



Supporting Good Mental Health

Written by **Professor Chris Cook** and accompanied
by “have a go” habits developed by **Ruth Rice**

The effects of mental health problems are huge. Nearly nine out of ten people with mental health problems have been affected by stigma and discrimination. Given the challenging times we are living in with coronavirus, the reflections in this booklet were updated and new resources written in March 2020. They seek to provide hope, reassurance and comfort.

If you want to speak to someone, please visit the Mental Health Foundation website, which has lots of helpful resources and contacts. Visit www.mentalhealth.org.uk.

DAY ONE

Living in isolation

The hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each one to his home, and you will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone because the Father is with me. I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace.

JOHN 16:32

Self-isolation is much talked about as a way of protecting ourselves, and one another, from coronavirus. Even for those of us who like solitude, this can be too much of a good thing. For others, the thought of being cut off from others for a long time is little short of soul-destroying. Isolation can be a cause of anxiety, fear and depression.

As the coronavirus crisis has developed through Lent, it is timely to recall the isolation that Jesus experienced when arrested, and to remember the enforced isolation of many around the world who are in prison for what they believe in.

There is a stark contrast between Jesus' confident assertion in John's gospel that, even when deserted by all his disciples, he will not be alone, because the Father is with him, and his desperate cry from the cross in Mark's gospel: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken

me?" (Mark 15.34) Perhaps the different Gospel writers emphasised what spoke most powerfully to them – confidence or vulnerability? Or perhaps it reflects the difference between theory (the things we know are true) and painful experience, with all the confusion and emotions that it evokes? Or, perhaps it is more about appearances? Jesus – appearing and feeling forsaken, is not alone. The disciples – scattered to their homes, have isolated themselves from God.

It is easy to say, "You are not alone; God is with you." It is not easy to live with isolation from the warmth of human company. However, isolation is not really, or only, about how many other people are in the room or house with us. It has more to do with who is in our hearts and minds, and how we may reach beyond the confines of rooms and homes to connect with those we love.

A "Have a Go" habit: Praying in isolation

- There are different ways in which people experience isolation: socially, physically, emotionally, spiritually. Who do you know who is isolated in these ways? Remember them (in thought or prayer) each day, as an affirmation that they – and you – are not alone.
- Use the internet to find out about the plight of Christians, and other religious minorities, around the world who are isolated because of their faith. Whether in prayer, giving, or writing letters and e-mails, be "with" them.
- We are fortunate in the 21st century. With phones, tablets, and the internet, we can break barriers that would previously have been insurmountable. Can you reach out and have a conversation with someone who may struggle on their own today?

DAY TWO

Loneliness

Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted. Relieve the troubles of my heart, and bring me out of my distress. Consider my affliction and my trouble, and forgive all my sins.

PSALM 25:16-18

Loneliness is an experience that we can all relate to, but almost 1 in 5 people in the UK often or always feel lonely. The figures are higher for the elderly and for young people. If you are lonely, it would seem, you are not alone but that is unlikely to provide much comfort. We are social creatures. We need to feel connected to others.

It is possible to feel lonely in a crowd, or in a marriage. It is equally possible to be alone and not to feel lonely. Feeling lonely and being alone are different things. Loneliness is more about the company that we would like to have and do not have, the discrepancy between the way things are and the way we would like them to be.

Enduring loneliness can be both a cause and a consequence of mental ill health. The Psalmist is lonely

and afflicted, distressed, and troubled. In Psalm 25, loneliness is associated with troubles of the heart or, as we might say, depression and anxiety. Pain and trauma can create, and perpetuate, our feelings of loneliness. We can feel abandoned even when others are trying to show that they care. We may feel that others do not understand what we are going through.

The Psalmist turns to God for help, and asks that God will turn to him. Prayer is not a magic solution for loneliness. Nonetheless, like the Psalmist, we can be honest before God; there is no need to pretend. We turn to God for God's sake, not simply to ask him to fix things. God is always there, even if it does feel as though he has turned away. When feeling lonely, turning to God, and asking God to turn to you, is not a bad place to start.

