



Martin Luther on Mental Health

Practical Advice for Christians Today

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Purpose: Five centuries ago, Luther dispensed advice that essentially foretold modern cognitive and behavioral therapy techniques. This advice, viewed through the lens of contemporary psychology, is practical and applicable to Christians today. For readers who struggle with their mental health (or have loved ones who do), this book provides assurance that God knows our suffering and loves us.

Study Outline

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Session One – Getting Started

Read Preface, Introduction, and Chapter 1 – pp. 7-25

And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.

– 1 Thessalonians 5:13

Preface

This book primarily focuses on Luther’s kind, compassionate, prescient advice to those experiencing emotional distress. Reading his letters, I was astonished to realize that Luther was dispensing modern mental health advice. He understood and administered counsel that is essentially indistinguishable from what was developed in the twentieth century and used widely today. He focused on the way people think, understood how thinking could cause emotional distress, pointed out how thinking is often incorrect, and advised correct thinking. We now call such counsel cognitive therapy – one of the most effective health care interventions ever developed. In addition, he dispensed advice about behavior. He counseled against isolation and for doing enjoyable things. We now call that behavioral therapy – another effective treatment against emotional distress. (8)

- Was Martin Luther always known for his kindness?
- What help is it to look to Luther for an approach to mental health?
- What dangers lurk?

Introduction

Examples of mental distress and illness – pp.9-13

Luther’s Thoroughly Modern Counsel

The letters show that Luther was a warm, caring counselor. Luther always emphasized the reassurance of the Gospel to console those in emotional distress. He knew that the devil was the source of all illnesses, including mental health problems. (13)

Note: chapter 5 will explore the connection between the spiritual and the mental/physical at greater length. What is the connection between illness and faith?

Why This Book?

This book is written to help readers, whether pastor or layperson, do what Luther wrote Matthias Weller in October 1534: “God has commanded men to comfort their brethren, and it is his will that the afflicted should receive such consolation as God’s very own. Thus our Lord speaks through St. Paul, ‘Comfort the fainthearted.’” (14)

- What help is it to have a robust mental health system?
- What dangers lurk?

As Luther did and as modern mental health professionals do, you can help people in emotional distress change their thinking and their behavior in order to feel less troubled. (14)

Note: Chapters 9 and 10 will address how to help... and when to refer someone for professional assistance.

Chapter One: Rates of Mental Health Illness and Associated Problems

Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment.

– John 7:24

The Epidemiology of Mental Illness

Research reveals that mental health illness is common and costly... about one in five adults ages 18-65 will have a mental illness during any given year. Anxiety is by far the most common mental illness, followed by major depression. Mental illnesses vary by severity and NIMH defines serious mental illness (SMI) as a mental illness that results in serious functional impairment – causing serious limits in one or more major life activities. About one in twenty persons has an SMI in any year. Many persons have more than one disorder. The chance of having a mental illness at some point in adulthood is about 46 percent. (18-19)

Risk Factors

Important information about risk factors for mental illness has been discovered. For example, men are more likely to develop a substance use disorder, whereas women are more likely to develop depression. Racial and ethnic minorities are more likely to develop a mental illness. Both unpleasant experiences in childhood and being the victim of domestic abuse put a person at a much greater risk of developing a mental illness. (19)

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

In a typical study, adults are asked whether they experienced various adverse events in childhood, including physical or sexual abuse, emotional abuse or neglect, or serious family problems (such as parental mental illness or incarceration). Results show that most adults have experienced at least one ACE, and that one in six adults experienced four or more. ACEs predict adult mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, substance use problems, and high-risk behaviors such as smoking and heavy drinking. (19-20)

Domestic Abuse

Domestic abuse is the experience in adulthood of physical, sexual, and emotional mistreatment by a spouse or partner... About one in three persons reported being the victim of domestic abuse at some point in their lifetime. (20)

Note: more specific definition and discussion in Chapter 10 (pp. 146-148)

