

Message: "Emotional Health: A Message of Hope"

How do you feel today? We hear the question all the time. The typical response is "fine" or "okay." We seldom hear what the other person is really feeling; their emotional state. Even more rarely are we open to hear about someone else's emotional state. I think that's sad as it means we may have a lot of acquaintances, but few relationships where we can openly share what's weighing on our soul.

It's hard to have empathy for another person when we're dealing with despair and trauma ourselves. We're struggling to cope with our own physical, mental, emotional and spiritual challenges.

We've all been wounded by the trauma we're all experiencing. And that's not counting the cost of the things happening to us in our every day lives: death, separation, divorce, addiction, abuse, illness, accidents and the stress and strain of trying to make ends meet while caring for your family.

How are you feeling? If you're like many people, you're feeling isolated, stressed, tired, anxious, depressed and fearful. I have news: the feelings and emotions you're experiencing are normal. There's nothing wrong with being sad or joyful or anything in between. Solomon wrote, "*For everything there is a season ... a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance*" (Ecclesiastes 3:1,4).

We've been talking about healthy ways to cope with trauma over the past few weeks. We started with the current state of trauma in America, recognizing grief affects all aspects of our being. I spoke about our physical health and about mental health.

This week, we're going to spend some time reflecting on our emotional health. The bottom line is this: it's okay to show your emotions. There's no shame doing so. After all, God gave them to us.

There's nothing wrong with shedding tears. Jesus cried when he was standing in front of the tomb of Lazarus, one of his best friends (John 11:35). There was no shame or guilt. It was a heartfelt, natural emotion. Jesus was also called "*the man of sorrows*" (Isaiah 53:1-3). He certainly understands grief, sadness and rejection. We can safely turn to him.

There's also nothing wrong with laughter. One verse I wish was in scripture is this, "Jesus laughed." Some you may have seen a picture of Jesus laughing in my office. It was given to me by a dear sister in Christ several years ago. Some people see Jesus as a solemn, serious person. I believe this view misses the mark.

Jesus was a well-rounded, healthy human being. He loved being around children and children loved being with him (Matthew 19:14). That's a sure sign. Jesus also had a sense of humor. After all, who doesn't smile when you imagine a camel going through the eye of a needle (Matthew 19:24)? Jesus encouraged laughter in his teaching and told parables where joy was found (Luke 15). At times, Jesus was even accused of being too joyful (Luke 7:34).

Being in an authentic relationship with another person means sharing our experiences: the good and bad times, laughter and tears, joys and concerns.

That reminds me of a story. One evening, there were two couples having dinner in a restaurant. One of the couples was newlyweds. They sat together, looked into each other's eyes and spent the evening in conversation. The other couple were much older; they had been together for many years. They, too, sat together. They looked into each other's eyes, touched each other, but sat together in silence.

The young couple noticed the older couple. The young husband said, "Isn't it sad; they have so little to talk about?" The young bride said, "Isn't it marvelous; they can communicate so much without speaking."

When you are emotionally available and connected with another person, conversation may be unnecessary. Some of the most powerful moments in my life and ministry were just sitting quietly with a person, letting them know I was there, emotionally available. I know you have the same experiences.

Those moments are God-moments. God's Spirit connects us to God and other people at a deep, spiritual level. We're connected so deeply language has no meaning. Paul put it this way, "*the moment we get tired ... waiting, God's Spirit is right alongside helping us along. If we don't know how or what to pray, it doesn't matter. [The Spirit] does our*

praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans. [The Spirit] knows us far better than we know ourselves, ... and keeps us present before God. That’s why we can be so sure that every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good” (Romans 8:26-28, MSG).

Being in touch with your emotions and emotionally available to others is one of the ways we care for others. We’re living as God’s children, made holy by the presence God in our lives and the lives of others. Tuning out our emotions or desensitizing ourselves to them is like taking two strings away from a six-string guitar. Our life becomes filled with discord, rather than harmony.

You may not realize it, but feeling is part of our Wesleyan DNA.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, famously describes his Aldersgate experience in his journal entry from May 24, 1738, *“In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading [Martin] Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.”*¹

This God-moment happened unexpectedly. There are certainly times when it happens that way. More often, these special encounters with the Holy Spirit come to those who are seeking, those who have opened their hearts to receive something special from God.