A "Have a Go" habit: Prayers

- Photos of family and friends, and other reminders around the home, can trigger feelings of loneliness, but they can also be good prompts for prayer. They can remind us to write, or send a message, or make a telephone call. Imagine that God also gets a copy of the letter/message, so that it becomes a part of your prayer.
- Pray for God's creation (and that we might all look after it better). Make use of TV, internet and other media to provide points of contact with the outside world. Use these things as reminders to pray for others.
- Try writing a letter to God – what do you want to say? What would you point to in your life? What would you ask, and what kind of answer would you like back?

DAY THREE

God in our struggles

*Jacob was left alone;
and a man wrestled
with him until
day-break.*

GENESIS 32:24

It has been said that if you cannot stand your own company when alone, you should not impose it on other people! Perhaps this is unfair? Some of us (especially the extroverts) only really get to know ourselves in company with others. However, isolation does have a way of confronting us with some of the things that we try to avoid. We say that our “demons” haunt us in a sleepless night, but sometimes it is God who haunts us in our solitude.

Jacob, fleeing from one set of problems, in the family of his in-laws, is returning to another set of problems back in his own family in Canaan. He is not really alone, he has a large family of his own, with many maids and servants. Despite this, as home gets closer so does the reality of the family conflict that he has avoided for so long, and so does the weight of the burden that he alone carries.

In the solitude of a sleepless night he finds himself wrestling with a man who will not disclose his name. Given his fears, we might conclude this man represented Jacob’s demons, but Jacob comes to a very different conclusion. “I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved” (verse 30). Judging by Jacob’s experience, seeing God may sometimes be a real struggle, but it is nonetheless a blessing. In the light of the following day, Jacob is reconciled with his brother.

We may not want solitude, but sometimes life forces it upon us. It is easy to focus on the loss of companionship and loss of opportunities that isolation brings. Sometimes, however, what we really fear are the reminders of the things that companionship and activity usually help us to avoid. Scary though these things may be, God may well be in our midst, waiting to bless us.

A “Have a Go” habit: Praying in solitude

- Make a list of all the good things – and people – that you miss when you are on your own. Give thanks to God for all the opportunities that life has afforded to enjoy these things, and for all the people through whom he has blessed you.
- Digging up our deepest fears may not be a good idea when we are on our own and have no one to turn to. However, if they come your way, avoiding them may also not be a good idea. Simple prayers can become a means of finding God as we wrestle with these fears. For example, [the Lord’s Prayer](#) or the Jesus Prayer (Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner), can be said over and over again. Lighting a candle can also be a helpful prayer, asking God to bless us as we struggle in the dark. If the struggle is hard, then do reach out to others for help (using the internet or telephone if you are in strict isolation).

DAY FOUR

How are **you**?

After they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh, Hannah rose and presented herself before the Lord. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the Lord. She was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord, and wept bitterly. She made this vow: 'O Lord of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a Nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head.'

As she continued praying before the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought she was drunk. So Eli said to her, 'How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine.' But Hannah answered, 'No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord. Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time.' Then Eli answered, 'Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him.'

1 SAMUEL 1:9-17

Have you ever found yourself not knowing what to say when someone cheerily said "How are you?" Perhaps you felt awful, but didn't like to say so? A friend of mine had this experience once when leaving church. She decided to be honest, and said that she felt terrible. The unheeding reply was "Oh – that's good!"

There are unwritten expectations about how people should behave, just as there were when Hannah prayed in the Jerusalem temple. Mental ill health makes it difficult or impossible to fulfil them, and our unwillingness to be honest about such things contributes to the stigma.

By conferring stigma on those who suffer from mental ill health, or even on those who simply give honest emotional replies to everyday questions, church and society make things worse.

Unlike God, human beings cannot see what is in someone's heart – unless they share them. However, if we ask, we need to be ready for honest answers, and honest answers make vulnerable people more vulnerable. If we join in with God, in searching out one another's vulnerabilities, we need to get more like him in loving and accepting what we find.

A "Have a Go" habit: Truth time

- Look at Psalm 139:1 "O Lord, you have searched me and known me". God loves you and really knows you. Read the Psalm, slowly more than once every day for a week.
- Choose one of the things God says about you and stick it next to your bed on a post-it note.
- Whenever you feel misunderstood repeat the truth on a post it.

Time well spent

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.' But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.'

LUKE 10:38-42

“What is the passion in your life? Do you spend a lot of time wishing you could do something else, particularly at this moment of global crisis?”