Scrutinizing the Numbers

If your church has three hundred members, sixty will experience a mental illness in any given year. You can guess that fifty members had four or more ACEs growing up. If two hundred members are adults, sixty-five have experienced some form of domestic abuse. (20)

The Continuum of Mental Health

Most persons will experience some level of emotional distress in their lifetime... Some have mental illness that never goes away. The term serious and persistent mental illness, or SPMI, describes severe versions of lifelong conditions, including schizophrenia, cognitive impairment, and autism. Other mental illnesses are not quite as severe, but can last a long time, such as generalized anxiety disorder... Mental health, mental health problems, and diagnosable mental illness should be thought of as existing on a continuum. In contrast, most persons and most professionals tend to think in categorical terms – in black and white. For them, the person either has a mental illness or they do not. (21)

The Medical Model and Mental Illness

The medical model of illness dominates health care because it tends to work. Its primary supposition is that illness always has an identifiable cause. A body becomes sick because something was inflicted on it (e.g., an injury) or infected it (e.g., a virus). The medical model posits that people are either healthy or ill and that if the cause of illness is eliminated, health will be restored... Because there is so much variability in mental health problems, because it exists on a continuum, the medical model does not work well...

The question should not be, “Is this a mental illness?” The proper question is, “Is this problem bad enough to warrant help?” (22)

The Cost of Mental Illness and Mental Health Problems

Emotional distress is the defining feature of most mental illnesses... a less well-known but common consequence of mental illness is physical pain, including headaches and stomach problems. Pain is exacerbated by sleep problems. (23)

The family of a person with mental illness suffers the distress of watching a loved one in pain and confusion. They might witness their loved one get insufficient treatment. They might worry when treatment does not work well. (23)

Concerning Treatment

Psychiatric medications affect the biology of the brain... they do not usually eliminate a mental illness, but they can significantly reduce symptoms. Psychological interventions... involve talking about thoughts and behaviors in order to improve feelings and to improve functioning in roles and relationships...

There are effective medications and therapies for almost all disorders. (24)

Unfortunately... less than half of persons with mental health problems received treatment. Even worse, fewer than half of those who seek help will be treated by a mental health professional...

Persons with mental illness do not obtain appropriate treatment for various reasons. They might be unsure that the problem is serious enough to warrant professional help. They might not know where to obtain treatment, or they might not know what treatment would involve. The most likely barrier to seeking treatment is stigma... our society, and even many in the Christian Church, endorse ignorant and misguided attitudes toward mental health problems. (25)

Session Two – Gaining Understanding

Read Chapter 2 – pp. 26-40 and Chapter 6 – pp. 68-75

Chapter Two: Mental Health, Mental Health Problems, and Mental Illness

Folly is a joy to him who lacks sense, but a man of understanding walks straight ahead.

– Proverbs 15:21

Emotions (Affect)

Emotions, or feelings, are generally negative or positive. We have a mix of feelings throughout every day. Emotions usually change from moment to moment... The intensity of emotions also varies...

Our emotions are central to our identity, as how we feel about things is perhaps what most defines us. Physically, all persons are nearly identical, with similar cells, bones, organs, and biological processes. We differ, however, in whom we like and love, what we dislike and despise...

Our emotions make us who we are.

If you want to make someone feel bad, mock or invalidate their emotions... Thus the essence of love and compassion is to respect and even appreciate another person's emotions. (27)

Affect is a feeling at a particular moment... Mood is an emotion that endures... Affect is emotion from moment to moment, but we usually return to our mood...

Affect that does not change or is inappropriate can be an indication of mental illness. Flat affect is the term to describe the inability to experience emotions. Inappropriate affect occurs when the felt or expressed emotion is incongruent with the situation... (28)

Behavior

Behaviors are actions... In trying to determine whether a person has a mental health problem, a clinician will evaluate whether a person's behaviors are causing problems... When behaviors cause impairment in roles and relationships, this indicates a mental health problem. (28-29)

Thinking (Cognitions)

The most important mental activity is thinking. The many ways of thinking are referred to as cognitions. These include memories, assumptions, perceptions, expectations, plans, problem-solving, and so forth...

