



Troubled Minds: Responding to Mental Illness



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How to use this resource for a group study

This Bible study can be used for an individual or a group. If you intend to lead a group study, follow these simple suggestions.

- 1** Make enough copies of the Leader's Guides for everyone in the group.
- 2** Don't feel that you have to use all the material in the study. Almost all of our studies have more information than you can get through in one session, so feel free to pick and choose the teaching information and questions that will meet the needs of your group. Use the teaching content of the study in any of these ways: for your own background and information; to read aloud (or summarize) to the group; for the group to read silently.
- 3** Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting people to open up.
- 4** When working through the questions, be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It's important for your group to know that others share their experiences. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.
- 5** Begin and end the session in prayer.



A Christian Response to Mental Illness

LEADER'S GUIDE

The right action starts with the right attitude.

Mental illness is a reality of life, and churches are often at the front lines of mental health care. While church leaders and other Christians may not realize this, people regularly approach the church because they need help in dealing with the symptoms of mental illness—their own or someone else's. We need to be ready to respond to people who need us, and this response starts with considering mental illness from a Christian point of view. This study will help you consider what the Bible's teachings show us about mental illness.



Scripture: [Psalm 139](#); [Matthew 9:35–38](#); [14:13–21](#); [John 13:33–35](#); [15:9–17](#); [Romans 7:14–25](#)

Based On: *Troubled Minds* by Amy Simpson, Chapters 1 and 3, "A Family Story" and "Suffering People"

A Christian Response to Mental Illness

Leader's Guide

PART ONE

Identify the Current Issue

Historically, the church has had a mixed response to the suffering caused by mental illness. Christians have been pioneers in medical care, establishing the first hospitals to care for people with mental illness. They have been reformers, insisting on more humane treatment for people with psychiatric disorders. But they have also been the bearers of misinformation about mental illness, have ignored or rejected those who were ill, and have failed to follow through with the spiritual counsel and loving community suffering people needed.

It's time for the church to step forward again, as it has in the past, and actively help meet the needs of people with mental illness. Taking such a step starts with considering our own attitudes in light of the appropriate Christ-like response to mental illness.

Discussion Starters:

- [Q] How is mental illness usually discussed or portrayed in our society?
- [Q] How is mental illness usually discussed or portrayed in the church?
- [Q] How do you typically react when someone mentions mental illness?
- [Q] How do you think God wants us to respond to mental illness?

PART TWO

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: Jesus loves people affected by mental illness.

Read Matthew 9:35–38. When Jesus was living on earth, he spent a lot of time caring for people who came to him in desperation. The gospels record some of these activities in a manner that makes them easy to overlook, but it's clear that Jesus sometimes spent multiple days at a time healing and ministering to people who needed help.

Matthew's gospel gives us a poignant picture of Jesus' perspective on the people who came to him as he traveled through the towns and villages around the Sea of Galilee: "He had compassion on them because they were confused and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." And he took action to ease their suffering: "He healed every kind of disease and illness." Clearly Jesus loved these hurting people both with his emotions and with his deeds. This same Jesus loves the hurting and ill people among us today.

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By contrast, in *Troubled Minds*, Amy Simpson says this of those who witnessed her mother's psychotic episode in the dentist's office: "The receptionist and the people in the waiting room took turns staring at her, glancing at me and studying the floor. And not one person asked me—a completely rational and nonthreatening fifteen-year-old kid—if I needed help" (p. 25).

[Q] Why does Simpson say her experience in the dentist's office is an illustration of the way many people in the church respond to mental illness?

[Q] How have you seen the church, and individual Christians, respond to mental illness?

Read Matthew 14:13–21.

[Q] How does this passage demonstrate Jesus' love and care for people?

[Q] How did Jesus show that he cared for people's physical, and not just spiritual, needs?

[Q] If Jesus loves people affected by mental illness, how might that knowledge change the way people with mental illness view themselves?

[Q] What does Jesus' love mean for the way we treat people who have mental illness?

Teaching Point Two: We are all flawed and vulnerable.

In *Troubled Minds* Amy Simpson writes, "We are so uncomfortable with being forgiven and called and yet weak and suffering, we turn away from the suffering and weakness in our midst. We reject them in the name of our claim on a world we don't yet live in. We try to amputate those parts of the body of Christ that exhibit the most suffering. We don't want to look at them, because they remind us of what we're trying to forget—the truth about every single one of us" (pp. 30–31).

The truth about all of us is that we're flawed because of sin and vulnerable to the effects of disease, decay, and death. No one is immune from suffering in this life or from dying at the end of it. When we acknowledge this about ourselves and become comfortable with this perspective, we begin to become the kind of people who can love others in their own flawed and vulnerable condition.

Read Romans 7:14–25.

[Q] In this passage the Apostle Paul described his own condition, suffering under the consequences of sin. Why did Paul call himself "a slave to sin"?

[Q] What did Paul mean when he said, "I am not the one doing wrong; it is sin living in me that does it"?

[Q] What was Paul referring to when he wrote about "another power within me that is at war with my mind"? How does this power show itself in our lives?

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[Q] In our world and in our own lives, how do we see evidence that life “is dominated by sin and death”?

[Q] What's the remedy for this problem?

In *Troubled Minds*, Simpson writes this about the church: “Ours is supposed to be a community where the hurting, broken and sin-scarred find rest and redemption. Where everyone present owns up to being a hurting, broken and sin-scarred individual, rescued from the ultimate death, the ultimate suffering—which we deserve—by the grace of God. Where that same grace causes us to reach outside ourselves and, through the Holy Spirit's power, love one another” (pp. 31–32).

[Q] How can acknowledging our own vulnerability to sin and death make us more compassionate and humble people?

[Q] How might this attitude change the way we view and behave toward people with mental illness?

Teaching Point Three: Mental illness does not make us worthless.

Our world tends to marginalize people who suffer from mental illness, and Christians are often tempted to do the same. It's easy to ignore what we don't understand, what scares us, or what we hope will never be true about ourselves. But it's not up to us to decide that someone is no longer worth our love and attention. While mental illness may alter the course of a person's life, and managing it may come with limitations, it doesn't mean that person's life is no good anymore. In fact, we can be sure that God always has plans and purposes for everyone.

Our response to mental illness must reflect this view: everyone matters to God and has value in his kingdom. Offering friendship, supportive community, and treatment options can help people with mental illness get back to pursuing and living by God's purposes for them.

[Q] Why do people sometimes believe mental illness makes someone worthless, or at least less valuable than others?

[Q] How have you seen this attitude toward people with mental illness?

Read Psalm 139.

[Q] What does this Psalm suggest about our value to God and his attention to the details of our lives? Where does our value as people come from?

[Q] Reread Psalm 139:16. This verse suggests God is completely aware of all we will experience in this life. What does this imply about God's plans and purposes for people with mental illness?

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[Q] How do you think God sees life-altering problems like mental illness?

[Q] What does your own attitude toward mental illness show that you believe about people's value?

[Q] How can we show that we believe people with mental illness are just as valuable and precious as anyone?

