

my friend is struggling with...



**a series about hope in mental illness**

**A RESOURCE FOR FAITH  
THROUGH MENTAL ILLNESS.**

*Studied in the Spring of 2024*



# NOT A SIN

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Did you know that the brain is one of the most complex structures in the universe? It houses billions of cells, the storage capacity is virtually unlimited, and guess what else... it's an organ! What's so surprising about that? Well, just like any other organ, the brain can get sick, damaged, or injured. Just because it's a different kind of organ doesn't mean it's exempt from problems. There are many different reasons why your brain might become sick or injured... trauma, genetics, medication, chemical imbalance, etc. One area of brain sickness that is currently taking adolescents by storm is the problem of mental health. It is a topic in the church that has been neglected, and you might've possibly heard of or thought of some phrases like this before:

- "You're the only one going through this!"
- "You are too broken for God to use!"
- "Mental illness is a sin!"
- "Your sin caused your mental illness!"

Take these phrases and throw them in the trash, because none of it's true! We'll debunk these as we go on.

Some of the most common mental health disorders are: Depression, Anxiety, Bipolar Disorder, Substance Use Disorders, Eating Disorders, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Dementia, and the list goes on. These are just the most common ones. You may have struggled or may be struggling with one or more of these... and you've probably wished that you could be "normal." You've probably viewed your disorder as a curse. You've probably repeatedly prayed your disorder away. Maybe someone told you that you struggle with your mental illness because of some sin you've committed, that your problems will go away if you stop sinning. Hear me say this...

## **Someone's sin is NOT the reason for their personal mental illness!**

How many perfect people in scripture did God use to do His will? 1. Himself in the form of the Son. But even Jesus dealt with problems related to mental illness (more on that later). That's not to outright say that Jesus "struggled" with mental illness, but He did experience some similarities. The Bible gives us hope that God can still use people like us who struggle, because everyone that He used also struggled with something. It shows us that it's okay to be "not okay," but God doesn't leave us that way.

Believing that people were sick because of their sin was a traditional view of religious Jewish people. Jesus debunks this belief in John 9.

# NOT A SIN

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## **Read John 9:1-3**

Do we have a narrow perspective of why we might be dealing with mental health problems? Possibly. How can God's works be displayed in our mental illness? Could someone who *dealt* with mental illness help carry you through yours? They understand the struggle. They know what to do and what not to do. Maybe they struggled so that they could help others who struggle with the same problems. People with anxiety or depression can be some of the most empathetic people, because they know the struggle. People with ADHD are some of the most creative people there are. Maybe it's not all about us! Maybe it's about how the works of God can be displayed in us.

The world is broken, but God didn't design it that way. There's good news: God can take things that are different (like mental illness) and make them life giving. Instead of only viewing your mental illness as a problem, could you view it as a way that God will bless someone through you someday?

If you're reading this resource, you either struggle with mental illness or know someone who does. No worries, we have tips for both parties.

If you struggle with mental illness:

1. **You are not alone.** (*Read Psalm 130:1-2, Psalm 6:3* -- people in scripture suffered as well). According to the National Institute of Mental Health, an estimated +/- 49.5% of adolescents struggle with some form of mental illness.
2. **Your diagnosis is not your identity.** (*Read Genesis 1:27, Psalm 139:14*).
3. **God sees you.** (*Read 1 Peter 5:7, James 4:8*).

If your friend struggles with mental illness:

1. **Be present with them.** Remember when Job was suffering? What did his friends do? They sat and cried with him, saying nothing at first. There is power in just being present.
2. **Reaffirm their identity in Christ.**
3. **Intercede on their behalf by praying for them.** (*Read Galatians 6:2*).

Key Takeaway

**Your mental illness is not a sin, and your identity is found in Christ, not your mental health!**

# DEPRESSION

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When we talk about mental illness, depression is one disorder that is mentioned every single time. But did you know that depression may look different for some people? Not everyone experiences the same symptoms. Here are some symptoms that may occur, but not always for everyone:

- Loss of appetite
- Brain fog
- Exhaustion
- Can't sleep

The list goes on. Along with symptoms are feelings we may have... feeling like you're not good enough, feeling sad or numb, etc.

It's important to define the terms of depression before reading further. There is a reactive depression, which would bring feelings of deep sadness after an event... trauma, loss of a loved one, parents get divorced, etc. That's depression out of grief, and is temporary. But then there's depressive disorders, which may feel like a roller coaster that you can't get off of. As we mentioned before, the brain is an organ, which is not immune to sickness. It's possible for your brain to have chemical imbalances that cause depressive disorders. With this type of depression, you may feel sad at the most random times. It may cause you to not be able to function. It can feel like a real hinderance on your life. That's the type of depression we'll focus on here. But before we go on, it'll be important to keep this thought in your mind as you read through the section...

