

# PLAIN TRUTH®

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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION®

## Mental Health Care: A Christian Response



Brad Jersak

**M**y dear friend is a good man and faithful Jesus-follower. Truly. Kind and uplifting—effusive in his encouragement—completely loveable. A generous human being and effective communicator of the good news.

My friend is also in recovery from a very serious mental health crisis. It has been terrifying for him and his wife, for his children and his friends. His situation required urgent medical intervention. Hospitalization. Rigorous testing. Medication.

One and the same man—a beautiful spirit tormented by a physiological meltdown that assaulted his mind and emotions. How is that possible? Aren't people of good faith who love the Lord supposed to enjoy abiding peace

and emotional stability? So we once thought.

*Not so long ago, mental illness was stigmatized in our society and either meticulously repressed or overtly condemned in the Christian culture of “sucking it up and holding together.”*

We didn't know what to do with conditions that couldn't be preached out of us or held in check with Bible-laced platitudes. In fact, in the 1970s, two of my friend's brothers suffered from serious mental illnesses of their own, and a common reaction from the community had been contempt for their parents, as if they were to blame... all the worse since the dad was also a pastor.

But you know what? We've come a very long way.

Granted, we're currently drowning in a pandemic of anxiety

disorders, chronic depression, and trauma-related disability. But at least we're able to talk about mental illness openly without feeling the need to shame or blame those who are suffering or assume that anyone who pursues therapy has lost their faith.

Now, in my friend's case, the underlying issue was that he spent years enduring chronic stress, unknowingly wearing out his adrenal system. And what do a pair of fried adrenal glands mean for mental and emotional health?

I did some research and learned that our adrenal glands make cortisol, which is our body's main stress hormone—our own built-in alarm system. I found out that when we're under stress or in danger, cortisol levels increase to activate our fight or flight responses. It regulates our body systems, our mood, our motivation and our fear. And when a crisis passes by, our cortisol levels calm down so our heart, blood pressure and other systems go back to normal.

But what if you're under constant stress long-term and the alarm system gets stuck in the “on” position?

So it was that my friend's body began to react involuntarily and without warning, flooding his system with cortisol and then, because it destroyed his sleep cycle, his body was unable to clear it from his system. The result was weight-gain, hyper-responsiveness and



feelings of panic centered in his chest—as if he were about to die of a heart attack.

My friend's descent was so severe that he said, *"Eventually, any sound, movement, or touch felt like daggers to my mind. It was agony."*

Can we consider how his trial had nothing to do with wavering in his faith or knowing God's love for him? Hearing that *"Christians shouldn't feel that way"* would not only have been a vacuous platitude, but probably be better identified with the "accuser of the brethren"!

### Holistic Support

But I have good news. That's not the type of response my friend experienced. He told me that the primary emphasis from all his caregivers (doctors, nurses, counselors and psychiatrist) was on self-compassion, kindness, and showing mercy to himself. His family, friends and house-church fellowship were all consistently supportive.

But most of all, in those hours and nights of deepest darkness, my friend testifies to God's goodness!

In that gloomy abyss, he saw that only the suffering God, the One who bears our sins, sorrows and infirmities, could help.

He said, *"Even before my body could receive it, my spirit knew (directly, existentially) the vicarious humanity of Jesus, fully present inside my weakness."*

The combination of appropriate medical help (including carefully regulated medications with no shame), empathetic support and spiritual care is, step-by-step, restoring his health.

That's right—I'm not averse to the wonders of science, rightly applied. So too, I'm not embarrassed to invoke the heavenly Father's care through prayer, especially when a friend in need asks for it. My friend shared how profoundly moved and helped he was by two specific prayers offered on his behalf.

First, our mutual friend Lise prayed and sent along this beautiful prayer:

*"Holy Trinity, I pray for my friend and the distress he is feeling right now in his body. Jesus, we know you felt our anxiety to the point of sweating blood. By your Incarnation, living life in your human body, you sanctified the feelings our friend feels right now and is experiencing in his body. Lord, I ask that you intercede for him to our Father and, together with the Holy Spirit, that an outpouring of your love and tender care would address what is happening in our friend's body and mind. Bring a special word of peace to calm the storm he feels right now. Help, Lord. Lord, have mercy, Christ have mercy. Amen."*

The second meaningful prayer encounter was with a "spiritual director" who read the following words to my friend—words my friend composed for himself a while ago but which he now needed someone to cite on his behalf. He's allowed me to share it as a message that some of our readers may need to hear for themselves:

### You Are My Beloved (Adapted from Henri Nouwen)

As you listen closely to God's loving voice with great inner attentiveness, you will begin to hear your heavenly Father say:

*"You are my beloved child, on you my favor rests. I have called you by name from the very beginning.*

