

# The Bible's Keys to Mental Health

Why are mental problems and disabilities on the rise? Could it be that we overlook the Bible's keys to healthy, positive thinking?

by Noel Hornor

**D**r. Gro Harlem Brundtland, director-general of the World Health Organization, reported in 2000 that "five of the 10 leading causes of disability worldwide . . . are mental conditions" (*Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, 2000, 78).

The five conditions she listed are major depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disorders, alcohol abuse and obsessive-compulsive disorders. In addition, significant mental-health disorders plaguing humanity include phobias, generalized anxiety and panic disorder. Any of these maladies can be disabling.

Worldwide, mental-health afflictions are increasing. The total share of disability caused by them increased from 10.5 percent in 1990 to 12 percent in 1998 and is expected to increase to 15 percent in 2020—almost a 50 percent increase in only three decades. Depression, currently the fifth-leading cause of disability, is projected to jump to second place by 2020.

Treatment options—including medication and counseling—are available and should be utilized with wisdom and some research. However, for some kinds of mental illness, specifically those not caused by genetic factors and/or chemical imbalances, *prevention* is the better choice.

Why is prevention preferable rather than treating a problem after it arises? Although treatment often works, it usually is much more costly. The costs often include financial losses, physical-health deterioration and trauma to family members—sometimes resulting in family disintegration.

Many mental illnesses *can* be prevented, and the Bible provides helpful information to that end. After all, it is a handbook from God on what we should think and how our minds should work. Among other things, the Bible tells us how to relieve stress and the kind of stimuli we should allow into our minds. Here are some crucial biblical keys to mental health.

## The power of a positive attitude

We start with the obvious merits of simple positive thinking. In Philippians 4:8 the Bible instructs us in proper thinking: "And now, my friends, all that is *true*, all that is *noble*, all that is *just and pure*, all that is *lovable and gracious*, whatever is *excellent and admirable*—fill all your thoughts with these things" (New English Bible, emphasis added throughout).



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Those who consistently apply these positive words will practice positive thinking, a habit crucial to mental health. "A positive outlook is known to improve recovery from surgery and the immune system's ability to fight off disease as well as aid in cancer recovery, to reduce the fight-or-flight response and hence stress disease [and can] . . . restore our tranquillity and turn our unhappy, anxiety-producing hormones into happy ones" (Archibald Hart, M.D., *The Anxiety Cure*, 1999, p. 217).

The characteristics of an optimistic mindset include the ability to focus on the positive when the negative seems overwhelming. The key lies in turning a problem into a challenge and then working to meet it.

We also must avoid filling our minds with the negative and degrading aspects of the world around us. The apostle Paul wrote that some things are so shameful we should not even speak of them (Ephesians 5:12). Yet many of the degrading things to which Paul referred fill our print and electronic media.

If we want good mental health, we should discipline our minds to avoid a degrading mental diet. The principle of "garbage in, garbage out" certainly applies with respect to our minds. The net effect of what occupies our minds—and often comes out of our

mouths—will be as pure or as corrupt as whatever we let enter our minds. We jeopardize our mental health when we subject our thinking to mental trash. To remain psychologically stable, we must discipline our mind to avoid thinking in the gutter.

Paul practiced the advice he gave to the Christians at Philippi and exhorted them to follow his example (Philippians 4:9), telling them that if they did so the "God of peace" would be with them. Peace of mind and a clear conscience (Acts 23:1; 24:16; 1 Timothy 1:5) are essential characteristics of sound mental health.

## Reining in feelings and emotions

Where do feelings and emotions come from? When God created man in His own image (Genesis 1:27), He included the human personality, which can express godly feelings.

The primary characteristic that summarizes God's very being is *love* (1 John 4:8, 16). But Paul describes a greater range of godly characteristics and emotions as aspects of the fruit of His Spirit. They include "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23, New International Version). The Bible exhorts us to be full of this Spirit (Ephesians 5:18).

If these traits are dominant in our personality, we are less likely to suffer from mental aberrations. Such a mind will be self-controlled; it will be stable and able to endure the difficulties of life. It will be *optimistic*, and optimism is a vital part of a healthy mind. “Optimistic people are more able to roll with life’s punches and slough off stress—and they live longer” (Bradley Wilcox, M.D., Craig Wilcox, Ph.D., and Makoto Suzuki, M.D., *The Okinawa Program*, 2001, p. 273).

Conversely, “a person without self-control is as defenseless as a city with broken-down walls” (Proverbs 25:28, New Living Translation). This person will be vulnerable and driven frequently by negative emotions. His outcome is described in Galatians 5:19-21. His accompanying problems can include adultery, sexual immorality, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, envy and drunkenness. Living this way exacts an automatic penalty that makes one a candidate for instability, unhappiness and mental problems.

We choose our emotions, and we live with the consequences. The types of emotions that prevail in our minds are a major determining factor in whether we succeed at life itself. “Emotions are a mixed blessing. They are responsible for many of man’s finest and greatest achievements. They are also responsible for some of the greatest tragedies in our world” (Norman Wright, *The Christian Use of Emotional Power*; 1974, p. 13). If we choose healthy emotions, we can be happy and achieve success in life.

