

Healing the Effects of Stigma

In the Name of Jesus

How can we help?



marja bergen

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ADDRESSING THE PAIN

In the Name of Jesus

How can the pain of stigma be reduced? How can the good in those of us with lived experience be recognized and affirmed? We need to have caring people to build us up.

Followers of Christ are among the best individuals to make this happen because they have Jesus as their example.

Would you like to help?

THE PAINFUL EFFECTS OF STIGMA

What is the pain that people with mental health challenges live with? This is what they would tell us.

- We are looked down on.
- We are not understood.
- Our truths are not believed.
- We are shunned rejected, excluded.
- We are made to feel ashamed.
- Our abilities are often underrated.
- Our opinions are not respected.
- We are not taken seriously.

In human terms, what does this mean?

This pain does not come from our mental illness. There is no medication for it. It comes from what the world makes us feel about ourselves. It comes from stigma and should not be ignored, just like pain from other health conditions are not ignored.

If you were to live with all these negative attitudes towards you, how would you feel? This is important to understand. Because when you understand how stigmatized people feel, you'll be in an excellent position to be able to be good support for them.

Having a mental health condition is not our fault. There is nothing we could have done to prevent it. We need the kind of acceptance that Jesus once showed to those the world rejected.

In the following pages I show what Christ followers can do to make their friends with mental health issues feel better about themselves and grow in confidence.

Although I separate each source of pain and how we can help, they don't appear separately in our lives. In fact, they are all there with us, all at the same time. The suggestions for spiritual support that I give in this booklet could be applied on an ongoing basis, no matter what the people we care for are going through. Our needs are great and are often felt daily.

Most of all, the caregiver needs to show the love of Christ as he has shown himself to us.

ARE YOU A WOUNDED HEALER?

“The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

Matthew 25:40

We are all wounded by pain at one level or another—whether it be physical, emotional, or spiritual. Wherever we look, we’ll see the wounded around us—the sick, the lonely, the hungry, the thirsty.

In his book, *The Wounded Healer*, Henri Nouwen wrote how, “in our own woundedness we can be a source of life for others.” If you, as a person who understands another’s wounds will reach out to help, you may—as the Bible says—be doing it for Christ himself (What you do for them, you also do for him.)

Each of us can be a wounded healer because on certain levels we will be able to relate to the pain of others. There comes a time when we must stop looking at our own wounds and start looking on the woundedness of others. When we take the focus off ourselves we won’t be as aware of our own pain.

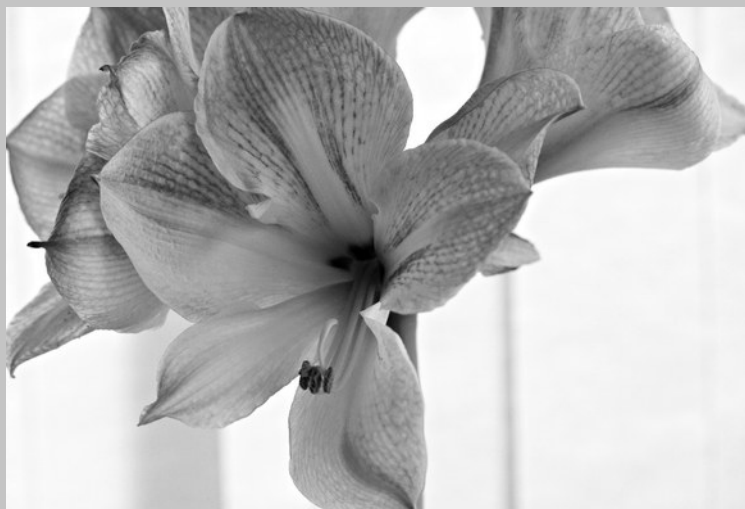
Our understanding of others’ pain will help us show the love of Christ by being present with them and by being the good listener they need to have. To know you’re being heard is one of the greatest healers.

Have you thought of this? Read what Isaiah 53:5 NLT had to say about Jesus:

*But he was pierced for our rebellion,
crushed for our sins.
He was beaten so we could be whole.
He was whipped so we could be healed.*

Jesus was a wounded healer. “*He was beaten so we could be whole.*”

What better example do we have to follow?





How can we help?



The way we feel.

We are looked down on.

How can you help?