► Optional Activity

Have each group member spend a few moments thinking about this last question and how it might apply to them personally. People who have family members or friends with mental illness might revisit their attitudes toward those specific people in their lives. People who themselves have mental illness might consider their own sense of self-worth. Each person should write down a commitment to do something—and it may be very small—in the next week that affirms the value of people who have mental illness.

Teaching Point Four: Love is the right response.

Read John 13:33–35. As Christians, we are called to love. In fact, this “new commandment” couldn't be emphasized with greater importance in Scripture. Jesus delivered this instruction to his disciples shortly before his crucifixion, when he had very little time left to teach them. He chose to focus them on love for one another. While love might look different in different circumstances and relationships, as Jesus' followers this injunction applies to us as well. People with mental illness may not always be easy to love, but we are called to love them anyway. And especially as we love the people who are part of our own Christian community, this love will make us identifiable as true followers of Christ.

[Q] Why do you think Jesus said, “Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples”?

[Q] How might love be especially powerful when given to someone who has a mental illness?

Read John 15:9–17.

[Q] Why do you think Jesus found it necessary to command his followers to love each other?

[Q] What does it mean to love one another in the same way Jesus loves us?

[Q] How can we show this kind of love to people with mental illness?

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PART THREE

Apply Your Findings

There's no doubt we need a better understanding of mental illness and an adjustment in our Christian response. But this change doesn't start in outward action; it starts in our hearts and our minds. Part of this process is simply learning more about what mental illness is and how it's best treated and managed. But just as crucial is a change in our attitude. We must approach the topic of mental illness with humility and an acknowledgement of our own problems. We must recognize that we're no better than others, regardless of their problems. God has granted us his love and grace even though we don't deserve them, and he offers the same to others. He expects us to extend the kind of love that shows we have been changed by his.

Action Point: Spend a few moments in silent prayer, with each person sitting before God and listening for the Holy Spirit's conviction. As God brings to mind people you have failed to love or consider valuable, repent of your attitude and ask God to change your heart and your behavior.

—Amy Simpson is the author of *Troubled Minds: Mental Illness and the Church's Mission* (InterVarsity Press). She also serves as editor of Christianity Today's Gifted for Leadership. You can find her at AmySimpsonOnline.com and on Twitter [@aresimpson](https://twitter.com/aresimpson).

Additional Resources

Grace for the Afflicted: A Clinical and Biblical Perspective on Mental Illness

by Matthew S. Stanford, PhD (Biblica Publishing, 2008). Each day men and women diagnosed with mental disorders are told they need to pray more and turn from their sin. Mental illness is equated with demonic possession, weak faith, and generational sin. Why is it that the church has struggled in ministering to those with mental illnesses? As both a church leader and professor of psychology and neuroscience, Michael S. Stanford has seen far too many mentally ill brothers and sisters damaged by well-meaning believers who respond to them out of fear or misinformation rather than grace. *Grace for the Afflicted* is written to educate Christians about mental illness from both biblical and scientific perspectives. Stanford presents insights into our physical and spiritual nature and discusses the appropriate role of psychology and psychiatry in the life of the believer.

The Journey of Spiritual Friendships

Leader's Guide

Ministry with Persons with Mental Illness and their Families, edited by Steven D. Thurber (Fortress Press). Those who are afflicted as well as those who are adversely affected by mental illness often live lives of “quiet desperation” without recourse to appropriate assistance. Most caregivers confronted with these illnesses in the work of ministry have had no training or accurate information about mental illnesses, so frequently they do nothing, resulting in further harm and damage. In *Ministry with Persons with Mental Illness and Their Families*, psychiatrists and pastoral theologians come together in an interdisciplinary, collaborative effort to ensure accuracy of information concerning the medical dimensions of mental illness, interpret these illnesses from a faith perspective, and make suggestions relative to effective ministry.

Leaders & Depression, TodaysChristianWoman.com. Janine Petry writes, “If you’re struggling with depression as a leader, please hear this from someone who’s been there: *you are not alone.*” There is help and hope, and through the pages of this training resource, you’ll find both. As you care for the needs of many, may these articles—written by authors who understand—help care for you as you seek rest for your heart, mind, and soul.

How to Help the Depressed, TodaysChristianWoman.com. There are so many who battle depression all the time for a myriad of reasons. Whether it’s from a chemical imbalance, circumstances, or past experiences, the specter of depression weighs heavily on them. If you’ve experienced depression yourself, or have lived with anyone who has, you know how difficult it can be. To make matters worse, many Christians feel that they shouldn’t be depressed. They have the false idea that if they were just more spiritual, they would not have these dark thoughts. The articles in this resource give perspective on this complex topic so that you are able to understand and help those you love who are depressed.

“Anxiety Attack!” by Tommy Nelson, LEADERSHIP JOURNAL (January 16, 2013). What’s a pastor to do when he can’t find the peace he’s preached for years?

Why So Much Suffering?

LEADER'S GUIDE

Christians can find hope and meaning in mental illness and other hardships.

Why do we suffer? This question isn't easy to answer, but it doesn't have to threaten our faith. One of the reasons mental illness and other forms of suffering feel like threats to faith is because many Christians have bought into the philosophy (knowingly or unknowingly) that we shouldn't suffer in this life, that it's normal to be happy and healthy all the time. In this study, a look at Scripture will show us a different perspective.



Scripture: [Numbers 21:4–9](#); [John 3:13–17](#); [Romans 5:12–17](#); [8:19–23](#); [8:35–38](#)

Based On: *Troubled Minds* by Amy Simpson, Chapter 2, "Mental Illness Is Mainstream"

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PART ONE

Identify the Current Issue

For various reasons, some of them unknown, mental illness is on the rise in our society. Most people are shocked to discover just how common it is. As *Troubled Minds* tells us, “about one in four adults—a little more than 25 percent of Americans ages eighteen and older—suffers from a diagnosable mental disorder in a given year” (p. 33). Mental illness is indeed “mainstream.” This means more and more people are in need of help with both the medical and spiritual consequences of illness.

It's easy to feel overwhelmed by this level of suffering, and it's easy to be paralyzed by the idea that this just is not the way life is supposed to be.

This is true: life is not supposed to be this way. But that doesn't justify living in denial. There's a reason life is this way, and mental illness is consistent with what the Bible teaches us about sin, suffering, and life in this world.

Discussion Starters:

- [Q] Why do philosophers and theologians talk about “the problem of suffering”?
- [Q] When have you found your faith tested by the problem of suffering?
- [Q] How has suffering served to strengthen your faith or the faith of someone you know?
- [Q] How might the growing frequency of mental illness challenge our faith?
- [Q] In what ways does the growing frequency of mental illness give us opportunities to exercise and express our faith?

PART TWO

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: Mental illness is common for the same reason other forms of sickness are.

In *Troubled Minds*, Simpson writes, “We are imperfect as a body and imperfect as individual bodies. We are wrecked by sin and its consequences, fully as wrecked and disfigured as those around us. No one is left untouched by life in a world like ours” (p. 29).

Even though Jewish and Christian Scriptures and theology have taught us for thousands of years that our world is tainted by sin and painfully tortured by the slow effects of death and decay, we seem to forget that we should not expect perfect health in this life. We also

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tend to forget that our brains are physical organs, subject to disease, decay, and injury. And when our brains have trouble functioning, that trouble can have profound effects on our thoughts, emotions, and behavior. We should not be surprised that so many people have problems that affect the way their brains work.

