

*Extract of*

# JESUS & YOUR MENTAL HEALTH



LINKING GOD'S WORD & MODERN SCIENCE  
TO FIND PEACE ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

REBECCA MAXWELL, LMFT

## ENDORSEMENTS

If you've ever wished you had a good friend who is also an incredibly helpful therapist to consult with during all of life's challenging events, this book is what you need. Rebecca is a personal friend of mine who is full of mental health wisdom and who correctly handles the word of God. Her book is not just a resource to read once, it's a treasure trove for your emotional well-being you'll return to time and again. "Jesus and Your Mental Health" should definitely be on your reading list this year!

—Lysa TerKeurst *New York Times* best-selling author of  
*"Forgiving What You Can't Forget"* and *"Good Boundaries and Goodbyes"*

Rebecca Maxwell is a warrior for the wounded, the broken and the suffering and I admire her like crazy for, among many things, standing on the front lines in the battle for her patients' mental health. Born out of professional experience, educational training, Biblical study and much prayer, Rebecca's written a beautiful and powerful book. "Jesus and Your Mental Health" is a guidebook that approaches mental health issues through a spiritual lens and offers a Biblically-informed understanding that will comfort you, let you know you're not alone, and help bring you not only to a place of healing, but to the One who can and wants to heal you. Rebecca is not a fly-by-night with an untested opinion. She has and does stand in the trenches, daily, and because of this she knows and has seen that even mental illness falls under the umbrella of God's sovereign hand and we can trust Him in it and through it.

—Charles Martin, *New York Times* Bestselling Author

I highly recommend that every Jesus follower read *Jesus & Your Mental Health*. Rebecca Maxwell has crafted a powerful and compassionate resource that skillfully blends biblical truth with modern psychological insights. This book

offers a profound, grace-filled approach to understanding mental health from a Christian perspective, providing both spiritual wisdom and practical guidance for those struggling or seeking to help others.

Rebecca's thoughtful exploration into mental wellbeing is a vital tool for anyone who desires to navigate mental health with both faith and understanding. She doesn't just offer theoretical knowledge, but real, tangible insights that can be used in everyday life to help us and those around us find peace, healing, and hope.

Through clear and compassionate explanations, *Jesus & Your Mental Health* shows us how to honor God in our struggles, apply His Word to our hearts, and embrace the intersection of science and faith. If you're looking to understand mental health through the lens of scripture, this book is a must-read. It will equip you with the tools you need to care for your own mental health or support loved ones in their journey toward wholeness.

—Carrie Williams, *Executive Director of Exponential NEXT*

Rebecca Maxwell has been a professional and personal guiding light in my life. As a fellow psychotherapist privileged to work alongside her, I've witnessed her unshakeable commitment to bridging faith and mental health. This book is more than a resource; it is a lifeline for those seeking to unite their faith with the facts of mental health, guiding those who feel unsure, confused, or lonely. "Jesus & Your Mental Health" beautifully combines biblical truth with psychological insight. It will guide you through the complexities of mental well-being and illness from a spiritual perspective, providing trust and clarity while breaking the stigma within faith communities. I am confident that "Jesus and Your Mental Health" will encourage you and help you understand your pain, hurt, and struggles along with God's intentions with renewed clarity.

—Tesa Saulmon, *LMHC CSAT*

In the words of Carmela Soprano, “Psychology doesn’t address the soul- that’s something else- but, this is a start.” Rebecca Maxwell does address this in “Jesus & Your Mental Health” by delving into the foundations, struggles and next steps of understanding psychology through a Biblical lens to live out the God sized dreams you are capable of having and experiencing when your mind, body and soul align with God’s plans for you. “Jesus & Your Mental Health” makes much of Jesus’ example of how he endured the realities of human brokenness as he walked the earth and how his ultimate sacrifice continues to be our greatest comfort. She uses scripture to address how whole-self integration is evident in both scripture and utilized in Christian counseling and mental health practices. This book is a must read for anyone who has experienced mental health struggles or has walked alongside a loved one in this space. It is now pivotal in how I work with my clients and foundational for a Christian counseling approach.

—Amaranda Sakamoto, LCSW

Maybe you have struggled to understand how your complex bio-psycho-social systems interact with your life of faith. There are many books you can read about following Jesus, and many about mental health; but there are few that bring these two important topics together into a cohesive whole. My friend Rebecca Maxwell does this beautifully in *Jesus and Your Mental Health*. It’s often said that “new” scientific discoveries are just catching up with God’s design revealed in scripture. Because Rebecca is a dedicated follower of Jesus *and* a seasoned professional therapist, she is able to masterfully guide her readers to understand the intricate relationships between significant biblical insights and relevant psychological data. *Jesus and Your Mental Health* is trustworthy and authoritative while remaining approachable and accessible. Whether you are battling significant mental health challenges or just want to be a more integrated and healthy person, this book will help you discover the life that God intended you to live.

—Pastor Jonathan Vinke, *The Church of Eleven22*

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Note about personal stories—the stories in this book may resemble real people and may reflect current or former clients. Names and details have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

All scripture references are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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***For my earthly dad***

*You taught me to be a life-long learner,  
a reader and writer,  
and a good human.*

*See you soon.*

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# FOREWORD

I have known Rebecca Maxwell, both as a friend and ministry partner, for many years. She is a gifted therapist, an incredible wife and mother, and most importantly, she loves Jesus like crazy. She's also humble and never seeks a platform or the spotlight. I have been waiting for her to write this book for a long time. I don't know if she would have pulled the trigger to get started if someone hadn't announced in a sermon that she was soon to be releasing a book that everyone should read (I may have done this without checking with her first)!

