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A Full Life: From Stigma to Resilience



Living an authentic life means embracing all parts of one's personal journey—the triumphs, joys, setbacks, and vulnerabilities. This understanding is especially paramount when confronting the stigma surrounding mental health within the priesthood and the vowed religious life. It takes courage, resilience, and a shared commitment to community care to break the barriers created by stigma. One path to transform our life challenges into profound moments of healing and growth is through the integration of theological truths and cultural practices. In Christian tradition, resilience is deeply rooted in Christ's love and sacrifice for all.

Jesus' willingness to bear suffering for restoration (Isaiah 53:5) serves as a powerful reminder that brokenness is not the end of the story. The promise of abundant life (John 10:10) invites us to find meaning even in our struggles. Christ's ministry to those on the margins—offering compassion to the sick and outcast—shows us the way forward. Following His example, at Southdown, we continue to create spaces of empathy and understanding where silence and shame are replaced with support and hope.

In Maasai tradition, broken jewelry or beadwork is repaired with new or mismatched beads, adding to the item's story rather than erasing its history. Similarly, the Japanese art of Kintsugi celebrates cracks in pottery by repairing them with gold, making the piece even more beautiful. Both traditions teach us that healing is not about hiding imperfections but integrating them into our lives. Scars—whether physical or emotional—become a testament to the strength it takes to move forward and grow.

The sentiment expressed through a spiritual song during a recent commissioning Mass beautifully captures this idea. The lyrics, "*At the end of the day, I wanna hear people say my heart looks like Your heart,*"¹ remind us to align our hearts with love and grace. This authenticity requires a willingness to be vulnerable, to heal, and to let our lives reflect resilience and compassion. Just as repaired beadwork and gilded pottery tell a deeper story, our lives can radiate strength when we face challenges with openness and faith.

Addressing mental health requires breaking down the walls of stigma and recognizing that challenges do not diminish us—they shape us. By fostering understanding and extending compassion, we honour the full range of human experience, weaving both brokenness and beauty into one story. Together, we embody the hope of Christ's love and the wisdom of cultures that celebrate resilience through imperfection.

Living life to the fullest is not about avoiding struggles but about transforming them into a tapestry of grace, hope, and connection. May we continue to walk this path together, ensuring that no one feels forgotten and that every heart shines with courage and kindness. In doing so, we fulfill our shared purpose.

Sincerely,

Rev. Francois Diouf, OSB, Ph.D.
President and Chief Clinical Officer

¹ Chris Tomlin. (2011). *Your Heart (David)*. On *Music Inspired by The Story*. Capitol Christian Music Group.

Breaking the Barrier of Stigma: Promoting Mental Health and Help-Seeking in Faith Communities

By Marc Simpson, BSW, MSW, RSW



Mental health stigma is broadly defined as the negative attitudes and beliefs society holds toward individuals facing mental health challenges. While stigma is pervasive across society, it can be even more pronounced within faith communities, where mental health struggles are often misunderstood or viewed through a lens of judgment and moral failing. In parishes, dioceses, religious orders, and lay ecclesial movements, a culture of shame may prevail, and individuals experiencing mental health difficulties may fear social exclusion, discrimination, or even misinterpretation of their faith (Corrigan et al., 2015).

For members of faith communities, particularly those in leadership roles—such as bishops, pastors, religious superiors, and lay leaders who provide spiritual, pastoral, or administrative guidance—stigma can create additional layers of isolation. The belief that seeking help may be seen as a sign of weakness or insufficient faith can further exacerbate feelings of alienation. The consequences of this stigma are clear: individuals may be unwilling to share their struggles, leading to untreated issues with detrimental effects on both their mental health and ministry. While my primary focus is on ordained clergy, women and men religious, and lay pastoral workers in faith communities, the broader implications of stigma extend to all members of the faith community, including parishioners. Addressing this stigma is not only an act of compassion but also an essential step toward fostering spiritual well-being and healing within faith communities.

Understanding Mental Health Stigma

Mental health stigma creates complex barriers that prevent individuals from seeking help or fully participating in society. In faith communities, both public stigma—negative societal attitudes about mental health—and self-stigma—internalized shame and guilt—can be particularly harmful. Fear of judgment, along with feelings of inadequacy or weakness, often prevent individuals from seeking support (American Psychiatric Association, 2020). The struggle with mental health is often experienced in silence, and shame can keep those suffering isolated and hidden. In my work at Southdown, I frequently see the tragic consequences individuals face when they delay emotional and psychological help. Many go to great lengths to avoid stigma, facing their struggles alone for years, fearing judgment and hoping to manage on their own.