[Q] Why are we so often surprised when serious sickness and suffering happen to us or people we love?

[Q] Why does mental illness seem especially surprising or shocking when it happens to Christians?

In *Troubled Minds*, Simpson points out that the number of people affected by mental illness in the United States is “about equal to the total percentage of people diagnosed with cancer each year, those living with heart disease, those infected with HIV and AIDS and those afflicted with diabetes—combined.” She points out that we commonly minister to people affected by these other diseases but routinely ignore those with mental illness. “In contrast to the care we provide for others, we have very little patience with those whose diseases happen to attack their minds” (p. 37).

[Q] What causes us to miss the opportunity to minister to so many people who need love and support?

Read Romans 8:19–23.

[Q] What does this passage tell us about why problems like mental illness are so common?

[Q] In what ways have you seen the created world “groaning as in the pains of childbirth”? How have you seen the effects of this in your own body and mind?

[Q] Why has God promised us “new bodies”? What are the implications of this for diseases that affect our brains?

[Q] According to this passage, how should we view mental illness and other types of suffering?

► Optional Activity

As a group, make a list of the things people usually need when they're sick or suffering in other ways: medical care, financial help, companionship, and so on. Then discuss why you think people with mental illness often don't receive this kind of help from people in the church. Come up with some specific things your group, and your church, can do.

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Teaching Point Two: God never abandons us to suffering.

The Bible, in both the Old and the New Testament, makes clear that God does not abandon his people. While we may not always feel God's presence or believe he is with us, he never leaves us. And because he knows us intimately, including our most sinful thoughts and our greatest weaknesses, we can never become so unlovely that he will walk away in disgust.

[Q] Why do suffering people often feel as if God has abandoned them?

Read Romans 8:35–38.

[Q] What do these verses say about the idea that God might abandon us?

[Q] What are some of the things Paul says cannot separate us from God's love?

[Q] If these things can't cause God to withhold his love from us, why do troubles like mental illness often make us feel alone?

[Q] How should we respond when we feel God has abandoned us?

[Q] How should we respond when tempted to believe God has abandoned someone else?

Teaching Point Three: Suffering should point us to Christ.

We have all kinds of remedies to cure disease, manage pain, and help us live longer. And we should be tremendously thankful that God has given the ingredients in the natural world, and the necessary human knowledge and ingenuity, to discover and manufacturer these remedies. But ultimately nothing we can create will cure us of our sinful condition or the suffering it produces.

The final remedy for all suffering is in Jesus and his cure for sin. This is part of the purpose that suffering—including mental illness—plays in this life. It helps us recognize our need for God. It points us toward the restoration we can find only through faith in Jesus.

This truth about suffering helps to illuminate Christ's purpose in placing his church in this world. As Simpson writes in *Troubled Minds*, when it comes to responding to mental illness, "The church should not lag; it should lead the way... As living temples carrying God's presence in this world, we must allow his light to shine out from us and infiltrate the darkness that surrounds so many people and drives some of them to despair."

Read Numbers 21:4–9.

[Q] Why did God allow his people to suffer in this story?

[Q] How did God respond when the people sought his help?

[Q] Why did God tell Moses to create a bronze snake and lift it on a pole?

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Read John 3:13–17.

[Q] How is Jesus similar to the bronze snake Moses made? How is he different?

[Q] What does this passage show about God's purpose in telling Moses to make the bronze snake?

Read Romans 5:12–17.

[Q] How did suffering come into the world through Adam?

[Q] How did Jesus become the remedy for suffering?

[Q] How does suffering help us see our need for Jesus and for "God's wonderful grace"?

[Q] How can we as Christians help point suffering people to Jesus?

PART THREE

Apply Your Findings

So many people feel their faith shaken by a crisis—whether it's related to mental health or not. But often this crisis comes not because of the trial but because of our expectations. When we expect an easy life, despite what the Bible teaches, we will be shocked at what life actually is. When we believe that God has promised to make Christians feel happy all the time and make us immune to mental health problems, we may feel betrayed by God when depression, anxiety, or other troubling emotions make us feel miserable.

God has not promised that life will be easy for anyone—in fact, Scripture pretty much guarantees that it will be hard for all of us, including faithful followers of Jesus. Instead of letting difficulty shake our faith, we can let it reinforce our faith. Trouble is evidence that what the Bible teaches is true. And nothing draws a seeking heart closer to Jesus than suffering.

Action Point: When you find yourself surprised by suffering, look at Scripture to see what it actually teaches. Especially read about the lives of Old Testament prophets (like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Hosea), Paul, Peter, and Jesus himself. Consider their lives as examples not only of the kind of suffering we should anticipate in this world, but also the proper response to it.

—Amy Simpson is the author of *Troubled Minds: Mental Illness and the Church's Mission* (InterVarsity Press). She also serves as editor of Christianity Today's Gifted for Leadership. You can find her at AmySimpsonOnline.com and on Twitter [@aresimpson](https://twitter.com/aresimpson).

Additional Resources

Life's Tough Questions by Dr. Steven Waterhouse (Westcliff Press, 2005). Pastor Waterhouse provides a theological exploration of mental illness and other difficult issues.

When Someone You Love Suffers from Depression or Mental Illness by Cecil Murphey (Beacon Hill Press). Does someone you love struggle with depression or mental illness? The social stigma associated with these diseases many have disappeared, but the day-to-day challenges will face as you walk through this trial with your loved one remain. As much as you want to fix it, you won't be able to. But it is important that you take care of yourself--both physically and spiritually--during this difficult time. In this book, Cecil Murphey offers daily words of encouragement as you travel with your loved one on this road that neither of you would have chosen. As you face the uncertainty of tomorrow, these readings will help you keep your eyes on God in the midst of the trials.

"God of the Schizophrenic" by David Kurt Weiss, CHRISTIANITY TODAY (May 2, 2011). A young man with schizophrenia describes rediscovering his faith amid the ravages of mental illness.

"Where Is God for the Suffering, Starving, and Freezing?" by Holly Burkhalter, HER.MENEUTICS (January 8, 2014). The author relates her own story of recognizing the Lord in a world of pain and distress.

Dealing with Depression, TodaysChristianWoman.com. If you haven't struggled with depression, it can be hard to understand. If you have struggled with depression, you know how difficult it is. This guide will offer help and hope for when you or someone you love struggles with depression.

Mental Illness and the Church's Responsibility

LEADER'S GUIDE

We are part of the solution to this health crisis.

The church can't afford to ignore mental illness. Mental illness is so common, it affects nearly everyone. And responding to suffering of all kinds is part of the work we are called to do. As people called to spread love and hope, we must step out and offer what only the people of God can offer. This study will help your group consider the church's role in healing and offering hope.



