

# Messiah and mental health

**David Bruce Rose**

I sat with my pen poised over the paper, ready to record every drop of wisdom which was about to flow from the mouth of my professor. I was so excited to be sitting in the classroom of one of the greatest Christian thinkers alive. But instead of speaking, he began to weep. At first, his mouth quivered. Then large tears began to roll off his cheeks, dripping onto his notes. Soon he was wracked with sobs, unable to speak.

I froze. I could not think of any way to help. One or two other students said things like, “It’s OK,” but he did not respond. I think he knew, as we all did, that it was not OK. Here was a man of deep faith, a mighty servant of God, overwhelmed by sadness. We came to him for wisdom, and he could only cry.

As the sobs subsided, he caught his breath and began to explain that he suffered from what he termed “neurotic crying”. By this he meant that, with no warning, he would suddenly begin to cry. He said he was in psychotherapy to address this problem, but, as we all saw, it still remained.

Then he asked a question that silenced the room. He said, “Because someone trusts Jesus, does that mean that they will not

have emotional problems?” He answered his own question, saying, “No. Just as believers are not immune to financial, relational or physical problems, they are not immune to emotional problems. Jesus does not keep us from the same problems that everyone else in the world faces. What He does do is help us cope with those problems when they come.”

That morning in my seminary training, I heard wisdom on a subject I had not expected. Now, some 22 years later, I am an ordained minister, a psychologist and part of the staff of a seminary. In those roles, I work with individuals and families who struggle with a wide range of emotional problems. Many of these people find that their relationship with Jesus provides them with a way to solve those problems. Others find that their problems continue but that Jesus walks with them in the midst of their pain.

Many believers think that emotional or psychological problems indicate a lack of faith. As I learned that morning in seminary, this is not the case. On the one hand, it is clear that faith in Jesus improves the emotional element of our life, just as it does all the other elements of our life. On the other hand, I have worked with many people who have amazingly deep and strong faith and still suffer from severe emotional disorders. Sadly, some of these people tell me of well-meaning Christian friends who have increased their pain by misunderstanding this. They reported that their friends sometimes made statements such as, “If you would only trust Jesus, your depression would lift” or “Your

hallucinations are indications of demon possession. You do not need medication. You need to renounce the devil.” It is hard for believers to know how to respond when emotional problems occur, but implying that the problems are only due to a lack of faith can actually increase those problems.

## The biblical description of humanity

To understand emotional problems, we need to understand people. Throughout Scripture, we find humans described as a unity. In the creation story in **Genesis 2** we see that God made Adam from the dust (physical elements) and filled him with God’s own breath or spirit of life (spiritual elements). Adam thinks (for example, when he names the animals) and feels (for example, joy when he sees the woman). It is also clear that he was made for relationship with other people and, most important, for relationship with God. Adam is then described as a whole person who includes an interconnected mind, body and spirit.

The interconnectedness of this unity implies that, just as physical problems such as chronic pain can (but do not have to) block spiritual growth, psychological problems such as depression can (but do not have to) block spiritual growth. It also implies that spiritual growth can help physical and emotional growth. The story of Elijah in **1 Kings 19** is an excellent illustration of this.

## Elijah’s depression

1 Kings 19 begins with Elijah emotionally

drained. After the excitement of his victory at Mount Carmel, he experienced a normal emotional letdown. In addition, he was physically exhausted after running alongside the king's chariot on the return to Jezreel. To top it off, instead of being praised as a spiritual hero, he returned to the news that the queen had ordered his death!

Scripture describes Elijah as showing symptoms of the psychological disorder called "major depression". He was fearful and sad, and withdrew from interaction with other people. He saw no hope and wanted to die. His thinking was confused. His belief that he was the only one who still followed God was inaccurate and may have reflected a thought disorder. His depression also affected his faith, as can be seen by his lack of trust in God to protect him.

Elijah knew that God was his only hope and, therefore, he went to the desert to seek God. And, even though Elijah was discouraged, depressed and weak in faith, God responded with grace and love.

It is important to notice that God's response provided for Elijah's whole person. God cared for Elijah physically, emotionally, cognitively, relationally and spiritually. God did not immediately speak to Elijah. He knew what Elijah needed and so, before he provided for Elijah spiritually and emotionally, God provided for Elijah physically. He sent an angel to feed Elijah and to help him sleep. Then God sent Elijah on a walk to Mt. Horeb. It was not until Elijah arrived at Horeb rested, nourished and physically strengthened that God spoke

to him.

When God finally spoke to Elijah, He directly confronted Elijah's behaviours and thoughts which had contributed to his depression. He confronted Elijah's isolation by ordering him to join with other faithful believers (Elisha, and Jehu), and He confronted Elijah's inaccurate belief that he was the only one who still served the Lord, stating, "Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel – all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal." Then, by His presence, God restored Elijah's faith.

### **When should a believer see a counsellor?**

Counselling or psychotherapy is consistent with the biblical description of humanity when it is seen as part of a process of growth which deals with the whole person – physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual. But how does a believer know when it would be good to see a counsellor? In my experience, there are two situations in which counselling is likely to be helpful. The first is when there is significant emotional pain, either in yourself or in those who are close to you. When your own actions are not improving the situation quickly enough, it may be very helpful to consult with a mental health professional to see if counselling might help. The second situation in which counselling can help is when personal growth seems to be stalled or is not occurring as quickly as you wish. One need not always be growing, but when you have set a personal goal and are having difficulty reaching it, counselling can help. Psychotherapists are usually required to

undergo therapy themselves as part of their training, and many other people have found that counselling has helped them identify the steps they needed to take to become the person God has called them to be. In my own experience, counselling helped me to recognize how much of what I thought was God's call in my life was actually my own emotional needs. That discovery freed me to hear what God actually wanted from me.