#### Take time out

We live in such a fast-paced world that it is essential to schedule breaks from our routine. “Taking time to rest is not an option in

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today’s world; it is a necessity. Yet more people struggle here than in almost any other area of their lives. It is perilous not to take time to rest” (Hart, p. 118).

Even Jesus and His apostles felt this need. Notice one such occasion in Mark 6:31: “Then Jesus said, ‘Let’s get away from the crowds for a while and rest.’ There were so many people coming and going that Jesus and his apostles didn’t even have time to eat” (NLT).

For mental rejuvenation and avoiding stress overload, we need daily rest. Especially as we get older, an afternoon nap can rejuvenate us. We also need regular vacations if our financial circumstances and work situations permit. Even if one does nothing but stay at home on holidays, breaks from

our routines can be beneficial.

In addition, God tells us we need to schedule *one day in the week for rest*. After completing His work of creation, God rested on the seventh day (Genesis 2:2). The Hebrew word for “rested” is *shabath*, the verb form of the noun translated as “Sabbath” in Exodus 20:10-11, where God gave the Ten Commandments to Israel and commanded the Israelites to keep His Sabbath holy by resting on the seventh day of every week.

#### Too much change

Some mental-health practitioners recognize the value of this weekly practice. “One of the most powerful arguments in favor of pushing for a greater emphasis on rest comes from the Bible . . . God rested on the seventh day . . . From the outset, the Bible presents us with the idea that rest is important, and furthermore, that a specific time has to be set aside for rest . . .

“I happen to believe (and a lot of scientific evidence is accumulating to support this belief) that we were designed for camel travel, not supersonic jet behavior . . . Today, however, we are exceeding these limits, not just barely, but by a huge margin. The penalty is an epidemic of stress disease and anxiety disorders, especially panic anxiety” (Hart, pp. 118-119).

About 40 years ago a French doctor who taught at Harvard observed: “If psychiatric illnesses are truly increasing in the Western world, the reason is not to be found in the complex and competitive character of our society but rather in the accelerated rate at which old habits and conventions disappear. Even the marginal man can generally achieve some form of equilibrium with his environment if the social order is stable, but he is

likely to break down when the extent and rate of change exceed his adaptive potentialities. For this reason mental diseases are likely to become more apparent in areas undergoing rapid cultural transitions” (Rene Dubos, *Mirage of Health*, 1959, pp. 208-209).

The Sabbath provides a time to take a break from the world of stress and tension. “. . . We live in a culture that is constantly feeding us stress-producing messages . . . With today’s round-the-clock access to news we now can receive a twenty-four-hour-a-day parade of mostly negative information . . . The news, in fact, has become so stressful that some health experts . . . recommend periodic ‘news fasts’ to improve psychological health” (Wilcox, Wilcox and Suzuki, pp. 237-238).

(To learn more about the biblical Sabbath,

please request our free booklet *Sunset to Sunset: God’s Sabbath Rest.*)

#### Confront your fears

Everyone is afraid of something. Some fears are healthy, but some are not. When a fear becomes persistent and irrational, it is a phobia. “Specific phobias strike more than one in ten people” (Hart, p. 180). Some major fears are agoraphobia, fear of being in public places, and claustrophobia, fear of confinement or crowded places.

When one has a phobia, he will often anticipate encountering the circumstance that is apt to trigger it, which can set up persistent anxiety. God does not want us to be controlled by such fears. The Bible says, “Do not be afraid of sudden terror . . .” (Proverbs 3:25).

How can we overcome phobias? “They must be confronted, but not in a way that reinforces them. It is possible to overcome almost every phobia. It just takes time and effort. Real-life exposure to whatever situation you might fear is the most effective way to overcome that fear” (Hart, p. 179).

It is often beneficial to seek professional counsel when confronting a phobia that seriously impacts your life, but developing a relationship with God is even more important. In doing so, you can grow in His love, and “love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18).

#### Confront anxiety with confidence

Although most people are not phobic, almost everyone has to struggle against worry, which is a form of fear. Our age is the era of anxiety. Everyone experiences some anxiety, and it can be a useful emotion when it triggers us to act to avoid danger. But, if it impacts our life seriously, we must take action to overcome it. “Every anxiety sufferer must learn new ways of thinking and develop methods for changing their former thinking patterns” (Hart, p. 111).

The Bible verifies that this kind of thinking is essential, telling us to “be renewed in the spirit of your mind” (Ephesians 4:23).

How do we do this? One anxiety-reducing technique is to cleanse your mind at day’s end. Evening is “a good time to do a ‘mental wash’ when you review anxieties that are cluttering your thinking and dump those that are not important” (Hart, p. 204).

The Bible confirms that this is sound advice in a passage that tells us what to do at day’s end. “Meditate within your heart on your bed, and be still” (Psalm 4:4).

Sometimes anxieties relate to meeting our basic needs. Jesus said, “Do not be anxious then, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘With what shall we clothe ourselves?’” Jesus also recommended a cure for these worries: “. . . Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things

shall be added to you" (Matthew 6:31, 33, New American Standard Bible). The point is that, when our priorities conform to God's will, we can live in confidence that He will help us meet our other needs.