Scripture: [1 Corinthians 1:18–25](#); [13:1–13](#); [2 Corinthians 2:14–16](#)

Based On: *Troubled Minds* by Amy Simpson, Chapters 4–6, “Coping,” “Church Life,” and “Ministry Life”

PART ONE

Identify the Current Issue

When it comes to responding to mental illness, churches tend to go to one extreme or another. Either they ignore it or worse, tell the suffering person it's just a spiritual problem that should be handled spiritually, without any medical intervention. Or they send people to mental health professionals and then forget about them, deciding they've done their job.

Neither approach is right—people with mental health problems, like other health problems, often need to receive some kind of treatment, even if just a few sessions with a counselor.

But they also need spiritual support and loving community, things their mental health professionals won't provide. The church can help fill the gaps in mental health care and can help meet the important spiritual and social needs of people as they're working to be healthy.

Discussion Starters:

[Q] What kinds of things is your church good at?

[Q] What kinds of things is your church not so good at?

[Q] How can those strengths and weaknesses guide your church in deciding what you can do to help people with mental illness?

PART TWO

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: Our world has imperfect solutions.

Troubled Minds has a lot to say about the shortcomings of the mental health care system, which Simpson calls "broken." She says, "It was not designed to do what most people need it to do" (p. 81). She also discusses the imperfections of treatments like psychiatric medications and hospitalizations, which can be of tremendous help but usually can't provide everything a person needs for whole and healthy restoration.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:18–25.

[Q] How are our medical remedies indicative of the wisdom of humans?

[Q] What makes our medical remedies valuable? What role do they play in healing and managing mental illness?

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[Q] What do people with mental illness need that mental health professionals can't give them?

[Q] Why does "the message of the cross" sound foolish to many people?

[Q] What does that same message offer to people with mental illness and those who love them?

[Q] How can churches and individual Christians help provide what people with mental illness need?

Teaching Point Two: We are here to represent Christ's presence in the world.

Read John 17:15–19. When Jesus prayed for his disciples shortly before his crucifixion, he specifically mentioned that he was not asking God to take them out of the world. Even though they did "not belong to this world," he asked God to make them holy as he was "sending them into the world" (John 17:18).

Jesus has a purpose for his followers here on this planet, and that purpose is directly related to how we respond to people affected by mental illness.

[Q] What purposes do most people seem to live for?

[Q] What is the result of living for such purposes?

Read 2 Corinthians 2:14–16.

[Q] What do these verses say about our purpose as Christ's followers?

[Q] How can we go about spreading "the knowledge of Christ everywhere, like a sweet perfume"?

In *Troubled Minds*, Simpson writes, "When the church is silent to a person in crisis, it can sound remarkably like silence from God" (p. 100).

[Q] Why does our silence send such a strong message about God's interest in hurting people?

[Q] Why is our attitude toward suffering people so important?

[Q] If our purpose is to accurately represent Christ, what is our responsibility toward people with mental illness?

► Optional Activity

Play a guessing game to illustrate the power of purpose in people's lives. Brainstorm a list of purposes people might live for (such as earning money, acquiring possessions, being comfortable, having fun, enjoying family, etc.). Then write each on a slip of paper and have each person draw a paper without telling anyone else what's on it. Take turns illustrating your assigned purpose by talking before the group or acting out the life of a person who is living for that purpose. See if you can guess what purpose the person's life and speech reveal.

Teaching Point Three: Our response to mental illness matters.

Because we are here on earth as representatives of Christ, carrying his Holy Spirit within us, our behavior toward people in need communicates either truth or falsehood about God's own love for them.

In *Troubled Minds*, Amy Simpson writes, "The church matters because it is the first place many people go when they need help of all kinds, including help with symptoms of mental illness. It matters because it represents God and is equipped by the Holy Spirit to pour out Jesus' love on this world. And when someone is rejected, ignored or marginalized by the church—representatives of God—they feel rejected by God" (p. 132).

Our unloving response to people with mental illness can be powerful. Our loving response can be even more powerful because the work of Christ is in it.

Read 1 Corinthians 13:1–13.

[Q] What are some of the words this passage uses to describe love?

[Q] What kind(s) of love do you think this passage is talking about?

[Q] How can we live up to this description of love?

[Q] What are some specific words from this passage that we will need to apply in our relationships with people who have mental illness?

[Q] Read 1 Corinthians 13:13 again. What do the ideas that "love will last forever" and "the greatest of these is love" suggest about why our response to mental illness matters?

PART THREE

Apply Your Findings

Historically, the church is the number-one place people have gone for help in dealing with mental illness. How prepared is your church to offer help? What would Jesus offer in response to someone's request for help? How can you offer something similar? It's important to always remember that we are here as representatives of Christ himself. That means our response to mental illness can give a beautiful picture of what Jesus is like or can create a powerful false impression of him.

Action Point: Consider what your church could do to point people with mental illness to Jesus. This doesn't mean offering trite or pat answers or belittling their suffering ("Just read the Bible and pray and it will all go away"). This means engaging with them, showing Jesus' compassion, and offering hope for redemption through Christ. Could you start a support group or counseling ministry? Organize a team of volunteers who will visit people in psychiatric hospitals who are able and willing to have visitors? Raise funds to help pay for mental health care? Consider the first step in pursuing a plan to help.

—Amy Simpson is the author of *Troubled Minds: Mental Illness and the Church's Mission* (InterVarsity Press). She also serves as editor of Christianity Today's Gifted for Leadership. You can find her at AmySimpsonOnline.com and on Twitter [@aresimpson](https://twitter.com/aresimpson).

Additional Resources

Faith & Mental Health: Religious Resources for Healing by Harold G. Koenig, M.D. (Templeton Foundation Press, 2005). This book explores the history and research behind the relationship between faith and mental health.

Fresh Hope: Living Well in Spite of a Mental Health Diagnosis by Brad Hoefs (Xulon Press). Fresh Hope is a resource for the church, with an emphasis on wellness, empowering people to be active participants in the pursuit of healing. This resource supports churches in their effort to serve those who struggle with mental illness. As a "wounded healer," Brad Hoefs has provided a theological framework and philosophy of ministry for the church in partnering with the medical community on behalf of those who live with a chemical imbalance. Brad's story of recovery and growth brings hope to those who are not satisfied with merely coping with the challenges of a harsh medical diagnosis and medication. It is an invaluable resource for the church in coming alongside the millions in our communities who struggle with mental illness.

Mental Illness and the Church's Responsibility

Leader's Guide

Ministering to Those with a Mental Illness by Amy Simpson, SmallGroups.com. This 4-session Bible study will help you discern how to help those who are suffering from a mental illness. It covers such topics as what it means to be a Christian who is suffering emotionally, how to discern if something is a mental illness or has other causes, how the church should respond to those with mental illness, and how to provide hope for those who are depressed.

Pathways to Promise: Ministry and Mental Illness This is a website hosted by the Missouri Institute of Mental Health to promote a caring ministry with people with mental illness and their families. These resources are used by people at all levels of faith group structures from local congregations to regional and national staff.

"Bi-Polar Priest" by Jerry DiSpigno, LEADERSHIP JOURNAL (June 1, 2011). One church leader relates his story of life in ministry and on meds.

Shining Light on Stigma

LEADER'S GUIDE

Christians must replace false beliefs and stereotypes about mental illness with truth.

