

# Mental Health Awareness: You Are Not Alone!

Mental Health Awareness Sunday

Luke 8:26-39  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Our gospel reading from Luke 8 is referred to as the story of the Gerasene Demoniac. This is a man on the margins. He's isolated from his community, chained, and howling in torment. **If this story were unfolding in our cities today, we wouldn't say he is possessed by demons, rather he is "mentally ill."** This is a man we would cross the street to avoid. We'd say he needs medical attention or just to be ignored. But Jesus doesn't walk past this man. He walks *toward* him. Today's scripture invites us to do the same – for those around us, and for the parts of ourselves we'd rather hide.

Today, we focus on Mental Health Awareness, a topic too often whispered about instead of brought out into the light of day. We all carry wounds that are unseen. The world teaches us to conceal them, to keep them polite and private. But we are called to bring all of who we are – body, mind, and spirit – into the light of God's healing love. Therefore, we are invited to reflect upon our inclusion, empathy, and compassion for those who struggle.

Let's start by naming the pain not just the person. Jesus asks the man his name. He responds, "Legion" for many demons had entered him. This is a powerful moment. Jesus starts with a question, not a command, not a rebuke. **He sees the man, not just the problem.** "Legion" represents the overwhelming burden the man carries. He names his pain. **Too often, we don't allow people to name their pain. Yes, mental illness in its many forms is still stigmatized today. That's why so many still suffer in silence.**

In our churches and communities, people living with anxiety, depression, PTSD, bi-polar, even addiction, are often either unseen or even mistrusted. We must be a church that names these struggles with compassion, not shame or judgment. A community of faith where **saying "I'm not okay" is met with "We are with you, you are not alone."**

Back in our story, let's look at the setting. We're told this man had been living among the tombs. He was "kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles." **This is a man cast out, not just by demons but by society.** This man was tied up by people who didn't know what else to do. We still do this symbolically today. This is more than a personal problem, it's **a systemic response to pain. The community, the system, fears what it does not understand.** How often does our society respond to mental distress with policing, incarceration, or simply isolation, rather than compassionate care?

This is a justice issue. Jesus disrupts this. He frees the man not only from the demons but also from a society that had given up on him. As followers of Jesus, we are

called to challenge systems that chain people down, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. **Healing and liberation is justice.**

After the man is healed, we're told, "he was sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind." That's a picture of restoration. **He is restored to dignity.** But what happens next? Now that he is well we'd expect the community to celebrate. They do not. Instead, they are afraid and ask Jesus to leave. **Sometimes, people are more comfortable with the chaos they've learned to live with than with the disruption healing brings.** Restoring dignity threatens systems built on marginalization, on keeping people broken. Healing can be disruptive. Wholeness challenges norms and the status quo. This restored man is a living testimony to everything the community failed to do before.

**We must become communities that are not afraid of people's transformation,** communities of healing prepared to welcome people after the miracle in the **lifelong journey of recovery,** reintegration, and spiritual renewal. **And yes, that means sitting with our discomfort at times.**

Our story concludes with the man begging to follow Jesus. But Jesus sends him back to his community, saying, "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." Jesus doesn't ask the man to hide his past, he tells him to proclaim it. He commissions the man as a witness, a preacher, a truth-teller. People with lived experience of mental health issues should not be hidden, they should be heard, and yes, even here at church.

**This story, then, calls us to see those who suffer, challenge systems that shackle, walk with people in recovery, not just at their "healed" moments, and make mental health a regular part of our conversation. People, including ourselves, are not their diagnosis, nor defined by their suffering. People, including ourselves, are not alone or abandoned. People, including ourselves, are beloved children of God, bearing the image of God even in our suffering.** Let us be that kind of church, a community of faith of radical welcome, honest testimony, and unshakable compassion.

