

West View Methodist Church
Home Group and Bible Study Notes
‘ARE YOU OKAY?’
“The Suicide Deception” (Session 1)

The Biblical Foundation for this Session

“Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.”

(Psalm 42:11)

As Your Group Gathers: Getting The Discussion Started

As the leader of the Bible study group, welcome your group members and make them feel comfortable. Then share / read the following information with / to your group:

The World Health Organisation says that mental health can be defined as a state of well – being in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community. Mental health affects how we think and feel about ourselves and others, how we interpret events, how we learn, how we cope with life events and how we develop and sustain relationships.

Yet, there are a lot of misconceptions about mental health that continue to persist. So, here are some myths and facts:

Myth: Mental health problems are very rare.

Fact: 1 in 4 people will experience a mental health problem in any given year.

Myth: People with mental illness aren’t able to work.

Fact: We probably all work with someone experiencing a mental health problem.

Myth: Young people just go through ups and downs as part of puberty, it’s nothing.

Fact: 1 in 10 young people will experience a significant mental health problem.

Myth: People with mental health illnesses are usually violent and unpredictable.

Fact: People with a mental illness are more likely to be a victim of violence.

Myth: People with mental health problems don’t experience discrimination.

Fact: 9 out of 10 people with mental health problems experience stigma and discrimination.

Myth: It’s easy for young people to talk to friends about their feelings.

Fact: Nearly three in four young people fear the reactions of friends when they talk about their mental health problems.

As seen above, one in four people experience a mental health problem at some point in their lifetime and this is as true for those in the church as anyone else. Every single one of us participates in the daily activity of balancing life's stresses with the emotional resources available to us. We will usually do this unconsciously, in the same way that our bodies prompt us to replace energy lost through physical activity. We all have emotional health issues, just as we have physical health issues. Some people are largely able to take their wellbeing for granted; others will need to make particular efforts to stay well; still others may need to receive much more comprehensive care to live a full life.

Whilst society has become increasingly conscious of promoting investment in physical wellbeing through diet and exercise, far less has been done to encourage investment into emotional and mental wellbeing. Mental health concerns are not a minority issue, instead, they affect humanity in general. In fact, the World Health Organisation, which measures the global impact of diseases, says that only one other health concern – heart disease – has a bigger impact on global social and economic life.

As Christians, we are motivated to care not just for those who are currently suffering from mental illness, but to see unity in the body as a whole. Paul reflects this unity in 1 Corinthians 12:26 when he says:

'If one member suffers, all suffer together;

if one member is honoured, all rejoice together.'

Just like physical injuries and diseases, mental health problems can affect anyone. But having poor mental health does not mean that God cannot use us to extend and expand the reach of His love, grace and salvation. In fact, a number of biblical figures may today be described as mentally unwell. Such a list may include the writer of many Psalms, prophets like Ezekiel and Jeremiah, not forgetting Jonah and Elijah who both prayed for death because they didn't feel they could go on. Each one was used powerfully by God despite their mental health challenges!

As the leader of the Bible study group, ask and discuss the following questions together as a group:

- **When you think about depression, do any characters from TV, film or books come to mind? How would you describe them? How has media and social media shaped our understanding of mental illness and depression?**
- **What causes mental health problems? What do you think?**
- **What do you think people mean when they talk about the stigma of mental health?**

Opening Prayer (Pray the following prayer or one of your own):

"Lord Jesus, we thank You that our struggles with my mental health can't stop us from finding rest in You. The rest You offer sits right beside our grief and mental pain. It mingles with our sadness and fear. Your rest is available even when our body is triggered, our emotions are troubled, and our thoughts spiral out of control.

Lord, we want to experience the mystery of a soul at rest amid mental turmoil. May Your Holy Spirit lead and guide us, as we seek to engage with Scripture in such a way that makes us more caring, compassionate, and empathetic. We commit and commend ourselves and this Bible study to you, Lord. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen."

