

the Secret of

MENTAL HEALTH



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Meaning of Mental Health 3

Dangers to Mental Health 5

Fear / Anxiety / Worry 5

Resentment / Bitterness / Hatred .. 11

Shame / Inferiority / Withdrawal.... 13

Guilt / Hopelessness /
Self-Destruction 15

Overcoming These Dangers..... 19

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MEANING OF MENTAL HEALTH

We are being confronted these days with much advice from psychiatrists and psychologists regarding mental health. The average person is becoming more and more aware of the increase of mental illness and is watching the progress of medical science in the treatment of these conditions with keen interest. Many people are wondering whether or not Christianity has anything to offer by way of treatment or even prevention of mental illness. The answer will be found in the Bible.

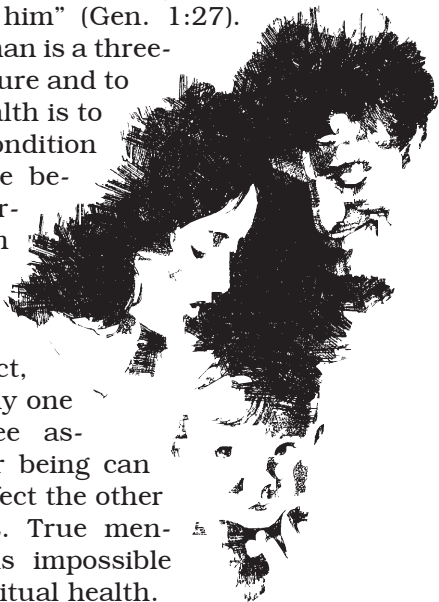
The term mental health implies the normal, well-balanced, happy experience of one who is conscious of being at peace with God and in a state of goodwill towards mankind. Mental health is a positive experience. It is not just the absence of mental illness. It is not just sanity as opposed to insanity. It is a positive sense of well-being. It is the very joy of living itself.

Not all psychiatrists would agree with this definition of mental health. Many describe this condition in terms of being able to adapt oneself to any environment. They consider that in order to have mental health one must

be able to compromise, to find a middle course. To many psychiatrists, the teaching of such concepts as "right and wrong" and "sin and punishment" is looked upon as poor mental hygiene. They regard Christianity as superstition.

These psychiatrists fail to recognize the three-part nature of man. Just as God is a Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—so also is man a trinity—spirit, soul (or mind) and body—because "God created man in his own image, in the image of God created He him" (Gen. 1:27).

Therefore, man is a three-in-one creature and to speak of health is to refer to a condition of the whole being. Our spiritual health affects our mental and bodily health. In fact, illness in any one of the three aspects of our being can and does affect the other two aspects. True mental health is impossible without spiritual health.



DANGERS TO MENTAL HEALTH

There are four outstanding mental attitudes which are a threat to mental health: 1) fear and its companions, anxiety and worry, 2) resentment and its companions, bitterness and hatred, 3) shame and its resultants, feelings of inferiority and withdrawal, and 4) guilt and its resultants, hopelessness and self-destruction. Let's consider together each one of these dangers, and how we may be protected from them by adhering to the teaching of the Holy Bible.

• **Fear/Anxiety/Worry**

Many studies have shown—and physicians now recognize—that fear, anxiety and worry can and do cause the following physical conditions: digestive disturbances; increased heart rate; increased blood pressure; increased action of the kidneys; muscle tension resulting in spasm and pain; increased sensitivity of the nerves with an over-response to sound, light, touch, etc.; chronic fatigue; headaches; pains or aches anywhere in the body; and such chronic illnesses as eye complaints, stomach ulcers, asthma, heart disease, eczema and arthritis.

Fear, anxiety and worry have been given to us for a purpose. Without them we would be fool hardy creatures who would not live very long because of our failure to recognize danger and do something to avoid it. The purpose of fear, anxiety and worry is to prepare us for action. That is the reason for the physical changes noted above. These changes lead to disease only if we handle our fear, anxiety and worry unwisely. It is most unwise to continue to live in fear, anxiety and worry without doing anything about them.

These conditions may become habitual with us. Indeed, worry may become such a habit that we do not realize we are worrying and thus our bodies are kept in a continual state of tension. This is often the cause of chronic fatigue. The reason why some people feel tired all the time is often just unrecognized, continual worry.

