul was even schizophrenic. The psychiatrist might even admit to Paul suffering from Disruptive Mood Dysregulation Disorder, but that would be very brave because no one yet knows the cause or the treatment for it. It would be admitting that maybe Paul had a point, that there really are things going on in the human mind beyond our human control, that includes (dare we say it) the powerful influence of evil.

But that's a scary thought because it means delving into realms we have no understanding of, and no means of dealing with, either. On the other hand, if we can't find ways of dealing with the likes of Hitler, or serial killers, or madmen who coldly blow up innocent people, or bullies addicted to inflicting injury for pleasure and power, and criminals who have no remorse or empathy for their victims, how much more suffering must we endure while we wait for the mental health experts to come up with new understanding and new solutions?

But who wants to admit that maybe we don't have the answers, and God does? Or that Paul was right after all that the reason we cannot come up with solutions is because "the sinful mind is hostile to God" (Romans 8:7)?

Oops. Now we're really treading on sensitive ground, because Paul is stating bluntly that we'll never come up with solutions to mental illness while our attitude to God stinks. But what's God got to do with anything, today's experts ask? He's more likely the *cause* of mental illness, not the solution, they say, because look at all the weird ideas that God-nuts in religion come up with, like messing people's minds up with visions of hell and burning forever. Religious people and Christians have simply disqualified themselves from any contribution to mental health, therefore, because they're probably the most mentally sick people on the planet.

And sadly that criticism has merit, but putting aside religion and its silliness for a minute, does Paul actually have a point? He's definitely right about our natural hostility to God, because we prove it every time we poo-poo any hint of God's involvement in our world, either in its creation or its problems. But surely it raises the obvious question as to **why** we're so hostile to God, when the only thing he seems to have done wrong is not let us do what we want without consequences. Other than that he's given us amazing minds that get enormous pleasure out of life and learning, and discovering the wonders of creation.

But not all creation is wonderful. Some of it is horrible, like disease, accidents and natural disasters that remain a constant worry for us. Our minds are never free of anxiety about the future, the economy, or the inability of governments to meet all our needs. The planet is under stress, our kids are being bullied in deeply worrying ways, and their future doesn't look bright either as house prices soar, and secure, satisfying full-time jobs for life are under threat. And behind the appearance of general well-being is an undercurrent of helplessness, that suddenly opens up in conversations when someone admits to problems in their family. Then the flood gates open as to what's really going on, and we discover that all sorts of people aren't coping at all well in this world.

Is it time, then, that we gave Paul a chance to explain what he came up with as the cause and solution to mental illness? And he's not talking as some superior, look-down-your-nose, "I've got all the answers," head-in-the-clouds, religious nut, either. He's talking our language. He admits to having mental problems himself, and how frustrated he is too at his helplessness.

Well, the first revealing thing Paul says in **Romans 8**, is that the human mind is governed by two laws, the “law of the Spirit of life,” **verse 2**, and “the law of sin and death.” Putting aside the religious-sounding language, it’s good to know, at least, that there are **laws** involved, which is something we can understand. Paul also explains in less religious terms in **verse 5**, what each of these laws does in our minds. The law of sin and death, or “the sinful nature” as Paul calls it, kicks our minds into doing what our “(sinful) nature desires,” while the second law of the Spirit of life kicks our minds into doing what the “Spirit desires,” each with its own visible consequences (verses 6-7).

This can only be observed in humans too, because humans are the only creatures on earth with what Paul calls a “spirit” (verse 10). The Greek word for spirit means the power we humans have to feel, think, decide and make choices, and what Paul then shows in Romans 8 is what happens to that spirit inside us **with and without the Holy Spirit**.

What happens to our human spirit **without** the Holy Spirit is slightly unnerving, though, because Paul says it’s dead. In **verse 6** he says “The mind of sinful man is death,” and in **verse 10**, “your body is dead because of sin.” In other words, if we’re simply operating by the first law of what our nature desires, our entire being, body and mind, is floating like a dead fish downstream. It has no control over the evil impulses banging away in our heads that make us (like Paul) do things we don’t want to do, or not do the sensible things we know we should do.

When a person is diagnosed in the secular world as having Disruptive Mood Dysregulation Disorder, therefore, what it really means is the poor chap is operating by the first law alone, and there is nothing in the whole wide world that can stop the injury to his mind and body.

No wonder so many promising young people suddenly begin to fall apart emotionally and start cutting themselves and attempting suicide, as they too discover there is nothing they can do about their volatile emotions and the damage they’re doing to themselves and to others. And they feel utterly helpless, because no one, it seems, can help them.

They may receive therapy and medication that enables them to function, yes, just as Paul was able to function in Romans 7, and thousands of people today without the Holy Spirit are able to function as well - **but functioning isn’t “life and peace”** - as Paul calls it in Romans 8:6.

Functioning doesn't stop the rage that wells up inside us when somebody doesn't live up to our expectations, or life isn't treating us the way we think it ought to. Functioning isn't enough to stop people wondering, "What's the point?" after years of struggle and not much to show for it.

Functioning helps, but it doesn't equip a person to deal with the stresses, pressures and the horrors of a selfish world bent on its own destruction. It doesn't stop the madness lurking inside our heads that can spill out any second when sensitive buttons are pushed and our emotions explode. But functioning is all that the world of psychiatry and experts in mental illness can offer, leaving a person open and susceptible to emotional collapse and self-disgust, just like Paul who wailed at how wretched and helpless he was in Romans 7:24.