Worship Segment (Optional):

- “God’s Got Us” by Maverick City Music and Kirk Franklin:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kb-XrghkCis&list=PLWa9L1N49NVHIGj9XNUY2CVAoR5tkkh6z&index=19>
- “Keep Praying” by Maverick City:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fGaAIDKhGmw&list=RDfGaAIDKhGmw&start_radio=1

Discussion Questions: Exploring God’s Care for Elijah During his Depression & Discouragement

As the leader of the group, share the following information with the Bible study group. Then invite a Bible study participant to read **1 Kings 19:1–15** to the group, before discussing the questions that follow:

1 Kings 19:1 – 15 (NIV)

^{19:1} Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. ² So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, “May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them.”

³ Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, ⁴ while he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. “I have had enough, Lord,” he said. “Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.” ⁵ Then he lay down under the bush and fell asleep.

All at once an angel touched him and said, “Get up and eat.” ⁶ He looked around, and there by his head was some bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again.

⁷ The angel of the Lord came back a second time and touched him and said, “Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you.” ⁸ So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he travelled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. ⁹ There he went into a cave and spent the night.

And the word of the Lord came to him: “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

¹⁰ He replied, “I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.”

¹¹ The Lord said, “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.”

Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. ¹² After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. ¹³ When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

Then a voice said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

¹⁴ He replied, “I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.”

¹⁵ *The Lord said to him, “Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram.*

The Prophet Elijah had a spiritual CV and resumé unlike most figures within the Old Testament. For example, Elijah is fed by ravens in the wilderness (1 Kings 17:2 – 16), he resurrects a dead widow’s son back to life (1 Kings 17:17 – 24), and Elijah is able to outrun a chariot that is led by horses (1 Kings 18:46). Besides Enoch, Elijah is the only other Old Testament character to never taste and experience physical death; as he was taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire (2 Kings 2:11 – 12). However, despite all of Elijah’s accolades, we find him in a peculiar spot in 1 Kings 19. We see him in a situation that is really unlike any situation he’s ever been in, because he’s in a place of such depression that he really wants his life to be taken from him. Elijah has just had one of the most intense periods of his life in 1 Kings 18:25 – 39: He has stood up against the 850 prophets of Baal and called down fire from heaven, in order to prove to Israel that Yahweh is the one true God. Upon receiving a death – threat from queen Jezebel, fleeing for about 160 kilometres and finally finding himself alone in the wilderness. How does God treat this exhausted and depressed man? He supports Elijah very practically by giving him food and allowing him to rest. Once Elijah is starting to feel better, God takes him to a very special place, namely Mount Horeb. This is the same place as Mount Sinai, where God met Moses, giving him the Ten Commandments and confirming His covenant with the people of Israel. Standing in that place, Elijah would no doubt have been reminded of God’s promises and His past faithfulness. But unlike God’s appearance to Moses, which was marked by wind, fire and earthquakes, this time God comes in a gentle wind. Finally, once fully recovered and renewed, God gives Elijah an important new task, showing he can still be used by God. In Elijah’s case, as is so often the case in our own lives, he experiences his greatest achievement in ministry only to be followed by his greatest discouragement and season of depression.

Depression can affect anybody, including Christians. In fact, every year one in five church ministers will suffer from depression. Medical skill, an active faith and a supportive community can make a real difference. The word “depressed” is a common everyday word. People might say “I’m depressed” when in fact they mean “I’m fed up because I’ve had an argument, or failed an exam, or lost my job”, etc. These ups and downs of life are common and normal. Most people recover quite quickly. True depression means having a low mood and other symptoms each day for at least two weeks. Symptoms can become severe enough to interfere with normal day-to-day activities. There will be low mood, loss of enjoyment and low energy. It’s difficult to think positively about the future. It can affect sleep as well as weight and appetite. Depression isn’t just ‘feeling a bit low’. It can be triggered by a one-off event or by long-term unhelpful thought patterns. It could have its roots in a physical illness. Occasionally, depression may have a spiritual cause, such as struggling to accept forgiveness. Many people may never know what caused it. If two people have depression, it’s unlikely the cause is the same. Depression doesn’t go away by just ‘pulling yourself together’, but requires a combination of approaches. Talking treatments can help change negative thought patterns. Antidepressants can help balance the chemicals in the brain which allow us to feel good. Christian community can help with isolation and loneliness.