As a pastor, my responsibility is to shepherd the flock that God has given me, helping them to discover and deepen a relationship with Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 5:2). I have been in ministry a long time and let me tell you something that I know is true: the gospel "works"! There isn't a broken place in life that the gospel can't heal, because it is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes (Rom. 1:16). Whether it's in your marriage, your parenting, your vocation, or your daily habits, God has designed a way for you to live that is in line with his blessing and intention for you.

Even though I am not short on confidence in the power of the word of God, I also know that there are situations that often require solutions that go beyond a pastor's training and expertise. Sometimes when we experience ailments in the body and the mind, we need the help of godly professionals to administer the healing. As we say around our church, God

can heal through people, prayer, or pills, and it is still all his sovereign grace that makes the healing possible.

This is what Rebecca does so well in this book. She brings her confidence in God's word as authoritative and effective and combines it with her deep understanding of our mental and emotional makeup. The result is a powerful tool that will benefit your spiritual life and help you apply godly wisdom to your thinking, your habits, your wounds, and your relationships.

In Deuteronomy 6:4–5 we read one of the most famous prayers in all of history, called the “Shema.” It says, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” When we love God with all that we are (heart, soul, mind, and strength), we live the kind of abundant life that God intends for us to live (see John 10:10). Jesus didn't just come to change your address in eternity. He wants to transform your thinking, your feelings, your relationships, and all that you love. This book will help you do that. Don't just read this book; read it, apply it, and share it with your friends and family. I promise you your life will be blessed.

Be free,

Pastor Joby Martin

The Church of Eleven22

# INTRODUCTION

The absence couldn't be ignored; it was like a shadow that lingered even in the brightest moments. My husband and his brother would scan the crowd at school ceremonies, clutching some small hope that this time, she might be there. A graduation, a sports event—milestones meant to be shared with family—all served as painful reminders of her absence. My mother-in-law lived with chronic and debilitating clinical depression, the fallout of a series of traumatic events that shaped her life in ways few could comprehend.

Her darkest episodes were marked by self-harm and the unbearable weight of suicidality. She made multiple attempts to end her life, leading to extended hospitalizations that left her family navigating the void. For her sons, her struggles also exposed them firsthand to the depths of the human psyche. It was a wound, reopened again and again, each time they faced another depressive episode with their mom.

And then, there was the church. Once a sanctuary, it became another source of isolation. Parents whispered behind closed doors, warning their children to keep their distance from the family with “problems.” Friends disappeared, leaving my husband and his brother to shoulder the stigma of something society refused to understand. Mental illness was an unspoken danger in those circles, a fear that alienated rather than united.

For my brother-in-law, the weight of that rejection made him run. The shame and anger of being shunned by the community that was supposed to offer love and support left him estranged from the faith community for years to come.

\*\*\*

Until the last few decades, Jesus and mental health would likely not land in the same sentence. There has been a great divide in the understanding of physical health and mental health. Struggles in the mind are obviously much harder to “see”; therefore, they are more difficult to understand. In the past, the church often viewed mental health issues as a result of sin or a problem with faith. For physical illnesses, church members would rally for prayer and support the family with meals and visits. But for a long time, Christians didn’t know what to do with mental health issues like anxiety, depression, addictions, mood and personality disorders, and the like. Many who struggled had their experiences diminished or dismissed, sending them deeper into their struggle with an added dose of shame.

Even today, our very well-meaning Christian friends sometimes don’t grasp the struggles with mental health and want to (rightly) point us to the Great Physician, the Ultimate Healer, God, our heavenly Father. Unfortunately, mental health issues often are not resolved with simply more faith and prayer. While these are essential spiritual disciplines and important components of a good treatment plan, our well-meaning brothers and sisters often impart shame when these simplistic answers don’t bring total healing on their own. Shame is the sense that something is wrong with us, a permanent wrong that feels hopeless to change. Shame is an emotion that can put us into hiding, escaping, and numbing that leads to addictions and, very literally, into a death spiral. If mental health struggles are not approached from a holistic perspective, we can easily stay stuck in isolation and shame without the support of our faith communities. As a marriage and family therapist, I regularly see these issues in my office. It often takes people far too long to engage in counseling because of the shame associated with their struggles or with getting help. In some cases, churches have told those struggling that they cannot seek mental health counseling outside the church. This keeps people from receiving care from well-trained clinicians and keeps them suffering for too long.

Shame keeps people believing they are alone. But the reality is that they are not alone. If you have been walking around with shame or a sense of abandonment due to well-meaning, yet ill-informed advice, I am deeply sorry. I'm glad you have picked up this book. In spite of the alienation from some in the church, my husband did experience love and care from several families and pastors in his church who came alongside him, literally becoming a pseudo-family and faith community of support. I desperately wish that my brother-in-law would have had this same experience in the faith community. Thankfully, the faith seeds were planted early for him, and despite the alienation he experienced, he is walking with the Lord today. I am grateful that we are currently seeing a shift in the attitudes in the church regarding mental health, how to support those who suffer, and how to encourage congregations to consider mental health as an important part of overall well-being. And as a Christian therapist, I couldn't be more thrilled.

## **Prevalence of Mental Illness in America**

In America, we are increasingly hearing celebrities and professional athletes using their platforms to share their journeys with mental illness and encouraging people to seek help and support. There are also a multitude of mental health organizations and charities dedicated specifically to promoting mental health and understanding mental illness. Some of these include Mental Health America (MHA), National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), MentalHealth.gov, Bring Change to Mind (BC2M), as well as many disorder-specific organizations.

