

The image is a full-page background photograph. It shows a harbor scene at sunset. In the foreground, the dark silhouettes of several people are visible, some sitting on a low wall or ledge, looking out towards the water. The middle ground is filled with the calm, shimmering surface of the water, reflecting the golden light of the setting sun. Several large cargo ships and smaller boats are scattered across the harbor. In the background, a range of low mountains or hills stretches across the horizon under a warm, orange-hued sky. The top of the image is framed by the dark, leafy branches of trees, creating a natural border.

THE SANCTUARY COURSE®

SESSION 8

THE CHURCH



SCRIPTURE: PSALM 42:11

*Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.*

The refrain “for I shall again praise him” is a beautiful way to bring this course to a close. The psalmist acknowledges the reality of suffering, but remains confident in the truth that God is a source of hope and help. Whether deliverance arrives swiftly or not, the knowledge that it will arrive enables the psalmist to conclude this lament on a note of praise.



SESSION OVERVIEW

In this session you will:

1. Review the mental health topics covered in previous sessions
2. Consider how your community can support mental health
3. Reflect on your experience in this course



CORE CONTENT

You made it! This is the final session of *The Sanctuary Course*. Over the past seven sessions you have examined many different facets of mental health.

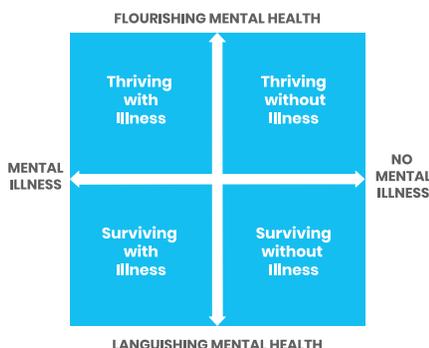
In **Session 1** you learned about the prevalence of mental health problems and explored the opportunity for Christian engagement in the conversation surrounding mental health.

According to the Canadian Mental Health Association, all Canadians will be affected by mental health problems at some point in their lives, either through personal experience or through the diagnosis of a relative or friend. In fact, one in five Canadians faces a mental health problem every year.

However, there is another reason why the Church should pay attention to the topic of mental health. According to the Mental Health Commission of Canada, individuals affected by mental health problems will often seek help from spiritual leaders first and foremost.

In **Session 2** you were introduced to the mental health continuum and began to expand your understanding of mental health.

In **Session 3** you took a deeper look at the realities of mental illness and wrestled with some of the biggest questions Christians have about this topic.



...the experience of mental illness varies widely. Some individuals live with symptoms every day, while others may go weeks or months virtually symptom-free. Mental illness can look like insomnia and stress, or it can look like psychosis.

How do the biblical promises of hope, healing, and transformation apply to individuals struggling with mental illness? ...sometimes we experience victory in life, and sometimes we experience suffering and the negative consequences of living in a fallen, sinful world.

In **Session 4** you examined the process of stigma and reflected on Christ's experience of rejection.



In **Session 5** you explored the journey of recovery and looked at the five essential elements of hope, identity, responsibility, education, and community.



In **Session 6** you reflected on the importance of companionship and learned about the spiritual practices of providing hospitality, neighboring, adopting a side-by-side perspective, listening, and accompaniment.

In companionship you do not need to have all the answers, provide a diagnosis, or resolve every problem; you simply need to make space and time for another person.

In **Session 7** you considered the importance of self-care practices and learned about the unique needs of families and caregivers.

When we practice self-care, we are engaging in an activity with the specific intention of caring for ourselves.

When an individual is experiencing mental health problems, his or her family is immediately placed under a significant amount of stress.... Sharing the burden of support will give caregivers the opportunity to practice self-care.

Throughout each session, you have relied on psychological, social, and theological perspectives to illuminate the complexities of mental health. You have also listened to the stories of individuals with lived experience in order to better understand the wide range of mental health problems and recovery journeys.

Today you will be meeting Alastair, who lives with depression. This film mentions the death of a friend by suicide.



WATCH VIDEO



DISCUSSION QUESTION

In what ways does Alastair's story reflect the themes of this course?

Remember, these questions are not mandatory; they are simply invitations. Any member of the group is free to decline an invitation at any time, and the group as a whole may decide to skip over a question if it seems unhelpful.

Now these three perspectives—the psychological, the social, and the theological—will be set aside in order to focus on the ways that your community can move forward. In the first session it was stated that this course was created to raise awareness and start conversations in local churches regarding mental health. It is time for your conversations to really begin. As your group reads through the following questions, take time to reflect on the specific gifts, strengths, and resources of your community. Discuss each question and consider whether the Holy Spirit is extending an invitation to you before reading the suggestions and ideas offered.

"In all of society, the church has the greatest potential for being a caring and healing community. Local bodies of believers can bring a sense of belonging to the members, opportunities to develop skills, support to those who feel weak, healing to troubled individuals, and guidance as people make decisions and move toward maturity."¹

How can your church welcome everyone on the mental health continuum?