Depression can cause negative thoughts, including feeling guilty, helpless or hopeless. God offers alternatives: forgiveness, love and hope. But remember, depression can make it hard to believe this. If others blame past sin or a weak faith for the depression, this can make things much worse and lead to a negative spiral. It’s important to understand that if someone isn’t cured from depression, it’s never the fault of the individual for not having ‘enough faith’. God uses many different ways to heal, including miracles, counselling and antidepressants. There are many factors which influence our mental health and wellbeing – from genetic and biological to social and cultural, economic and political, and even

spiritual. Historically, all kinds of health problems were thought to be the result of demonic powers and influences. This led to many negative repercussions, especially against people with disabilities and those with chronic conditions. In physical health, that assumption has been overcome: We now believe that medical science reveals causes and remedies for physical health issues. But the idea has lingered in the area of mental health – some still assume the causes of mental illness are spiritual and treat medical science with scepticism. An example that is often cited is the Gadarene man who meets with Jesus (see Matthew 8:28-34) and is made well by having a legion of demons cast out of him. His symptoms include nakedness, cutting himself with stones, living in the tombs and violence; he is a dangerous man, strong enough to break chains. This description fits a popular but completely incorrect stereotype of schizophrenic illness. As a result, some people have made the false assumption that negative emotional symptoms are simply the result of demonic activity. This belief can be extremely distressing for Christians who are suffering from mental health issues: A problem with their brain chemistry suddenly becomes equivalent to a problem with their faith and spirituality. Whatever our conviction in terms of the origins of mental health, we can agree that Jesus afforded dignity and humanity to every person he encountered. The question we are called to wrestle and grapple with is: How can we make sure we do the same?

- 1. Elijah was clearly a man with a deep and committed sense of faith in God. Yet, he struggles with suicidal tendencies during his most difficult moments. Why do you think it's important that we assure people that depression is not a sign of weakness or a reflection of sin / a lack of faith in their lives? What are some harmful stereotypes and beliefs that society and religion still has about suicide? As a Christian community, how can we break the stigma and stereotypes around mental illness, depression and suicide?**
- 2. Elijah's greatest season of discouragement and depression happens right after his greatest achievement in ministry. His story reminds us that life is full of ups and downs, and peaks and valleys. Jesus himself reminds us in John 16:33 that "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." Do you think that the unrealistic perception and belief that everything in life will always turn out pleasantly and positively can have a negative impact on our mental health? Why or why not?**
- 3. In 1 Kings 19:2 – 3, we see that fear causes anxiety. Out of fear that Jezebel would kill him, Elijah flees into the wilderness. However, a few verses later in 1 Kings 19:5, he asks God to kill him. Elijah's anxiety, which is fuelled by fear, means that he is unable to think logically and clearly about his situation and circumstances. As Christians, how can we minimize the role that fear plays in our decision – making and in how we view our circumstances? Do you think that we expend far too much mental energy worrying and obsessing over things that will never actually happen? Why or why not? How do we shift our mental energy from fearing an uncertain future to acknowledging the blessing and providence of God in the current moment?**
- 4. Depression and anxiety is often closely linked. Depression is when our world closes in on us, and we feel overwhelmed by a sense of darkness and gloom. However, anxiety is when our soul is stretched thin and we feel as if we have no control over the outcome of our lives. Elijah doesn't fear death, instead he fears having no control over the outcome of his life. Elijah is unable to discern between what he can control and what he can't control in his life. One of the best ways to minimize depression and anxiety in our lives, is to differentiate between the things we have power over and the things we don't. What freedom might we find in refusing to hold onto things, decisions, people and concerns that we have absolutely no power or control over? What causes us to hold onto the things we have no control over,**

whilst overlooking the things we can control? How do we practically identify the things we can and can't control in our lives?