Martha welcomes Jesus, and she serves Jesus in practical ways. She wants to do the right things. How can this be wrong? Somehow, amidst the mental activity and busy routine, she risks losing the one thing that is needful.

She is understandably cross with her sister. Perhaps she is jealous? Does she really want to be at Jesus's feet too – or is the activity a way of avoiding that? Our passions to do what is right are vital to society and human wellbeing, and we cannot do without them, but they easily become an end in themselves. They lead us away from other priorities. They master us and consume us. Mental and spiritual wellbeing require that we keep them in context.

A “Have a Go” habit: The cup

- To help with the “one thing”...being with Jesus... attach your daily habit of sitting with Jesus for a few minutes to an object e.g. a Mug or cup and a certain chair / seat.
- Sit still before the day gets going and hold a cup in both hands.... know you are held.
- Repeat, breathe in or meditate on Psalm 46:10 “Be Still and Know that I am God!”

Switching focus



Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.' But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.'

LUKE 10:38-42

Life sometimes feels like one long to-do list. It always seems like someone else manages it better than we do. There is nothing new in frenetic activity, and the longing for space, for time to think and just catch our breath, particularly at this difficult time.

In our story, Mary is lovingly devoted to Jesus. She hangs on his every word. We might ask – What if Martha had been like this too? Who would have cooked dinner?! Presumably – eventually – someone would have had to call for a break and the work would have been shared?

Jesus validates Mary's choice. She is sitting, listening, taking time to reflect, to learn, and to be with God. Of course, Mary would need to work too. But Jesus here reminds Martha that all of us need a balance between activity and rest, between doing and being, between throwing ourselves into work and responding to demands, and proactively looking after our deeper selves. It may be you can only carve out a minute or two at a time – but those are precious already. Find time today to sit at the feet of Jesus, and listen, to him, to yourself, to the deeper, quieter voices of life.

A “Have a Go” habit: Mary moments

- Now you are practising your “Martha” habit with your cup, sitting at Jesus feet, try a “Mary” make over: pick any household task such as boiling a kettle.
- As you do the chore slow down, see Jesus there while you take a little longer...try not to multi-task...breathe deeply and be aware of Jesus near you.
- Repeat [Psalm 16:8](#) “I keep the Lord always before me”...whatever chore or task imagine doing it with and for Jesus.

Hearing voices

And when Jesus had been baptised, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.'

MATTHEW 3:16-4:3

Where did that thought come from?! We've all had the experience of thinking something strange and wondering where the idea came from. If it's a good thought, we might say "I would never have thought something like that! It must be God." If it's a bad thought, we may feel that it reflects badly on us – or that it must have been the devil that put it there.

Our inner voices are a vital part of our conscious experience. They are also the fabric of our prayers. If we are wise, we learn to discern which ones are to be listened to. Jesus was obedient to the Spirit, who led him into the

wilderness, but then he heard the voice of the tempter. This voice questioned what the voice from heaven had said at his baptism. Indirectly, it helped him because, in his dialogue with this voice, he clarified what his vocation as Son of God was to be. It would not be about self-serving miracles, about human glory, or avoidance of suffering. It would be a life of service and self-giving.

We know now that many people hear voices (out loud) who are not mentally ill. It is not the hearing of voices that we need to be afraid of. We all hear voices. We need courage to listen, and wisdom to discern what they mean.

A "Have a Go" habit: Centring prayer

- Sit still in a chair whilst you drink your cup of tea or coffee today.
- Repeat and breathe in the words of [Psalm 85:8](#) "I will listen for what the Lord says for He will speak peace".

Eat, Rest, Sleep

Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there.

But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: 'It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.'

1 KINGS 19: 3-4

Have you ever been busy with work or a task and, having got through it all, then found the anti-climax afterwards even harder to deal with?

Following a dramatic confrontation with the prophets of Baal, Elijah found himself in a literal and spiritual wilderness. None of us are immune to bodily, emotional and spiritual tiredness. The threats of those who seek to do us harm, get to us. We feel negative about ourselves, about our circumstances, and about what might happen in the future. We get depressed.

We doubt God, and feel that we have failed God. We might even feel that our lives are no longer worth living. Life seems both dark and hopeless. This is not about lack of faith.

