

Introduction to Mental health - 30 minute talk for ET church

Today I'll be talking about what mental health is, and what it isn't, drawing on some of the insights from facilitating the mental health first aid training. The other talks will be more specific and go deeper in certain parts of mental health, the bible and our responsibility as community. This is an introduction . . . a general overview to set the scene for what is to come.

Before we start, some of the content may bring up challenging thoughts and feelings. Let's take a moment to consider - who is someone that you can tell or seek support from if you feel overwhelmed. First up, what comes to mind when you think of mental health? Tell the person next to you. *30 seconds*

What is mental health?

Everybody has health . . . everybody has mental health. Mental health is referring to the thoughts, feelings, emotions and behaviours of a person. I prefer to use the term mental wellbeing, instead of mental health, as it feels more positive and encouraging than the latter. I will use both terms interchangeably here so fair warning if you find this confusing.

Mental health foundation (NZ) defines wellbeing as *“having the tools, support and environments we need to be who we are and to build and sustain lives worth living”*.

WHO (World Health Organisation) defines **mental** health as:

a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community. It has intrinsic and instrumental value and is integral to our well-being. (WHO)

These define wellbeing and mental health; so it stands to reason that mental ill health is when something impacts these. When someone does not have the tools, support and environment they need to be who they are; when they are unable to cope with the stresses of life, learn and work well. Things that impact the way they think, feel and behave towards themselves and others.

These definitions acknowledge that people do not live in isolation – the bible tells us that God created a partner for Adam, because it is not good for man to be alone. God is all about community and relationships, and it's important for us to remember that when considering mental health and wellbeing.

Continuum

Mental health is not binary, not black and white – it is not as simple as you either have it or you don't. Rather it is experienced on a continuum ranging from having good mental health or wellbeing (in the green), where we are able to function in positive and healthy ways; to it having a significant impact on our everyday functioning (towards the red), and anywhere in between. Our experiences of mental health are fluid, they will shift along the continuum at different times in our life, possibly daily, although we may not necessarily experience symptoms of or a diagnosed mental illness. Because it's not fixed it means there are always things we can do to positively impact our mental wellbeing.

Te Whare Tapa Whā

The bible tells of the body of Christ being made up of interconnected parts, that all work together (ideally) and each part has it's part to play. So too, as individuals we are made up of interconnected parts; that work together and impact one another. One model that helps us understand this holistic perspective is Te Whare Tapa Whā. The four dimensions of hauora/wellbeing (or walls of the whare) influence and support one another.

This model reminds us that the whare (representing the person) is made up of pillars or walls of wellbeing, each one connected to and supported by the whole structure. If one part is weakened, the whole structure remains sturdy. However if one part falls down, or the weakness is prolonged, the rest of the parts become weakened putting at risk the whole.

In the same way our whole wellbeing is interconnected and supported by the whole structure. What impacts one facet, impacts the whole. The strength of the whole can be supported or balanced by the strength of the rest of the parts.

For example, research shows that balanced nutrition can improve mood; connections with people can improve mood; faith can improve mood.

Prevention is better than cure, even when things negatively impact a person's wellbeing, they still have the strength to stand. For example food nutrition is something that requires daily maintenance rather than bingeing on all the nutrients one might need for the year ahead. In the same way having practices that maintain our mental wellbeing are important on a daily basis, rather than doing them all in one day in the hope it will keep us well for the year ahead.

You should each have a page called things to do . . . what I'd like you to do is circle or highlight four things that you could do (or perhaps you already do) for your wellbeing. You can do so while I keep talking.

Five ways to wellbeing

This resource was developed by Mental Health Foundation NZ and was a familiar image that was used in the initial stages of the Covid 19 pandemic. This is about maintenance – some things that have been shown to improve and maintain a sense of overall wellbeing.

It's helpful to remember that we all have something to offer. Again the image of the body of Christ comes to mind in which we each have specific roles to play that are unique and important and contribute to the health of the whole system. Finding your own or supporting other to find their own niche goes a long way to supporting wellbeing.

What to look out for?

It's important that we all have supportive people who listen, pay attention to what's happening, and encourage us to seek help when necessary. Some things that could indicate someone is experiencing a mental health challenge, illness, or crisis:

- Sudden or dramatic changes in behaviour, appearance, language or engagement
- Withdrawal from usual activities
- Negative words/body language/thoughts etc
- Excessive outpouring of emotions
- Expressing thoughts/feelings of hopelessness, unworthiness, unloved, unwanted . . . etc
- Obsessive or compulsive behaviours – jiggling, wringing hands, excessive cleaning
- Physical marks or scars from burns/scratches etc
- Increased fatigue
- Extremes of usual routine (ie sleep, food, communication)
- You might not notice anything

These could be signs/symptoms of a mental health challenge, or a mental health crisis. A MH challenge is when symptoms and feelings occur for such a long time and intensity that they start to impact the person's ability to function every day and perform their normal activities. Usually two weeks or more of sustained feelings/impacts is when professional support is suggested. A mental health challenge does not necessarily result in or involve a diagnosed illness. A MH crisis is when the level of distress and urgency is increased and it becomes (or could become) an emergency situation. This requires assessing the level of urgency – is there risk to the person or others?