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), one in five adults experience mental illness each year. In addition, one in six U.S. youth aged six to seventeen experience a mental health disorder each year.

With 50 percent of all lifetime mental illnesses beginning by age fourteen and 75 percent by age twenty-four, it is no wonder our country is shining the light on this important topic and working hard to address these issues. Our children and loved ones are dying by suicide at alarming rates. People with depression have a 40 percent higher risk of developing cardiovascular and metabolic diseases than the general population. Approximately a third of U.S. adults with one mental illness also experience a substance use disorder. The rate of unemployment is higher among U.S. adults who have mental illness. Students with mental, emotional, and behavioral concerns are more likely to repeat a grade or drop out altogether. Depression is a leading cause of disability worldwide. Depression and anxiety disorders cost the global economy \$1 trillion in lost productivity each year. Reducing the stigma associated with mental illness is, rightfully so, a popular topic in our society so that folks are more likely to seek help and pursue healing and health.

Mental illness is defined as a mental, behavioral, or emotional disorder that can vary in impact from mild to moderate and even severe impairment. Severe mental illness results in serious functional impairment, limiting one or more major life activities.<sup>1</sup> Mental health struggles like depression, anxiety, mood and personality disorders, substance abuse, and addictions are not a new phenomenon. They are not only part of our current culture but have been part of the human experience from the beginning.

## **Mental and Emotional Struggles in the Bible**

As we search the scriptures for wisdom and understanding about God and his people, we see a wide range of human experiences and the emotions that color them. For example, David's honesty in his writing of the Psalms shows us that he suffered greatly from several issues, including loneliness, anguish, guilt, and shame. These feelings were often described as overwhelming by David: "My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear."<sup>2</sup>

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1 <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/mental-illness>

2 Psalm 38:4

The prophet, Elijah, was discouraged, depressed, scared, and exhausted: “I have had enough, Lord, he said. Take my life; I am not better than my ancestors.” Job experienced great loss and illness that led to bitterness, lack of peace, and a desire to die: “Why did I not perish at birth and die as I came from the womb?”

These are but a few examples of the mental turmoil that is part of humanity across time. It would be inappropriate to diagnose biblical people based on our limited information about them. However, it is likely that some of these people experienced mental health issues that, in modern times, we may refer to as complex trauma, addictions, depression, grief, and others. Even though we cannot diagnose them, there is much that we can glean from their stories regarding the human experience across time. We see how these very human experiences can become impairing to a person’s functioning and relationships.

## **Finding Wisdom for Mental Health**

Many options can be found online for dealing with and managing your mental health. Some of what you will find can be helpful, but how can you know? Like anything else that we search on the Internet, there are a multitude of options, but most of them are not rooted in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As Christians, we need to find some footing in this mental health movement because there is a sea of information and resources available at our fingertips. This book will help you hold fast to the scriptures for evidence of how God has formed the brain and mind and how all the elements of our humanity work together. We will examine timeless examples of mental struggles and see where Jesus shows up for those who are struggling. From the accounts of Jesus’s time on earth, we know that Jesus shows up for those who struggle with all kinds of issues that the world would ignore, and he leaves for us wisdom in his words and actions. He shows us with his own life how to care for our whole being, as well as how to share burdens with our neighbors. And most

importantly, he leaves us with the Holy Spirit living inside of us, reminding us that God's peace, comfort, and healing are as close as our breath.

I have written this book to give Christians this footing: a place where we hold fast to the truth and wisdom found in God's Holy Word and also discern what God is revealing through scientific research. Since I began the practice of psychotherapy, I knew that God was impressing upon me that his provision, his goodness, and his healing are available to us. And that if we really, really know him, we can find his truth even in science. God has fine-tuned my practice toward helping believers engage in mental health services and supporting the church in its efforts to come alongside those who are struggling. It is difficult to know who to trust for information these days, especially with so much coming at us on a topic we may not be that familiar with.

My intention is that this book would combine biblical truth and a scientific understanding of the mind to better engage the mental health movement for yourself and those you love. As we explore both mental well-being and mental illness, I want you to see that this book as a companion in the journey. This book will not be an exhaustive look at all mental illnesses or a handbook for addressing any one issue. Rather, I aim to provide a primer or a guidebook for Christians as they engage these issues in an American culture that continues to give them a prominent place in the news. Most importantly, I want you to take away from this book that you are not alone in your struggle. And if it's your loved one who is struggling, you have a companion in the journey of understanding and support.

In Part 1 of this book, we will explore the foundations of good mental health, including understanding our humanity from a theological perspective. It will get a little technical as we explore the mind, brain, and emotions. I think it is important to understand from a scientific standpoint how we were created by God, and it will give some background for the chapters to follow. We will also look at how to engage in practices for good mental health and why it is important to learn how to suffer in a world full of suffering.

In Part 2, we will explore the common origins of mental health struggles, including identity, early childhood relationships, and trauma. Gaining a better understanding of these roots will lay the foundation for Part 3.

Part 3 explores several of the most common mental health issues, how they present in different ways, and approaches to healing that address the whole self (heart, soul, mind, and strength). We will also touch on more profound mental illnesses for basic understanding.

Part 4 will include suggestions for how to go about finding the right clinician and when the appropriate time may be to seek help. We will also address some frequently asked questions and hesitations about therapy and counseling.