One example is a young diocesan priest who, after battling inner turmoil, depression, and burnout for years, decided to seek support from Southdown. His deteriorating mental health strained his relationships with fellow priests, parishioners, and family, leaving him isolated. For years, he carried his struggles alone, using overwork and misaligned behaviors as coping mechanisms. He later admitted that his fear of judgment and concerns about his future prevented him from seeking help, and in therapy, he revealed that he had internalized “stories” of other priests being “labeled” after seeking mental health support. After building trust, he decided to enter residential care at Southdown, engage in therapy, and complete the program. Now, he shares his experience with his fellow priests, inspiring others to follow suit. His courage has led many diocesan members to seek mental health support, with many attributing their willingness to his example. His story underscores the profound challenges that stigma poses in pastoral ministry, where mental health struggles are often concealed out of fear of judgment. It also highlights the

transformative power of a supportive, understanding community in fostering healing and renewal.

The Role of Faith Communities in Breaking Stigma

Faith communities play a unique and vital role in dismantling the stigma surrounding mental health. Faith community leaders, clergy, women and men religious, and lay pastoral workers, and other members, can foster an environment that promotes understanding and openness about mental health issues. Research shows that support from community leaders and structured programs can significantly reduce stigma, fostering a safe space for discussion (Griffiths et al., 2014).

For many, faith is a vital element in mental health recovery, complementing traditional therapeutic approaches rather than opposing them. Spirituality and conventional mental health care often work synergistically, enriching each other to support holistic well-being. Promoting this perspective can encourage leaders and faith community members to approach mental health struggles with empathy and understanding, reinforcing the idea that mental health, like physical health, deserves attention and care. By championing awareness and acceptance, faith communities can create spaces where people feel empowered to seek help without fear of judgment or alienation (Corrigan et al., 2015).

Breaking the Silence: Encouraging Help-Seeking Behaviour

A critical step in breaking the silence surrounding mental health is encouraging help-seeking behaviour, where individuals feel comfortable reaching out for support. For the priest in the example above, sharing his experience became a bridge for others, inspiring them to take the first step toward healing. Silence often traps individuals in their suffering, but seeing others who have sought help can serve as a powerful source of encouragement (Griffiths et al., 2014).

Fostering a culture of openness and understanding within faith communities is essential. Leaders are key in modeling vulnerability and promoting resources for emotional and psychological support. Through training, spiritual accompaniment, and structured opportunities for dialogue about mental health, faith communities can become more attuned to these struggles and encourage members to prioritize their mental well-being. By reassuring individuals that seeking help aligns with both spiritual and personal growth, faith communities can help break the silence and stigma surrounding mental health.

Overcoming Barriers to Seeking Help

Barriers to seeking mental health support are multifaceted and often rooted in deeply held fears. For clergy, women and men religious, and lay pastoral ministers, concerns about confidentiality, the potential impact on their vocational role, and the perceptions of others can amplify these fears. Leadership is instrumental in addressing these concerns by fostering a compassionate, supportive atmosphere where individuals feel assured of their privacy and the genuine support of those around them.

Encouraging help-seeking behaviour is essential in breaking the stigma surrounding mental health within faith communities. Faith communities can foster a culture of acceptance by promoting open discussions about mental health. Church leadership can further

support mental health awareness by integrating it into church programs, supporting mental health initiatives, and collaborating with local organizations. Religious orders can ensure that mental health resources are accessible to their members by offering and encouraging participation in services such as counselling, support groups, and wellness workshops.

Conclusion

Breaking the stigma surrounding mental health in faith communities requires a concerted effort from all members.

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By acknowledging the issue, addressing misconceptions, and fostering an environment of support and understanding, faith communities can promote mental health and encourage help-seeking behaviour. In practical terms, leaders, clergy, women and men religious, and lay pastoral ministers—can model a positive attitude toward mental health care by normalizing conversations about emotional wellness and advocating for resources such as counselling and therapy. By doing so, they send a clear message that seeking help is a path toward personal healing and, by extension, a stronger community (Corrigan et al., 2015).

Living an Authentic Life Through the Lens of Spiritual Direction

By Beverly O'Grady, M.T.S., D.S.D.