“In fact, even the hairs on your head are all numbered. Do not be afraid; you are more valuable than many sparrows.” (Luke 12:7)

- Take some time with us, listening to things we want to share.
- Help us see the good in ourselves.
- Remind us of how God sees everyone of us as worthy individuals.
- Note how Jesus healed many who had been considered unworthy by the world.



The way we feel.

We are not understood.

How can you help?

*Making your ear attentive to wisdom and
inclining your heart to understanding.*
(Proverbs 2:2)

- When listening to us, do so with an attentive and caring spirit.
- How would Jesus listen? Probably quietly, using eye contact.
- Show that you're trying to understand by reflecting back to us what you hear us saying.
- Try to put yourself in our shoes.



The way we feel.

Our truths are not believed.

How can you help?

*A false witness will perish, But the man who
listens to the truth will speak forever.*

(Proverbs 21:28)

- Imagine having something very important to tell and having no one believe you.
- Everyone has a right to have their story heard by open-minded people.
- There may at times be reasons to doubt us because of the nature of our mental health, but that doesn't mean that we shouldn't be heard.
- Even Jesus was not believed by his brothers who had known him for thirty years. (John 7:5)
- What would the world be like today if no one had believed Jesus?



The way we feel.

We are shunned, rejected, excluded.

How can you help?

Why Lord, do you reject me and hide your face from me? (Psalm 88:14)

- These are some of the most hurtful and unfair situations to experience and can do a lot of damage to our self-esteem and confidence.
- As followers of Christ, try to adopt his spirit as you meet people with mental health challenges.
- Jesus even accepted the tax collectors, who everyone loathed. He had dinner with them.
- Remember how Jesus responded to the prostitute, the lepers, and the outcasts?



The way we feel

We are made to feel ashamed

How can you help?

*I trust in you; do not let me be put to shame
nor let my enemies triumph over me.*

(Psalm 25:2)

- Throughout Jesus' life, the Bible shows us that he accepted people who were rejected by everyone else.
- He treated them as people of worth.
- Sinners were forgiven. The sick received care.
- He asks us to do likewise.



The way we feel.

Our abilities are often underrated.

How can you help?

I can do all things through Him who strengthens me. (Philippians 4:13)

- Many individuals with mental health conditions have gifts that surpass those of “well” people.
- Ask us to contribute—our skills, our gifts, our knowledge.
- Encourage the development of such gifts in us.
- Help us realize that God has given us a life of value where many possibilities exist.



The way we feel.

Our opinions are not respected.

How can you help?

*Let the wise hear and increase in learning,
and the one who understands obtain
guidance, (Proverbs 1:5)*

- Everyone should have their opinions heard, regardless of their mental health, especially if it's in an informal setting.
- We who live with mental health issues could very well come up with creatively different views because of our unique perspectives.
- Even if the value of an opinion is doubted, be kind and show that you appreciate the input.



The way we feel.

We are not taken seriously.

How can you help?

Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony.

(John 3:11)

- Consider how it would feel if the things you did or talked about were not considered worth listening to.
- When this happens to us we start thinking that we don't matter. That we're not considered to be as human as others.
- Remember how Jesus welcomed little children to come to him?
- Jesus welcomes all of us and hears what we want to say.
- To Jesus, we all count. We all matter.



HOW CAN SPIRITUAL SUPPORT LEAD TO HEALING?

It can make us feel better about ourselves:

- by knowing that we have worth,
- by finding security in God's love,
- by developing confidence,
- by finding meaning in life.

Overcoming stigma leads to better mental health:

- by gaining confidence
- by learning to have the courage to move forward,
- by developing emotional strength,
- by developing faith, hope, and love.

As we receive healing, which is an ongoing process, we learn to use our lives to contribute to our community and our world.

THE GIFT OF COMPASSION

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.

2 Corinthians 1:3-4

In his book, *Faith and Mental Health*, Harold Koenig, M.D. wrote that mental illness could be viewed as a gift. “It can sensitize the emotionally or mentally ill person to the pain and suffering of others, uniquely equipping them with the insight and ability to help.”

We who live with illness and disability will be able to relate to the sentiments the apostle Paul expressed in the above. Through our own needs for compassion we have learned how to have compassion for those who suffer as we do. In this way our mental health issues can provide us with a gift for others.

The hunger for God is great among those in need. That is especially true for those living with mental health issues. I know it is. I’ve seen it. I’m one for whom this is true, well remembering what it was to be ill before I had God in my life.