## **Having depression is not a sin!**

What it can be is a real medical condition. It's not something you simply "pray away." I (Nathan) have an atrophic left kidney, which just means that my kidney is smaller than normal, and I can't do anything about it. My kidney is an organ, same as my brain. My kidney is sick. It's just something I deal with. In reference to depression, if someone tells me "just pray it away" or "you must not be a very good Christian if you're depressed," then I'd say, "So I should just pray for my kidney to magically grow too?" I believe in miracles, truly, but I also understand that we live in a broken world where sickness runs rampant. If my kidney didn't grow, it's not a sin issue. If your brain has a chemical imbalance, it's not a sin issue.

We mentioned in the "Not a Sin" section that Jesus himself dealt with problems related to mental illness. Let's talk about that.

# DEPRESSION

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## **Read Isaiah 53:3**

Depending on what translation you read that in, you may see the term “deepest grief.” The word originally used would translate to “a sickness or disease characterized by malady, anxiety, and calamity.” Sound familiar? How does this scripture verify that mental illness isn’t a sin? Jesus had sorrow. Jesus felt deep grief. Jesus was despised. Jesus felt anxious (more on that later). Jesus was also sinless. So...

**To say things like depression, anxiety, sorrow, grief, etc. are sins is to say that Jesus sinned. If Jesus sinned, He wasn’t perfect. If He wasn’t perfect, then His sacrifice meant nothing.**

We serve a God who understands our feelings, and even went through a lot of the same feelings and emotions while He was physically here on earth that we go through everyday. God empathizes with us. Your depression may make you feel like He’s not close, maybe because up until now you’ve believed that mental illness was a sin, and sin separates us from the Father. But that couldn’t be farther from the truth, He is close to you.

## **Read Psalm 34:15, 17-18 and Proverbs 18:14**

Crying out to God acknowledges our need for Him. We may have crushed spirits and are in need of His rescue. He’s the only one who can rescue those with crushed spirits, and He does... because who can endure it?

If you struggle with depression:

1. **Get help.** God puts people in our lives for a reason. He wants us to seek wise counsel. God sends people.
2. **Be open.** It can be hard to admit you need help, but you need to tell someone.
3. **Cry out to God.** God isn’t mad at you, He wants you to lean on Him. (**Read 1 Peter 5:7**)
4. **Don’t withdraw.** Sometimes your mind in solitude is a dangerous place to be.
5. **Look up.** There is hope. Remind yourself of the truth of God’s view of you.

If your friend struggles with depression:

1. **Help carry the burden.** (**Read Galatians 6:2**).
2. **Be faithful.** They’ve trusted you with personal info, don’t break their trust.
3. **Look up.** You look up too. Don’t let the distractions of the world keep you from noticing those in need of help.

## Key Takeaway

**You are not alone or unloved. God loves you and is near to you!**

# ANXIETY

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You can't talk about depression without talking about its best friend, anxiety! Everyone knows that when talking about mental illness, anxiety is right up there on the list. Anxiety can be caused by many different reasons for many different people. For a teenager, it could be a test you're worried about in school, a sports game or a band recital. It could be when someone says "Hey, we need to talk," and you suddenly replay the last 6 months of your life in your head, thinking about everything wrong you've ever done. For me, it's walking out of a store without buying anything, thinking that someone will think I'm stealing. It's when I get on an airplane, and even knowing the safety statistics for flying, my brain is thinking "What if we crash?" It's also when I'm driving while a cop is behind me, and even though I'm driving the speed limit, I'm worried about being pulled over.

Just like with depression, we're going to focus more on anxiety disorders, as opposed to general anxiety. General anxiety can be explained by the examples above... scenarios that come to an end. Anxiety disorders? Could come by the way of traumatic or stressful life experiences, brain structure (the brain is an organ... which can get sick! Do you get it by now?), drug/alcohol abuse, genetics, etc. In the same way with depression, the symptoms can be different for everyone:

- Frequent worry that interferes with daily life
- Withdrawal from social life
- Panic attacks
- Fixation on fear of next panic attack
- Reoccurring nightmares, flashbacks, numbing of past trauma
- + more

This type of anxiety can't be controlled, but it can be managed. The difference between control and management is important, because telling someone to control what you have no power over is just cruel.

Here are some disclaimers before we go on:

1. **Do not attempt to diagnose yourself.** Seek professional help.
2. **We're not solving anxiety. We're beginning an important conversation.** If it could be solved, it would've been by now. It should be an ongoing conversation.