Throughout this book, I hope to show you how the Bible and the study of psychology intersect for our common good. I want you to see the wisdom of God's word and the way that scientific research reveals a loving creator who has so intricately created us to be able to find wholeness and healing through his Son. I am excited to show you how Jesus models healthy responses to human experiences for us. Though we will not tackle more complex mental health issues, we will look at next steps for finding trusted care and helping your loved ones. Let's face it: we all have experienced or know someone who has experienced these common mental health issues. My hope is that you will gain practical insights and suggestions for taking real steps toward growth, healing, and better mental health for your good and for God's glory.

As you begin this book, I offer this verse as a prayer for you:

*Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, as it goes well with your soul (3 John 1:2).*

# PART 1

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Foundations of Good Mental Health

# Chapter 1

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## THINKING ABOUT OUR HUMANITY

*To the woman he said, “I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.” And to Adam he said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life (Genesis 3:16–17).*

### **Brokenness: The Human Inheritance**

When we or someone we love suffers mental illness, we often wonder why. Our first inclination is that we should be able to control these issues—depression, addiction, or any other affliction of the mind. We seem to think we should be able to command our minds, to will ourselves to do what is good for us or make these afflictions go away. But brokenness, even of the mind, for all of humanity was ushered in by the first man and woman who disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden in Genesis 3. The passage in Genesis highlights several results of brokenness that were ushered in by the fall, like pain in childbirth! It’s hard even to imagine childbirth without pain, but it seems that was God’s intention in the beginning! This brokenness brings difficult relationships: God’s perfect design of a husband’s authority over his wife and family to live in harmony has now become a thing of discord and

pain. The land is now broken: It shall no longer produce as God intended. Man and woman will have to toil in pain to be fed from the broken ground.

As a result of the fall, our bodies experience brokenness in the form of disease and pain, both mentally and physically. In the same way, our relationships experience brokenness both emotionally and physically. The earth that we inhabit is broken; weather patterns are extreme and dangerous to human life. There is no more perfect garden where all shall eat and be satisfied; we now have hunger and famine throughout the world. There is confusion and disunity about things like our identities, our roles, and the definition of human life. The fall has broken every part of humanity and the world that we were given to inhabit.

But God.

I love this simple phrase that comes from Ephesians 2:4-10. It reminds me of what God has done for us. Sin and disobedience may have broken the beautiful, pain-free existence that God intended for us. But God, in his mercy, promises us what is to come in heaven: no more pain and sorrow. This is good news! And he doesn't stop with a promise of heaven. He also promises to give us everything we need on earth for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:2-4).

As we set our sights on what to do about this brokenness, let us first look to the example of Christ. While he was fully God, he was also fully human, enduring the realities of inherited human brokenness. He faced betrayal and contempt from those whom he was closest to. He felt the full weight of sadness when his friend Lazarus died. And as he prepared to go to the cross to reconcile the broken relationship between the Father and his people, Jesus experienced overwhelming grief. Over and over in the Gospels, we see Jesus moved with compassion for those who are suffering. His ministry was of healing physically, mentally, and spiritually.

Many mental health issues are a result of the everyday experiences, just as Jesus experienced in this broken world: difficulties in finding and keeping work, difficult relationships, tragedies, illness, prejudice and racism,

our own as well as other people's sin, natural disasters, and the list goes on. One place that we can find wisdom in navigating these issues is the Word of God. As our creator, God created our bodies down to the smallest cells; he knows us intimately, having knitted us together in our mother's womb.<sup>3</sup> Jesus also shows us the way: how to experience real emotion and how to deal with a variety of human struggles as he ministered to folks on his journey to the cross.

In addition, scientific research continues to discover God-given resources for mental health, both illness and wellness, that may not be directly commanded in scripture. As modern research continues to help us understand how the body and mind function, we can learn a lot about how to keep our minds healthy. Science often reveals the intricate nature of our creation and the ways God made us to heal and find wholeness. Scripture may not explicitly draw brain maps for us, but God has gifted us with a wealth of knowledge and wisdom to discern His design.

## The Intersection of the Bible and Psychology

In my experience, Western medicine and science are placed at odds with the Bible, as though we must choose one or the other to trust. Those who choose science alone cannot understand how Christians could believe in an invisible God that allows evil, suffering, and injustice. Christians who support the Bible to the exclusion of scientific research suggest that research is too easily manipulated and cannot be trusted. For Christians, there is a predominant teaching in the Church that the science of psychology cannot be trusted because it goes against the Bible in presupposing that all people are inherently good. In addition, I have had some tell me that the Bible can be the only source of counsel, and psychology is wrong because it encourages people not to take ownership of their problems.

Even though Christians sometimes shun the applications of psychological research, we all use it on a daily basis! For example, when we want to achieve success in a particular area, psychology prescribes goal-setting and breaking the large goal into smaller achievable goals. This coincides with the biblical wisdom we see in Proverbs 16:9: “The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps.”

In athletics, we often teach children to visualize their goals, a psychological technique that has been found beneficial for achieving targets. We also lecture to children about the power of their attitudes and “shrugging off” mistakes as a positive attribute of mental toughness. This concept relates to Proverbs 23:7: “As he thinks in his heart, so is he.”

We can see the benefit of perseverance in Galatians 6:9: “And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.” In psychology, the concept of perseverance can be likened to resilience, the ability to adapt quickly to stressful or traumatic events. Resilience is highly regarded in the psychological community as an important component of psychological health and well-being, one that can be developed in a person.

