

Handling Conversations with the Mentally Ill

The ministry talks with people suffering through a wide assortment of complex personal issues. Some of those conversations include people considering serious and dramatic action such as suicide. Others are with people that admit they are working through various forms of mental illness.

We recognize these are incredibly difficult conversations. Since we are not trained counselors, these conversations can quickly become overwhelming. We want to encourage you to not think of yourself as having to solve every issue and heal people.

Often the most loving thing we can do is simply listen and encourage someone to get professional help. The most Christ-like thing we can do in many of these extreme moments of stress is to simply acknowledge their pain and all they are going through.

We try to maintain a list of appropriate agencies to forward people to such as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline in the Referral Information section of the Volunteer Training Portal. Additionally, we will be including simple articles that offer encouragement to our volunteers on how to better handle these difficult conversations. We hope you find these helpful.



How Should We Respond to Mental Illness

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Working with university students in Berkeley, California, I'm used to feeling in over my head. "Divinity school didn't prepare me for this," I often find myself thinking—in response to students' relationship struggles or their questions about vocational discernment. But nowhere has my sense of inadequacy been more acute than in my encounters with mental illness.

Mental illness manifests itself in the mundane realities of university life as well as in exceptionally stressful seasons of anxiety. When a student shared with me her experience of walking in on a roommate's suicide attempt, I realized I was working above my pay grade. I needed outside help.

Fortunately, I know several licensed Christian counselors in the area. I am quick to refer students to these professionals for help. And yet, hearing about students' painful situations has led me to ask what scripture can offer those of us who serve people facing mental illness and self-destructive behavior. The gospels are replete with encounters of demonic torment, but can these stories offer any contemporary guidance.

One story has been helpful for me. All three synoptic gospels tell of Jesus visiting a farming town on the eastern shore of the sea of Galilee ([mark 5:1–20](#); [matt 8:28–34](#); [luke 8:26–39](#)). As Jesus' boat touches land, a tormented man runs to meet him. This man had been living at a distance from others, among the area's graves. His torment didn't just play out in his relationship; it manifested itself on his body. the way Mark describes it, this man was constantly hurting himself with whatever he could find.

Most translations say this man had been "bruising himself with stones" (mark 5:5). A literal translation of the Greek verb meaning "to bruise" (*katakopto*) is "to cut up." Like so many who have sought relief in sharp objects, this tormented man cut himself with whatever was at hand. Sharp stones whispered silent promises of relief.

"What is your name?" Jesus asks the man (mark 5:9). It's an innocent enough question, but it reveals how Jesus sees a person beyond their self-destructive behavior. Jesus doesn't allow this man's struggle to steal his personhood. This is a man with a name, Jesus remembers—and invites us to remember—even if his torment speaks most loudly in this moment.

Later, after the man is healed, shaved, and dressed, Jesus takes his leave. Once again, the man sets off after him. He begs to stay with Jesus. It's little wonder why. "Go home to your friends," Jesus says, recognizing again that this man is more than his torment. The man has a community who loves him, Jesus assumes, who will want to celebrate his recovery. "Tell them how much the Lord has done for you," Jesus says, "and what mercy he has shown you" (Mark 5:19).

People struggling with mental illness and suicidal thoughts should seek the help of a qualified counselor, but those of us who name Christ as Lord have the responsibility to honor their personhood and seek their healing, using the best resources available. We are also called to persist in hope. This

account of Jesus' encounter with someone struggling with self-destructive behavior has helped me to not lose sight of the individual behind the struggle.

The prophet Micah paints a portrait of the fulfillment of time, when women and men from all over the world will stream to the site of God's in-breaking kingdom on earth. On that day, Micah tells us, those whom this world has made weary will find rest. Instruments of pain will finally be transformed for good ends.

"In that day, saith the Lord, I will gather her that is bruised, and will receive her that is cast out" (Mic 4:61).