

The Church and Mental Health



St. Mark Coptic Orthodox Church
Parents Meeting
June 11th, 2023

“Our hearts are restless until they find rest in you oh Lord!”- Saint Augustine



Why Mental Health? Why the Church?

The Church is a **hospital**, and not a courtroom, for souls. She does not condemn on behalf of sins, but grants remission of sins.....

No one is truly free or joyful besides he who lives for Christ. Such a person overcomes all evil and does not **FEAR ANYTHING!**

-St. John Chrysostom



Mental Health Conditions and Contexts

- ▶ EVERYTHING IS SPIRITUAL
- ▶ Anxiety, Depression, Alcohol/Drug Use, Suicidality
- ▶ Anger issues/Personality Disorders and Traits, Social Media
- ▶ Peer Pressure, Family Problems (Marital and family dynamics)
- ▶ Communication Issues, Defense Mechanisms!!!



How does the Church view mental health?

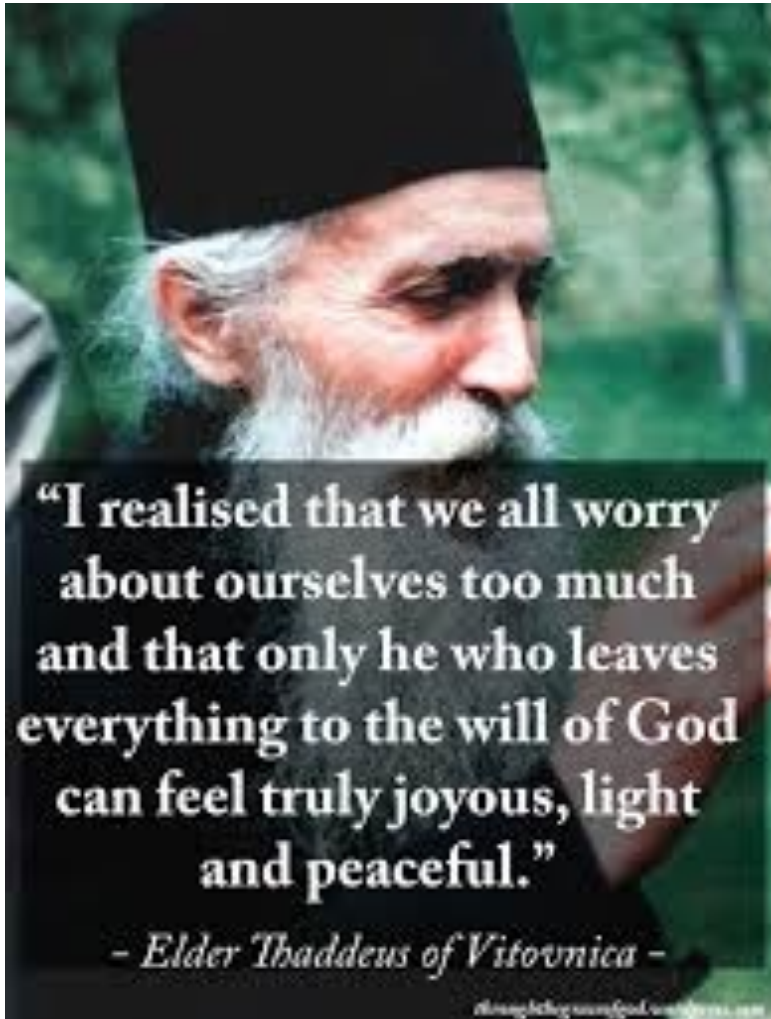
- ▶ **Scriptures:** The Prophets, the Psalms, Proverbs, Sirach, Spiritual Anguish
- ▶ Fathers of the Church on depression, anxiety, worry (St. Ephraim, Evagrius, St. John Cassian)
- ▶ **Desert Fathers:** management of thoughts, worry, anxiety, acedia, despondency/despair (Origin of CBT), Canons of St. Timothy
- ▶ Mental Illness is **NOT** a Sin, it is a struggle that is fought, and the Church has always known and provided help for those struggling with this
- ▶ “The Hope of those who have no Hope, and the Help of those who have no helper”- **Litany of the Sick, Liturgical Prayers, Agpeya Prayers**



Scriptures:

