

Here is my message manuscript, along with some additional information in a few sections.

INTRODUCTION

Hello everyone, I'm Jordan Dunlap, the Group Life Pastor here. ...As someone who has wrestled with anxiety, depression, and other diagnosed struggles - along with perfectionism and low self-worth for a large part of my life - and as a pastor who meets with people who also struggle with a mental disorder or illness - or they have loved ones who do... [Mental health is a topic we must discuss and embrace in the Church.](#)

Believing in God and following in Jesus' footsteps doesn't mean we get a "magic pass" to never deal with this. Each of us dwells in a body with a unique brain, heart, and abilities that are impacted by our genetics, upbringing, environment, relationships, traumas, and more.

Even though I've been walking closely with God for many years now, I'm still finding areas of my mind and emotions that need to be better understood, recalibrated, and healed. Even as someone who weirdly enjoys discovering what's weak or broken so I can invite God in to transform it - there are days I wonder - *"Will I ever be "done" with unpeeling layers of "stuff" to work on?"*

If I'm not constantly relying on God, I pretty easily get frustrated and discouraged about the difficulties I face. There are some Bible verses I go to often to remind me of an important truth. These were written by the Apostle Paul who suffered from an affliction... while he was passionately following Jesus Christ, and pursuing God's purpose for his life.

He says in 2 Corinthians 12 NIV - **8** Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. **9** But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast **all the more gladly about my weaknesses**, so that **Christ's power may rest on me. 10** That is why, for Christ's sake, I **delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.** What an impressive, counter-cultural way of thinking. Embracing our weaknesses so that the power of Jesus Christ in us can shine brighter than our challenges. This is what we can choose - but it's rarely easy.

THE PROBLEM

Today I'm going to share a lot of information on mental health and how we may respond to our struggles. So to help you all out I'm going to send a follow up email later today with my transcript of this message and some mental health resources. If you're not on our email list and want to sign up you can go to newlifefm.com/connect and click "Join email list". I'll also share on our Facebook page.

Whether we're open to self awareness and change or we'd rather avoid digging deeper into our mental health - we all need to be grounded in what's real if we're going to make progress and have more peace and power in our lives. In a few moments I'm going to share some statistics with you, but first I want to offer a definition so we're all on the same page:

A **Mental illness/mental disorder**: a condition that affects a person's thinking, feeling, mood, or behavior, especially in a way that has an undesirable impact on some aspect of their life. Both terms refer to conditions that range from mild to severe and impact daily functioning.

Now let's look at some facts from the **National Alliance on Mental Illness**:

- More than 1 in 5 U.S. adults experience mental illness each year
- More than 1 in 20 U.S. adults experience serious mental illness each year
- More than 1 in 7 U.S. youth ages 6-17 experience a mental health disorder each year
- 50% of all lifetime mental illness begins by age 14, and 75% by age 24
- Suicide is the 2nd leading cause of death among people ages 10-24
- 1 person dies by suicide in the U.S. about every 11 minutes
- 46% of people who die by suicide had a diagnosed mental health condition
- 52.1% of U.S. adults with mental illness received treatment in 2024
- 70.8% of U.S. adults with serious mental illness received treatment in 2024
- The average delay between onset of mental illness symptoms and treatment is 11 years

There are a lot of suffering people in our country alone, and many of them are not getting adequate support and treatment. Many choose a devastating way out because it doesn't seem like they have another choice. I'm sure there are more people who belong in these statistics, but they've never actually shared their problems with anyone. I don't know how many of these people know God - but one problem I want to address is this...

It often seems like in the Church there's an unspoken law that we're not allowed to talk about or show our disorders because we may be perceived as not having enough faith or not trusting God enough. We may even avoid getting necessary help like counseling, trauma therapy, medication, or certain accommodations out of fear of judgment. Many of us put on a mask to hide our true selves.

This past year I heard the term **“Toxic Positivity”** for the first time. It's defined as **“A pressure to stay upbeat no matter how dire one's circumstance is; a belief that negative thoughts about anything should be avoided.”**

Whether we're walking with God or not, that is not the solution. Denial may temporarily feel better, but in the long run only causes more pain, isolation, and un-health than being honest and inviting other people in to see the real us - the us that needs help. Keeping things hidden can not only affect us mentally and emotionally, but physically and spiritually as well.

Modern culture often teaches us to “power through”, “show no weakness”, and “be your best self” through sheer effort. How many men have been taught “it's not okay to show emotion”? How many moms trying to hold their family together believe the lie that “asking for help makes them a failure”? How many struggling teens hide their true feelings or self-harm because of shame or that they don't want to be a burden to their parents?

God will never ask us to fake a life at peace. **Having a mental illness or disorder does not make us a weak human being, or a weak Christian.** It doesn't mean our faith isn't strong enough, that God is punishing us, or that we deserve it.