Elijah's response is honest and leads him to meet with God not in dramatic events, but in a place of sheer silence (verse 12). However active and enthusiastic we may be in God's service, we all have our limits. When we reach these limits, are we able to encounter God in the silence to which they lead us?

A "Have a Go" habit: Eat, rest, sleep

- If you read the [rest of Elijah's story](#), you'll see that he needed sleep, and food and something to drink. Are you getting enough sleep and eating well?
- Use a meditation phrase from the psalms. "I will both lie down and sleep in peace; for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety." ([Psalm 4:8](#)) Repeating this as you go to sleep may help.
- Practice the [ancient prayer of examen](#) at the end of each day.
- Thank God for signs of his love and beauty. Let go of things that were not lovely and beautiful. Be forgiven and try to forgive. Bless yourself with peace as you drop off.

DAY NINE



Blessed are those who mourn

*Blessed are those
who mourn, for they
will be comforted.*

MATTHEW 5:4

'Count your blessings' is one of those unhelpful things that people say when they really mean 'You shouldn't feel the way you do'. It can be one of the least helpful things to say to someone who is feeling low. So what does Jesus mean? Is he another one of those unhelpful people, who know just how to say the wrong thing?

We often think that "blessed" means "happy", but how can those who are unhappy (because they are mourning) be happy? Blessedness is not exactly happiness. It is not helpful to tell people who have been recently bereaved that they should be happy, even if this is based upon a hope of heaven or life after death. But this isn't really what Jesus is saying. The context of that passage is one just like ours – in which war and terror place people in exile and captivity, and in which the present reality is anything but happy.

Pain and trauma can easily lead us to struggle with our mental health – quite rightly. Bad things do, and should affect us. But what Jesus is promising is different; more a promise that God is always with us even – perhaps especially – when it seems otherwise. God walks with us to help us find meaning and new hope. God also calls his people to comfort one another, so that this comfort isn't some distant concept, but a reality for today. We are called to provide comfort, and allow ourselves to be comforted by the love of those around us.

There is, however, a paradox to reflect upon. We often do not fully realise the depth of God's love when we are content and self-satisfied. Sometimes, only when we mourn over the loss of the people and things that we love the most do we fully appreciate what really matters.

A "Have a Go" habit: **Sit down**

- Picture being in that crowd and Jesus catching your eye, knowing your feelings and circumstances and saying straight to you "you are blessed".
- Have a go at breathing in the word "blessed". Repeat it slowly.
- Look at [Psalm 40](#)... a bad day, a deep hole? God lifts you, God sets your feet on a rock, God puts a song in your heart...



Worry

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7

“Don’t worry!” Easy to say, and hard to do. If only we had a “worry switch”, so that we could simply turn off our worries! I wonder if that would help, though? If I am worried about my friend who is ill, I worry because I am concerned. What kind of person would I be if I didn’t worry, if I wasn’t concerned?

Paul’s teaching to the Philippian Christians was probably based on what he had heard of Jesus’s teaching (Matthew 5:25-34), so it came on good authority. Paul wrote from bitter experience, and knew how hard it can be to find peace. He wrote of the anxiety that he felt in his daily concern for the churches for which he was responsible (2 Corinthians 11:28). Like Jesus, who knew distress and agitation in Gethsemane, Paul did not sail through life

on a perpetual wave of joy and peace. Despite this, many Christians reading this passage have felt condemned.

St Paul can appear to be telling them that they do not have enough faith. In fact, anxiety and worry are good indicators of what we care about. In this sense, they are very much like prayer. The essential difference is that Jesus and Paul turned their worries into prayer by bringing them into the presence of God and enfolding them in His peace. The problems begin when we think we can find our own peace, outside of this context. It is impossible to get through life without worrying, unless we care for nothing and no-one. It is what we worry about, and what we do with our anxiety, that matters in God’s kingdom.

A “Have a Go” habit: Meditation

- Choose a meditation phrase for this week from a Psalm of your choice...something good and true e.g. [Psalm 18:1](#) “The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer...”. Write it down and keep it with you...as the background on your phone maybe.
- Make it your constant “go to” thought whenever you catch yourself worrying...Chew it over, breathe it in, walk it out.

The Divided Self

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin.

ROMANS 7:15-25

Have you ever said, “I’m in two minds about that!”? Sometimes we find ourselves torn between what we’d like to do, and what we think we should do. Most of us can remember times when we made the wrong choice. We were selfish, and others paid the price; or we went for short term gains, knowing full well that we would regret it long term.