- ▶ “Therefore do not **worry** about tomorrow, for tomorrow will **worry** about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”
- Matthew 6:34
- ▶ “Cast all your **anxiety** on him because he cares for you.”- 1 Peter 5:7
- ▶ “**Anxiety** in a man's heart weighs him down.” (Prv 12:25)
- ▶ “For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, **thoughts of peace** and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.”- Jeremiah 29:11





**“I realised that we all worry
about ourselves too much
and that only he who leaves
everything to the will of God
can feel truly joyous, light
and peaceful.”**

- Elder Thaddeus of Vitovnica -

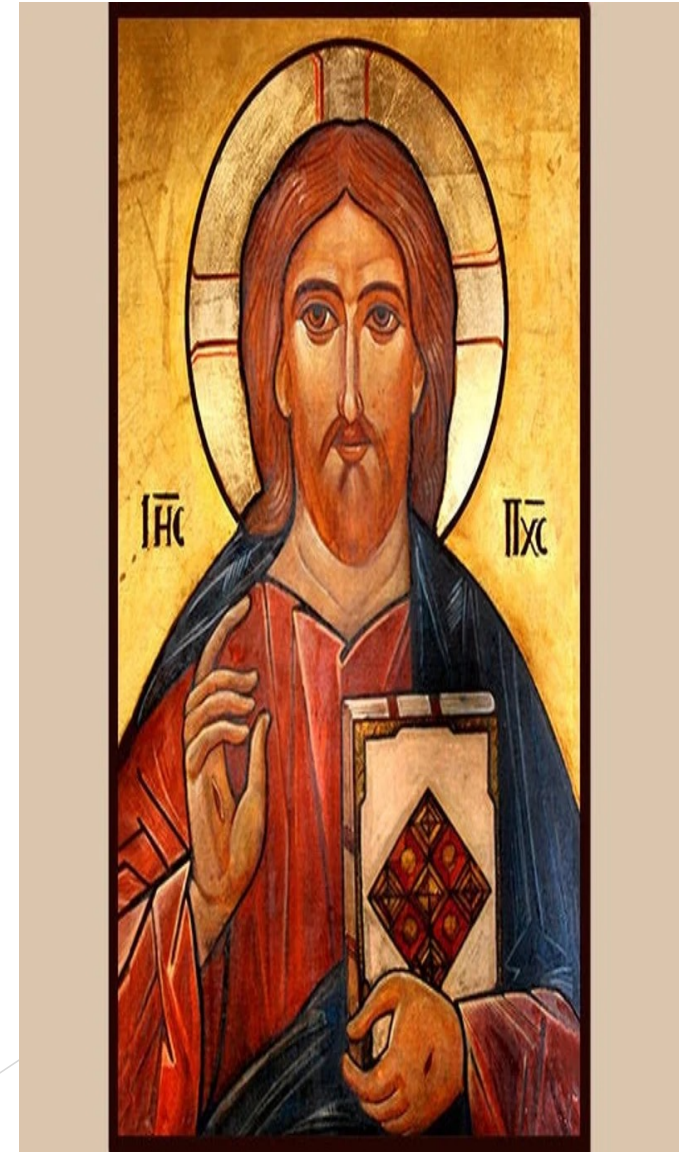
throughthesun.com.au



Modes of Healing and Development

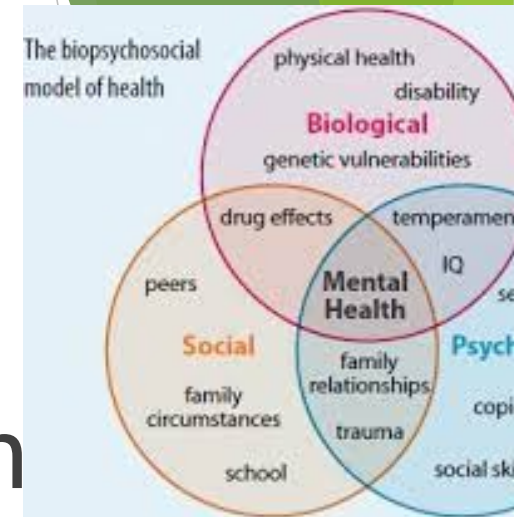
▶ “And Jesus increased in **wisdom** and **stature**, and in **favor** with **God** and **men**.” – Luke 2:52