There are many factors that impact our mental health - and **Ignoring or masking our struggles will prevent us from living in the increased healing, freedom, and wholeness that God offers us.** We must be willing to be honest with ourselves, Him, and others if we want to see change.

WHAT GOD SAYS

Because our thought life can affect every part of us, it will set the reality we live in each day, whether healthy or unhealthy. Change must start with what we believe about God, our identity, and our purpose - so how do we go about doing that?

Well, we have two supernatural resources available to us, if we're only willing to use them. First we have the Bible - a book that holds everything we need for life and for godliness. It holds the keys to understanding why this world is broken and the beautiful redemption that Jesus offers us.

Romans 15:4 NIV **For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.**

...Endurance, encouragement, and hope are three things we will absolutely need on our mental health journey! The Bible can be our primary mental health textbook - and we should use it daily.

2 Timothy 3 NIV **16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, 17 so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.**

The Bible reveals everything. The nature of God - our loving Creator, His design for us as His creations (both before/after we screwed things up with our free will and brought sin into the world), Jesus who died to save us from sin and rose again to defeat it forever, and the Holy Spirit who empowers us when we invite Him into our lives via the free gift of salvation.

When we step into a relationship with God through faith in Jesus, we can know that no matter how difficult this earthly life is for us, we have the promise of eternity with God in heaven, where all sin and pain and dis-order will cease to exist.

Until then, reading God's Word and walking closely with Him allows us to change our beliefs and attitudes, giving us newfound power as we follow His commands and trust Him with each part of us. This is the second supernatural resource we have - an active relationship with God. We can talk to Him and hear from Him in prayer to be empowered for this life. He offers supernatural help to us when we ask!

In Matthew 7:7 NIV Jesus tells us to - **"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.**

Hebrews 4 NIV **16 Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.**

Philippians 4 NIV **6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. 7 And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.**

By aligning our thoughts with the truth God has spoken to us in the Bible and personally in prayer, we will find strength, grace, peace, and wisdom for our mental health challenges that we cannot achieve in our own power. These are beautiful results of closeness with God.

And before I move into the realm of toxic positivity where you may have heard pastors say "Just read your Bible and pray and everything will be alright..." I want to state plainly here that yes, these are two vital practices that will change our lives if we do them. But that does NOT mean we will never need other support or treatment.

If we're diagnosed with an illness, we very well may require treatment like medication or therapy. We should pray for supernatural healing, but if we don't see God answering us with a miracle, He may have other plans for us. He often uses our weaknesses for a much greater purpose, and avoiding help can actually keep us stuck in a place we aren't meant to be.

If we each surrender our unique mental health situations to God in prayer, invite Him to share His wisdom with us, and stay grounded in the truth of Scripture - it will transform our minds and our life. It doesn't mean everything will be perfect all the time - but we will no longer be facing things alone.

The Bible is packed with wisdom for a healthy life, and some verses focus on the renewing of our minds, hearts, and body as these are all important to God. Romans 12 NIV **1 Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God - this is your true and proper worship. 2 Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is - his good, pleasing and perfect will.**

2 Corinthians 4:16 NIV **Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.** ...If we're not taking advantage of the Bible and prayer, we miss out on so much that God wants to offer us. We aren't meant to do this life without Him.

MENTAL HEALTH / MY STORY

While we're focusing on mental health today, I want to share some information for your own personal awareness, or to offer others as you see a need. The **Most common mental health disorders: anxiety disorders, major depressive disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)**. Sometimes these are seasonal, and sometimes they're long term. **Other disorders include: bipolar disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), borderline personality disorder (BPD), and schizophrenia spectrum disorder.** There is also a **high level of co-occurring substance use disorder with mental illness.**

I also want to add in genetic brain differences that are often classified as disorders, because they can greatly impact mental health, and even cause those three main disorders. If you've never heard of Neurotypes, they refer to the different ways brains are wired: Neurotypical brains function in a way that aligns with societal norms. Neurodivergent brains function in ways that differ/diverge from the typical "norm".

The **Most common Neurodivergent types: Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), Tourette Syndrome, and learning differences like Dyslexia (impacts reading), Dyspraxia (impacts coordination), Dyscalculia (impacts math), Dysgraphia (impacts writing).** These are considered natural human differences, not just deficits, often involving unique ways of thinking, learning, and processing the world, and they can create many challenges in neurotypical environments.

Neurodivergence is not a formal diagnosis itself, it simply shows there are diverse ways brains can function. About 1 in 5 people in the U.S. are neurodivergent. So, looking around, about 20% of the people in this room, myself included. Part of the reason I'm so passionate about teaching on mental health is because navigating my own has been constant throughout my life.

Today, I want to share publicly for the first time that earlier this year I was diagnosed with Autism. And that may come as a surprise to some of you because I don't fit many of the outward stereotypes you've seen or heard about it. A major part of why it took 36 years for me to be diagnosed was because I masked its effects so well.