How do you feel? No matter whether you’re here in person, watching online or reading the sermon afterward, you’re making the choice to do so. There’s something deep down drawing you this God-moment. If you’re like me and everyone else gathered, we have a story to tell about how our hearts feel. God knows your story. We want to hear your story. I invite you to connect to a person or group and share your story. You will make our lives better and, in turn, your life will be made better.

¹ <https://www.umc.org/en/content/holy-spirit-moments-learning-from-wesley-at-aldersgate>

Does hope come from our heart, head or from outside of us?

There is a connection between spirituality and hope. The author of Hebrews knew this, “*Faith is the reality of what we hope for, the proof of what we don’t see*” (Hebrew 11:1). God gives us hope as a gift.

We are better when we’re connected with God and others. We learn through relationships. When people – particularly children, realize they can safely express their emotions with you, it has great benefits. A bond is formed. There’s greater trust. There’s a sense of security. We feel accepted for who we are. These formative experiences shape and form the relationships we seek out later in life.

The nature of your relationships matters. Some of our relationships are healthy – they feed our emotional health in a positive way. Other relationships are unhealthy – they draw from our emotional health in a negative way. To put it simply: some people fill our soul; others drain our soul. You can choose what kind of friend you will be and who you will have as friends.

One of the potential downsides to close relationships is our dependence on the other person. We all have some degree of co-dependency. That comes with being in a relationship. But there are times when our emotions get out of control, when we can become too dependent on another person’s emotional or mental state. When that happens, we need to use our emotional intelligence to step back. In meditation, this is the concept of equanimity; accepting without judging. Our Bishop, Rev. Dr. Grant Hagiya, wrote a book on emotional intelligence called *Spiritual Kaizen*.² You may want to read it to learn more.

Dr. Edwin Friedman said, “The most important attribute ... is not knowledge or technique ... they need a non-anxious presence.”³ We can be present in a non-anxious way.

Ready or not, you are in ministry, the ministry of all believers.

You are part of a relationship with another person. You are part of a household. You are a model for children and others in our community.

² Grant Hagiya, *Spiritual Kaizen: How to Become a Better Church Leader*, Abingdon Press, 2013

³ Dr. Edwin Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leader in the Age of the Quick Fix*, Seabury Books, 2007

Your life is a witness to your faith in Jesus. You may not realize it, but it’s true. This isn’t something you can avoid. It’s also something you shouldn’t be anxious about. It’s the nature of our life and Jesus’ way.

When you choose to be present and emotionally available to others in a non-anxious way, you make a difference. How you do so is by letting things go. 95% the things people say and do are focused on themselves and their own interests. You can’t control them (nor should you try to). The only person you can control is yourself. And the best thing you can do is admit the truth of your emotional state. Once you can admit you aren’t just happy or grateful, but sad or angry or down, you’re on the way. Be honest with yourself, God and others. Forgive yourself and others. When you do, you’ll find the peace of Christ. I truly believe that’s the secret to emotional health and contentment.

Dr. Friedman also said, “Somebody who has a deep faith tends to have both internal and external pathways to help them deal with stress. When we’re facing adversity or trauma, it’s the capacity to lean into one another that gives us hope. A deep robust faith in Jesus is what we need to endure at a different level because we know things will get better.”⁴

How are you feeling today?

Reach out to someone. Be the friend you want to have. You’ll be glad and you’ll feel better.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 47

Psalm 77:11-15 (CEB)

- ¹¹ I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord;
I will remember your wonders of old.
- ¹² I will meditate on all your work,
and muse on your mighty deeds.
- ¹³ Your way, O God, is holy.
What god is so great as our God?
- ¹⁴ You are the God who works wonders;
you have displayed your might among the peoples.
- ¹⁵ With your strong arm you redeemed your people,
the descendants of Jacob and Joseph. *Selah*

Hebrews 4:11-16 (CEB)

Therefore, let's make every effort to enter that rest so that no one will fall by following the same example of disobedience, because God's word is living, active, and sharper than any two-edged sword. It penetrates to the point that it separates the soul from the spirit and the joints from the marrow. It's able to judge the heart's thoughts and intentions. No creature is hidden from it, but rather everything is naked and exposed to the eyes of the one to whom we have to give an answer.

Also, let's hold on to the confession since we have a great high priest who passed through the heavens, who is Jesus, God's Son; because we don't have a high priest who can't sympathize with our weaknesses but instead one who was tempted in every way that we are, except without sin.

Finally, let's draw near to the throne of favor with confidence so that we can receive mercy and find grace when we need help.