What does it mean to live an authentic life? From an early age, we are taught to conform to structures intended to keep us safe, but these structures can also limit or dull our creativity. Sometimes, they are developed for the ease and well-being of the authority figures in our lives—parents, teachers, religious leaders, and society. In the process of trying to fit in, people can lose sight of who they truly are and how they are called to bring their unique gifts into the world.

When I sit with a new directee in Spiritual Direction, I often ask, "What brings you joy? What do you do for fun?" This question can catch people off guard, and they may initially feel it is irrelevant to the seriousness of obeying God and living a good Catholic or Christian life. However, there is value in discovering what sparks passion and joy within us. Engaging in activities that allow us to lose track of time—such as running, playing music, painting, or working with a handicraft—can lead us into Kairos, God's time. By stepping outside of ourselves, we have the opportunity to become lost in the joy of the activity. Joy is a fruit of the Holy Spirit, and its quiet, sustaining presence helps us weather life's storms.

In Spiritual Direction, I listen for joy and reflect this insight back to the directee. Joy brings meaning to life and helps us understand that we are all a unique part of God's creation. When joy is absent, it is important to step back and examine the life we are living. The potential for more goodness emerges when we are willing to peel back the layers of assumption and conformity that mask our authentic selves and overshadow the true expression of our gifts.

We must ask ourselves:

- Is the structure or paradigm I am living under bringing me happiness, or is there another way to live that fills me with purpose and joy?
- What can I offer the world that expresses God's presence in me?
- What unique talents do I possess?
- Are my gifts being valued and encouraged to bring more goodness into the world, or has part of my authentic self been rejected?

Time for quiet is essential if we are to hear God's voice with our hearts. As we connect with God, we become more aware of the deep yearnings within us. Too often, we push our feelings down and ignore the uncomfortable physical responses our bodies have to certain situations. Trying to live up to someone else's expectations can be painful. Our authentic selves know what we need to thrive, but we must create the space and stillness to hear God speak.

Have you ever taken the time to sit with a decision between two paths? Imagine yourself in one scenario and notice how it feels inside. Set that scenario aside, then envision the second scenario and sense how it feels. Does one scenario feel "more right" than the other? Is there a greater sense of peace with one choice over the other? We want to move toward that sense of peace to connect with our authentic truth.

The Holy Spirit communicates with us through the body when we give the body the time and respect to listen to its physical responses. This connection serves as a doorway to the authentic self—the self that has been quietly waiting for us to stand at the threshold and say, "Can I keep you company? I want to listen to what you are willing to share with me." As a Spiritual Director, I seek to facilitate this inner communication. When I provide time for silence, I create space for the directee to engage in the inner dialogue that welcomes the knowledge the body carries. I pay attention to subtle shifts in the directee's posture or facial expressions, which often reflect this inner conversation. Sometimes, a sense of relief, a release, or a moment of clarity emerges about how the individual wants to move forward in their life.

To live authentically, we need to be at peace with ourselves and listen for the rightness of our own way of being. God invites us to live in joy—to truly enjoy being in this world, with all its challenges and triumphs. By connecting to our discomfort and pain, we discover what we want to leave behind and what we want to move toward. Let God communicate through the rightness of being in your body, and trust that the next right step will emerge on the road to living your authentic life.

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Dr. Eran Talitman, Ph.D., C.Psych. Reflects on His Retirement



As Eran embarks on his well-deserved retirement on December 20 after 26 years of dedicated service, he shares this heartfelt reflection on his journey and experiences.

"The journey of being at Southdown as a clinical staff member has been incredible. I have significantly grown as a person and as a psychologist. I am grateful for having worked with both residents and staff members who were intelligent, kind, generous, creative, extremely conscientious, enthusiastic, and energetic. I have been most proud of the fact that we were able to provide a safe, accepting, and non-judgmental atmosphere for residents to examine their intense shame, guilt, loneliness, isolation, fear of rejection, and/or the sense of not being good enough. The most impactful experience for me was to witness a transition from the worst moments in their life to a sense of peace, self-acceptance, joy, and hope as they left Southdown. I will always remember my time at Southdown as one of the most important blessings of my life. I feel so blessed and grateful for having this wonderful journey."

We are most grateful to Eran for his significant contributions toward furthering the healing mission of Southdown, and we wish him all the best in this new chapter of his life.

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