Autism truly is a spectrum and no two people on the spectrum are exactly alike. Mine is greatly internalized and I expend a ton of energy when in public - including here at church - to hide all the things that people may judge me for because they aren't "typical".

From a very young age through attending a private Christian school and going to church I developed a strong belief that people don't like when you're different.

Following the rules and fitting in is much safer, even if it means forcing yourself into boxes society deems as 'normal' so you don't get in trouble and can keep a few friends. So I did, and I did it very well. I became a perfectionist on the outside, and very alone on the inside.

I was a little chameleon - hiding my weird thoughts and actions the best I could so no one noticed I was different. I took out the stress that this caused on my own body through obsessive skin picking and hair pulling, which I now realize was how I stimmed. Stimming is what neurodivergent people do to calm down their hyper-vigilant, overstimulated nervous systems.

I felt constantly overwhelmed with the amount of data my brain took in without my control. I had strong sensitivities to lights, sounds, smells, tastes, textures, temperature, and especially the weather. I had a lot of headaches, with many medical tests offering no answers.

These and other factors like emotional hypersensitivity, literal thinking, and needing routines made me more susceptible to anxiety, depression, and trauma. I was deeply insecure, and often had unhealthy boundaries which brought me a lot of pain - especially in romantic relationships.

Because I had no idea my brain was wired differently, I began to assume these struggles were my fault. I felt like a weak, broken, alien that didn't fit into the molds of my friends and family - as if I were living in a different reality. All while being a Christian who did her best to love God and even became a pastor at age 30. I fought so hard to fit in, but rarely felt like I was "enough".

It wasn't until February of this year when my counselor encouraged me to research neurodivergence that I became aware of the root cause of my lifetime struggle. Neurodivergence became my new special interest and I dove headfirst into books, videos, and research. I soon discovered that high-masking, late-diagnosed autism was my reality. I made a spreadsheet of about 500 data points from my life that pointed to having ASD and in May I was formally diagnosed.

That turning point in my life brought a lot of relief - I now knew it wasn't my fault that I was struggling so much - but it also brought a lot of grief. Realizing that I'd been hiding behind a mask my entire life, hiding even from myself, was a lot to work through. Wishing I had known earlier so I could avoid a lot of suffering and self-hatred was hard.

My symptoms got worse for a while. Everything was exhausting as I became hyper-aware of how life-sucking it is to live in a world not designed for my brain. I spent months with depression and increased social anxiety. I struggled to leave the house or come to work. Sunday mornings were the hardest for me. But... all the processing forced me to face myself, and to go to God with everything.

Let me tell you, I have never prayed so much in my life. My world was flipped upside-down, and there was no way I was going to handle it on my own. I've never had to **"Be still and know that He is God"** (Psalm 46:10) more often. I've never rested more. I've never had more grace for myself. I was brought to the end of me so I could start new, and figure out who I really was in Christ, taking off my mask in His presence.

And I'm happy to share that 6 months later I'm starting to feel more grounded with the brain I have. Although there will always be things I have to navigate differently than many others, I can also see the strengths. I'm very smart, I'm hyper creative, I'm passionate about my special interests (and I have a lot!). I'm detail-oriented, practical, resourceful, organized. I'm an advocate for truth and justice. I love helping other people learn.

I'm also seeing how God's timing is perfect with my late diagnosis. I doubt I would have ever said yes to my ministry call if I knew I had autism. It would have seemed utterly impossible at the time. But being in ministry has challenged and built my faith, teaching me to be reliant on the Holy Spirit more than myself. I need God's help for everything I do and because of that I actually feel more empowered and at peace than I ever have been before.

Trust me - I still have bad days... I still have a lot to figure out... but on the good days I know that my neurodivergence keeps me close to God, humble, and allows me to connect with and support other atypical people. I've seen firsthand that our differences do not have to destroy us; they can actually be our superpowers when we submit them to God and use them for good.

Me sharing all of this with you is just one step toward embracing my authentic self, and inviting others in to see the real, sometimes very weird, but also pretty wonderful me. I don't want to hide any more - and I know the Holy Spirit will help me to unmask a little at a time. Praise God for His goodness!

APPLICATION

I do believe that many more Christians walk around hiding their mental health struggles - wearing a facade of "steadfast faith" or "I'm fine!" in front of others, while they're inwardly suffering with pain and fear that most people never see.

So as we move into personal application, please know that no matter where YOU are at with your mental health, you're not too far gone, and there is still hope. Even if you've felt stuck for months, years, or - heck - your whole life like me! ...if you remember that you have a choice of what to do next, you will never have to stay stuck.