The tragedy of functioning is that it never gives a person the pleasure of being independent. He is always dependent on others to keep his mind from blowing to pieces, whether it be therapists or friends or the endless patting on the back by parents, spouses, teachers, coaches, employers, minions and mentors telling him he's such a fine chap and doing great. But one let down by any of those people can send a dependent person into a spiral of depression and self-hate again.

What a tragedy that he can never experience the pleasure of being in control of his life, of having mastery over his weaknesses and phobias, of having mastery over the negative and deceptive influences of others, mastery over his reactions when horrible things happen, and mastery over getting a big head and wanting to be admired and noticed. Wouldn't it be great if none of those things bothered him anymore, and like Paul he could be **content in whatever situation he found himself in** (Philippians 4:12)?

But such is the power of the second law, "the Spirit of life." It offers contentment, an inner peace and life that carries us through the ups and downs, that keeps us on a steady course as the storm rages all around us, that enables us to be independent of all the gods and idols of society selling their empty but highly attractive wares as the means to happiness and self-mastery.

God would love us to be independent of all that, to have dominion over this world as he phrased it in Genesis, not be sucked in by it as Adam and Eve were, with the promise of "wisdom" from a tree. Wisdom can't combat evil, any more than a pill or therapy can enable people today to win the war against their rotten thoughts and runaway emotions.

But where does that leave us if all the “wisdom” of the mental health community cannot win this war against our “sinful nature”? Are psychiatrists and psychotherapists stuck forever with a box full of blunt tools, condemning them to hours and hours of listening to people’s problems with no clear remedies for self-centredness, self-pity, and self-justification? I imagine some counselors must also wonder, “What’s the point?” as patient after patient leaves the counseling session still baffled as to how they can break free of what troubles them.

What troubles them is simple, according to Paul; it’s not knowing that the law of sin and death, the driving force in human brains that makes people think the world revolves around them and their feelings, their needs, and their wants, has actually been done away with by Jesus. It no longer rules us, or better put, we no longer need to be ruled by it. It is actually possible, therefore, to break free of what troubles us, because in **Romans 8:3**, Jesus “condemned sin in sinful man.”

Jesus took the law that constantly injects evil thoughts into our heads, and condemned it. He did it by becoming “a sin offering” (3), meaning he took all that evil into himself - just like an animal sacrificed for an Israelite’s sin in the Old Testament took that person’s sin into itself - and Jesus killed it in his death on the cross. And the law of sin and death could never come back with any sort of defence, because it had killed an innocent man. Never again would it be allowed to rule people’s minds, just like a Judge who condemned an innocent man to death would never be allowed to preside over people’s lives in the dock again.

So the first law ruling our human spirits had its back broken by Jesus. Oh, it looks like it still has control over people, and we have a massive mental health community **acting as if it still controls people** too, as it constantly pumps out its **own** solutions to mental illness, rather than telling people that what’s troubling them has actually already been dealt with by Jesus.

And the evidence that it’s been dealt with by Jesus is the number of people in the world who are functioning really rather well. They go through a typical childhood in reasonably stable families, they get good careers, have their own families, become well-known and liked in the community, do lots of fun things with their children and grandchildren and friends, and their funerals are well attended.

And the amazing thing is, they manage to do it all **without ever understanding or taking an interest in why Jesus was crucified**.

How can that be? Well, they're simply reaping the results and living in the afterglow of Jesus destroying the power of the first law, allowing the world to at least keep functioning without us all going mad and totally wrecking the planet. **But it's still only functioning.** It is a far cry from the "life and peace" that only the second law can supply. It's all well and good that Jesus' death freed us from the ravages of the first law, but to be truly free from it **personally** requires "the law of the Spirit of life" too, **verse 2**, because, **verse 13**, it's only "by the Spirit that we put to death the misdeeds of the body."

It's only by the Spirit's desires influencing our spirit **INSTEAD**, therefore, that we have self-mastery over the emotions that cause our misdeeds in the first place, and total independence from evil and the influences of the world.

We're living in a world, though, that thinks that's all nonsense. But where do these happily functioning people turn when things go wrong in their lives, their emotions spin out of control, nasty thoughts fill their minds, they say and do things that cause damage they can't repair, they're plagued by guilt and self-disgust, and they're tempted to do something really stupid to themselves and to others? Where do they turn to stop the self-loathing and rage in their heads that threatens to destroy them in both mind and body? And what if their mental health deteriorates to the point they admit to needing counseling? What help can these people who have no interest in God expect?

Well, let's hear it from Dr. Allen Frances, who served as the chairman of *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV*, which is **the** most influential guidebook on mental illness **in the world**. He's also had years of experience as a leading psychiatrist, and he said this: "I have reviewed dozens of definitions of mental disorder and find none of them the slightest bit helpful either in determining which conditions should be considered mental disorders and which not, or in deciding who is sick and who is not."

In other words, the mental health establishment can't even determine if what's going on inside your head even **IS** a mental illness, or not. But that's the tragic situation this world finds itself in for not being interested in mental health and mental illness from God's point of view. It is left with no understanding of the laws governing the human mind, no understanding of what opened up to the human mind because of Jesus' death, and no clue as to what treatment God made available through the Holy Spirit.

So, what is God doing about this awful mess, if anything?....(continues in Pt 2)