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Addressing Mental Health

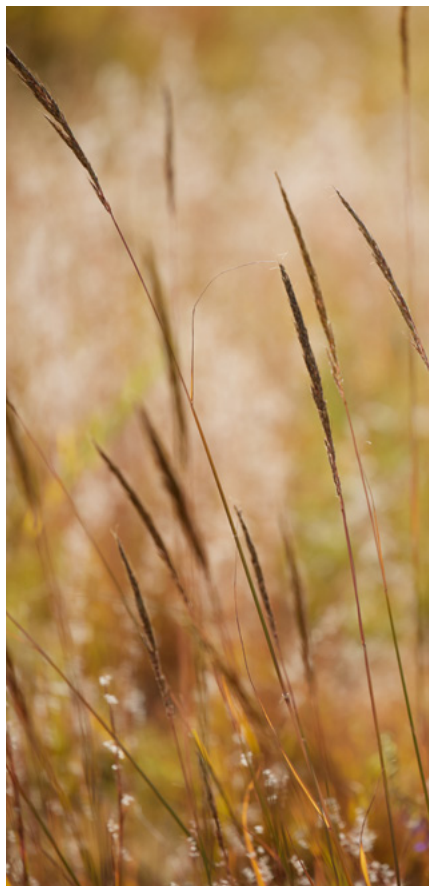
Allow me to share several observations I made as our family has passed through trials.

Even though our family has enjoyed rich blessings while joyfully walking the covenant path, we have also faced exceedingly high mountains. I wish to share some very personal experiences regarding mental illness. These include clinical depression, severe anxiety, bipolar disorder, ADHD—and sometimes a combination of them all. I share these tender experiences with the approval of those involved.

During my ministry, I have encountered hundreds of individuals and families with similar experiences. Sometimes I wonder if the “desolating sickness” covering the land, as mentioned in the scriptures, might include mental illness.¹ It is worldwide, covering every continent and culture, and affecting all—young, old, rich, and poor. Members of the Church have not been excluded.

At the same time, our doctrine teaches us to strive to become like Jesus Christ and be perfected in Him. Our children sing, “I’m trying to be like Jesus.”² We long to be perfect even as our Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ are perfect.³ Because mental illness can interfere with our perception of perfection, it remains all too often a taboo. As a result, there

is too much ignorance, too much silent suffering, and too much despair. Many, feeling overwhelmed because



they do not meet perceived standards, mistakenly believe they have no place in the Church.

To combat such deception, it is important to remember that “the Savior loves each of His Father’s children. He fully comprehends the pain and struggle that many experience as they live with a broad range of mental health challenges. He suffered ‘pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind; . . . [taking] upon him the pains and the sicknesses of his people’ (Alma 7:11; emphasis added; see also Hebrews 4:15–16; 2 Nephi 9:21). Because He understands all afflictions, He knows how ‘to heal the broken-hearted’ (Luke 4:18; see also Isaiah 49:13–16).”⁴ Challenges often indicate a need for additional tools and support and are not a character defect.

Allow me to share several observations I made as our family has passed through trials.

First, many people will mourn with us; they won’t judge us. Due to severe panic attacks, anxiety, and depression, our son returned home from his mission after just four weeks. As his parents, we found it difficult to deal with disappointment and sadness because we had prayed so much for his success. Like all parents, we want our children to prosper and be happy. A mission was to be an important milestone for our son. We also wondered what other people might think.

Unbeknownst to us, our son’s return was infinitely more devastating for him. Note that he loved the Lord and wanted to serve, and yet he could not for reasons he struggled to understand. He soon found himself at a point of total hopelessness, battling deep guilt. He no longer felt accepted but spiritually numb. He became consumed by recurring thoughts of death.



Skylight and landscaping view (left) at the Conference Center in Salt Lake City

While in this irrational state, our son believed that the only action left was to take his own life. It took the Holy Ghost and a legion of angels on both sides of the veil to save him.

While he was fighting for his life and during this immensely difficult time, our family, ward leaders, members, and friends went out of their way to support and minister to us.

I have never felt such an outpouring of love. I have never sensed more powerfully and in such a personal way what it means to comfort those in need of comfort. Our family will be ever grateful for that outpouring.