We also use psychology every day in parenting when we reward our children for a job well done, like with dessert after eating a healthy meal and for obedient behavior. What we are doing here is a form of operant conditioning by B.F. Skinner: delivering a positive or negative reinforcement to shape behavior. We surely see a reward promised in the Bible as well: “The wicked earns deceptive wages, but one who sows righteousness gets a sure reward” (Proverbs 11:18).

The Bible and the science of psychology do not need to be at odds. We can view psychological research through the lens of scripture, what we know about God and ourselves in the Bible. Christian psychologist and author Dr. Juli Slattery says, “Psychology rooted in biblical truth is the study and

application of how God designed us to function and is the pursuit of health in the places where we experience emotional and relational brokenness.”<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly enough, secular clinicians are among the first to recognize the importance of spirituality in human life and treating the whole person. In speaking of the traditional medical model, Daniel P. Sulmasy, a doctor and medical ethicist, believes that the “reductivist, scientific model is inadequate to the real needs of patients who are persons. Having cracked the genetic code has not led us to understand who human beings are, what suffering and death mean, what may stand as a source of hope... All human persons have genomes, but human persons are not reducible to their genomes. To paraphrase Marcel (1949), a person is not a problem to be solved but a mystery in which to dwell.”<sup>5</sup>

Psychologists and other mental health clinicians are increasingly operating with a biopsychosocial-spiritual view of human development and behavior, as suggested by Dr. Sulmasy. In this holistic view of human functioning, we see four aspects of self: biological (the physical), psychological (the mind), social (relational), and spiritual (related to the spirit or soul, the search for transcendent meaning). Including these aspects of psychological study and research will only give us a greater understanding of the intricacies with which God has created humans and the interplay between the parts of self.

As we understand scientific discoveries, we grow to love God even more for showing his sovereignty, beauty, complexity, and care for us. One important area of scientific discovery is that of the differences and interplay between the brain and the mind.

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4 Slattery, Juli. *Rethinking Sexuality: God's Design and Why It Matters*. Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 2018.

5 Daniel P. Sulmasy. “A Biopsychosocial- Spiritual Model for the Care of Patients at the End of Life.” *The Gerontologist* 42, suppl. 3 (Year): 24. Oxford: Oxford University Press. [https://academic.oup.com/gerontologist/article/42/suppl\\_3/24/569213](https://academic.oup.com/gerontologist/article/42/suppl_3/24/569213).

## Chapter 2

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# THE BRAIN, THE MIND, AND THE WHOLE-SELF INTEGRATION

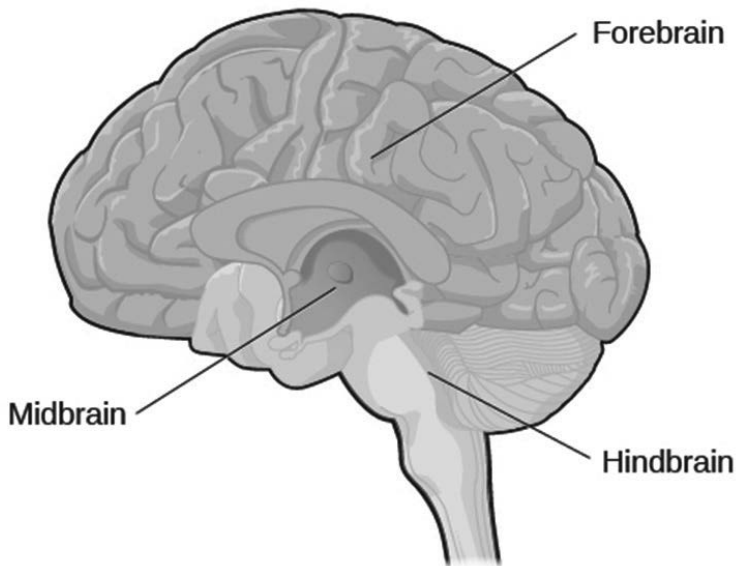
**T**he brain and the mind are words often used interchangeably, but some differences exist. When understanding the differences between the brain and the mind, we are speaking about the intersection of the tangible and intangible, the seen and unseen, something you can hold in your hand vs. something we see evidence of but cannot dissect. I want you to hang with me here. When we start talking science, I know some of your eyes glaze over, you'll start scrolling Instagram, or you may throw this book on the pile of books yet to be finished! I am going to try my best to give you a brief understanding of the brain and the mind—enough for us to build on through this book. So hang in there; for the next handful of pages, it will be worth it!

The brain is the physical organ that sits inside our skull and supports the functions of thinking, feeling, and engaging in physical activity (behavior). The National Institute of Health (NIH) defines the brain as the “most complex part of the human body. This three-pound organ is the seat of intelligence, interpreter of the senses, initiator of body movement, and controller of behavior. Lying in its bony shell and washed by protective fluid, the brain is the source of all the qualities that define our humanity.”<sup>6</sup>

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6 National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke. *Brain Basics: Know Your Brain*. Bethesda, MD: National Institutes of Health. Accessed March 6, 2025. <https://www.ninds.nih.gov/health-information/public-education/brain-basics/brain-basics-know-your-brain>.