A relationship with God is fundamental to overcoming our fears. The Bible exhorts: "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5), and, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (4:13). The only way we can develop the mind of Christ is to first repent of ignoring God's biblical instructions, then be baptized and receive God's Spirit (Acts 2:38). In doing so we can cleanse our minds and develop new mental habits. "For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind" (2 Timothy 1:7).

#### The healing power of humor

As simple as it sounds, the ability to laugh is an aid to mental health. Joy is akin to laughter, and it, too, is part of the fruit of God's Spirit (Galatians 5:22). "A merry heart makes a cheerful countenance" (Proverbs 15:13), and "a merry heart does good, like medicine" (17:22).

Humor triggers literal physiological and mental changes in your body. Laughter "touches us at a deep emotional and physical level . . . By its very nature it changes our perception and invites us to look at things in a different light. It shows us that life can be silly, even crazy at times, but it still can be enjoyable" (Wilcox, Wilcox and Suzuki, pp. 272-273). One doctor notes that "humor, smiles, and laughter are the very best stress-busters" (Herbert Benson, M.D., *Timeless Healing*, 1996, p. 277).

A relationship with God provides the deepest and most-abiding joy. "The Bible has much to say about the joy, the sheer happiness, of the redeemed . . ." (*The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 1982, "Humor in the Bible"). In one study of more than 500 men, "significant associations emerged between the participants' religious involvement and their health . . . such as less depression" (Kenneth Cooper, M.D., *It's Better to Believe*, p. 5).

Physical activity such as gardening, walking and other regular exercise can also benefit your mental health.

#### Avoid dangerous addictions

People suffering from mental problems—including undue stress—often rely on ingestible substances to help them get through the day. But this kind of crutch can easily lead to

a collapse and fall. "Many people who suffer from emotional disorders or mental illness turn to drugs and alcohol to self-medicate, as a way of tolerating feelings that are intolerable. Yet, ironically, this method of self-treating seldom works in the long run and frequently makes matters worse" (*Johns Hopkins Family Health Book*, 1999, p. 1225).

Besides addictions to mood-altering substances, sometimes people become addicted

who is genuinely focused on helping others who is unhappy or dissatisfied with life . . . I can assure you that they are happy because they are directing their attention away from themselves" (Hart, p. 223).

Jesus recognized this and demonstrated that love and service are keys to happiness and mental health. He performed the menial task of washing His disciples' feet to demonstrate that His disciples were to serve one

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to things that are normally proper and healthy. Some, for example, develop addictions to food, sex or work. Though not a problem in moderation and within God's laws, losing control in any of these areas will often lead to greater problems.

The Bible addresses the need for balance and control. "All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any" (1 Corinthians 6:12). We should have but one addiction—and that is a devotion to love God and our fellow man. The supreme power that should rule over us is God through the Holy Spirit.

#### A social support system

" . . . Woe to him who is alone when he falls, for he has no one to help him up," says Ecclesiastes 4:10. The 17th-century poet John Donne had a related thought: "No man is an island." Good mental health requires contact with other people. One of the first revelations of the Bible is that God designed us to need other people: "It is not good that the man should be alone" (Genesis 2:18).

The need for emotionally supporting family and friends is scientifically established. "What happens if we have no close relationships? The message that emerges loud and clear from scientific evidence accumulated since the mid 1970's is that having a reasonable quantity and quality of social relationships is essential for mental and physical wellbeing" (Paul Martin, M.D., *The Healing Mind*, 1997, p. 157).

Human interaction spawns growth and is essential mentally and physically. Proverbs 27:17 tells us that "as iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another" (NIV).

Perhaps the chief benefit of uplifting social contact is that it provides us the opportunity to learn how to love and serve. This is vital to mental health. "I have never met a person

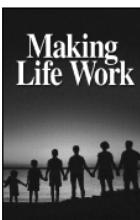
another as He had served them. After washing their feet Jesus said, "Now that you know these things, happy are you if you do them" (John 13:17, Twentieth Century New Testament). Later in the same chapter He told them, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another" (verse 34).

Jesus earlier said, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39). One of the two great commandments in the Bible (verses 37-40), this is a message that is consistent throughout Scripture: We should all be friends. The book of Proverbs extols the benefits of friendliness and neighborliness. "The neighbourly qualities which Proverbs urges on the reader add up to nothing less than love" (Derek Kidner, *Proverbs, an Introduction and Commentary*, 1964, p. 44).

Obedience to the commands of the Bible and nurturing a relationship with God the Father and Jesus Christ form the foundation to completeness and mental well-being. "This is the end of the matter: you have heard it all. Fear God and obey his commandments; this sums up the duty of mankind" (Ecclesiastes 12:13, Revised English Bible).

#### Recommended Reading

To learn more about building a successful, happy life based on biblical principles, request your free copy of *Making Life Work*. This full-color, illustrated guide will show you some of the best biblical advice on health, family, friendships, job and career, marriage, parenting and finances. Discover how you can make life work today.



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