Some people try to repress their worries. They attempt to forget or put out of their minds the things that cause them fear, anxiety and worry. However, when we stop to think about it, putting a thought out of one's mind or trying to forget it is simply pushing it back further or deeper into the mind where it is merely out of sight.

The mind is like a cupboard where all our experiences are stored. Everything we see,

hear, feel or experience is stored there. Near the front of the cupboard and easily remembered are the things we need to remember, those we use from time to time. Near the front also are the things we like to remember, as well as the experiences which are too bulky and impressive to be forgotten. We tend to push into the back of the cupboard of our mind the things that irritate us and the things we do not want to think about.

Consider for a moment what would happen in any cupboard into which we pushed all the odds and ends of our housekeeping and especially the foods and other things we did not like. You know that sooner or later those things we had pushed to the back would begin to cause offense from dust, decay, rust or tarnish. That cupboard would soon cause us embarrassment and discomfort until it was cleaned out.

So it is with those who load their minds with indecisions, vague wishes, procrastinations, unsolved troubles, grudges, jealousies, real or imagined wrongs and dissatisfactions. These ferment and fester and cause nervous and emotional tensions and anxieties. These are the worry tensions that upset

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the working of different parts of our bodies and produce symptoms. If we regard these symptoms as evidence that we have a physical disease and worry about our health, we increase our tension and set up a vicious cycle. So all of us need to clean out our minds from time to time.

Jesus commands us not to worry. We read in Matthew 6:31: "Do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'" Then again in Matthew 6:34 we read: "Do not worry about tomorrow." The futility of worrying is pointed out in James 4:13-14: "Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit;' whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow."

But Jesus gives us the ultimate reason for not worrying in Matthew 6:32: "For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things." There is no need to worry if we have a heavenly Father. He will provide for His children. However, if we cannot claim God as our heavenly Father, in whom can we trust? If we are not children of God, we do have great cause to worry.

Our Lord Jesus Christ knew that there was no way to cure worry and anxiety by negative action. It is useless to say to some-

one, "Just don't worry." People often say, "I can't stop worrying." There is only one cure for fear, anxiety and worry, and that is to do something positive about it. Jesus gives us the solution for all worry in Matthew 6:33: "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you."

Our Lord tells us how to "seek the kingdom of God" in John 3:5 when He says: "Un-

less one is born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God."

When we talk about the new birth, many people are as puzzled as Nicodemus was. A moment or two of thought, however, will show us how simple our Lord's explanation is.



When we were born into this world we were thrown upon the mercy of others. Life before birth was automatic and we had no knowledge either of our own needs or of the source of their supply. The unborn baby does not know its mother. Life after birth is not automatic. The baby feels his need of warmth and food and attention; he feels discomfort. Although he does not know what caused his anxiety and

unhappiness, as the baby cries in his discomfort and then becomes aware of soothing satisfaction, he becomes aware of the source of his care, the one who loves him.

The person who has not been born again is drifting along in life, taking what was given to him without care or thought. To be born again is to become aware of our discomfort and to cry to God as our Father for His mercy and forgiveness because of the finished work of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Then we are born into a new realization of our oneness with God. Since God is our Father, there is no longer any need to worry.

As a child doing the will of his father, we will then say in all our decisions and plans what we are taught in James 4:15: "If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that." With this attitude, we shall have a continual consciousness of the Holy Spirit of God in us. In His presence we cannot worry. Hence the cure for anxiety and worry is to practice the thought of His presence.

We will be tempted to be afraid, to be anxious and to worry. The temptation may reach the point where we fear that God has forsaken us. But He never has and He never will. So, when tempted to worry, think of 1 Peter 5:7: "Casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you." Never doubt it, child

of God: "He cares for you." Do not doubt it, fearful, anxious, worried sinner: "He cares for you." He died and rose that you might be born again and that you might become a child in that great family of God whose members have no cause for fear, anxiety or worry.