One of the hallmarks of God's people should be our commitment to truth. While we may not always agree on all aspects of what is true, we can be united in our dedication to pursue truth rather than hide away in fear or sleep under a blanket of wishful thinking. The stigma attached to mental illness is based in both fear and misinformation. This study will challenge Christians to battle that stigma with a sober look at what the Bible teaches.



Scripture: [1 Kings 19:3–4](#); [Jonah 4](#); [Matthew 23:1–4](#); [Mark 5:1–20](#); [Luke 13:1–5](#); [John 9:1–3](#); [2 Timothy 1:3–7](#)

Based On: *Troubled Minds* by Amy Simpson, Chapter 7, "Persistent Stigma"

Shining Light on Stigma

Leader's Guide

PART ONE

Identify the Current Issue

Among the most difficult parts of having a mental illness is stigma—a special kind of social rejection that comes from stereotyping, marginalizing, and ridiculing people who are ill or susceptible to illness. People consistently react to mental illness, and think about it, in ways they don't react to other kinds of illness. Because of stigma, many people with mental illness are too ashamed to let others know they're struggling, or even admit it to themselves. This sense of shame and fear of the consequences keeps many from seeking the help they need.

Stigma is essentially based in fear, and of all people, Christians should be determined not to let fear rule our lives. Unfortunately, though, when it comes to mental illness, many Christians compound stigma with some religiously based assumptions of their own.

Discussion Starters:

- [Q] Why do you think mental illness is stigmatized in our society?
- [Q] How have you seen the effects of this stigma?
- [Q] Do you agree that stigma is essentially based in fear? Why or why not?
- [Q] Why should Christians not live in fear?

PART TWO

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: Mental illness is not the same as demon possession.

Among the ways mental illness is stigmatized in the church, Simpson lists the common idea that all mental illness is caused by demon possession. This assumption discourages many people from finding the medical help they need. It also “seems out of step with Scripture. Given its rarity in biblical times and the apparent incompatibility of demon possession with new life in Christ, does anyone really believe 25 percent of our population is demon possessed? Automatically asking questions about demon possession distracts us from our calling to minister to people in need. It is harmful and negligent and may discourage a person from receiving critical treatment” (p. 159).

Read Mark 5:1–20.

- [Q] In this passage, what did demon possession look like?

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[Q] How is that picture of demon possession similar to what you know about mental illness? How is it different?

Most people with mental illness don't show symptoms that look anything like what Jesus encountered in Mark 5. They suffer from severe anxiety, depressive moods, and other symptoms that impair their functioning but don't cause uncontrollable violence, blasphemous outbursts, or superhuman strength.

[Q] Why do you think some people automatically attribute mental illness to demon possession?

The Bible shows us a few examples of people who seem to have shown symptoms of mental illness. Some of these people were God's followers, clearly not possessed by demons.

Read 1 Kings 19:3–4 and Jonah 4.

[Q] How did Elijah and Jonah show symptoms of depression and even suicidal thoughts?

[Q] How can biblical examples give us a clearer view of the relationship between demon possession and mental illness?

Teaching Point Two: Mental illness is not God's punishment for individual sin.

Another source of stigma in the church is the idea that people with mental illness are receiving some kind of special punishment for sin. Simpson acknowledges, "We live in a world poisoned by our sin and its consequences, and we reap those consequences every day. In addition, a person's sinful actions and choices can have devastating consequences—and sometimes contribute to a decline in mental health." At the same time, "In the Bible, both the book of Job and Jesus himself discourage us from seeing illnesses and tragedies as punishment for people's sin" (p. 161).

Read John 9:1–3. Like many people in their culture, the disciples assumed the man was born blind because God was punishing his parents' sin or his own. Jesus corrected this assumption in an astonishing way: by calling it an opportunity for God's power to show itself.

Although God may not miraculously heal most of us, as he healed the man's blindness, he still shows God's power through our pain and through the strength and grace he provides in the midst of challenges. When we insist that suffering people would not be ill if only they would repent of their hidden sins, we diminish our view of this redemptive work God does.

[Q] Why do you think the disciples asked who was to blame for the man's blindness?

[Q] How do you think they responded to Jesus' answer?

Read Luke 13:1–5.

[Q] Why do you think Jesus specifically mentioned the idea that those who suffered “were worse sinners”?

[Q] What does Jesus' teaching in these two passages suggest about our eagerness to blame people for their suffering?

[Q] What do you think churches should teach about the relationship between sin and mental illness?

Teaching Point Three: Mental illness is not just a spiritual problem.

Our brains are mysterious organs, and for most of human history they have been barely understood. Brain science is still a frontier, but we now know enough about these complex organs to understand that they are vulnerable to disease, decay, and injury just like the other organs in our bodies. And when they don't function properly, they change our thoughts, feelings, and behavior.

Because we have not understood this in the past, we have been quick to assign these changes to spiritual problems. Our spiritual lives are deeply intertwined with our physical and emotional health, but overspiritualization denies reality. As Simpson writes in *Troubled Minds*, “Spiritual growth and discipline certainly play a role in healing mental illness and other ailments.” But that doesn't mean spiritual exercises are the only appropriate remedy. “While nothing is wrong with more prayer or more faith—mental illness or not—there is not a lot of wisdom in treating illness exclusively with spiritual discipline” (pp. 162–63).

Understanding what causes mental illness, and what treatments work, can help us understand that they are illnesses with biological roots and spiritual growth is just one element of what makes us healthier people.

[Q] Why do you think the suggestion of more prayer or more faith is such a common response to mental illness?

[Q] How do you think the suggestion that a mentally ill person “doesn't have enough faith” affects that person? affects the person's likelihood to seek medical treatment or counseling? affects his or her relationship with God?

Simpson writes that insisting people need to simply pray more or have more faith “is the work of Pharisees” (p. 164).

Read Matthew 23:1–4.

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[Q] In these verses, why did Jesus warn people against following the Pharisees' example?

[Q] How did Jesus respond to the Pharisees' habit of crushing people "with unbearable religious demands"?

[Q] How might Jesus respond when Christians tell suffering and ill people they just need to be more religious?

[Q] What role does spiritual activity play in caring for mental health?

[Q] How can activities like Bible reading, prayer, worship, and affirming our faith complement medical treatment and counseling?

[Q] What should we tell people instead of laying religious burdens on them?

Teaching Point Four: We don't have to live in fear.

Ultimately, stigma is based in fear. We fear mental illness because we don't understand it, we fear the unpredictability of people's behavior or the demands they may place on us. We fear the stereotypes we've seen in movies and on TV, and ultimately we fear facing the reality that each of us is vulnerable to mental illness. Stigma is self-protection. It helps us convince ourselves that mental illness happens only on the margins to people we don't know, to people who deserve it; it won't happen to us or the people we love. Stigma helps us make excuses for ourselves when we wonder what we can do to help—and decide we can't do anything because we're not "qualified." Stigma feeds our fears, which in turn reinforce stigma, which feeds our fears . . .

But we don't have to live in fear. We are called to live in love.

[Q] How do you usually respond when someone starts talking about mental illness?

[Q] Why do you think our first reaction is so often fear?

[Q] Why are people generally so reticent to talk about mental illness?