I, along with others like me, know the pain of depression and anxiety. I also know how terribly unfair it is to be made to feel shame for having an illness I could not help. I

understand how knowing God's love assures me of my self-worth. I'm able to pass that assurance on to others. And because I know the comfort God gives me, I'm moved to comfort others through him.

Have you heard God call you to support those who suffer as you do? Are there people in your community with whom you could relate? People who you could give reassurance to—reassurance that they're loved, though they might be feeling rejected?

God looks for a heart filled with his love for others. He looks for a heart that's filled with a love for Jesus and gratitude for what he's done. He looks for a person who's willing and eager to

“comfort those in any trouble with the comfort [they themselves] receive from God.” (vs 4)

To such a heart God has been known to bring the greatest kind of joy. This joy goes to both—those who give his love and those who receive it.

TELL THEM OF HIS LOVE

There are those who have never felt real love before. They don't know what real joy is. Could we help them feel what God's love is like—the love they truly need?

Friends might wonder what this love we speak of is all about. They wish they knew it. Would it fill that emptiness they have inside—that loneliness, that hunger?

Physician and author Gabor Maté worked on the Vancouver Downtown Eastside, treating addicts and prostitutes. He tells how almost all his woman patients told him about the abuse and neglect they suffered as they were growing up. He talks about the great hunger these people have for “something,” though in most cases they know not what. Maté identifies this as a hunger for God. He says there is a God-shaped void, or hole, inside these troubled people, a hole they seek to fill through alcohol, drugs, and promiscuity.

Not everyone who hungers for God has addictions. There are many lonely people who know their life is missing something. Others suffer from illnesses that are hard to cope with—illnesses that cause endless pain.

If you know God and you have friends who are in need of him, I hope you will show them what his love is like. In every way I hope you will. Because right now they are children without a Father.

Please tell them they matter to him—the God of never-ending love. To him who will receive them like a child. The Father who will always keep them close if they will let him.

You'll be surprised to find that in reaching out with God's love to those who need it, your own capacity for his love will increase. You'll discover the joy of sharing him with another.

The Bible tells a story about someone who had been living with a God-shaped void inside.

A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. As she stood behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them. (Luke 7:37-38)

I wonder if the woman, thought to be a prostitute, instinctively recognized Jesus as someone who regarded her as a special person, someone he deeply loved?

Did she recognize him in the way someone might recognize a long lost mother or father whose love she vaguely remembers but hasn't felt for a long time?

What would life have been like for her, making a living by giving herself to strange men? How would she have felt about herself? Unclean? Worthless? Very likely. What would she need to feel better? I'm sure what she needed

was for someone to show her real love—someone who would love her for her heart, not her body. Did she even recognize that need in herself? Or did she simply experience an emptiness, an emptiness she had not been able to fill?

Then Jesus came along, the person who could offer her love and who could fill the emptiness she had inside. She was overwhelmed.

Her tears tumbled down like the tears of a child. In the greatest expression of gratitude, one that she didn't plan and couldn't have helped, tears spilled over Jesus' feet as he was reclining. With love, and in an act of worship, she wiped his feet with her long hair. She kissed them and poured perfume over them.

This woman's experience can be true for your friends as well. They too can approach Jesus with gratitude, releasing all that is painful inside. Better than anyone or anything in this world, Jesus can provide what they need: compassion, love, forgiveness. He can help them get a fresh start. They will hear him say:

"I love you deeply. You are clean and you belong to me."

CARING – JESUS' WAY

... a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

Luke 10:33-35

What I most appreciate about Jesus is his humility. When caregivers use his attitude as their example something special happens to the care they provide. They don't consider themselves above the person they care for. Individuals with such love have a genuine desire to be there for the person in need, treating them as an equal. Love comes naturally and easily.

The story of the Good Samaritan, part of which is shown above, is a parable Jesus told about a stranger showing mercy to an injured man he had found lying on the road. The Samaritan in the story portrays what Jesus is like. This is the kind of person I would appreciate having with me when in trouble.

I can trust a person who does not consider themselves greater than me. I can trust a person who bends down to my level to hear me whisper my prayers—a person who will patiently bandage my wounds, though their own life might be busy. I can have confidence in the kind of love

given by such a person. Such love is authentic, coming from a sincere heart—a heart that is not pre-occupied with self but others.