Human beings have a unique capacity to reflect upon their own actions and to wish that they were other than they find themselves to be. Members of Alcoholics Anonymous are told: you cannot do this on your own,

we need a “higher power” to rescue us from ourselves. As Christians, this is foundational to our faith. St Paul found this help in the grace of God that he encountered in Jesus.

Being a Christian does not mean that the struggle is over. In a sense, we are all addicted, and we all need this grace; we all struggle within ourselves against the “evil that lies close at hand”. Being a Christian is about recognising our need for that grace, about seeking it out, and welcoming it into our lives. God wants to be partners with us in rescuing us from ourselves.

A “Have a Go” habit: An honest emotional inventory

- Step 4 of the 12 step programme is “Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.” Try making your own moral inventory. Perhaps just look at the last 24 hours, or limit your inventory to one area of your life (work, family, or friends). Be honest – and be sure to include the positive as well as the negative.
- Write down one thing that you really like about yourself, and one thing that you dislike. Sometimes it can be hard to accept that we are not perfect. Ask God to help you to develop your strengths and to find ways to overcome your weaknesses.
- Use [Psalm 103:1](#) “Bless the Lord Oh my soul and **all that is within me** bless His Holy name” to offer God all that is within you.

Forgiveness

*And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.
For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also
forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive
your trespasses.*

MATTHEW 6:12-15

Forgiveness makes good business for self-help books. How do I forgive? How can I let go? We often hear that forgiveness is good for you. It makes you feel better. All easy to say. But what do you do when hurt and pain keep coming back when you least want to think about them? When resentment is eating at you and you can think of nothing else? Maybe we can all forgive little things, but what about the big things, the things that break up part of who you are? Or what about forgiving ourselves – sometimes that is the hardest task of them all.

Forgiveness is sometimes humanly impossible. I might not want to forgive. I might not even be able to think of forgiving, and yet holding on to the anger hurts me more than the offender. The person who hurt me may not want

to be forgiven. It is tempting to opt for “forgiveness lite”, hiding from the enormity of what has happened and cutting to a quick solution, trying to ignore or diminish what has happened.

Sometimes, all that we can do is say, ‘I want to forgive’. Or maybe, ‘I want to want to forgive’! And see where the journey takes us. Offer the whole thing to God in prayer: a willingness to be changed, or an honest admission that we simply cannot forgive. God can multiply the little that we bring, just as Jesus multiplied a few loaves and fishes to feed thousands. Forgiveness takes time, but God is patient. And has our best interest at heart: God knows that in forgiveness, we will always find healing and freedom, however long and painful the road to get there.

A “Have a Go” habit: Wash and go

- Read [Psalm 51:2](#) “Wash me thoroughly...and cleanse me from my sin”. Repeat these words to yourself, through the day.
- Use [The Lord’s Prayer](#) each lunchtime. Repeat slowly... forgiving as we are forgiven is a daily habit not a one-off act.”



Love

He said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”

MATTHEW 22:37-39

What does love look like? Some people find it hard to say “I love you!” but it can also be too easy to say the words without really knowing what they mean. Perhaps they just mean a nice warm feeling inside? Real love – for God or others – is visible in what we do and how we live. How is your love visible to others?

Faith is good for mental health. It brings lots of things that research has shown to be important – relationships,

social networks, and lifestyle amongst others – but faith is not primarily about what I can get out of it. The really important reasons for believing are summed up by Jesus in just two commandments – loving God, and loving those around us. These are not so much commandments (things we must do, because we are told to) as principles for getting to the heart of what really matters most. They are the basis of human flourishing – in body, mind and spirit. Love is good for mental wellbeing. God is love.

A “Have a Go” habit: Learning and giving

- The [5 steps to mental wellbeing](#) have a lot to do with love: Connect, Be Active, Keep learning, Give to others, Be mindful. Which of these do you need to take a look at?
- Take some time today to learn more about someone you love: whether it is God or a neighbour, or perhaps the work of a charity expressing love in practical ways.
- [Psalm 107:8](#) “thank the Lord for his steadfast love”. Can you give thanks today for God’s love and then pass it on in giving to others? Love looks like something...maybe like giving a kind word or two, or an offering of help?”