



THE JOURNEY OF HEAD AND HEART



During the COVID-19 pandemic, the mental health suffering around the world and the effects of how individuals' process the thoughts, emotions and adversity that accompany this season, have all come to the fore of our attention and focus.

One of the many privileges of being a mental health professional is the honest and meaningful conversations that we get to have with many individuals. It's a privilege because all too often people are scared to share what they really think and feel and it's painful, hard stuff to talk about. To be on the other end of this courageous act is a privilege.

The wonderful thing about seeing a professional (if you haven't tried it, I recommend), is that they are trained to view their clients with unconditional positive regard, just like Jesus does with us. What safety there is in this! No judgement. A safe space to be better and do better.

What I have always taken a special interest in, is the recurring themes and patterns that we as clinicians see emerge from Christian clientele; who do not all come to us with mental health concerns. Sometimes, normally functioning people suffer a loss, trauma; maybe relational or workplace difficulties; and come to us for support.

SURPRISE AT SUFFERING

We commonly hear patterns in people's processing when faced with difficulties as follows; "Why is this happening to me?" "What did I do wrong?" "I try to be a good person and do the right thing?" "Perhaps I didn't pray enough?" or "Perhaps I didn't have enough faith?"

As illustrated above it is not just surprise, but the individual is often prone to blame themselves, experience guilt and even shame for just the experience of suffering. This is not only perplexing but saddening.

As followers of Jesus, so too shall we, experience suffering. Yet this is not obvious to many, and to be honest, I am not surprised! Who among us really wants to hear a sermon on Sunday about suffering! Yet, my guess is that those experiencing suffering would and do need to hear this.

In the discipleship moments of small groups and catch ups over coffee or meals, it is so important that we chat through the struggle in our lives. The things that are not going so well, the suffering of the past, present and potential in our future. Allowing ourselves to face the reality of this world in contrast to the world that is to come. To encourage each other, and remind each other that there is Good news!

The Good news is that we will never suffer alone, "the Lord never leaves us nor forsakes us." Aside from his friendship and presence, the Lord also provides us with people, trained and lay people with God's gifting, grace and skill to assist others during these difficult times.

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We commonly observe an incongruence between what individuals know in theory (theology) and what they believe (core beliefs). This is commonly referred to as the process of sanctification by bible scholars and it refers to the process by which we become more Christ-like. The key word here is become.

In simple terms this is how we establish the process of renewing the mind, which makes up a large part of the process of sanctification and assists individuals in merging theology with their core beliefs.

1. Thoughts are just thoughts;
2. Thoughts may or may not be true;
3. Thoughts need observing and challenging with logic;
4. Automatic negative thoughts are often unhelpful and need challenging;
5. We can use logic e.g. the evidence for or against a thought to challenge it;
6. If it is deemed that the thought is not true, then change the thought to a more helpful thought in its place.

The great news is that Christ's commitment to us in His word is that he will complete the good work he has begun in us (Phil 1:6). In addition, our therapists at Master's Psychology can teach you how to 'renew your mind' with some skills taught in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT).

EMOTIONAL SUPPRESSION

Emotions are a seriously misunderstood phenomenon. They are God given yet many of us are very afraid of emotion due to our lack of understanding and usually due to our experience of emotions within our first family.

Commonly there is a lot of judgement of self when feeling emotions. Ironically this judgement of the emotion creates more problems than the experience of the emotion in and of itself. For example, if an individual experiences anger but is uncomfortable with the feeling of anger, they may experience what we call a 'meta-emotion,' which is an emotion about an emotion. In turn the anger, coupled with disappointment and shame (the meta-emotions) needs to be navigated. This process then becomes far more complex than just addressing the anger itself.

In simple terms this is how we establish an understanding of emotion and dealing with emotions.

1. Emotions are real;
2. Emotions are also called feelings because we physically feel them in our bodies;
3. There is a part of the brain that releases emotions and hormones throughout our body;
4. God created this emotion centre in our brain to give us 'signals.' For example if we didn't feel love or care for others then there would be no experience of sadness. The sadness gives us a 'signal' that we are losing something we care about.
5. People need to receive treatment for mind, body and spirit as they are all connected (i.e. emotions may be impacting the body).

Should you find that you are experiencing adversity and a type of suffering not previously experienced, please reach out to your GP, or appropriately trained mental health professional for assistance where your needs and experiences can be assessed.

We believe that with fresh approaches to mental health, suffering can be minimised, hope catalysed and care tailored to individual needs.

Written by Kellie - Provisional psychologist, Masters & Co.

The contents of this article are not prepared as definitive statements or prescribe instructions for your personal circumstance and no guarantee can be given that this information is free from error or omission. The diagnosis and treatment of mental illness requires the specific attention of a GP or properly qualified mental health professional engaged to treat your personal circumstances, in the appropriate setting. Masters & Co., all employees and agents shall accept no liability for any act or omission occurring as a result of reliance on the information at this article and for any consequences of such act or omission. If you are experiencing a mental health crisis, please contact lifeline.