That's Jesus' kind of love. It's humble.

Some of us need care periodically. It's good to be cared for by people who are followers of Christ like ourselves. But even Christian caregiving isn't always what it should be. Sometimes, in their zeal to do the Lord's work, people get close to treating us as charity cases instead of people of worth.

Painful situations can develop when a caregiver no longer sees us as being in need. The friend we thought they were abandons us, no longer spending time with us the way they had been. Anyone who has experienced such rejection will understand the great pain it brings. They will understand how worthless they were made to feel.

That's why it's important not to rely on a single supporter, but to have a number of friends we could call on when in need.

Jesus, our best friend of all, is unlike earthly supporters. He never views us as a project. We can rest in Jesus' friendship, knowing he will always be there. He tells us that we are all equal under God and we can look at ourselves in that light. We are as worthy as those who care for us.

One day we'll be able to give care to our caregivers.

Sample Devotionals



FROM CONCEPT TO WORKABLE MINISTRY

I have a collection of devotionals to share. Although they are specifically written to address pain experienced by people living with mental health challenges, many like to read them. These devotionals could form the beginning of a care ministry of your own.

At <https://marjabergen.com/devotionals> you can freely download them and browse to find what you would like to send out to people who need Christ's healing. You will find a total of 230 devotionals for individual use and 60 interactive devotionals for group use.

Why not make a list of interested people and send them out on a regular basis? That alone will provide much of the spiritual food readers will need to help them with their day-to-day lives.

The following pages contain s selection of some of the devotionals availabe to you at <https://marjabergen.com/devotionals>

May God bless you in your work.

marja

ASHAMED NO LONGER

When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, because she thought, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed." Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering. (Mark 5:27-29)

As Jesus was walking toward the home of Jairus, a synagogue leader, to heal his daughter, a crowd gathered around Him, as it so often did. In the crowd was a desperate woman who had suffered from vaginal bleeding for twelve years. Medical treatment had cost her all she had but it did not help.

Her condition caused her more than weakness and other health problems. Almost as serious was the shame it brought her. She was considered unclean, which meant that everyone she touched would become unclean as well. Neither was she permitted to enter the temple.

Have you ever felt ashamed? . . . about embarrassing things you've done? . . . about embarrassing illnesses, disorders, or other health conditions you might have?

If you are one of the many who have, you will understand how this woman might have felt. Shame makes a person feel unworthy, disrespected, "dirty." Hopeless as a person who will ever be accepted by others.

Yet she believed that Jesus could heal her. . . . If she could only get close enough to him. But how to do so with all those people crowding around him? If she wanted him to heal her she would have to tell him her problem, as Jairus had done. But what shame that would bring her! Everyone would hear and realize that she, an unclean person, had touched so many. Shame upon shame!

And so, seeing that asking Jesus to heal her was not an option, she drew close to him and touched a corner of his cloak, not thinking he would notice. *Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering.* (verse 29) *At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who touched my clothes?"* (verse 30)

When the woman identified herself, Jesus asked her to do the unthinkable—to openly tell her story. Trembling in fear at his feet, she poured out her shame in front of everyone.

Jesus must have been very moved by this woman's faith. He bent over her and said, *"Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering."* (verse 34)

He called her "daughter," a warm expression showing love. What a wonderful thing it would have been for her to hear him say that! To know that all was well. After her twelve years of living with shame, Jesus now shows her acceptance and love.

What does this story mean to you? What can Jesus do for you?

Although we may not experience a physical cure from illness in this lifetime, our faith in Jesus can bring healing in other ways. We don't need to feel shame before him. He sees who we are on the inside and will bring healing to our heart and soul.

Maybe you will hear him tell you too, as He told the woman in this story: "Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering."

With love Jesus accepts us. He calls us His sons and daughters. We don't need to be ashamed.

JESUS UP CLOSE

At that time Jesus said, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned and revealed them to little children.” (Matthew 11:25)

Have you ever tried to bring yourself back to the child you used to be during those days when everything in the world around you was sparkling new? Have you ever drawn close—really close—to examine beautiful things?

If we could only be like that child again, seeing Jesus up close. It would be so good if we could truly see the real person Jesus was and still is for us. Invisible to our eyes, though real.