The brain's structure includes three main parts: the forebrain, midbrain, and hindbrain. The hindbrain includes the brain stem, spinal cord, and cerebellum; it controls the body's vital functions. The hindbrain's cerebellum coordinates movements. At the uppermost part of the brainstem is the midbrain, which controls reflex actions as well as eye movement and other voluntary movements. The forebrain primarily consists of the cerebrum, which is the most developed part of the human brain. The cerebrum is the source of intellectual activities and allows you to plan, imagine, and think. The inner brain, which is hidden from view, serves as the gatekeeper between the spinal cord and cerebral hemispheres. These structures determine our emotional state and allow us to initiate movements without thinking about them. Note that this is a very brief and non-exhaustive description of the brain structure and its functions.



It is much easier to understand what the brain is because it is a physical, tangible thing that can be studied and examined. The mind is quite a different thing to attempt to understand.

The mind is the element of a person that enables conscious thought, awareness of self, others, and the world, to think, to feel, and to choose. It cannot be examined physically, yet it can be observed and sensed. Clinical and cognitive neuroscientist Dr. Caroline Leaf describes the mind as separate yet inseparable from the physical brain. The mind uses the brain, the brain responds to the mind, and the mind can change the physical structures of the brain with intentional activity. A person's behavior comes from the mind's process of sensing, feeling, and thinking. The mind is a stream of conscious and unconscious activity when we're awake and unconscious activity when we are asleep. The brain responds to the environment and to other people with neurochemical, genetic, and electromagnetic changes.<sup>7</sup>

Psychiatrist Dr. Curt Thompson<sup>8</sup> describes the mind as both “embodied” and “relational.” The mind incorporates the brain but also the entire body. It is always moving, growing, learning, and changing with new information and insight. The mind also has a relational aspect in the ongoing process of both formation and change. Dr. Thompson explains that our minds are not just our own because so much of what makes up our minds has to do with the interactions we have with other people. Whew. The mind is clearly a vast, intricate, amazing part of what makes us human. It is a difficult task to explain the mind and how interconnected it is with our own bodies, the minds of others through verbal and nonverbal communication, and the world around us, both natural and human created.

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7 Leaf, Caroline. *What Is the Mind?* Accessed March 6, 2025. <https://drleaf.com/blogs/news/what-is-the-mind>.

8 “**The Mind.**” *Being Known Podcast*, season 1, episode 6. Released March 23, 2021. Accessed March 9, 2025. <https://www.beingknownpodcast.com/>.

Each day, our minds are different from the day before. Indeed, each moment is different than the one before. Check out how this might work for any one of us:

On a rainy Monday morning (it's always on a Monday, isn't it?), Maya had a flat tire and had to change it before she could head to work. Frustrated with the rain, the delay, and the fresh set of clothes that she had to put on, she arrived late to work. Finally grabbing her first cup of coffee, she sat down to return emails and spilled her coffee all over her keyboard. The day felt ruined already! But during lunch, a colleague shared a funny story that made her laugh. By the end of the day, Maya passed by a street musician playing one of her favorite tunes, and her mood unexpectedly lifted. On her way home, she decided to phone her grandma, who always knows the right words to say. Each small experience—good or bad—had shaped her mindset throughout the day. A flat tire and a spilled coffee fueled her irritation, while laughter and music rekindled her optimism. The mind is like a sponge, absorbing the emotions of each moment, but it's also resilient—always ready to reset with the right nudge.

The rise of the field of cognitive neuroscience in recent years has catapulted our understanding of the interplay between the brain and nervous system with the mind. The word cognitive indicates the process of thinking, and neuroscience encompasses all the fields of study regarding the brain and nervous system. Simply put, this field studies the connection between the brain and behavior. According to researcher J.L. McClelland, “Cognitive neuroscience seeks to use observations from the study of the brain to help unravel the mechanisms of the mind.”<sup>9</sup> It “combines the experimental strategies of cognitive psychology with various techniques to actually examine how brain function supports mental activities.”<sup>10</sup> God intentionally created

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9 J.L. McClelland. Cognitive Neuroscience. In International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences. Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2001. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B0-08-043076-7/03406-9>.

10 M.E. Raichle. Functional Brain Imaging. In International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences. Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2001. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/B0080430767034070?via%3Dihub>

the physical brain and the mind to work together. Scientists are continually gaining more knowledge about the physical things of the brain through research, such as how neurons that produce chemical and electrical signals cause perception, memory, insight, and reasoning in the brain. Scientists can also observe how knowledge is acquired and represented in the brain's physical structure. These types of research help us see how this knowledge is then used in thought, perception, and behavior.

Scientific research is a common grace to humans because it helps us understand and discover ways to treat disease, as well as to prevent disease and optimize physical and emotional health. Increased studies in the area of neuroscience have also shown the positive impact of spiritual practice (which heavily involves the mind) on anxiety, depression, recovery from illness, addiction recovery, and more serious psychiatric disorders, as well as neuroplasticity. (Mohandas E. (2008).<sup>11</sup> Neuroplasticity is the ability of the brain to physically change its neural networks—a literal rewiring that changes the way it previously functioned. It is amazing to know that God, our Father, the author of life, created us with the ability to grow, change, and heal through the Holy Spirit by way of spiritual disciplines that he outlines in the scriptures. What an amazing God we have!

One example of neuroplasticity in action comes from the program Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). AA is a highly effective recovery program for anyone suffering from substance use disorder. One study shows that the rates of abstinence are about twice as high for those who attend AA, higher among those who previously attended AA, and show higher levels of abstinence for those with higher levels of attendance.<sup>12</sup> Another study

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11 E. Mohandas. “**Neurobiology of Spirituality.**” *Mens Sana Monographs* 6, no. 1 (2008): 63–80. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3190564/>.

