



## SESSION 4 TRANSCRIPT

- April Gladman: “These things I remember as I pour out my soul: how I went with the throng, and led in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival.”
- April Gladman: It was at college where I started to feel that I didn’t think I was that healthy and something wasn’t quite right. I was finding that I was sleeping a lot, having a lot of nightmares, anxiety, and fear. Where’s all this coming from and why do I find it so hard to do things that everyone else does with ease?
- April Gladman: My mom and I started to research together: What could this be? We went to talk to a psychiatrist. She knew within the first ten minutes that I definitely had bipolar disorder; just everything I explained and everything my mom had witnessed just perfectly resembled bipolar disorder. I’m actually very good at hiding my struggle. When I would tell people, “I definitely struggle with bipolar, I definitely have manic depression,” even some of my best friends thought, “No, no; your life looks good and you look really good, and no, I think that that’s not the case.” Well, I’m suffering terribly, and you don’t want to believe that.
- April Gladman: Mental illness is no different than every other illness out there. It’s the organ of the brain that is not functioning properly. For me to tell you, “I don’t understand your cancer, I can’t see your cancer”—that would be very frustrating and hurtful. And I’m going to try not to do that, because I understand firsthand that it’s very frustrating when you are suffering deeply and people are saying you aren’t, or that you don’t have reason to be, or that it’s not real.
- Hillary McBride: So often there’s stigma around the mental health issues that we experience, and particularly in the Church, we’ve come up with a story about how it’s something to carry shame about because we don’t have enough faith. We don’t have enough of the Holy Spirit in us. We don’t have enough relationship with God, or discipline, or whatever it is. And yet we have such different stories about physical health. There would never be that shame on people if they broke their leg and their leg was having a hard time getting reset and healing.
- Hillary McBride: So it makes me wonder: Why are the stories about physical health and mental health so different? Where in the history of the Church have we constructed a story about mental health and spirituality where mental health is something we carry shame about?”
- Lee Kosa: I wonder if some of the ways that we think about what it means to be a Christian have been heavily reduced to giving mental assent to certain theological truths or frameworks. So that privileging of the capacity of reason maybe plays into the stigma around mental illness. If in some way our capacity to reason or our cognitive ability is somewhat compromised or limited due to mental illness, we don’t necessarily know what to do with that.



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- Lee Kosa: Well, how can you then be Christian if you can't make rational sense of theology anymore and the systematic theologies that we hold so dear and defend? To be Christian is to be a gift from God, [someone] who is worthy of love because we are a gift. That's the baseline instead of our ability to give cognitive mental assent to theological truths. I wonder if that would change the way we think about some of these things.
- Leslie: As April's mom, this process at times has been very painful, very difficult. I realized that this was more than just normal sadness or normal concern for different life situations, but didn't again know what it was. Sometimes she wasn't sleeping. One time she didn't sleep for three days straight. I'd get the psalms out, and I would just read her psalm after psalm, thinking, "How do I comfort this kind of suffering? How do I help? I'm going to read psalms. We're going to read that and see if God's Word comforts her."
- Leslie: There's a sense of helplessness you feel because you don't know what to do or how to help them. You pray a lot. You feel like, "I need to be strong right now," and you don't always feel like that inside. You feel helpless and you feel ill-equipped.
- April Gladman: My mom was one of my biggest advocates, and together, we learned as much as we could. Even with the medication, life was still just very difficult and I thought, "I need more help." I found a group called the Living Room, and I decided to just try it once, go on my own. I was nervous about it and what kind of people would be there and what would we do. But when I went, I found it was a huge relief and a breath of fresh air to find other people who had very, very similar stories and feelings and situations.
- April Gladman: Finally, I'm talking to people who understand and know exactly what I'm going through—not just people around me who are healthy, who want to do me good, but people who can relate and understand that this is what it feels like to be the one struggling.
- Hillary McBride: I feel sad that so many people suffer alone and only get to talk about their experience of mental health when they feel like they're through it. There's this unwritten narrative, this liturgy of mental health that [says] we don't share our struggle until we are far enough out of it that we can look back and say, "It was really hard." I think about my own experiences of mental health and how much loneliness there was because of how much shame there was about saying, "This is my struggle and this is my story."
- Hillary McBride: I wonder if my pain, if my suffering would have gone on so long if there wasn't so much shame, and I could let people in, and there were more resources to feel seen and cared for. But somehow there's a story that we've been told that [you] don't talk about it until it's over. And you wish that people had the safety and the freedom to say, "Right now I'm struggling—not ten years ago, but right now."



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- Sue Nickel: Exactly.
- Ross Hastings: That says quite a bit about the Church. We say that the Church ought to be a place where broken sinners come, and confession, I think, should be part of every service in my opinion. But it also ought to be a place where this kind of brokenness is welcome.
- John Swinton: If you think about what stigma is--stigma, Erving Goffman says, comes from the slave trade, where a slave owner would buy a slave and put a mark on that slave. As soon as that mark is put on the slave, everything they are is reduced to the size of that mark. So you're no longer a person. You no longer have a name. What you are is a chattel. You're something that belongs to somebody else, and the mark points that out. That's precisely how stigma works in relation to mental health.
- John Swinton: As soon as you have a diagnosis, you lose a lot of things. You lose your own story to some extent. These sticky labels reduce people to the size of the diagnosis and then refuse to listen to their stories. So one of the things that the Church can gift to people living with mental health challenges is simply to call them by name and simply to listen to their story, to not listen to it through the filter of a diagnosis. I mean, I'm not in any sense anti-psychiatrist, not at all. But listen to the descriptions that come from other people and begin to think [about] what it means for people who encounter the world in that way to be part of this community.
- John Swinton: I think the Church has the same stigma that is within culture, but there is an added dimension of spirituality where we try to explain these particular experiences using a particular hermeneutic or interpretive framework that comes from a tradition. Sometimes that can be manifested in compassion and love and friendship, but sometimes it can be manifested in accusations of demon possession or sinfulness or enforced healing within which, rather than the idea of shalom where healing is to be with God,
- John Swinton: actually, unless you get rid of this particular set of experiences, then you can no longer really function well within that. What must it be like if you speak to people within the Church, and they say, "Your experiences are evil, and by implication you are evil"? What on earth would that feel like for somebody to say that? Now, it may be said compassionately. It may be said in a way that people want to help this individual by using their spiritual gifts, by using spiritual discernment as they see it.
- John Swinton: But sometimes people forget that actually they're not talking to concepts and ideas, they're talking to people. As soon as you forget that, then that kind of spiritual stigma can be quite oppressive.
- April Gladman: As a youth leader in a church, I was asked to share my story with the youth group.



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And as much as it takes courage, I really appreciated that they wanted to help end the stigma and to bring awareness to the youth group and young people, because I know without a doubt there are people in every room who can relate. And to be able to openly share and to be invited and welcomed is huge because I want to feel like there is something positive coming out of my struggle [and] that I can also return the blessing of being helped by helping others.

April Gladman:

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