▶ “Great is the mystery of Godliness God was **manifested in the flesh**”- 1 Timothy 3:16

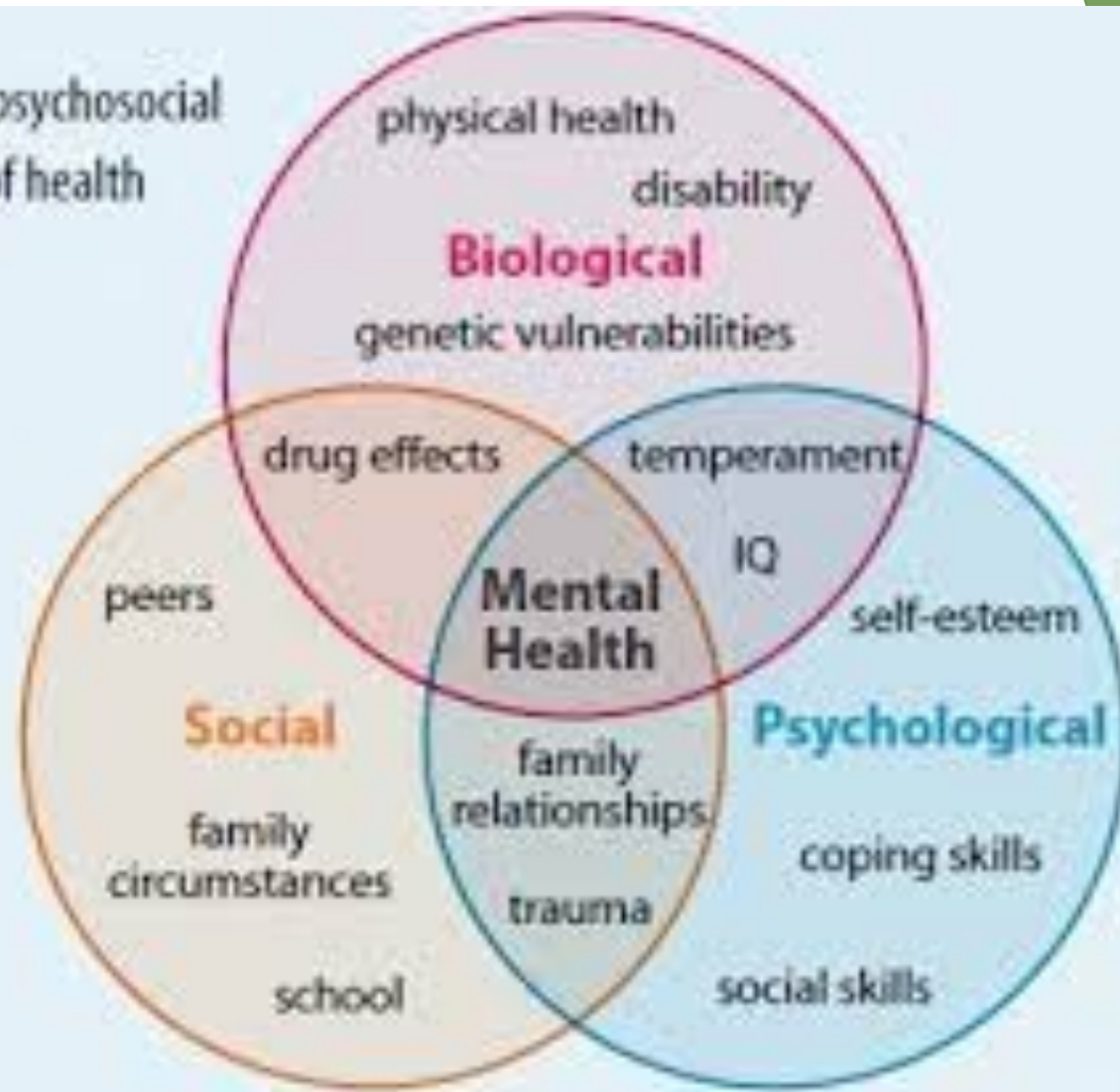


Bio-Psycho-Social-Spiritual Development and Healing

- ▶ **Biological:** Christ Grew in Stature
- ▶ **Psychological:** Christ Grew in Wisdom
- ▶ **Social:** Grew in favor of men
- ▶ **Spiritual:** Grew in favor of God