Mental health professionals evaluate a person's thinking in great detail in order to determine whether someone might have a mental health problem... In particular, they listen for negative thoughts since they essentially determine how someone feels and what someone does, which both affect how well we do in roles and relationships. (29)

Roles and Relationships

Roles define our life's tasks, obligations, and responsibilities. All of us have many roles in life...

Relationships are what most of us consider to be the most important and rewarding parts of our lives. Problems in developing or maintaining relationships can be due to mental health problems.

Roles and relationships are closely intertwined. Most roles are defined by relationships...

Mental health professionals evaluate how well a person is doing in roles and relationships to determine whether they might have a mental health problem. Someone having difficulty fulfilling role obligations or forming and maintaining loving relationships might have a mental health problem. Impairment in either or both might be due to thoughts, behaviors, and feelings. (30-31)

The Mutual Influence of Thoughts, Behaviors, and Feelings

Our thoughts, behaviors, and feelings determine one another...

The association between thinking and behavior is easy to recognize. We act according to our intentions, decisions, and choices...

There are occasions when an adult's actions cannot be attributed to intention, but these occasions are fortunately rare. Behaviors are a choice. Do not let anyone convince you otherwise. Sometimes anger or sadness gets the better of someone and leads them to do something they should not do. Generally, though, people act how they choose to act, whether they insist that their emotions are to blame or not. [Example of a man who curses at his wife when angry, but not at his boss or at a police officer.] (31-32)

The distinction between thinking and emotions is extremely important, as it opens up the possibility of helping someone in emotional distress. At the same time, there is much modern misuse of the conflation of thoughts and feelings.

Our feelings are immensely important. They define who we are... This has led to the absurd idea that feelings are always correct... Feelings are important and are to be understood, appreciated, and respected. But the modern notion that feelings are always correct has been terribly confusing and outright abused. The reality is that not every feeling is justified. Feelings are based on thinking, and *thoughts can be wrong*. The modern-day hobby of asserting that any hurt feeling is evidence of maltreatment motivated by ill intent is detestable...

Even though it might not work, we must continue to point to reality, point to facts, and point out errors in thinking. It will not often help, but adhering to the truth in all its forms is all we can do. (34-35)

Defining Mental Health, Mental Health Problems, and Mental Illness

A mentally healthy person *thinks* accurately and realistically, *feels* much the way he or she wants, and is in control of his or her *actions*. As a result, the person is able to fulfill *roles* and make and keep important *relationships*...The *DSM*, published by the American Psychiatric Association, specifies the criteria for various mental illnesses. According to the *DSM*, a person has a mental illness if he or she experiences intense distress or exhibits impairment in roles and relationships because of problems in thinking, behavior, and feeling...

Cognitive behavior therapy focuses on changing cognitions and behaviors so that the person feels better and does better in his or her roles and relationships. As we will see, Luther advised cognitive behavior interventions five hundred years before we called it that. (36-37)

Stigmatizing Thoughts, Emotions, and Behavior

In any given year, 1 in 5 persons will be diagnosed with a mental illness. Over the course of a lifetime, about 1 in 2 persons will experience one. Fortunately, there are many effective treatments for all illnesses. Unfortunately, most persons with mental health problems do not seek treatment for them... They are often reluctant to acknowledge emotional distress because of the stigma society holds toward mental health problems. Understanding and addressing stigmatizing thoughts toward mental health problems is the first step in being able to help.

Society has very particular and derogatory ideas about mental illness. A common belief is that persons with mental illness are dangerous and unpredictable... Another idea is that a person with mental illness must deserve it... Some people believe that mental health problems happen only to the weak. Strong people “fight through it” and “tough it out.”...It is likewise unfortunately common to think that parents and families are to blame for mental illness in children.