With your free will - which is a gift from God - you can take one of the following steps that you feel led to:

1. **Be open to the reality of what got you here.** Please, if you've been running from your mental health struggles, start running toward them so you can find support. There will be factors both out of and in your control, so here a few categories to get a sense of where they may have begun:

Physical Factors - Genetics, birth defects, developmental differences, injuries/chronic pain, disease, traumatic physical experiences, inability to meet exercise/nutritional needs, unsafe physical environment (poverty, hunger, homelessness, etc)

Relational Factors - parent/guardian upbringing (feeling unsafe, neglected, unwanted), social environment at home/school/church/other, any form of abuse from another person

Mental Factors - negative beliefs/thought patterns/view of self (identity) - may be tied to things people spoke to you/about you, or self-created intentionally or not; habits and addictions

Spiritual Factors - church hurt/spiritual abuse, disconnect from God, spiritual attack, generational sin passed down from family, consequences of intentional sin/rebellion

Circumstantial Factors - loss of a loved one/job/home, divorce, move, diagnosis, season of high stress, unexpected change, isolation

These often overlap and mix, and you can see how many are outside of your control. What you can control is how you respond to them. Being aware is the starting point. Then you can move to step

2. **Invite God's loving power into your mental health journey.** For some of you, this may begin by placing your faith in Jesus for the first time. If you believe that God is real and that He sent Jesus to save you, you can commit your life to Him right now. This eternity-changing decision will give you new Holy Spirit power you haven't had before.

Romans 10:9 NIV **If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.** Let's all read this prayer out loud together, and for those who are speaking it from your heart for the first time, you'll be welcomed into God's family.

"God, I realize that I am a sinner in need of a Savior. I believe you created me and sent Jesus to save me on the cross by dying for my sins and rising again, defeating sin and death. I accept this free gift and want You to come into my life and change me from the inside out. Thank you for Your love. In Jesus' name, Amen."

For those who are believers, Step 2 includes setting aside time to pray - on your own, with a pastor, or with another trusted Christian - about your unique situation. Ask God for guidance on what is next for you in each area you discover. This takes humility and courage - but He will give you wisdom if you're willing to ask!

Proverbs 3 NIV **5 Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; 6 in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.** And lastly, we have to move from understanding and deciding - into the doing:

1. **Take one or more action steps toward a healthier you.** This may be talking to a doctor, having some tests done, finding a counselor, therapist, or psychiatrist. It may be reading books or watching videos on a specific mental health disorder to get more insight. Remember, I'll be sending out some resources for you to give you some starting points.

If you have biological needs that cannot be fixed any other way, your next step may be trying medication for the first time. I'll say it again - there are some illnesses that - outside of miraculous healing from God - will not get better on their own. Maybe your miracle looks different in this season.

For some people, medication is their miracle. It completely changes their quality of life. Doesn't mean they love Jesus any less or that they don't have faith. I needed anti-depressants to help me function through the ending of my first marriage. I was not able to do that on my own.

Some of you may need to stop seeing yourself as ONLY your problems or diagnosis and step into the full identity that Jesus has given you instead. That you are loved, safe, forgiven, that you have a purpose, that you have gifts to offer this world. Step into those and see how things change.

For some of you, having a loving support system for the first time will bring freedom and empowerment. Continue praying for God to move in your circumstances - He does still heal people of anxiety, depression, and other conditions - but also be open to other ways He may want to work.

If you are ready to build a **Community of Support** around you who you can begin to unmask with, start with one **family member or friend you trust**. Then you can join a **Small Group** or **Volunteer Team**. Attend **Celebrate Recovery** or our **Grief Group**. Info on all those is right on our website.

Ecclesiastes 4 NIV **9** Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: **10** If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up.

Having a safe space to share what's really going on in your life can make the weight of your challenges so much lighter. People who love God, LOVE helping other people! It's an honor to support our brothers and sisters in Christ.

If you'd like to talk with me or another pastor here, please fill out a digital connection card at [newlifefm.com/connect](https://www.newlifefm.com/connect)! It's okay to have struggles - to have a diagnosis - to ask for help - to be vulnerable. We're here to offer you a safe space to be you.

For those of you who know you are or feel you may be neurodivergent, and you've been facing the world alone - I would especially love to talk with you.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

The mental health of God's Church must start with us; through our awareness, humility, courage, and reliance on His power over our own. We were not made to wear masks of fear. We were made to shine God's light and power to others, even while we're in the process of healing.

As we rely on the Holy Spirit to guide us, every struggle we have can be used for God's glory. We will realize that our challenges create beautiful testimonies that God can use to help others on their journeys. We can share in the burdens of life and encourage one another as we reveal our authentic selves.

We can pray for compassion that guards us against judgment and ask God how He wants to use us to help people find hope and support. We can remind the hurting that they are not alone in this world and point them to a loving God who has good plans for them, including everlasting life in heaven.

Will we do that church? I hope we will.