I cannot describe the countless miracles that accompanied these events. Gratefully, our son survived, but it has taken a long time and much medical, therapeutic, and spiritual care for him to heal and to accept that he is loved, valued, and needed.

I recognize that not all such incidents end like ours. I sorrow with those who have lost loved ones far too early and are now left with feelings of grief as well as unanswered questions.

My next observation is that it can be difficult for parents to identify their children's struggles, but we must educate ourselves. How can

we know the difference between the difficulties associated with normal development and signs of illness? As parents, we have the sacred charge to help our children navigate life's challenges; however, few of us are mental health specialists. We nevertheless need to care for our children by helping them learn to be content with their sincere efforts as they strive to meet appropriate expectations. Each of us knows from our own personal shortcomings that spiritual growth is an ongoing process.

We now understand that "there is not a simple cure-all for emotional



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and mental wellness. We will experience stress and turmoil because we live in a fallen world with a fallen body. Additionally, many contributing factors may lead to a diagnosis of mental illness. Regardless of our mental and emotional well-being, focusing on growth is healthier than obsessing about our shortcomings.”⁵

For my wife and me, the one thing that has always helped us was staying as close to the Lord as possible. In hindsight, we now see how the Lord patiently tutored us through times of great uncertainty. His light guided us step by step through the darkest hours. The Lord helped us to see that the worth of an individual soul is far more important in the eternal scheme than any earthly task or achievement.

Again, educating ourselves about mental illness prepares us to help ourselves and others who might be struggling. Open and honest discussion with one another will help this important topic to receive the attention it deserves. After all, information precedes inspiration and revelation. These all-too-often invisible challenges can affect anyone, and when we are facing them, they appear insurmountable.

One of the first things we need to learn is that we are certainly not alone. I invite you to study the topic of mental health in the Life Help section of the Gospel Library app.

Learning will lead to more understanding, more acceptance, more compassion, more love. It can lessen tragedy while helping us develop and manage healthy expectations and healthy interactions.

My final observation: we need to constantly watch over each other. We must love one another and be less judgmental—especially when our expectations are not immediately met. We should help our children and youth feel the love of Jesus Christ in their lives, even when they struggle to personally feel love for themselves. Elder Orson F. Whitney, who served as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, counseled parents how to help struggling offspring: “Pray for your . . . children; hold on to them with your faith.”⁶

I have often pondered what it means to hold on to them with faith. I believe it includes simple acts of love, meekness, kindness, and respect. It means allowing them to develop at their own pace and bearing testimony to help them feel our Savior’s love. It requires us to think more about them and less about ourselves or others. That usually means speaking less and listening much, much more. We must love them, empower them, and praise them often in their efforts to succeed and be faithful to God. And finally, we should do everything in our power to stay close to them—just as we stay close to God.

For all who are personally affected by mental illness, hold fast to your covenants, even if you might not feel God’s love at this time. Do whatever lies in your power and then “stand still . . . to see the salvation of God, and for his arm to be revealed.”⁷

I testify that Jesus Christ is our Savior. He knows us. He loves us, and He will wait on us. During our family’s trials, I have come to know just how close He is. His promises are true:

*Fear not, I am with thee; oh, be not dismayed,
For I am thy God and will still give thee aid.
I’ll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand, . . .
Upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand.*

Knowing how firm our foundation is, may we ever joyfully declare:

*The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose
I will not, I cannot, desert to his foes;
That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake, . . .
I’ll never, no never, no never forsake!⁸*

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen. ■

NOTES

1. Doctrine and Covenants 45:31.
2. “I’m Trying to Be like Jesus,” *Children’s Songbook*, 78–79.
3. See 3 Nephi 12:48.
4. “Like a Broken Vessel,” Mental Health: General Principles, ChurchofJesusChrist.org.
5. Sheldon Martin, “Strive to Be—a Pattern for Growth and Mental and Emotional Wellness,” *Liahona*, Aug. 2021, 14.
6. Orson F. Whitney, in Conference Report, Apr. 1929, 110.
7. Doctrine and Covenants 123:17.
8. “How Firm a Foundation,” *Hymns*, no. 85.