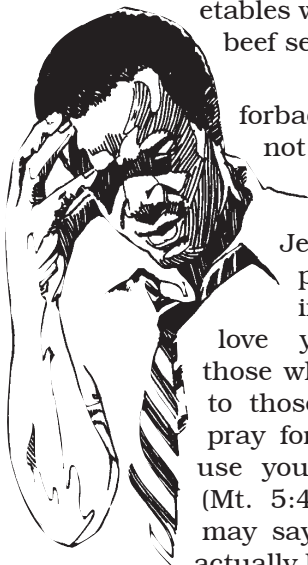
• **Resentment / Bitterness / Hatred**

Resentment that is allowed to grow in the mind turns to bitterness. Bitterness when fostered becomes hatred. They are degrees of the same attitude—an attitude of rejection, antagonism, anger and hostility. Our attack against the hated person may be by physical violence, by verbal abuse, by hateful thought or even by day-dream. Whatever the method of attack, every part of the body is stirred up and prepared for action.

As in fear so also in anger, certain bodily changes take place. The pupils of the eyes dilate; hearing becomes more acute; muscles become tense; the heart beats faster; blood pressure rises; digestion slows down and nerves become more sensitive. All this is the body preparing itself for action. This occurs even if we just entertain resentful thoughts.

If we have hateful thoughts then we are hateful people—physically, mentally and spiritually hateful. Resentment, bitterness and hatred interfere with the normal func-

tioning of our bodies. That is why Proverbs 15:17 says: "Better is a dinner of herbs where love is, than a fatted calf with hatred." Or as another translates it: "Better a dish of vegetables with love, than the best beef served with hatred."



The old Levitical law forbade hatred: "You shall not hate your brother in your heart" (Lev. 19:17). But our Lord Jesus Christ took the positive approach saying: "But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you" (Mt. 5:44). "Hard to do," we may say. No doubt, but it is actually harder on the digestive system to hate than to love.

It is impossible to love God—that is, to have a sense of oneness with God—and to hate our brother at the same time (1 Jn. 4:20). As we open our hearts to the joy of oneness with God, we lose all our resentment, our bitterness and our hatred of others. Surely that makes for peace of mind and for mental health.

• **Shame/Inferiority/Withdrawal**

Who of us has never had his or her feelings hurt? At times we have all felt slighted, left out, ignored, or have felt that our worth or position has not been sufficiently recognized. Hurt feelings are really hurt pride, and pride is self-esteem or self-love. If for some real or imagined reason our self-esteem has been injured we feel shame and a sense of inferiority.

Injured pride may produce anger and resentment. In many people, however, it produces shame. It is natural to protect ourselves from being shamed. Indeed many people withdraw themselves from as many social contacts as possible for fear they will be shamed and made to feel inferior. Many people try to hide their feelings of inferiority. Their efforts to do so, however, only lead to introversion or withdrawal from reality into a dream world and eventually even into very harmful mental illness.

Early in the life of every human being there appears evidence of pride, comparison with others, and rivalry. We have all heard children boast that "Mine is better than yours," or "My daddy is the toughest man in town," or "I'm bigger than you are," or "Our house is nicer than yours." These boasts may sound

cute, but they are evidence of pride and they carry with them the making of hurt feelings, feelings of inferiority and withdrawal.

We read in Proverbs 16:18 that "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall." And again in Proverbs 11:2 we are told, "When pride comes, then comes shame." Our Lord Jesus Christ has said in Matthew 23:12, "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled." Proverbs 21:4 makes it plain that pride is sinful: "A haughty look, and a proud heart ... are sin." James 4:6 very clearly states that "God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble."

And let us not forget what Jeremiah says: "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, nor let the rich man glory in his riches; But let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord exercising loving-kindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth. For in these I delight, says the Lord" (9:23-24).

There are people who try to cure the feelings of inferiority in others by attempting to build up their self-esteem, telling them that they are just as good as others and that there are lots of people worse than they are. But the cure for inferiority feelings is not to try to build up people's pride, but to as-

sure them that their humility is pleasing to God. Jesus calls us to be humble. He says in Matthew 20:27, "Whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave."

Humility rules out hidden inferiority feelings and is necessary for a feeling of oneness with God. In humility there is no pride in self, no easily hurt feelings, and no withdrawals from reality to protect one's feelings. In Matthew 11:29 we read "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls," that is, peace of mind. This is true mental health.

