

Revealing the Spiritual Wisdom of People with Mental Illnesses

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Photo by Rev. Laura L. Mancuso

There are many different lenses through which we can view the experience of mental illness. Today, I would like to speak about it from a spiritual perspective.

For some people reading these words, mental health challenges strike close to your heart. It may be something that you, or a loved one, struggle with on a daily basis. Others may encounter mental illness in the distressing behavior of a neighbor, co-worker, or friend. But everyone is touched by mental health issues in some way.

What do you suppose are the chances that any one of us will experience mental illness in a given year? The National Institute of Mental Health has conducted complex studies of the epidemiology of

mental illness. They have calculated that 1 in 4 American adults (26%) will have a diagnosable mental disorder each year— 58 million people. Nearly 1 in 2 people will have a psychiatric disorder over the course of their lifetimes.

I am speaking primarily about depression, anxiety disorders, schizophrenia, and mania (which, when it alternates with depression, is called "bipolar disorder"). While some among us will be fortunate enough to come out ahead in this statistical roulette—living and dying without ever developing a diagnosable mental health condition—none of us who is engaged with life will be able to completely avoid losses which lead to feeling, at least temporarily, grief, disorientation and/or fear.

The good news is that while such suffering cannot be avoided, it is not a cosmic mistake. It is not without meaning, and you are most definitely not alone!

- When a physician is diagnosing **depression**, the symptoms that he or she looks for are things like: being slowed down; feeling overwhelming sadness, hopelessness, or pessimism; an inability to experience pleasure; difficulty concentrating; sleep disturbance; weight gain or weight loss. This is the medical view of depression. But the main spiritual crisis inherent in depression is DESPAIR.
- The medical symptoms of **anxiety disorders** include: excessive worry; an inability to fall asleep or stay asleep; irritability; lack of concentration; trembling; shortness of breath, etc. But the main spiritual crisis inherent in anxiety disorders is FEAR and a LACK OF TRUST.
- The medical symptoms of **schizophrenia** include: delusions; hallucinations; disordered thinking; social withdrawal; blunted emotions. But the primary spiritual crisis in the experience of schizophrenia is ALIENATION.
- The medical description of **mania** includes things like: racing thoughts; rapid talking; decreased need for sleep; extreme irritability, euphoric feelings, or distraction; poor judgment. But

when we consider mania from a spiritual perspective, the main difficulty is a relentless RESTLESSNESS.

I am not saying that mental illnesses are only spiritual in nature. Nor I am saying that they should be treated solely by spiritual practices and spiritual support. What I am saying is that mental distress has a spiritual dimension, like all serious health conditions. Mental health and mental illness are inextricably linked with the spiritual journey.

The spiritual crises I mention as being associated with various mental health issues are not things that any of us would voluntarily sign up for. People can literally get lost in the despair, fear, lack of trust, alienation, and restlessness that characterize mental illnesses. They can even lose their lives.

Yet suffering is an inevitable part of life. We all experience suffering in one form or another. We may enjoy our lives during the good times when everything is going smoothly. But, truth be told, the easy times usually do not result in the most spiritual growth. It is typically the most difficult phases of our lives that produce the most spiritual depth.

As May Sarton says, "Pain is the great teacher...joy [and] happiness, are what we take and do not question...but pain forces us to think, and to make connections, to sort out what is what, to discover what has been happening to cause it."

Fortunately, the spiritual problems of despair, fear, lack of trust, alienation, and restlessness can be addressed directly—both by one's own spiritual practices, and through spiritual support provided by a loving community such as a family or congregation. Spiritual practices that an individual can engage in directly include: tai chi; yoga; other forms of body movement; mindfulness; meditation; prayer; reading sacred or inspiring texts; journal-writing; singing; dancing; artistic expression; making crafts; attending worship services; participating in 12-step groups; taking part in rituals; and consulting with clergy or indigenous healers. Such activities can build resiliency, restore hope, nurture a sense of balance and centeredness, and help us get us through especially difficult times.

All who commit themselves to a spiritual path are bound to experience mental distress. Some religious traditions—such as Hinduism and Buddhism—say that this spiritual journey is our true life's purpose, and that we will need to return to this realm over and over again, with all of its suffering, until we complete it. Earnest spiritual paths will likely involve venturing into spiritual wildernesses, where there may be few signposts and very little that is familiar to comfort us.

People with mental illness are experienced travelers in this sort of terrain. Just as you might purchase a tour book before venturing to a new continent, you may want to get some tips and pointers from people with mental illness—people who have already journeyed somewhere that you have not yet been.

If we can learn to respect and value the spiritual wisdom of people diagnosed with mental health conditions, we will be respecting their very essence. Then perhaps all of us, as a society, will become more capable of loving this part of ourselves: the part that gets disoriented, that is prone to despair, that loses sight of hope, that falls prey to fear, that cannot feel love, that is constantly in motion, and that keeps us from experiencing that beautiful inner stillness where we rest peacefully in the arms of the Divine Presence.

I came to the mental health field—and even to the intersection of mental health and spirituality—wanting to help, intending to be of service. What I have come to realize is that many people in recovery from mental illness possess a deep spiritual wisdom from which I can learn a great deal.