Mental health conditions include mental disorders and psychosocial disabilities as well as other mental states associated with significant distress, impairment in functioning or risk of self-harm.

MH Conditions	MH Crisis
Anxiety	Panic attack
Problematic substance use	Suicidal thoughts and behaviour
Depression	Traumatic event
Schizophrenia	Severe psychotic state
Psychosis	
ADHD	

Where to get support?

If you or someone you know are experiencing any of these signs/symptoms, knowing where to get help is important too. Some people/organisations you can contact are:

- GP
- Health Improvement Practitioner
- Psychiatrist
- Psychologist
- Helplines – 1737 free call or text counselling 24/7
- EPS (emergency psychiatric services)
- Life Matters Suicide Prevention Trust – peer support, advice and advocacy
- Turning Point Christian Counselling
- Social workers

In an emergency dial 111

Myth busting

Stand up and for each statement, either put arms out if you think it's true, or arms crossed if you think it's false. Let's practice

- It's important to force someone who doesn't want help to seek it **False**
- Exercise can help relieve depression **True**
- People with mental illness never recover **False**
- People with mental illness are violent and dangerous **False**
- Recovery from anxiety challenges requires facing situations which are anxiety provoking **True**
- A person who has experienced symptoms of psychosis is less likely to relapse if they have a good relationship with their family **True**
- Talking about suicide will increase the likelihood of someone attempting suicide **False**
- The bible tells us we will experience suffering in this world **True**

Sobering statistics

- 1 in 5 NZers will experience mental health challenge in any given year
- For under 18s that number is 1 in 3.
- In the 2023/2024 (financial year) 617 people died by suspected suicide in NZ
- Three most common mental health challenges/illness in NZ are Anxiety, mood disorders (ie depression) and substance use.
- Less than 1% of adults experience a psychotic disorder in any one year

NZ Stats

Global statistics from WHO

- In 2019, 970 million people globally were living with a diagnosed mental disorder, with anxiety and depression the most common.
- People with severe mental health conditions die 10 to 20 years earlier than the general population.
- Having a mental health condition increases the risk of suicide and experiencing human rights violations.

Many mental health conditions can be effectively treated at relatively low cost, yet health systems remain significantly under-resourced and treatment gaps are wide all over the world. Mental health care is often poor in quality when delivered. People with mental health conditions often also experience stigma, discrimination and human rights violations.

(WHO)

Risk and protective factors

There are many risk factors which increase the likelihood a person will experience mental unwellness, and many protective factors that increase the likelihood that same person will experience a positive outcome and recover well (in terms of mental wellbeing).

These factors can be biological, physiological, social, spiritual.

At any one time, a diverse set of individual, family, community and structural factors may combine to protect or undermine mental health. Although most people are resilient, people who are exposed to adverse circumstances – including poverty, violence, disability and inequality – are at higher risk of developing a mental health condition. (WHO website)

Two of the biggest protective factors are healthy relationships and seeking support (the earlier the better).

Wellbeing as found in the bible:

Some examples from the bible:

- Genesis 2:1-3
on the 7th day God rested
- Exodus 23:10-12
on the 7th year rest your fields
- Psalm 23
lead me by still waters, restore my soul, my cup runs over . . .
- Genesis 2:18
It is not good for man to be alone
- Matthew 4:3
Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word from the mouth of God
- Philippians 4:6-7
⁷And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.
- Ephesians 6:11-19
*¹¹Put on the full armour of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes.
¹³Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. ¹⁶In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.*

Jesus is a good model of how to maintain wellbeing . . .

- John 11:35 *Jesus wept* in response to the death of his friend Lazarus.
- Luke 22:40-46 *Jesus prays in garden of Gethsemane and takes the disciples along. He goes just ahead of them and knelt down to pray: "Father if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done." An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.*
- Luke 6:12-14 *Jesus withdrew to pray before choosing the 12 apostles whom he would send with a special commission.*

Key points:

- We all have mental health
- Mental unwellness is not always a diagnosed illness/disorder
- Risk and protective factors
- Relationships matter
- We have Hope through Christ Jesus our saviour **and** we experience suffering in this world

Useful resources

- Mental health foundation
- Just a thought
- 1737 need to talk?
- Turning Point
- Life Matters
- Mental health first aid

Downloadable free resources

- Helplines and supports
- Things to do from www.justathought.co.nz

At SUNZ, we see and hear stories of churches encountering people with mental health challenges either in their congregation, community, or among staff and volunteers. Part of our response is to offer some programs to equip churches to support people in practical ways, such as how to have a conversation, and when to seek support. If you want to know more, talk to me, or go to our website – www.sunz.org.nz

Any Questions, email to the ET church office for the panel discussion happening on 2nd November