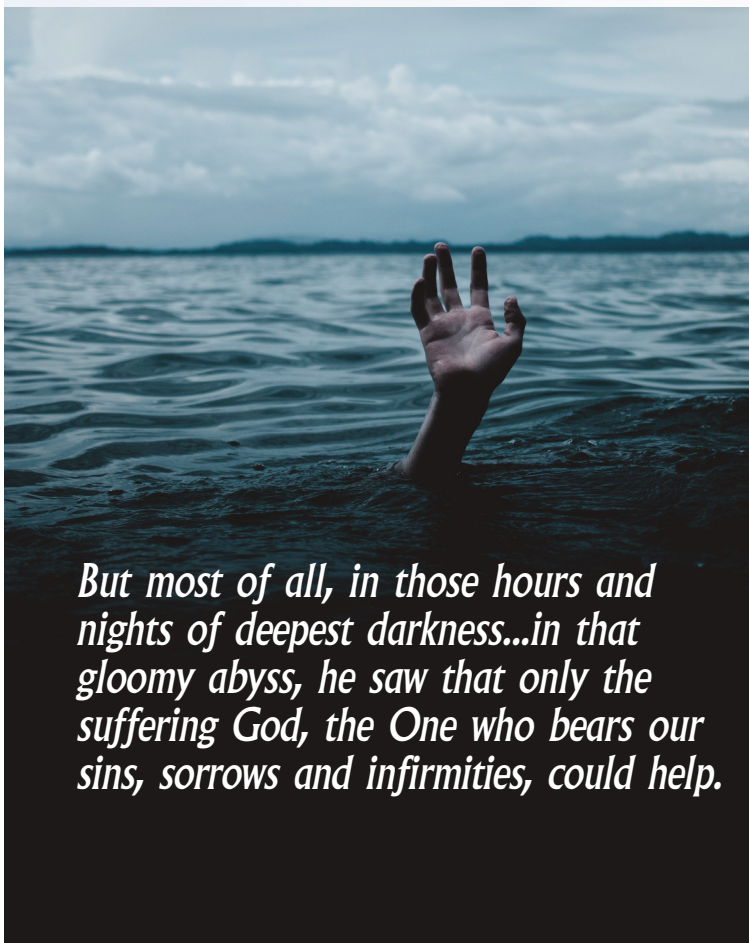
*You are mine and I am yours forever. I have molded you in the depths of the earth and knitted you together in your mother's womb. I have carved you in the palms of my hands and hidden you in the shadow of my embrace. I look at you with infinite tenderness and care for you, with a care more intimate than that of a mother for her child.*

*I have counted every hair on your head and journeyed with you at every step. Wherever you go, I go with you, and wherever you rest, I keep watch. I will give you food that will satisfy all your hunger and drink that will quench all your thirst. I will not hide my face from you.*

*You know me as your own as I know you as my own. You belong to me. I am your father, your mother, your closest friend, and the lover of your soul.*

*Nothing you have ever done or ever will do can make me love you more or cause me to love you less than I already do. Nothing can ever separate you from my love, for I have loved you with an everlasting love.*

*I long for you to make yourself intimately at home in my unfailing love and to experience my tender embrace as the place where you will receive all that you desire, all that you*



*But most of all, in those hours and nights of deepest darkness...in that gloomy abyss, he saw that only the suffering God, the One who bears our sins, sorrows and infirmities, could help.*



ever hoped for, all that you will ever need.

*It is the place beyond all earning, deserving, and rewarding. It is the place of surrender and complete trust. It is the place where you are held safe in the embrace of an all-loving Father who continually calls you by name and says,*

*‘You are my Beloved child, on you my favor rests.’”*

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While my friend’s story is unique to him, I hope you can infer three themes that apply to anyone suffering from mental or emotional illness:

1) We live as complex **embodied creatures** whose physiology sometimes needs medical care, and there is no shame in that.

2) We live as complex **social creatures** whose environments can be stressful, so pursuing uplifting activities and relationships is a beautiful necessity.

3) We live as complex **spiritual creatures** who are beloved children of a loving heavenly Father. While prayer may not feel like a miracle cure to what ails us, it can make us conscious that we have a divine Caregiver.

### Health Care Check-In

I’d like to leave readers with two helpful check-ins. The first list is eight caring *questions you can gently ask about someone else’s mental health* (or your own):

- 1) How are you feeling today (physically, mentally, emotionally)?
- 2) What’s taking up most of your headspace right now? Are there joys, sorrows, or worries you want to share?
- 3) When was your last full meal? Are you drinking enough water?
- 4) How have you been sleeping?
- 5) How are you getting your body moving?
- 6) What can you do today that would be life-giving for you?
- 7) What’s something you are looking forward to in the coming weeks?

8) Who are you connecting with these days that encourages you?

### Self-Care Check-In

How would you answer those questions? The second checklist is similar, but it suggests some avenues for active *self-care*:

- 1) *Affirmation*—speak an encouraging word to yourself and to someone else.
- 2) *Quiet time*—Enjoy a little undistracted me-time and/or God-time.
- 3) *Service*—Experience the joy of helping someone.
- 4) *Activity*—What exercise works best for you? How about a walk?
- 5) *Curiosity*—Invest in wonder, discovery, and learning.
- 6) *Creativity*—Activate a creative outlet.
- 7) *Nourishment*—What good things fill your soul (or your belly)? Savor it!
- 8) *Openness*—Let go of something and open your hands to God’s fresh gifts.

A prayer-thought from Psalm 103:1-5, speaking to our “inmost being”:

*Praise the Lord, O my soul,  
all my inmost being, praise his holy name.  
Praise the Lord, O my soul,  
and forget not all his benefits—  
who forgives all your sins  
and heals all your diseases,  
who redeems your life from the pit  
and crowns you with love and compassion,  
who satisfies your desires with good things  
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s. □*

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*I’m not embarrassed to invoke the heavenly Father’s care through prayer, especially when a friend in need asks for it.*