Again, the Bible is full of messy (not perfect) people that God uses. Some struggled with anxiety, depression, etc. God sees His children struggling and His heart breaks. He doesn't see you as a failing project who has so much anxiety and can't be fixed, *He sees you as someone worth dying for.*

# ANXIETY

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## **Read Psalm 94:18-19**

Why does God catch us when we're falling? Because He loves us, even if we struggle with anxiety. His love for us is based on who we are, not what we do or what we struggle with.

Struggling with mental illness is like a vulnerable battleground for spiritual attacks. The shame and guilt you might feel is not from God. Satan takes beautiful things and breaks them, while God takes broken things and makes them beautiful. How should we respond to the struggle? (**Read 2 Corinthians 12:8-10**).

Paul had no control over his struggle, the same way we may not have any control over our struggles. But we do have control over how we respond! How did Paul respond? He turned to God. He found that God's grace is enough.

**Prayer was Paul's first response, not his last resort! If it's important enough to worry about, it's important enough to pray about.**

Anxiety can feel like a fight. Again, a spiritual battleground. Sometimes it feels like a losing battle. But we aren't powerless (**Read 1 Timothy 6:12**).

**Anxiety is not a fight of fear, but a fight of faith!**

It takes faith to believe that you are loved and valued when your own thoughts attack you and try to make you think otherwise. It takes faith to run to Jesus in our struggles. It takes faith to do the thing that you're anxious about, trusting that God will get you through it.

If your friend struggles with anxiety:

1. **Treat them like a person, not a project.**
2. **Pray for them and with them.**
3. **Check up on them.**

If you struggle with anxiety:

1. **Seek counseling.** Remember, God sends people... consult them!
2. **Find community.**
3. **Meditate on God's Word.** Remind yourself what God says about you.
4. **Honor your physical health.** People who struggle with physical health tend to struggle with mental health as well.
5. **Start small.** Anxiety can feel like a mountain... don't try to solve it all at once! God gives you grace, so try to give yourself some too.

Key Takeaway

**God gives His children a spirit of power, not of fear. You are victors on the mental battlefield, not victims of a diagnosis!**

# SUICIDAL THOUGHTS

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Let's talk about strength. When we talk about strength, we tend to think about how much a person can carry. We quantify strength through how much a person can lift or how well they can deal with stress in a moment. The strength I want to talk about is not about if you can carry something, but how long you can carry something for. Take the image below for example:



Looking from left to right, the objects that these students are holding get heavier and heavier. You think that holding a water bottle would be easier than holding a container of laundry detergent, but this competition was not a matter of "can you carry it," but "how long can you carry it?" Can you guess which student gave in first? The one holding the laundry detergent. Then it was the student with the bottle of Germ-X. Funny enough, it was the student with the cup of pens who won, but that's besides the point! Everyone carries the weight of something... mental illness can be a burden you carry.

**The heaviness of a burden can't be measured in a moment, but by the length of time you carry it!**

A water bottle isn't heavy, but the longer you carry it (especially with one arm that you can't drop), the heavier it feels. The same thing can be said for our emotions... sadness, anger, confusion, worry, etc. Hold onto these things for a while, even if they feel light, and see how heavy they can become.

We're here to talk about suicidal thoughts. This is a very difficult, uncomfortable topic that people kind of just want to avoid... until it's too late. The first thing we need to understand is that having suicidal thoughts does not mean you have a mental illness, nor is it caused by mental illness. Anxiety and depression don't automatically lead to suicidal thoughts. People don't commit suicide because they feel depressed, they do it because they feel hopeless.

You may feel like you're failing over and over. Everyone else is succeeding but you're failing. You become angry with yourself because you can't find a win, and over time, that anger becomes bitterness. You feel ignored and unseen. The bitterness becomes depression. Life becomes numb. What's missing here? Hope. Where is the hope?

**Suicidal thoughts are loudest when we feel hopeless and have carried our burdens too long!**



# SUICIDAL THOUGHTS

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Before we proceed, we first must understand the difference in ideation and planning.

**Suicidal Ideation** is an initial thought to a hopeless moment. It's simply that, a thought. But **Suicidal Planning** is the act of finding and planning a way to end your life. Both should be taken seriously. One is a common response to hopelessness, the other is a misplaced hope in death. What does the Bible say about the issue?

**Read Matthew 26:38**

Jesus? Soul crushed with grief to the point of death? Jesus? Filled with so much anxiety to the point of sweating blood? (**Luke 22:44**). Jesus? Asked for His suffering to be taken away, but still submitted to the Father and His will? (**Matthew 26:39**). These are the parts of Jesus that we've neglected to talk about, because our society sees these feelings and emotions as weak. Guess what? No one understands you better than Jesus, who went through similar things that you're going through... the one who created you.