[Q] What might it mean to respond in love instead?

Read 2 Timothy 1:3–7.

[Q] What does Paul say about our proper attitude toward life?

[Q] What is the difference between a healthy fear of danger and a "spirit of fear and timidity"?

[Q] How is a spirit of "power, love, and self-discipline" dramatically different from a spirit of fear?

[Q] Why is a spirit of “power, love, and self-discipline” more appropriate for a Christian?

[Q] How can we approach mental illness with a spirit of “power, love, and self-discipline”? How might this change the way we behave toward people with mental illness?

► **Optional Activity**

Discuss some of the ways you have seen people with mental illness portrayed on TV, in movies, in books, in the news, in everyday conversations, and in other places. For each example, identify the message that portrayal sends about what mental illness is and how we should respond to people with mental illness. Talk about how these portrayals have reinforced a sense of fear around mental illness.

PART THREE

Apply Your Findings

Like all other people, Christians are tempted to live in the shadow of fear. The difference is, we are specifically called to live differently. And we are given the Holy Spirit of God, who fills us with the capacity for a different kind of life. Instead of fear, we can live in the light of love, grace, compassion, truth, and courage. Imagine if we let go of fear and these were the hallmarks of all followers of Christ—the world would see the difference! Let's commit to rely on the Holy Spirit to make us more like Christ himself, who never lived by fear. This commitment will naturally change the way we relate to people affected by mental illness.

Action Point: This week, encourage each person to read or listen to the story of someone who has struggled with mental illness. You can find numerous memoirs written by people who have mental illness or who have family members with mental illness. Better yet, talk to a friend or family member of your own and ask the person to share his or her story with you. Ask God to open your heart to that person and to help you overcome your fear and stigma.

—Amy Simpson is the author of *Troubled Minds: Mental Illness and the Church's Mission* (InterVarsity Press). She also serves as editor of Christianity Today's Gifted for Leadership. You can find her at AmySimpsonOnline.com and on Twitter [@aresimpson](#).

Additional Resources

Why Do Christians Shoot their Wounded?: Helping (Not Hurting) Those with Emotional Difficulties by Dwight L. Carlson, M.D. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994). Thousands of Christians suffer real emotional pain such as depression, anxiety, obsessiveness. Many other Christians, including prominent leaders, believe emotional problems are the result of sin or bad choices. These attitudes often only add to the suffering of those who hurt. In this book, Dwight Carlson marshals recent scientific evidence that demonstrates many emotional problems are just as physical or biological as diabetes, cancer, and heart disease. While he never discounts personal responsibility, Carlson shows from both the Bible and up-to-date medicine why it really is no sin to hurt. It will bring profound help for those who hurt and those who counsel.

Mental Illness, BuildingChurchLeaders.com. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, about one in four adults suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder in a given year. And serious mental illness affects 6 percent of the population, or 1 in 17 adults. What does it mean to pastor people through this challenging, often highly stigmatized, disease? This 22-page resource offers wisdom from those who have walked the path and tips on how to minister to the mentally ill.

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI). America's largest grassroots mental health organization dedicated to improving the lives of individuals and families affected by mental illness, NAMI provides information, advocacy, support groups, referrals, and more. NAMI is not a Christian organization, but works with churches and other faith-based organizations to help them provide support to hurting people.

Shadow Voices: Finding Hope in Mental Illness, DVD, directed by Burton Buller (Mennonite Media Productions, 2005). Here is an inside look at what it's like to live with a mental illness, and how individuals and their families find their way through a tangle of medical, governmental, societal, and spiritual issues. Ten people with mental illness tell their stories, and many experts and advocates in the field add helpful perspectives. Includes PDF discussion guide. Approx. 58 minutes.

"Through a Glass, Darkly" by Amy Simpson, LEADERSHIP JOURNAL (May 30, 2011). A look at how churches can do effective ministry to people with mental illness.

"Regeneration, Deliverance, and Therapy?" by Archibald D. Hart, LEADERSHIP JOURNAL (July 1, 1991). In their counseling, pastors have to decide which comes first: regeneration, deliverance, or therapy. This article includes helpful information to make that decision.

The Church Is Called to Help with Mental Illness

LEADER'S GUIDE

Pursuing our God-given mission means helping hurting people.

Many people who sit in church pews on Sunday mornings don't spend a lot of time thinking about the church's mission and purpose. Some believe these questions are for professional pastors and theologians to consider. But the church's mission is every Christian's mission, and it should guide the life of everyone who calls Jesus Lord. This study will shed biblical light on the church's mission and help your group consider how that mission applies to relationships with people affected by mental illness.



Scripture: [Matthew 5:13–16](#); [1 Corinthians 12:12–26](#); [Colossians 3:12–17](#)

Based On: *Troubled Minds* by Amy Simpson, Chapter 8, "What Churches Can Do"

PART ONE

Identify the Current Issue

Christians are not here accidentally; the church is not merely a social club established by humans. The church is all the followers of Jesus, united (whether we feel unified or not) by our relationship with God and by a common purpose. We are called to serve as vessels of God's presence here on earth and to do the work he equips us to do. Part of that calling means treating others lovingly, regardless of how unlovable they may seem.

The church's calling means we are perfectly positioned to offer love and hope to people affected by mental illness. Because God has loved and granted hope to us, we don't really have the option of doing anything less.

Discussion Starters:

- [Q] How would you summarize the church's mission?
- [Q] What role do individual Christians play in fulfilling the church's mission?
- [Q] What kinds of things distract the church from its mission?
- [Q] How can we pursue our mission in relationship with people affected by mental illness?

PART TWO

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: The church has a mission.

As followers of Christ, we are not here on this earth merely to engage in the pursuit of happiness or to live for our own comfort. We are not commissioned to simply bide our time hiding out until Jesus returns to earth.

We are here on a mission: to represent Christ to the world around us. We carry the very presence of God within us, in the form of the Holy Spirit given to all Christians. And the Bible tells us how our community life should look when we accept Christ's mission and allow the Holy Spirit to set the tone for our relationships.

- [Q] How often do you think about the church's purpose and mission?
- [Q] What would your church say is its purpose and mission? Based on your experience, what do you think your church really believes about its purpose and mission?

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Read Colossians 3:12–17. In *Troubled Minds*, Simpson calls this passage the church's "mission statement." She tells us, "This is what the church is created to do" (p. 31).

[Q] How well does your church live up to this mission statement?

[Q] What does this mission statement mean for how Christians should treat people with mental illness?

[Q] What would it look like to fulfill this mission statement in our relationships with people affected by mental illness—those who have mental illness and those who love them?

► Optional Activity

As a group, write a mission statement for your church that reflects what Paul wrote in Colossians 3:12–17. Rather than simply restate the passage, get as specific as you can be about how this mission might look in the time and place where you live. For example, what would it mean to "clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy"? To whom would you show that mercy?

Teaching Point Two: All Christians are called to the church's mission.

The mission of the church is a collective one. It is also a personal one. Pastors, small-group leaders, Bible teachers, and missionaries are not more responsible for this mission than the rest of us. We all have a role to play, and that includes showing love to people we don't feel qualified to help.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:12–21.