Many children create imaginary friends for themselves. Few will consider those friends real in that they can be touched or seen. But to them they are “as-real.” Imaginary friends have been shown to provide good company for children who have a lot of time to themselves and might be lonely. They provide someone to talk to and play with. The friends listen to the children and support them. An invisible friend is special and does not judge or find fault.

Sounds a bit like Jesus, doesn’t it?

Could we possibly summon back such an imagination and see Jesus as a child might see an invisible friend? The

difference, of course, would be that our friend Jesus won't be in our imagination alone. Jesus, though we might not physically see him, is very real.

How awesome our experience of Jesus would be if we could—like a child—imagine being with him as he walked the earth two thousand years ago. Imagine how you'd feel as you see him do the unthinkable—touching a leper and healing him. Imagine what it would be like to be part of a crowd, hearing Jesus present the most radical ideas you had ever conceived. What a thrill to realize a better world is possible! A world where God reigns.

Imagine Jesus so close that you could almost touch him. Can you feel the water in the basin sloshing around your feet as he bends over and washes them? How humble! You realize you want to be like him. You realize how you too would like to serve rather than be served.

As children, we readily obey Christ's call to us. We follow him, and he does give us what we long for. We do grow to be more and more like him.

If we could only be like children again . . .

“DO YOU WANT TO GET WELL?”

Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. Here a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, “Do you want to get well?”

(John 5:1-6)

After years of suffering, despite lack of improvement through medication or therapy, have you ever wondered whether there might be hope for you? Have you ever considered that God with his power could help you create a more whole life? Are you able to entertain that hope today?

I never seriously wondered whether wellness would ever be possible. I just got up each morning, hoping the day would be one of the better ones. I didn’t believe that my condition could improve.

The disabled man Jesus found lying by the pool called Bethesda felt the same way. He had been an invalid for thirty-eight years, hoping—but in actual fact, having given up—receiving healing in the medicinal pool. He had become quite comfortable in the place he had in life.

Listen to what Jesus asked the man: “*Do you want to get well?*” He asks you and me the same thing. A deeper form of the question would be: “Do you want your life changed?” Because when we’re made whole after a long illness, our life is bound to change.

Being whole is to be physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually well. It is to live life fully and happily. Wholeness is possible, even when we have a physical illness or disability.

How can we find such wholeness?

If you’re to be whole, change will have to come into the life you now have. Trouble is, some of us are afraid to let God change us. We resist. Like the invalid lying at the pool, we feel comfortable where we are. It might be too hard to make the effort. Or maybe, after being sick for such a long time, we have become discouraged. Some of us are in too much pain—physical pain, emotional pain.

Are you, too, fearing change?

Jesus is asking you, “*Do you want to get well?*” He offers you healing and will give you the courage and the strength to become the whole person you were always intended to be.

Here are a few things you could, with God’s help, change about your life to help you heal: Pray for friendships through which God can work. Focus on the beauty of the world around you. Let go of all that will hamper what

God wants to do inside you: anger, hurt, grief. Give up destructive habits like smoking or drinking. Clear the way for God to do his work in your heart and soul.

The most important thing about being whole is making Jesus part of your life by developing a deeper relationship with him. Jesus invites us to come to him in faith and trust, saying, *“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”* (Matthew 11:28)

Are you willing to be made well? Jesus said to the lame man, *“Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.”* And he tells us the same.

Walk with Jesus. Live with him. He’ll bring you peace for your soul. You will find the wholeness you’ve been longing for.

Lord, we thank you for your presence. Help us to stay open to you – open to the good you want to fill us with.



Medications and other world remedies cannot heal the ingrained wounds of stigma. The pain of rejection, shunning, exclusion, feelings of shame, and being looked down on, can only be relieved through spiritual means. By following Jesus and how he treated those the world would not have anything to do with, we too can learn how to help those who are being stigmatized today. This booklet will help the reader understand what it means to live with stigma. They will learn how to bring the love of Jesus to those who suffer and help ease their pain.

How can the painful effects of stigma be reduced? How can the good in those of us who live with mental health challenges be recognized and affirmed? We need to have caring people to build us up. And followers of Christ are among the best individuals to make this happen because they have Jesus as their example.

Marja Bergen has a total of seventeen years experience giving spiritual support to her peers—from 2006 to 2015 as she led her Living Room support group and from 2013 by writing Reflections on Scripture that she sent out to people with mental health needs. Marja is the author of many books about mental health and writes regularly for her blog. She lives in Burnaby, BC with her husband Wes.

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