Let's now look at all this from a more personal level. A few years ago, **John Pavlovitz**, our Harold E. Hill Lecture Series speaker in 2018, posted an article that I then shared on my own Facebook page. It's entitled, **"If you Don't Have a Mental Illness, Here's What It's Like"**. Yes, it's something John struggles with, as well as myself when it comes to anxiety and depression. He goes into detail of **how things like depression and anxiety affects, at times, what we simply can and cannot do, especially as it applies to interactions with others.** He concludes:

We're not ignoring you or flighty or lazy or irresponsible, we just can't do what seems to be a simple thing to you (send an email, return a text, [make a phone call,] show up), because our heads have made it impossible. Our inconsistency is not a choice it is a symptom.

We may cancel unexpectedly.

We may not call at all.

We may seem like we don't care, but we do.

That's why this is as difficult as it is.

If you don't suffer from mental illness, it may be hard to understand those of us who do, and we get that.

Be patient.  
Keep inviting us.  
We're trying.

When living with a mental health concern **it's common to feel like no one understands what you're going through.** If this applies to you, as it often does to me, **know that you are not alone – help is out there, and recovery is possible.** I've learned throughout my years in ministry that being a little **vulnerable goes a long way in opening a door to allow others to realize they are not alone in their struggles. You are not alone in yours.** A good question for us, as a community of faith, is how we can develop an increasingly welcoming and hospitable culture around mental health issues, much as we have done in dealing with other societal issues like LGBTQ+ inclusion and the work of antiracism.

One of the many resources I have found is an article entitled, **"Twelve Things We Wish You Knew: From Individuals Living with Mental Illness to Pastors and Churches."** With much the same effect as John Pavlovitz' article, I'll mention eight.

1. Mental illness is a medical issue, a disease. Anyone can have a mental illness. It is not a sign of weakness or failure. Nor is it the fault of the parents or ill person.
2. Mental Illness is treatable. Early detection and treatment are essential to improving the chances for recovery. Mental illness is not cured; recovery is an ongoing process unique to each person, which allows the person to carry on in daily living and learn to cope with the illness in a way that makes possible a fulfilling life.
3. Mental Illness cannot be prayed away. That message must be understood and adopted by pastors and communicated in congregations. Bad information on this can alienate people with mental illness forever and cause irreparable harm to them and their loved ones.
4. Substance use disorder [that's the new term for substance abuse or even addiction] is a mental illness, not a moral failing.
5. Support for people with mental illness also involves the network of their loved ones, congregation, and doctors and counselors.
6. People living with mental illness vary in the level of confidentiality they desire.
7. Many people living with mental illness and their loved ones want to be able to talk about mental illness. While most church members will not openly express their problems, a significant number will approach the pastor and others in the church to share mental illness-related issues when trust has been earned.
8. Living with a mental illness can be incredibly isolating and lonely—for both the individual with the illness and their loved ones/caregivers.

It is important for all of us to recognize that **mental health issues do not discriminate.** The emotional pain and suffering that accompanies these disorders can touch anyone. In the inclusive view of a community of faith, like ours, **the church must provide a safe space of mutual trust and respect necessary for open and frank dialog.**

**Let us actively work to eliminate the stigma associated with mental health conditions.** Seeking professional help is not a sign of weakness, but a sign of strength. This is true, and common, for pastors, including myself. **Prayer is powerful. But so is therapy. So is medication. So is a support group.** These are tools God has placed in our path for healing.

Let us **educate ourselves** so that we can be a safe and supportive community. **Our goal is to be a community of faith where everyone is valued for who they are – a place where each person is welcome to participate, including individuals with mental health challenges.**

This is just a beginning of a much-needed conversation, and action. May our welcome and our hospitality be extended equally and fully to all persons. And to those of us who struggle, never forget that **you are not alone.**

Amen.

*Resources:*

*Comfort My People: A Policy Statement on Serious Mental Illness*, The Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP) report to the 218th General Assembly (2008) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Report and Resolution on *The Church and Serious Mental Illness* approved by the 200th General Assembly (1988).

John Pavlovitz, "If You Don't Have A Mental Illness, Here's What It's Like", *Stuff That Needs To Be Said*, April 23, 2021.

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