The biopsychosocial model of health

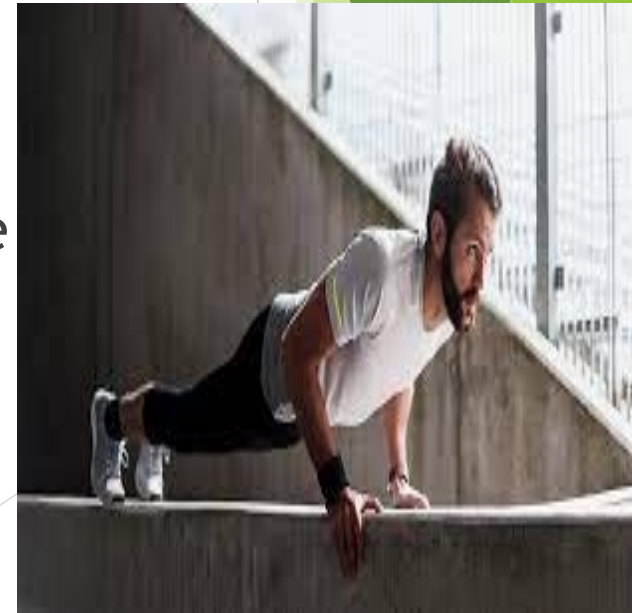


How to treat and help those with mental illness?

- ▶ **The Body: Temple, The Mind: thoughts, the Social: community, and the Spiritual: Mysteries of the Church and God**
- ▶ Church from the early times very empathetic
- ▶ **We must learn to empathize with those who struggle**

Biological

- ▶ **The Body and Care of it is revered and Pure in Orthodoxy**
- ▶ Diet, Exercise, Good Sleep Hygiene
- ▶ Role of Psychiatric Medications
- ▶ “Do you not know that your **bodies** are **temples of the Holy Spirit**, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own” - 1 Corinthians 6:19
- ▶ For bodily exercise **profiteth** little: but godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come.- 1 Timothy 4:8
- ▶ St. Paul teaches us that exercise of the Body has profit
- ▶ **Sirach 38-** Role of Physician and Medications





Psychological

- ▶ Coping Skills and Stress Management
- ▶ Keeping Busy: “**Idleness is the Devil’s Playground!**”
- ▶ Emergent vs Urgent vs Important,
Psychotherapy: utilization of therapist, counseling, avenue of release (catharsis)
- ▶ Meditation: Jesus Prayer/Arrow Prayer
- ▶ “We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and **take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.**” - 2 Corinthians 10:5