Community development begins with individual growth. As you look back over the course content, ask yourself whether there is a gift for you to unwrap. You may want to cultivate sensitivity in the ways you speak and think about mental health. You may feel ready to share your lived experience with others. You may want to acknowledge that everyone is on the mental health continuum. Or you may feel called to meditate further on the radical acceptance and hospitality exhibited by Christ in the Gospels.

There are also many ways for your community to grow. Lived experience can be acknowledged during services. Sermon topics and guest speakers can provide continuing mental health education. Mental health problems can be remembered in prayer. Compassion and companionship can be offered in response to suffering. As your church continues to move forward, individuals with mental health problems and their families will feel more supported and included in the community of faith.

How can your church support individuals facing mental health problems?

There are many actions you can take as an individual to support those living with mental health problems. You may decide to learn more about a particular mental illness due to the recent diagnosis of a friend. You may volunteer to cook a meal for a family experiencing a mental health crisis. You may feel led to start a mental health support group or a caregiving support group. Or you may offer the simple gift of a loving presence and a listening ear to someone in pain. Remember that even the smallest action can bless others and enrich your community.

Every church is called to different expressions of ministry and equipped with different resources. Maintaining an updated list of local mental health resources (including crisis services, clinics, support groups, and recommended counselors) is a great place to start. Your church may also want to offer counseling services, run mental health education programs, or provide housing and financial assistance to vulnerable members. If these options seem overwhelming, consider partnering with other churches or mental health ministries in order to offer support.

How can your church encourage recovery?

The importance of hope, identity, responsibility, education, and community in the journey of recovery has already been established. However, these are also important realities in the life of faith. Stop for a moment and consider all you have received in Christ:

HOPE

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. (1 Peter 1:3-5)

IDENTITY

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. (1 Peter 2:9)

RESPONSIBILITY

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:2)

COMMUNITY

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord... (Ephesians 2:19-21)

Sometimes individuals struggle to maintain spiritual practices or experience a connection with God due to their mental health problems, but this should not be a source of shame or condemnation. Many people report that it was the faith of their community that sustained them when they did not have the internal resources required to turn to God.

If you want to review the meaning of lament, read the introduction to Psalm 42 in **Session 1**.

Whether you are meditating on a biblical passage, listening to a sermon, or simply being supported by a community that shares these beliefs and values, your recovery journey and the journey of those around you can be strengthened and sustained through faith.

How can your church embrace the realities of languishing and flourishing mental health?

You cannot give what you have not received. Before you turn to make room for the experiences of others, you may need to acknowledge your own mental health journey. Perhaps you are in a season of languishing and need to reach out for help. Perhaps there are self-care practices you want to incorporate into your life. Or perhaps you need to grow in self-compassion. Taking any of these steps will help you and your community embrace the realities of languishing and flourishing mental health.

Your church may also want to incorporate expressions of lament into its services. God delights to encounter his people regardless of where they are on the mental health continuum, and this should be reflected in the forms of our worship.

CONCLUSION

Individuals suffering from mental health problems need more than professional contact with doctors and clinicians—they need meaningful relationships and supportive communities. Individuals providing care to those with mental health problems need more than information and expertise—they need an engaged community that can step in and offer companionship when their personal resources are depleted. And the world needs to see the unity that comes from recognizing that everyone is on the mental health continuum. Is it possible that God is calling his people to meet these needs? Hopefully this course has convinced you that the answer is “yes.”

Although the calling is significant, remember that change takes time. Your next steps may be small, medium, or large, and that is okay. At the end of the day, you are only asked to be faithful with what you have been given. It is the faithful God who will see this work through to completion.

*As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.
When shall I come and behold
the face of God?
My tears have been my food
day and night,
while people say to me continually,
“Where is your God?”
These things I remember,
as I pour out my soul:
how I went with the throng,
and led them in procession to the house of God,
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,
a multitude keeping festival.
Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.
My soul is cast down within me;
therefore I remember you*

*from the land of Jordan and of Hermon,
from Mount Mizar.
Deep calls to deep
at the thunder of your cataracts;
all your waves and your billows
have gone over me.
By day the Lord commands his steadfast love,
and at night his song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life.
I say to God, my rock,
“Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I walk about mournfully
because the enemy oppresses me?”
As with a deadly wound in my body,
my adversaries taunt me,
while they say to me continually,
“Where is your God?”
Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God. (Psalm 42)*



REFLECTION: GIFT AND CHALLENGE

Have each person in your group share the following:

1. One gift they have received from this course
2. One thing that has challenged them (or that they would like to challenge) from this course



PRAYER

Here is a closing prayer shared by believers through the centuries. Your group may decide to have every member read it aloud once as a way of speaking blessing over one another.

*The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.
(Numbers 6:24-26)*

ENDNOTE

1. Gary R. Collins, *Christian Counseling: A Comprehensive Guide*, 3rd ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 41.