12 LA. Kaskutas. “Alcoholics anonymous effectiveness: faith meets science.” *J Addict Dis.* 2009;28(2):145-57. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/19340677/>

specifically concludes that spiritual change contributes to recovery in the context of 12-step participation.<sup>13</sup>

I learned more fully about this program from my client, Vicky. Vicky didn't come to me for substance abuse, but rather stuck in grief after losing her daughter very suddenly a year earlier. As I helped Vicky move through the process of grief, I was privileged also to hear her story of healing from alcohol addiction with the help of AA. AA is based on the Twelve Steps, which correlate directly to biblical principles: recognition of our own limitations, surrender to a God of healing, repentance, confession, forgiveness, sanctification, restitution, reconciliation, and evangelism.

As Vicky shared her journey, what also became clear to me was that this program is especially unique and effective because of the social aspect. This social piece can be considered evangelism, or zealous advocacy for the cause that drives members to help others walk through the twelve steps. Vicky shared with me about those walking ahead of her on the journey who helped her do her work in each step, and she beams with joy when she shares stories of the others that she is now able to walk with on their journey through the steps. She knows that the power of AA is the one true God of healing that offers us new life in surrender to him. And that taking hold of that new life is a journey meant to be walked with others. These twelve steps, walked with others, essentially rewire the brain for healing and wholeness. It is easy to find research studies that tout the positive impact of AA on abstinence from alcohol.

### **The Mind as Part of the Integrated Self**

Since the Lord has created every part of our being so intentionally and intricately (Psalm 139), we ought to consider all of the parts of our humanity

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13 SE Zemore. "A role for spiritual change in the benefits of 12-step involvement." *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research*. 2007; 31(s3): 76s-79s. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/17880352/>.

when discussing the mind and its place in the whole self. Even though we know that we are living in the inheritance of brokenness, it is still true that God created man and woman in the grand finale of all of creation, giving them dominion over everything he had created. God looked upon all of his creation and saw that it was very good.<sup>14</sup> As we consider the mind, let us consider its place in all that was created and can be used to love God as he commands.

Quoting Deuteronomy 6, Jesus answered his disciples when they asked about the greatest commandment:

The most important is, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength” (Mark 12:29–30).

In this passage, Jesus describes four distinct parts of self: heart, soul, mind, and strength. Let’s briefly discuss the four parts of the self, beginning with the soul.

The soul is life. The Greek word used in this passage is *psyche*, translated here in English as “soul.” *Psyche* is synonymous with life. The word appears 105 times in the New Testament as soul, and 40 times it is translated life.<sup>15</sup> Soul is the most encompassing, profound meaning of life that transcends the physical existence of the body. The soul is made up of the spirit of God breathed into us as well as our human heart that can be tuned toward God, lit on fire for his will and ways by his extravagant love. The soul defines the essence of life for humans: the spirit of God that living in us, directing our hearts to live a life of loving God in response to what Jesus has done for us. In a way, the soul is the representation or activity of the whole-self integration.

So then, the soul contains the heart, but what is the heart? The heart is considered the “organ” of feeling and emotion, affection, and motivation. *My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and flesh sing for*

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14 Genesis 1:31

15 Joshua Hall. “**The Architecture of Man, Part 1: Heart, Mind, and Soul.**” *True Vine Life*. Accessed March 9, 2025. <https://www.truevinelife.com/growthinchrist/the-architecture-of-man-part-1-heart-mind-and-soul.>)

*joy to the living God.*<sup>16</sup> There is a physical heart that lives inside the physical body that pumps blood throughout our bodies and literally keeps us alive. The heart we speak of as part of the soul, and so often referenced in the Bible, is central to our emotional lives in the same way that the physical heart is central to physical life in the body.

In some ways, the heart is a driver; it takes in information from the body, the mind, the spirit of God, external sources, and relationships and sends us in a direction. Often, that direction is back to the mind to attain more knowledge and wisdom from the Bible, moving toward growth and maturity. In gaining knowledge and wisdom from the Bible, the heart should also move us in the direction of action, words, and deeds that align with God's word.

Author and Pastor John Piper states that when the mind is "rightly serving the heart [it] causes the heart to be aflame with Christ as a supreme treasure." He refers to the heart as a furnace that can be stoked and set aflame by gospel truths that are taken in through the mind.<sup>17</sup> Piper refers to the heart as the center of affection for God. I would add that the heart is also the center of our trust and belief in God as we see in these few passages:

*But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation (Psalm 13:5).*

*because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved (Romans 10:9).*

*Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me (John 14:1).*

The heart has a prominent place in these passages as a central aspect of our being. They show that the heart holds love, deposited from the Father,

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16 Psalm 84:2

17 John Piper. "Fuel for the Furnace," *Desiring God*, accessed March 9, 2005, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/fuel-for-the-furnace>.

that allows us to trust him for salvation, even when his full inheritance isn't yet realized. As a central aspect of our being, it is no wonder we are encouraged to protect it: "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life."<sup>18</sup>

Let us consider what it means to love God with our strength. Immediately, we think of our bodies, right? The word for might or strength in Deuteronomy 6 is actually translated to an adverb, "very." When we see this word translated in the New Testament Greek, it is translated as "power."<sup>19</sup> Both words still have implications for the physical, the activity of our lives. And if we are to be "doers of the word," as we are taught in the book of James, we must have healthy bodies to carry out the doing.