5. In 1 Kings 19:3 – 4, Elijah leaves his servant in Beersheba and goes into the wilderness all alone. Depression has a tendency to detach us from people. Yet, the last place Elijah should be by himself and all alone is in the wilderness, because none of us should be fighting our battles in isolation. God has gifted us with community and connectivity to support us, assist us and strengthen us. In which ways are the Christian community meant to be a gift to us? And in which ways are we meant to be a gift to our Christian community? What do you think a healthy and wholesome sense of community looks like within the church?
6. We know that we currently live in an era wherein we've never been as connected as we've ever been before due to technology. However, despite our technological connectedness, depression and suicide rates have increased exponentially due to isolation and loneliness. As a society, do you think that we've lost the ability to create authentic and genuine connections that are social and personal in nature? Why or why not? How might the constant temptation to compare our lives to people on social media or in the media negatively affect our mental health? Why is isolation, whilst participating in a false sense of connectivity through technology, a breeding ground for mental illness and issues?
7. Depression also has a tendency to plant seeds of lies into our minds when we're isolated and lonely. We begin to believe that no one cares for us or is concerned about us, we think that no one would be sad if we decided to commit suicide, or we assume that we add no value to our family or community. However, we can never be healed of the struggles that we continue to hide. Why do you think that some people find it hard to speak up and speak out about their struggles with mental illness, especially within Christian communities? How might we create spaces, as Christians, where people can feel more comfortable and at ease to share their struggles with us?
8. On two separate occasions, in 1 Kings 19:5 and 1 Kings 19:7, the angel of the Lord tells Elijah to get up, eat something and take some rest. We often use 1 Corinthians 6:19 ("Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?") in the context of sexual sin or addiction. However, it can also refer to taking good care of our bodies throughout our habits, such as watching our diets, getting regular and consistent sleep, exercising, etc. Why is the need for good stewardship of and care for our bodies often relegated to an afterthought within Christian circles? Do you think that there's a strong correlation between our physical well – being and our mental well – being? Why or why not? How can an over obsession with our bodies and their aesthetics cause mental health issues?
9. The angel of the Lord twice says to Elijah "Get up...", almost as if to remind Elijah that he can't stay where he is. Mental illness, and depression in particular, can easily deceive us into thinking that we should not get up (This sometimes looks like not getting out of bed in the morning) and not to pursue purpose and intentionality in our lives. Elijah needs to be reminded that he still has something bigger than himself to live for. What do you think "getting up" might look like for someone who feels deflated and exhausted by their mental health? How might we be able to assist people who suffer with depression to get up? How does God and belief in Christ provide a purpose that helps people to "get up" each and everyday of their lives?
10. In 1 Kings 19:11 – 13, God shows Elijah that God isn't in the fire, nor the violent wind, but rather in the soft and gentle whisper that passes by Elijah in the cave. One can really only hear a whisper when we are in close proximity to that person. This was God's way of

reminding Elijah that even in his depressive state and season, that God was far closer to him than he could imagine. This moment between God and Elijah would become the launching pad for the next season in Elijah's life, as his mission continues despite his depression. What prevents people with depression and mental health issues from sensing and knowing that God is with them? How might we be able to assure people with depression that God is far closer to them than they assume? We all need a mission in life, how might it be helpful to remind someone with depression that their mission isn't over, despite their struggles?

11. People with mental health issues often don't feel like they fit in. As individuals and as a church family, how could we respond? Are there any principles we can learn from God's approach to Elijah?
12. Are there any other aspects and parts of 1 Kings 19:1 – 15 that you think speaks powerfully into the reality of God's care for those who struggle with mental illness? Are there any other aspects and parts of 1 Kings 19:1 – 15 that you think speaks into the struggles of those with mental illness? What are those parts that stand out to you and why?

Group Challenge (Optional)

As the leader of the group, share the following: Looking at Elijah's story, we see how God responds to a desperate man. He takes the initiative to give practical support – food, drink and rest. Then He gently reminds Elijah of His past faithfulness. Finally, He restores him by giving him a new task.

- ***How can we put this into practice?***
- ***Are there people in your church who need practical help?***
- ***What can you do to support them practically?***
- ***How might we support them spiritually?***

Encourage the group to come up with practical, specific ideas.

Meditation (Optional)

As an individual, you can use the following questions to reflect on your journey and where God might be leading you next:

- Think of a time when you felt exhausted, isolated, maybe unable to see a way forward.
- What was going on?
- How did you feel?
- How did you get through it?
- Did someone reach out to you?
- Now think of someone who may be feeling alone, worn out, at their wits' end, or maybe struggling with depression. - How could you reach out to them?

Close the session by praying this prayer (Or one of your own):

"O God, whose love restores the broken-hearted of this world: pour out Your love, we seek of you, upon those who feel lonely, abandoned, or unloved. Strengthen their hope to meet the days ahead; give them the courage to form life-giving friendships; and bless them with the joy of Your eternal peace. Amen."