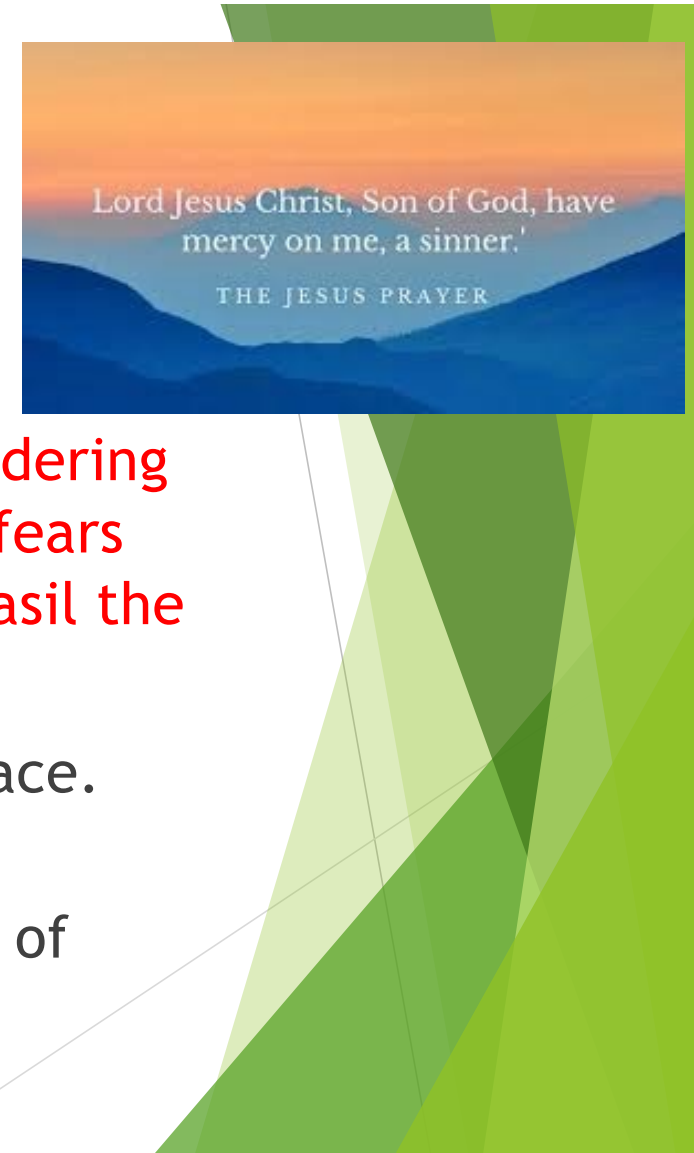
Social

- ▶ Always encourage **good social connections**
- ▶ **EMPATHY- Use your Wounds;** Never be apathetic, not too sympathetic, always empathetic
- ▶ “For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.”- Matthew 18:20
- ▶ “Though one may be overpowered by another, two can withstand him. And a threefold cord is not quickly broken.” -Ecclesiastes 4:12
- ▶ “Evil company corrupts good habits”- 1 Corinthians 15:33, **Church as a social gathering, Early Church Agape Meal; why church has social events**



Spiritual

- ▶ MYSTERIES OF THE CHURCH; **The Eucharist, Repentance and Confession**
- ▶ Prayer, Scripture reading and meditation
- ▶ **PSALMS!** The Psalms as Treatment for Bewildering Thoughts, Serenity of Soul, and helps with fears and a rest from the stress of the Day (St. Basil the Great)
- ▶ **Thanksgiving** is the first step of Joy and peace. Even amidst distress to always be thankful.
- ▶ Church starts every service with the prayer of Thanksgiving



Our Lord and The Blind Man

- ▶ **Biological:** “After saying this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man’s eyes. 7 “Go,” he told him, “wash in the Pool of Siloam” (this word means “Sent”). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing.” John Chapter 6
- ▶ **Psychological:** “His neighbors and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, “Isn’t this the same man who used to sit and beg?” 9 Some claimed that he was. Others said, “No, he only looks like him.” But he himself insisted, “I am the man.”- John Chapter 6 Verse 8
- ▶ **Social:** No social support, people were judging him, no close social network, abandoned, Our Lord became to him a friend, and someone who cares!
- ▶ **Spiritual:** Then the man said, “Lord, I believe,” and he worshiped him.
- ▶ **A man in distress, low self esteem and confidence, a man in worry and despair, anxious about his condition, begging for help**



Conclusions:

- ▶ Mental health conditions increasing
- ▶ Always provide a lending ear to those we serve especially our loved ones, and address all four domains as our Lord did
- ▶ If function compromised and safety concern refer to physician for evaluation. Involvement of Parents
- ▶ **YOU ARE NOT ALONE. Give examples of those in Scriptures who battled mental health conditions**
- ▶ Share in the suffering of others: **This is the True Manifestation of Aghape Love**
- ▶ Ultimate Goal in any type of wound or suffering is to share in the sufferings of Christ
- ▶ St. Paul said, “If we suffer with him we shall be Glorified with him”. Purpose of the Incarnation!





- ▶ “Only the wounded healer can truly heal” - Irvin Yalom
- ▶ Reminds us of Christ, and how we should look at our own wounds heal them, and then we can help and approach others in their strife and suffering

Resources:

- ▶ Raising Lazarus: Healing in Orthodoxy
- ▶ Orthodox Psychotherapy
- ▶ Mental Illness and Spirituality; Theology of Illness (Jean Charlet)
- ▶ Overcoming Anxiety/Depression: Christ, the Church Fathers, and Cognitive Scientific Psychology by Fr. George Morelli
- ▶ Writings of the Desert Fathers; St. John Cassian and Evagrius, Ephrem the Syrian
- ▶ Our Thoughts Determine our Lives, Elder Thaddeus
- ▶ Many Self Help Books on Depression/Anxiety: DARE, David Burns Feeling Good, etc.