

# IN THE MARGINS: Mental health and ministering with compassion

*By Tony Martin*  
*Editor*

May is Mental Health Awareness Month, a time to raise awareness, reduce stigma, and offer support to those who struggle with mental health issues. As Christians, we are called to love our neighbors deeply and holistically, which means acknowledging the mental, emotional, and spiritual burdens that so many carry. While our faith brings joy and hope, it doesn't make us immune to life's challenges or mental health struggles.

This is personal. If you've read any of my previous thoughts on these matters, you'll know that I deal with mental health challenges. I try to find that sweet spot between oversharing and being helpful. There has been a stigma attached to mental health issues among Christians. Mental health shouldn't be an issue for believers, right? Since my head injury about five years ago, post-concussion syndrome, apocalyptic migraines, and the accompanying depression, it is not a fun ride. I find myself in lows it would take an extension ladder to climb out of. I am blessed to have a great neurologist and some miraculous meds. People who want to avoid work, like the kid who doesn't want to go to school, sometimes pretend they're sick. There are days I have to pretend like I'm well.

Michael Reeves, writing in *Crossway*, February 24, 2018, states: "It comes as a surprise to some that Charles Spurgeon had a lifelong battle with depression. His reputation as a famed and powerful preacher, his cheery wit, and his cigar-smoking manliness might lead us to imagine there could never

be a chink in his Victorian Englishman's armor. It shouldn't be a surprise, of course: being full of life in a fallen world must mean distress, and Spurgeon's life was indeed full of physical and mental pain."

Spurgeon wrote:

*"I have suffered many times from severe sickness and frightful mental depression seeking almost to despair. Almost every year I've been laid aside for a season, for flesh and blood cannot bear the strain, at least such flesh and blood as mine. I believe, however, the affliction was necessary to me and has answered salutary ends ... You may be surrounded with all the comforts of life and yet be in wretchedness more gloomy than death if the spirits are depressed. You may have no outward cause whatever for sorrow and yet if the mind is dejected, the brightest sunshine will not relieve your gloom. ... There are times when all our evidences get clouded and all our joys are fled. Though we may still cling to the Cross, yet it is with a desperate grasp."*

*Charles Spurgeon*

## **Recognizing the Struggles**

In a Christian context, it's essential to recognize that mental health issues can affect anyone. The Bible doesn't shy away from the reality of emotional pain, as evidenced in the Psalms, Job's sufferings, or Elijah's despair. Understanding this can help us approach these issues with empathy rather than judgment.

## **How to Minister Compassionately**

- 1. Listen without Judgment:** Create a safe space where friends and family can share their struggles without fear of being criticized or dismissed. Active listening shows that you genuinely care.

2. **Educate Yourself:** Understand that mental health issues have biological, psychological, and social components. Learn about conditions like depression, anxiety, and PTSD to better recognize and respond to symptoms.
3. **Offer Practical Help:** Sometimes, mental health struggles make daily tasks overwhelming. Helping with chores, providing a meal, or running errands can relieve some of the pressure.
4. **Encourage Seeking Professional Help:** Reassure your loved one that seeing a therapist or doctor is wise. Their faith journey and mental health treatment can work hand in hand.
5. **Pray with and for Them:** Pray for strength, comfort, and wisdom as they navigate their challenges. Let them know you're in this with them.
6. **Be Patient and Consistent:** Healing takes time. Consistently checking in, even with a simple message or phone call, can show them they're not alone.

## **Ten Things Never to Say to Someone Dealing with Mental Health Issues**

1. **"Snap out of it."** Mental health struggles are not a matter of willpower. It's like telling someone to snap out of diabetes.
2. **"Everyone feels that way sometimes."** This can minimize their pain and invalidate their unique experience. We all have challenges, but for most they're transitory. Not for someone dealing with mental health issues.
3. **"It's all in your head."** These issues are not imaginary but deeply impactful.
4. **"Just pray more."** Prayer is powerful, but so is therapy, medication, and other interventions. God uses those tools. One of the scariest things about my personal journey was when I realized I couldn't simply pray myself out of the state I found myself in.

5. **“What do you have to be sad about?”** I have had a supernaturally blessed life. Still. Happiness isn't a guarantee against depression or anxiety.
6. **“God won't give you more than you can handle.”** While meant to encourage, this can seem dismissive. This is NOT scriptural. He routinely gives us more than we can handle.
7. **“You're overthinking it.”** The struggle is real and often overwhelming. Unless you've been there ...
8. **“You just need more faith.”** Suggesting that lack of faith is the root issue can cause guilt and shame. There were many biblical personalities who would hardly be accused of being faithless. Spurgeon doesn't strike me as having a weak faith.
9. **“But you don't look sick.”** Mental health struggles aren't always visible. This one is challenging – if you're sick, you should *look* sick, right? Not always.
10. **“Have you tried [insert unqualified advice]?”** Offering advice that minimizes their condition may only frustrate them.

### **Encouragement in Action**

By actively caring for those struggling with mental health issues, we embody Christ's love. The words of Paul in Galatians 6:2 call us to “carry each other's burdens.” Our listening ears, open hearts, and thoughtful actions can provide a light in the darkness, encouraging those who are hurting to lean on their community and their faith. May this Mental Health Awareness Month be a time when we step up to offer hope and compassion to those in need.