There are many things that we do to build our strength. We eat nutrient-dense foods, move our bodies, push against heavy things to gain power, and rest. We apply both pressure and rest to our bodies to keep them healthy. Out of all the parts of self, we tend to spend the most time caring for the body. Why do we do this? Well, what we can physically experience and see is going to garner most of our attention. In addition, as we age, we become more acutely aware of the need to care for our house (body) in order to accomplish the things we want to in this earthly life and to enjoy it as much as possible! God's word tells us that we are to give our bodies, our power, and our strength as a "living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to the God, which is your spiritual worship."<sup>20</sup> Even caring for our bodies can be a way to love God, as we manage well the abilities and power that he has given us.

Finally, we examine what it means to love the Lord with our minds. We have already begun our understanding of the mind from a more scientific aspect in relation to the physical brain. If you remember, the mind is the intangible element of a person that enables conscious thought and awareness of self and others and has the ability to think, feel, and choose. The mind is

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18 Psalm 4:23

19 <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/love-god-with-your-everything>

20 Romans 12:1

central to our thought life, to obtaining knowledge, and to governing our actions. According to late theologian R.C. Sproul, “The whole pilgrimage of the Christian life in our sanctification, then, is one in which we are seeking to love God more and more with our minds. The only way we can be transformed is with a renewed mind (Rom. 12:1–2). A renewed mind results from diligently pursuing the knowledge of God. True Christians want God to dominate their thinking and to fill their minds with ideas of Himself.”<sup>21</sup>

The mind directs the other elements of self (heart, soul, body) toward the will of God (Psalm 40:8). We can intentionally guide our minds with the knowledge of God through his word, actively reminding ourselves of his characteristics, like goodness, faithfulness, mercy, and grace. Our mind informs the heart, and when our heart is ablaze with the love of Christ, we are moved to action. What is actively deposited into the mind influences the health of the heart. When our heart is on fire with the love of Christ, it softens our hearts to live more like Jesus and toward the people around us. The heart and mind focused on God see the world through different lenses, so to speak. We will see others as being made in the image of God and be moved to offer them compassion. We will be able to see how God is working all the time in us and in the world (Philippians 2:13).

You can see that among the parts of self (heart, soul, mind, and strength), there is much crossover in description and function. In fact, we have these four parts that Jesus references in the New Testament, yet he is quoting God’s word in Deuteronomy 6, where there are only three parts stated (heart, soul, and might).

The heart and mind work in tandem and inform the soul. The heart, when it becomes ablaze for the Lord, informs our soul’s passions and desires to come more in line with God’s good and perfect will. I think that Jesus may expound on the heart by adding the mind so that we will have a clearer understanding of the parts of self as the New Testament writers continue to show us how we can direct our minds. Consider the Trinity,

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21 R.C. Sproul. “Loving God with Our Minds.” Access March 9, 2025. <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/loving-god-our-minds>

which is God in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Much of the essence of the three persons is overlapping as is the functionality of the three parts of humans. Yet, each part is distinct at the same time. With our human minds, we can try to make distinctions between heart, soul, mind, and strength. But the mystery of their interplay and oneness is not crystal clear to us. Because we are mainly focused on mental health in this book, one would assume that we would only be discussing the mind. However, I find it crucial that we understand the essence of all the material and non-material parts of who we are and how God has created them to be integrated and function best in this integration.

Paul explains this whole-self integration to the Corinthians, who were living very much with feet in two worlds: the culture in Corinth and the new life in the spirit. They were worshipping the Lord but also worshipping other gods with their bodies.

*“All things are lawful for me,” but not all things are helpful. “All things are lawful for me,” but I will not be dominated by anything.” Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food”—and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ (1 Corinthians 6:12-15a)?*

Paul explains later in this passage that even our bodies (as members of Christ) were bought with Jesus’s death and resurrection. Paul explains that all parts—heart, soul, mind, and strength—are to be tended to for God’s purposes. The body and soul are not separate. This speaks to an integrated self whose parts work together to bring God glory and demonstrate his love to the world. As we discussed earlier, the scientific community has developed a comprehensive, integrated, and holistic approach to understanding human health and well-being called the biopsychosocial-spiritual model. This model is widely used in healthcare and psychology to provide a more comprehensive understanding of an individual’s health and to develop effective treatment plans. The elements of this model are:

**Biological:** focuses on the biological and physiological aspects of health, including genetics, neurological functioning, and the impact of physical health conditions. Biological relates to physical aspects of the body and speaks to what the Bible describes as strength.

**Psychological:** involves the person's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors and includes coping mechanisms, mental health conditions, personality traits, and cognitive processes. The psychological aspect of a person speaks to what the Bible describes as the mind.

**Social:** considers the impact of the social environment, relationships, and support systems on an individual. It includes family dynamics, social support, cultural influences, socioeconomic status, and community interactions. The social aspect of a person most speaks to the heart aspect of self as described in scripture. It is in fullness of heart that we "one another" with the people around us.

**Spiritual:** defined broadly by the scientific community to encompass an individual's sense of purpose, meaning, and connection to something greater than oneself. The spiritual aspect of self that most closely relates to the element of the soul as described in scripture. For Christians, it is part of ourselves that knows there is more to this life than what we see. It longs for the face-to-face relationship with our creator and the promises of eternity with him.

Understanding the whole-self integration, evident in both scripture and utilized in the scientific community, is a helpful place to begin as we get ready to discuss what it means to have good mental health. We will continue with and expand our understanding of mental health by focusing more on the mind and its activities and capabilities. We will also see how the other aspects of self can help us have healthy minds. God has truly put us together in such a way that all our being works together in a beautiful symphony for his glory and our good.