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 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 lovely and gracious, whatever is excellent and admirable—fill all your thoughts with these things.” (New English Bible, emphasis added throughout).

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’s ability to avoid thinking in the gutter.

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 Horner

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?

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, the 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.

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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 gods 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 fruit (Ephesians 5:18).
If these traits are dominant in our personality, we are less likely to suffer from mental or emotional problems. Such people are more self-controlled; it is self-evident to them, and they are able to endure the difficulties of life. It will be optimistic, and optimists are more likely to become healthy and to live longer. "Optimistic people are more able to roll with life's punches and shrug off stress—and they appear to be healthier in general long-term" (Kellerman, Wilcox, Ilgen, and Richardson, 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 by powerful arguments in favor of his or her outcome is described in Galatians 5:19-21. His accompanying problems can include alcoholism, sexual immorality, hatred, contes- tions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, envy and drunkenness. Living this way exacts an automatic penalty that makes one more prone to instability, unhappiness and mental and emotional 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 respon-sible for some of the greatest tragedies in our world" (Norman Wright, The Christian Use of Emotional Power, 1974, p. 13). If we choose healthy and productive emotions, they can provide us with opportunities to achieve success and achieve 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 our routines can be beneficial. In addition, God tells us we need to sched-ule one day in the week for fast and rest while doing His work of creation, God rested on the seventh day (Genesis 2:2). The Hebrew word for "rested" is "shavu", and the root of the noun translated as "Sabbath" in Exodus 20:10-11, where God gave the Ten Com-mandments to Israel and commanded the Israe-lians to keep His Sabbath holy by resting on the seventh day of every week."

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today’s world, it is a necessity. Yet more people struggle here in almost any other area of their lives. It is perilous not to take time to rest and to rejuvenate. Even Jesus and His apostles felt this need. Notice one such occasion in Mark 6:31: "Then Jesus got away from the crowds for a while and rested." 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 rest. Whether we succeed at life itself is as defenseless as a city with broken-down walls" (Proverbs 25:28, New Living Translation). This person will be vulnerable and driven by powerful arguments in favor of his or her outcome is described in Galatians 5:19-21. His accompanying problems can include alcoholism, sexual immorality, hatred, contes- tions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, envy and drunkenness. Living this way exacts an automatic penalty that makes one more prone to instability, unhappiness and mental and emotional 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.

Confront your fears

Everyone is afraid of something. Some fears are healthy and necessary. A phobia, for example, is a fear that becomes persistent and irrational, and it is a phobia. "Specific phobias strike more than one out of every ten Americans" (Physician’s 4-14.4).

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. "Fear God and obey his commandments; this sums up the duty of mankind" (Ecclesiastes 12:13, Revised English 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. The Bible exhorts: "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5). "Do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (4:13). The only way we can develop the mind of Christ is by the will to ignore God’s biblical instructions, then be bap-tized and receive God’s Spirit (Acts 2:38). In doing so we can cleanse ourselves 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 a 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 go, like medicine" (17:22).

Humor brings psychological and social changes in our body. Laughter touches us at a deep emotional and physical level. By releasing our laughter, we allow our perception and invite us to look at things in a different light. It shows that life can be silly, even at times crazy, 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). "Living with related humor provides the deepest and most-abiding joy. The Bible has much to say about the joy, the sheer happi-ness, 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 involve-ment and their health . . . such as less depres-sion" (Kenneth Cooper, M.D., 1982, “Humor in the Bible”).

Healing, the International

To learn more about the biblical Sabbath, please request our free booklet Sabbath to Sun-set: God's SABBATH Rest.

Avoiding dangerous addictions

People suffering from mental illnesses— including undue stress—often rely on ingest-ible 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 or alcohol,” said the report, “in a way of tolerating feelings that are intoler-able. Yet, ironically, this method of self-treatment is highly addictive and often frequently makes matters worse” (Johns Hopkins Family Health Book, 1999, p. 1225).

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 who is genuinely focused on helping others who is unhappy or dismissed with life. . . . The reason for this is that our loved ones are demonstrating that love and service are keys to happiness and mental health. The performed the mental task of washing His disciples’ feet to dem-onstrate that His disciples were to serve one another as He had served them. After washing their feet Jesus said, “Now that you know these things, knowing 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 con-stant throughout Scripture: We should all be friends. The book of Proverbs extols the benefits of friendship and brotherly love. “The neighborly 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. 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, healthy life based on biblical principles, request your free copy of Making Life Work. Use of Emotional Power, a 32-page illustrated guide will show you how to use the positive power of your mind—value on health, family, friend-ship, career, mar-riage, parent and finance. Discover how you can make life work today.

Contact any of our offices listed on page 2, or subscribe to our magazine at www.gnmagazine.org.
If these traits are dominant in our personality, we are less likely to suffer from mental or emotional illness. When you are under stress, if you can control it, it will be manageable and not cause any undue stress—often rely on ingestible substances to help them get through the day. But this kind of crutch can easily lead to dangerous addictions.

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 things that are normally proper and healthy. Some, for example, develop addictions to food, sex, or alcohol. 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—that is a desire 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” (Ecclesiastes 4:10). The 17th-century poet John Donne had a related thought: “No man is an island.” Good mental health requires a relationship 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 relational connections? The message that emerges loud and clear from scientific evidence accumulated since the mid-1970s is that human beings are social by nature and that social relationships are essential to mental and physical well-being” (Piers Park, M.D., The Healing Mind, 1997, p. 157).

Physical activity such as gardening, walking and other regular exercise can also benefit mental well-being.

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Another way of demonstrating that love and service are keys to happiness and mental health. He performed the mental task of washing his dishes for 24 days to demonstrate that his disciples were to serve one another as He had served them. After washing their feet Jesus said, “Now that you know these things, blessed 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” (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 neighborly qualities which Proverbs urges on the reader add up to nothing less than love” (Derek Kidner, 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 neighborly qualities which Proverbs urges on the reader add up to nothing less than love” (Derek Kidner, Hopkins Family Health Book, 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).
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