In the first part of this article, I described the prevalence of mental health diagnoses and explored the spiritual crises associated with various mental health issues. This second portion of the article suggests ways that individuals and congregations can spiritually accompany those who are experiencing the symptoms of a mental disorder.

At a minimum, we can agree to "do no harm", in the spiritual sense. That means, first of all, not blaming the person or his/her family for the mental health issue, and not judging them for having it.

The following concrete actions can provide spiritual support to someone in mental distress.

1. ***Be an unflinching guardian of hope.*** It may be literally impossible for the person to feel optimistic about their future. Reassure them that they will not always feel as badly as they do when they are in the depths of their suffering. Protect this hope and gently remind them of it, even when they cannot believe you.
2. ***Be a trustworthy friend.*** When a person's world is in chaos and the ground around them seems unstable, your reliable presence can be safe harbor in a storm. Be very clear about what you can and cannot do; it's OK to take care of yourself first. So promise no more than you can deliver. But always do exactly what you say you will do.

And you may need to DO less than you think. Sometimes the most significant way to support another person is simply to show up fully in the midst of his or her suffering, without panicking or looking away.

Thich Nhat Hanh wrote, in his book, *Love in Action*:

*"Without doing anything,
things can sometimes go more smoothly
just because of our peaceful presence.
In a small boat when a storm comes,
if one person remains solid and calm,
others will not panic
and the boat is more likely to stay afloat."*

3. ***Insist that the person you know and love is still alive and present, if hidden.*** Just as you would help a friend living with cancer to see that their whole self is not defined by their diagnosis, so you can help a person with mental illness by reminding them that you still see the healthy and whole person within, even if they feel shattered.

A Quaker woman named Mariellen Gilpin has written a booklet, *God's Healing Grace: Reflections on a Journey With Mental &*

Spiritual Illness. She acknowledges with gratitude that many in her Quaker meeting simply treat her "as if the essential Mariellen is still in here somewhere." Tell your friend that you know he or she is still whole, and that you are confident of his or her ability to recover with time.

4. **Reference the other person's alternate reality without labeling it as "wrong" or "abnormal"**. When someone you care about is experiencing the alienation and self-doubt associated with alternate realities, you can be spiritually supportive by not judging them. This may be the only reality they have at the moment. So if you denigrate it, you are denigrating their entire world and their very self. Don't pretend to agree with it; if you cannot affirm it, you can at least remain neutral.

Jimi Kelley works for the National Alliance on Mental Illness in Tennessee. He shared a story about accompanying a woman who perceived that messages were being broadcast into her brain, which was distressing to her. She didn't want to go to a clinic and have them invalidate her experience. Jimi talked to her about the possibility that she was hearing things that the people at the clinic are not able to hear, and that taking medications might simply reduce her ability to receive the messages. I.e., if she took medications, she might no longer be bothered by the messages...even if they are still being broadcast. Rather than contradicting her experience, his gentle, affirming approach was helpful in enabling her to go for treatment.

5. **Be open to the possibility that mental health crises can co-occur with authentic spiritual awakenings**. Sometimes we need to be broken down in order to let go of the old and provide space for something new to take root. Christina and Stanislav Grof coined the term "spiritual emergency" to describe an abrupt spiritual transformation that overwhelms one's ability to cope.

These authentic spiritual awakenings can occur at the same time as a mental health crisis. Most importantly, don't assume that the spiritual dimension of the crisis is fabricated or inauthentic just because the individual has been labeled with a psychiatric diagnosis; the two experiences can co-occur, and there are ways

to support people to move through these experiences without getting stuck in them.

Keep the person safe, meet their basic needs for food, water, sleep, etc., and let them specify what is helpful in the moment. Some people need to be in constant motion, others need stillness. Some feel most safe indoors, while others want to be outside, in nature, and feel sun on their skin. A person may prefer being alone, or may need to be held. It is a very individualized process.

6. ***Finally, consider what you may be able to learn from people with mental illness.*** Spiritual growth requires us to go directly to where our most tender wounds are and open them up again, so that they can be healed at an ever deeper level.

When you delve really deeply into spiritual exploration, there's some pretty scary stuff in there! For example, when you consider the writings of the Christian mystics, for instance, their lives were not easy! There is THE VOID – there is UNBLINKING SELF-AWARENESS – there are DISORIENTING EXPERIENCES.

One of the necessary steps in devotion to a spiritual path is relinquishing control. Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest, writes about this process. She says that when bad things happen to us, we tend to exclaim, "I've lost control of my life!" But what we actually "lose is the illusion that we were ever in control of our lives in the first place.....this is why it takes a lot of courage to be a human being.

I have learned palpably the difference between "helping" and "walking alongside."

"Spiritual companionship" leaves open the possibility that today you may be the one in need...but next week, it may be me... and back again, over and over. This is the stuff of which real respect is made. It's not the distanced respect of "I'm in awe of how much you've suffered," but rather, "You have journeyed to places that I want to know more about."

Instead of pitying people with psychiatric diagnoses or stigmatizing their conditions, I believe we should consider learning from them as spiritual teachers.

Author's Note

This article is adapted from a sermon that I offered on February 7, 2010 at Live Oak Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Goleta, California.

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