[Q] Why do you think Paul chose the human body as a metaphor for the Christian church?

[Q] What does this metaphor suggest about individual Christians' importance to the church?

[Q] What does your life tend to show about your attitude toward being a critical "body part"?

[Q] What does this passage suggest about your role in pursuing the church's mission?

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Read 1 Corinthians 12:22–26.

[Q] Who might be some of the “parts of the body that seem weakest and least important?” Why might they be the most necessary?

[Q] What does it mean that “extra honor and care are given to those parts that have less dignity”? Why might they require extra care?

[Q] Does this describe your church’s treatment of people who have mental illness and other problems that make them seem weaker and less dignified?

[Q] Read 1 Corinthians 12:26 again. What are the implications of this verse for you and the way you relate to suffering people?

[Q] What can you do to help the church fulfill its obligations to people with mental illness?

Teaching Point Three: We have a lot to offer.

As followers of Jesus, walking around with the Holy Spirit of God within us, we have much to offer the world. Regardless of the way we feel, we can be beacons of hope and love when we let God’s light shine from the flawed and unglamorous vessels we are.

Allowing God to shine hope from our lives starts with acknowledging that we can’t do this on our own. None of us are loving, patient, or good enough to consistently be kind to others. None of us can offer truth or true lasting hope from our own observations of life in this world. But when we devote ourselves to worship and humble ourselves before God, something amazing happens: God begins to use us in spite of ourselves.

[Q] What does the church have to offer the world?

[Q] What do you think the world expects from the church?

[Q] Why do so many people come to the church for help with mental illness and other trouble?

[Q] Read 2 Corinthians 4:7–11. How are we like “fragile clay jars”? What kind of treasure do we hold?

[Q] How does our own suffering make God’s power and the life Jesus offers more obvious?

In Chapter 8 of *Troubled Minds*, Simpson profiles a handful of people who are doing effective ministry among people affected by mental illness, through their churches. The people she describes are “regular” people, not pastors or spiritual superheroes; they’re people who feel called to respond to God’s mission for them.

[Q] How are these “regular” people like fragile clay jars? How does God show his power

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through them? How does he use them to offer life to the world around them?

[Q] How can we offer life to the people around us? To people affected by mental illness?

Teaching Point Four: Our loving community can change the world.

While many people don't know they're longing for God, most people know they're looking for love. And while they might search for it in all the wrong places, the church should be a place where they can always see it in action. When we love one another—even at our most unlovable—we show what God's love is truly capable of doing in the hearts of people. And we become a community that makes the world better just because we're here.

Read Matthew 5:13–16.

[Q] How do salt and light change the world around them?

[Q] Why do you think Jesus chose these two metaphors to describe our influence on the world around us?

[Q] How should our presence in this world change it for the better?

[Q] How do we let our good deeds “shine out for all to see”?

[Q] How might seeing our good deeds inspire others to praise God?

Simpson tells us, “Realize that churches and their leaders can do a lot to help heal and support individuals and families affected by mental illness...you can demonstrate the kind of love God has for all of us—the kind that doesn't waver, no matter how hard we are to live with” (p. 196).

[Q] How should people who are “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world” behave toward people with mental illness?

[Q] How might our treatment of suffering people inspire others to praise our heavenly Father?

PART THREE

Apply Your Findings

It's easy to get caught up in the flow of the culture around us, simply floating along the current that feels most comfortable. But Christians are called to live intentionally, actively pursuing a life that will show the world what God is like. We do indeed have a lot to offer, and the stakes couldn't be higher. No follower of Christ is exempt from this mission, although

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we can choose to engage or disengage from the work.

In our relationships with all people, we must display the character of Christ. And people with mental illness are no exception. Our response to mental illness matters because it provides an opportunity to show who we really are—and who God is.

Action Point: Spend some time in prayer as a group, asking God to reveal his mission for you in regard to people with mental illness. Commit to pray individually this week, asking God to give you the grace and courage to respond to mental illness as you should. Then watch for opportunities—remember, you don't have to start a ministry or get a degree in psychology. No special qualifications are required simply to be a friend to someone.

—Amy Simpson is the author of *Troubled Minds: Mental Illness and the Church's Mission* (InterVarsity Press). She also serves as editor of Christianity Today's Gifted for Leadership. You can find her at AmySimpsonOnline.com and on Twitter [@aresimpson](#).

Additional Resources

When Your Family Is Living with a Mental Illness by Marcia Lund (Augsburg Books, 2002). Mental illness is a disease like any other. Those dealing with mental illness, whether in their family or with a friend, can be confused or frustrated by a disease that is unpredictable and detrimental. With straight-forward spiritual guidance, this volume is perfect for anyone affected by mental illness. Using practical suggestions for encouraging the reader to reconnect spiritually with God, this book can help sufferers resolve issues and find peace.

Broken Minds: Hope for Healing When You Feel Like You're "Losing It" by Steve & Robyn Bloem (Kregel Publications). Broken Minds is a deeply personal, yet practical, book for Christians who are clinically depressed or have been diagnosed with a mental illness. The book takes Steve's personal story of major depression and weaves through it Robyn's insights and Steve's professional knowledge. The result is a tapestry of practical information including definitions, treatment options, government services available, interactions with the church and God, and a deep compassion for those who feel like their world is falling apart.

"Mental Illness: One Simple Way to Help" by Amy Simpson, THE EXCHANGE (June 13, 2013). Amy Simpson describes one way churches can help with mental illness: stop

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concentrating on being cool and focus on being more like Jesus.

Transformation in the Midst of Suffering, TodaysChristianWoman.com. Much in life can cause us pain and suffering: physical illness, the death of a loved one, the betrayal or abandonment of a spouse, the rebellion of a child, the loss of a job, the breakup of a relationship, and so much more. This resource features the wisdom of those who've suffered far beyond what I've experienced in my life so far—the illness and death of children, the repercussions of violent crime, the prison of deep depression. Their candid stories of heartache and their powerful insights about spiritual growth will encourage you—maybe even more than you think is possible in your current state of pain.

"We're All a Bunch of Losers!" by Peri Gilbert, SmallGroups.com (November 7, 2011). Gilbert tells Christians we are all empowered to help free others from bondage.

God Can Redeem Mental Illness

LEADER'S GUIDE

We have more than one reason for hope, even when life seems hopeless.

When it comes to a topic like mental illness, it's easy to focus on pain and struggle and to lose sight of the good work God can do in any circumstance. Believing in God's redemption sometimes requires tremendous trust in the midst of overwhelming pain. But we don't trust for no reason—we can see examples of God's redemption all around us if we're paying attention. This study will help us consider how God redeems mental illness.



Scripture: [2 Corinthians 1:3–7](#); [4:13–18](#); [Ephesians 2:1–10](#); [James 1:2–4](#)

Based On: *Troubled Minds* by Amy Simpson, Chapter 9, "What God Does"

God Can Redeem Mental Illness

Leader's Guide

PART ONE

Identify the Current Issue

Redemption is one of God's specialties. His relationship with humans has always been about redemption, and his ultimate act of redemption was in Christ's sacrificial work on the cross. This work means all of us can be forgiven and stand before God without shame, as if we had never rebelled against him. This work also means someday those who have been forgiven will be made new, re-created with new bodies that will not see death and decay.