• **Guilt/Hopelessness/Self-Destruction**

In a paper entitled *The Accident-Prone Individual*, which appeared some time ago as a United States Public Health Service Report, the noted psychiatrist Dr. Franz Alexander made the following statement:

"There is a deeply ingrained attitude prevalent in our present civilization, that suffering expiates guilt. If a child does something wrong he is punished. Through the suffering caused by the punishment he makes up for his guilt, and thus regains the love of his parents. The conscience acts as an internal judge who demands suffering for our wrong-doings. Suffering relieves the

pangs of a guilty conscience and restores an inner peace.”

Let's consider his statement. Feelings of guilt are as old as mankind. Adam felt guilty. Cain had to suffer for his guilt. Ever since, mankind has been suffering as a result of guilt. The belief that “suffering expiates guilt” is by no means a concept of “our present civilization.” It is a basic belief of the human race and has nothing to do with civilization. The savage tribes of mankind have believed the same thing through the ages.

Guilt—that is the feeling of having done wrong, of having displeased a higher power—is a basic mental attitude. The child senses it before he fully learns right from wrong. He feels it first towards his parents. Those who talk of abolishing all guilt feelings by not teaching the concept of “sin” are talking foolishly. The Bible clearly indicates the basic nature of sin and the feelings of guilt that result from sin.

It is true that the child who feels guilty, often has his feelings relieved by punishment. It is also true that children and adults sometimes try to punish themselves for their feelings of guilt. But sad indeed is that person whose feelings of guilt loom so large as to dominate his whole being.

Such a person is aptly described by the

Bible in this way: "The Lord will give you a trembling heart, and failing eyes, and anguish of soul. Your life shall hang in doubt before you; and shall fear day and night, and have no assurance of life. In the morning you shall say, 'Oh, that it were evening!' And at evening you shalt say, 'Oh, that it were morning!'" because of the fear that terrifies your heart, and because of the sight

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which your eyes see" (Deut. 28:65-67). This is such a true picture of the person who is overcome by feelings of guilt.

Many people are willing to admit that they have done wrong, that they still do wrong, and that they feel guilty about it. However, it is common for people to want to make their

own atonement for guilty feelings. The husband who gets angry at his wife, says nasty things and then stalks out of the house, eases his own conscience by bringing her a box of chocolates or a bouquet of flowers as a peace offering.

Others may ease their consciences through a generous gift to their church or favorite charity. The penance of the Roman Catholic Church is supposed to be a mechanism of self-punishment for relieving guilt. But the transient self-righteousness that comes with

our efforts to relieve our own guilt only leads to pride and more sin.

There are many who repent and resolve to do better, relying on their own strength. They scorn the help of others and feel that to ask for help is to exhibit weakness of character. In his pride the alcoholic is very prone to assume that he can stop drinking without anyone's help. There are many also who seek to punish themselves for their feelings of guilt, and in their hopelessness and self-hatred commit suicide.

There are many who fight the feelings of guilt by comparing themselves with others. They say such things as, "I'm not as bad as that hypocrite," or "Their sins are greater than mine," thus trying to justify themselves. There are others who boldly defy their guilt feelings in a spirit of rebellion and pride. For these there is no peace of mind.



OVERCOMING THESE DANGERS

The only solution for overcoming these dangers to mental health is the Biblical one. Verse after verse teaches us that there is forgiveness of sin only through the atoning work of Christ on Calvary. And feelings of guilt can only be overcome by the merit of Christ's redeeming work. Consider a few of these verses:

“Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, and He will have mercy on him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon” (Isa. 55:7).

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (Jn. 3:16).

“If anyone sins, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the whole world” (1 Jn. 2:1-2).

“He (Jesus) was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities ... and by His stripes we are healed” (Isa. 53:5).

The cure for guilt is to be found in simple faith in the finished work of Christ: "For by grace are you saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God; not of works, lest anyone should boast" (Eph. 2:8-9).

True and lasting mental health results from a feeling of oneness with God. This is the belief of increasing numbers of psychiatrists and psychologists. But more importantly, it is the distinct teaching of the Bible. This realization of oneness with God cannot be bought or won or earned in any way by any work of man.

It is the free gift of God to all those who acknowledge their sins and repent of their sins and believe on the finished work of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Resting fully in Him we have that peace, that assurance, that security and that love for God and for our fellowmen which is the essence of mental health.

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