### How can I choose a counsellor?

Once it is decided that counselling might be helpful, how do you choose a counsellor? Some readers of this article may have had experiences where counselling was harmful or know stories of counsellors who were unethical or incompetent. Counselling requires that you feel safe to talk about important and private parts of yourself. While there is no procedure that guarantees to identify the perfect counsellor there are things that can be done to increase the chances of finding a counsellor who will be helpful.

*Licensing.* It is important that a counsellor meet minimal standards. When faced with serious problems, counsellors who are not properly trained can cause damage even though they try to be helpful. Standards vary in different provinces. Many do not license counsellors but, where they do, the first standard that should be examined is licensing. This assures that the counsellor has met the government's requirements for education and experience, and that the counsellor has not been found to have violated ethical standards sufficiently to have his or her licence revoked.

*Membership in a professional association.*

As you choose a counsellor, especially in a province that does not license counsellors, it is important to ask about membership in professional organizations. Professional organizations such as the Canadian Psychological Association, American Counseling Association, American Association of Marriage and Family Therapists or Christian Association for Psychological Studies not only have requirements for education and training but generally have higher ethical standards than licensing boards. While membership in these organizations does not completely ensure that the counsellor is qualified and ethical, it at least indicates that the counsellor is willing to be held accountable by others in the profession and has not been found to violate the ethical standards of that organization.

*Training and experience.* The third minimal standard for a counsellor is training and experience. It is always appropriate to ask any counsellor what experience and training he or she has had in dealing with the issues you wish to discuss. Counsellors are ethically required not to work outside the areas in which they have been trained. An ethical counsellor will be quite comfortable answering any questions regarding training and experience.

*Reputation.* No one counsellor can help every client. It is important to find a good match for you. A good first step is to inquire as to the counsellor's reputation. Ask other helping professionals which counsellors they would recommend to help

you. Your pastor and physician have had experience working with a number of counsellors. They should be able to suggest several who are likely to be a good match for you. It is also appropriate to ask friends or other counsellors. One client called me and said he was calling several counsellors in the area to ask for recommendations of other counsellors who could help with his problem. He said he was going to call the counsellor who got the most recommendations.

*Relationship.* Finally, it is important to remember that, as in any significant relationship, there is a “chemistry” that is necessary for an effective relationship between a counsellor and client. Once counselling has begun, if it does not feel like it is working, or if you are uncomfortable, it is important that you talk to the counsellor about your concerns; if they are not addressed adequately, it is always appropriate to ask the counsellor to recommend other counsellors who might be able to help you more effectively.

### **Should the counsellor be a believer?**

Should a believer only see a Christian counsellor? The answer to this question is: It all depends. It depends on what you need. The first thing you need is that the counsellor be competent. No one would go to a physician who, though he was Christian, had failed to pass medical school, yet a significant number of individuals present themselves as Christian counsellors and fail to meet the minimal standards of education, licensing and accountability to a professional organization described above.

Whether your counsellor should be a believer also depends on the issues you will be addressing. A well-trained counsellor can help you address a wide range of psychological issues, but when these issues interact with spiritual issues, the counsellor either needs to be willing to refer you to a pastor or should be trained in pastoral care/spiritual direction as well as psychotherapy. Not every counsellor who is a believer has this training. As part of the process of seeking a counsellor, it is important to ask: If it becomes important, would the counsellor be willing to consult with your pastor regarding your spiritual needs. Some counsellors are uncomfortable working with a pastor as part of a helping team. While there are times it is appropriate not to include your pastor in the counselling process, to completely rule this out may prevent you from receiving the fullest range of help possible.

Many believers prefer to see a counsellor who is a believer because they are afraid that a non-believing counsellor will interpret their faith in Jesus as harmful and attempt to convince them to reject Jesus. It must be clearly stated that professionally it is considered unethical for a counsellor to attempt to change the faith of a client. A counsellor works for the client and as such has been hired to help the client deal with particular problems. While it is appropriate to talk about your faith during counselling, it is inappropriate for a counsellor to exert pressure on you to change your faith. Clients in a counselling context who feel that their counsellor is encouraging them to change their faith should discuss it with

their counsellor. If the situation does not immediately improve, they should seek another counsellor and consider filing a complaint with the appropriate ethics committee.

## Help for emotional problems

So what can be done to help with emotional or relational problems such as depression, anxiety attacks, eating disorders or a marriage crisis? There are a number of practical steps which can be taken:

- Certainly one must pray. Jesus is Lord and the source of all healing.
- Scripture has much to say regarding many issues.
- Support and encouragement from friends is always helpful.
- Advice from your pastor, elders or other mature believers can also help.
- There are good books which offer solid information.
- And, as described above, I believe that God can use counselling to bring healing and growth.

When it is needed, it is poor stewardship to not use all that God has provided to reach His goals. There is a story of a man who fell out of a boat into a lake. A man of faith, he prayed for God to save him. After a while, a powerboat came by and attempted to rescue him. "No, thank you. I know my

God will save me,” he replied. A little later, a sailboat attempted to rescue him, and he again refused, firmly testifying that he would trust his God to answer his prayer. Then, as his strength was fading, a helicopter flew over. Again the man refused aid, saying, “I have prayed. God will provide.” The man drowned. As he stood before God, he angrily complained, “I prayed for Your help, and You let me drown.” God replied, “What do you mean? Didn’t you see the powerboat, the sailboat and the helicopter I sent you?”

It is a mistake to explain away all emotional and relationship problems as the result of disobedience to God. It is also a mistake for us to tell God how He will help us cope with those problems. As my professor explained years ago, “Jesus does not keep us from the same problems that everyone else in the world faces. What He does do is help us cope with those problems when they come.”

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