But redemption is not only for salvation, and it's not only for the future. It happens now, and in our eagerness to settle for cheap hits of happiness, we often miss it. God can take the worst in our world—and the worst in us—and use them for his work in this world. In all its forms, God's redemption offers hope for people affected by mental illness.

Discussion Starters:

[Q] What does "redemption" mean?

[Q] How have you seen God's redemption at work?

[Q] How might God's redemption offer hope to people who have mental illness or who have a family member or friend with mental illness?

PART TWO

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: God heals and changes people.

God is in the business of transforming people. He loves us just as we are, but he also loves us too much to leave us the way we are.

God can and does heal mental illness and other ailments in this life. But this is not always what he chooses to do. And when he doesn't heal us, he still offers his transformative work, which we can welcome in our lives. Mental illness may be hard for us to understand, but it does not mystify God. We can find hope in knowing that no matter our condition, God never gives up on us. He always offers us spiritual healing, a life of meaning and purpose, and the opportunity to become better versions of ourselves.

[Q] What are some ways you have seen God heal or change you or other people?

Read Ephesians 2:1–10.

[Q] What were some specific ways God changed the people in the church Paul was writing to?

[Q] According to this passage, why does God do his healing and transforming work in people?

[Q] Why does God “create us anew in Christ Jesus”?

In Chapter 9 of *Troubled Minds*, Simpson shares several stories that illustrate how God can heal and change people affected by mental illness.

[Q] Do you think God has good things planned for people with mental illness to do? Why or why not?

[Q] How might God use mental illness to change people or equip them for what he wants them to do?

Teaching Point Two: God uses our pain in his work.

When God allows his people to suffer, he always uses that suffering in his own work. He has jobs for us to do, and he has a way of taking the worst of our sufferings and using them for good, either in our own lives or in the lives of others.

We may not always realize how God uses what we have been through, but he does—especially as we actively welcome his work in and through us. Mental illness doesn't change the fact that we are called to represent him. Mental illness does not make any of us marginal to God's plans.

Read James 1:2–4.

[Q] According to James, why should we consider “troubles of any kind...an opportunity for great joy”?

[Q] How can suffering make us more “complete” and spiritually stronger?

[Q] How might God use mental illness to test our faith and make us more spiritually mature?

[Q] What does this passage suggest should be our attitude toward mental illness?

In *Troubled Minds*, Amy Simpson says this about the people whose mental-health ministries she describes: “God took their suffering at the hands of mental illness and turned it into the calling and qualifications to minister to others in Jesus' name. And he has done the same for me” (p. 209).

[Q] How does this show another good thing God can bring from hardships like mental illness?

Read 2 Corinthians 1:3–7.

- [Q] According to this passage, why does God give us comfort in times of trouble?
- [Q] How have you seen this happen in your own life?
- [Q] How should this understanding of God's redemption affect your attitude toward mental illness?

Teaching Point Three: Someday God will end all suffering.

In *Troubled Minds*, Simpson reminds us of the complete redemption awaiting followers of Christ: "We will see each other as God sees us—and we will love what we see. We will know true joy, untainted by sorrow. Our thoughts and perceptions will no longer be distorted by pain, grief, selfishness, greed, depression, anxiety, psychosis or pride" (p. 200).

In addition to the hope we have in the healing and purpose God provides in this life, we have something amazing to look forward to—the re-creation of our bodies and brains, remade as God intended us to be. In light of that astounding promise, we can look at our present suffering with a new perspective.

- [Q] How can an awareness of heaven change our perspective on this life?

Read 2 Corinthians 4:13–18.

- [Q] Why does Paul say he never gives up in preaching the message of salvation through Jesus?
- [Q] What do you know about the kind of suffering Paul went through as he spread the gospel?
- [Q] Why did Paul say his troubles were small and wouldn't last long?
- [Q] What kinds of things was Paul talking about when he referred to the "things we cannot see" that will last forever?
- [Q] How could you adopt the same perspective on suffering that Paul had?
- [Q] How might this perspective affect your view of mental illness?
- [Q] How can this perspective help you offer hope to people who struggle with mental illness?

► Optional Activity

Have volunteers tell stories of troubles they experienced as children and teenagers that no longer seem like a big deal. Discuss why time and growing up make a difference in our perspective and how that same phenomenon might apply to our eternal life beyond this one.

PART THREE

Apply Your Findings

People with mental illness have never had more hope at their disposal. Modern medicine—although flawed—offers a better understanding of the mind, better treatments, and more humane care than ever before. But the greatest source of hope is in God's redemption. That redemption is both for now and for the future, when all sickness will be healed and our bodies will be made new. What amazing grace God grants in showing us glimpses of this kind of redemption now, when he heals sick and suffering people and when he chooses to use our sickness and suffering in his good work.

Action Point: Choose one of the people whose encouraging stories are told in Chapter 9 of *Troubled Minds*. With a partner, thank God for the way he has shown his redemption in and through the person's experience with mental illness. Then ask God to make you an instrument he uses to bring about redemption in the life of someone else who's affected by mental illness—maybe even your own life.

—Amy Simpson is the author of *Troubled Minds: Mental Illness and the Church's Mission* (InterVarsity Press). She also serves as editor of Christianity Today's Gifted for Leadership. You can find her at AmySimpsonOnline.com and on Twitter [@aresimpson](#).

Additional Resources

Wrestling with Our Inner Angels: Faith, Mental Illness, and the Journey to Wholeness by Nancy Kehoe (Jossey-Bass, 2009). *Wrestling with Our Inner Angels* is Nancy Kehoe's compelling, intimate, and moving story of how she brought her background as a psychologist and a nun in the Religious of the Sacred Heart to bear in the groups she formed to explore the role of faith and spirituality in their treatment – and in their lives. Through fascinating stories of her own spiritual journey, she gives readers of all backgrounds and interests new insights into the inner lives of the mentally ill and new ways of thinking about the role of spirituality and faith in all our lives.

Troubled Minds: Responding to Mental Illness
God Can Redeem Mental Illness

Leader's Guide

Darkness Is My Only Companion by Kathryn Greene-McCreight (Brazos Press, 2006). *Darkness Is My Only Companion* takes a compassionate look at mental illness, offering theological understanding and personal insights from the author's personal experiences. It provides poignant glimpses into the mind of a mentally ill person and practical advice for friends, family, and clergy.

"The Way of Weakness" by Mike Erre, LEADERSHIP JOURNAL (January 21, 2014). The author describes what his struggle with anxiety and depression taught him about God's power.

Living with Illness, TodaysChristianWoman.com. Living with an illness can be one of the biggest challenges you'll ever face. Persevering in the midst of your struggle requires faith, patience, and strength. This resource offers encouraging articles and testimonies from women who have also endured a life-changing illness. See how an everlasting trust in God and the power of prayer can bring hope for a better tomorrow.

"Befriending the Darkness" by John E. Colwell, LEADERSHIP JOURNAL (January 21, 2013). How the psalms of lament shone God's hope into one man's manic depression.