The enemy brings shame, but Jesus hates shame (**Hebrews 12:2**). The enemy wants you to believe that the world would be a better place without you, but how could that be true if God created you? Died for you? Jesus was able to endure the cross because of the joy set before Him. Want to know what that joy was? ...you! Jesus thought about YOU on the cross, and you don't think you're worthy of the life He's called you to live? God thinks about you all the time (**Psalms 139:17-18**). God is with you in the valley (**Psalms 23:4-6**). Again, He understands you more than anyone, so why not go to Him with your burdens? (**Matthew 11:28**). Place your hope in God, not in death.

If you struggle with suicidal thoughts:

1. **Don't ignore your feelings.**
2. **Communicate your hurt.**
3. **Seek professional help.**
4. **Let God have a say in how you see.** Try to look outside of yourself and view things as God views them. If you did, you'd realize how precious you are.

If your friend struggles with suicidal thoughts:

1. **Assess.** How severe is the situation? Ideation? Planning?
2. **Always take their off-hand comments seriously.**
3. **Ask direct questions.**
4. **Connect them to hope / help.**
  - a. **NATIONAL SUICIDE PREVENTION LIFELINE | 1-800-273-8255 (TALK)**
5. **Stay connected.** Studies show that following up with someone who has had suicidal thoughts decreases the likelihood of them committing suicide.

Key Takeaway

**God wants a say in how you see; Hope is a person named Jesus!**

# A NOTE FROM NATHAN

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Mental health is such a hard thing. It can affect anyone and everyone, no matter how close to God you are. The goal here is not to solve your mental illness, but to keep a conversation going.

I've dealt with it myself. I struggle with anxiety. It affects me physically, making me feel sick at times. I feel like Paul in 2 Corinthians 12, having a thorn in my flesh that just won't go away. I've accepted the fact that it's just something I have to deal with. I don't blame God, I'm not mad at Him. I'd rather look at it from the perspective of using it to be able to help others down the road (page 2). We've been blessed with a community that has been called to carry each others' burdens (**Galatians 6:2**).

In the "Suicidal Thoughts" section (page 7), you see an image of our students trying to carry things that may or may not be heavy... not as a test of strength, but as a test of how long they can carry it. The things they carried were acting as their "burdens." Some people really struggle to let go of their burdens, and struggle to bring them to the feet of the King (**Matthew 11:28**). That's okay, because it's easier said than done. But until our brothers and sisters are ready to give their burdens to Jesus, guess what we get to do?



**HELP CARRY THEIR BURDENS!** Not as a suggestion, but a command. The same way that loved ones have helped me carry my burden of bad anxiety, I will help others carry their burdens... whether it be anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, or any other mental illness or emotion. How will people see the love of Christ if we don't show it to them?

During this series, we stressed in every single lesson that mental illness is NOT a sin and NOT our identity. I hope that this resource has helped shape this perspective in your life.

***Father, I pray for the person reading this. Whether it's them struggling, or a friend, I pray for healing. Let them see Your perfect love in their lives. Give us servant hearts to help carry each others' burdens. Let them see that You've given them a purpose, that they are fearfully and wonderfully made, that they are defined by YOU and YOU alone. Give them the strength to get through their problems, to come out on the other side and be able to help those who are struggling as well. Thank You for loving us. In Jesus' name, Amen.***

# AUTHOR CREDIT

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The series “my friend is struggling with...” was written by the Student Pastor team at The Chapel in Libertyville, IL. Credit for this series is given to Jeff Selph, Sara Selph, Sam Pettersen, and Zakry Cummings.

Big thanks to the Student Pastor team at The Chapel for their hard work in writing this very relevant series for people in the time of their lives where they need it the most... the teenage years. This series was a blessing to the McKnight Crossings Youth Group and we pray that the words from this series impact us for years to come.

Thanks to *Download Youth Ministry* for making this resource available to youth groups everywhere, helping youth ministers make disciples out of the youth in their churches. Material like this will help so many young people in their walk with Christ.

This resource book was created with the sole purpose of not forgetting what was studied, talked about, and prayed about in Spring 2024 within the McKnight Crossings Youth Group, and to continue the conversation of mental illness as it relates to our faith. We want to be able to bless those who missed lessons during this series, those who come into youth group after this series was taught, and those who may never get to be a part of this ministry or may never get to study a series about mental illness.

May this resource bless you in your faith journey and your battle with mental illness!

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identity is found in Christ, not your mental  
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**McKnight Crossings Youth Ministry**