It is bad enough to suffer, and [suffering persons and their families] don’t want to add embarrassment. Need proof? Of the people you know, how many can you identify as having mental illness? How many have spoken openly about it? (38-39)

Chapter Six: Thoughts, Behaviors, and Mental Health Problems, pp.68-75

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

- Romans 12:2

Thoughts and Behaviors Are Learned

We intentionally teach children some thoughts and behaviors... Many important things that children learn are neither taught nor learned intentionally... Children are born ready to learn about love. Children instinctively learn about themselves, others, and relationships. They learn from experience whether they are considered lovable and worth attention. They learn whether others can be trusted to take care of them. They learn to trust, or not to trust, that loving relationships are possible. (69-70)

Thoughts and Behaviors Become Habitual: Fast and Slow Thinking

Some thoughts and behaviors become habitual to the extent that they happen automatically and essentially disappear from awareness. We know from research by cognitive psychologists that these habits are necessary for day-to-day functioning... This illuminates the difference between two thinking systems, as described by cognitive psychologist Daniel Kahneman in his book *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. (70)

Slow Thinking

The slow thinking system is deliberate. This type of thinking requires effort and attention. When learning a new skill, we must concentrate on what we are doing, engaging our slow thinking system.

Fast Thinking

Much of our cognitive activity entails much faster, practically automatic thinking. When engaging in fast thinking, we think and engage in certain behaviors with minimal attention or effort.

Fast thinking capacity develops with experience... the fast system is almost completely involuntary... Fast thinking applies to behavior as well. Over time, with repetition and learning, many skills move from the slow, deliberate system to the fast system. In this way, sophisticated behaviors can become habitual. After a certain amount of experience, we can make coffee, type, or drive a car with little or no cognitive effort.

Put another way, fast thinking is knowing. I know how to drive a car, how to type, how to read... In a very real sense, then, fast thinking is not thinking at all but rather simply reacting based on what we have learned and now know. (71-72)

Thoughts Can Be Inaccurate, And Behaviors Can Be Unhealthy

Slow, deliberate thinking can be wrong. Even if we put effort into our choices and decisions, we can still make mistakes... Overall, however, when we engage in slow thinking, we are much more likely to realize our own thinking problems and errors.

Inaccurate fast thinking is much more likely and thus much more common... In similar fashion, habits of behavior can be quite unhealthy...

Importantly, if someone's fast thinking is inaccurate, he or she is unlikely to realize it unless it is pointed out. In the same way, bad habits can become so ingrained that their negative effect on health is no longer appreciated...

Whether fast (automatic) or slow (deliberate), thinking can be inaccurate. Whether intentional or habitual, behaviors can be unhealthy. Fast thinking is not easily recognized as inaccurate, and behavioral habits are not always seen as unhealthy. (72-73)

Session Three: Spiritual Distress and Mental Illness

Read Handout and Chapter Five – pp. 57-67

Handout: Preface to the Wittenberg Edition of Luther's German Writings

"A Correct Way of Studying Theology"

I want to point out to you a correct way of studying theology, for I have had practice in that. If you keep to it, you will become so learned that you yourself could (if it were necessary) write books just as good as those of the fathers and councils... This is the way taught by holy King David (and doubtlessly used also by all the patriarchs and prophets) in the one hundred nineteenth Psalm. There you will find the three rules, amply presented throughout the whole Psalm. They are *Oratio, Meditatio, Tentatio*. [Prayer, meditation, *anfechtung*] (285)

Firstly, you should know that the Holy Scriptures constitute a book which turns the wisdom of all other books into foolishness... therefore you should straightway despair of your reason and understanding... But kneel down in your little room and pray to God with real humility and earnestness that He through His dear Son may give you His Holy Spirit, who will enlighten you, lead you, and give you understanding. (286)

Secondly, you should meditate, that is, not only in your heart, but also externally, by actually repeating and comparing oral speech and literal words of the book, reading and rereading them with diligent attention and reflection, so that you may see what the Holy Spirit means by them (286-287)

Thirdly, there is *tentatio, Anfechtung*. This is the touchstone which teaches you not only to know and understand, but also to experience how right, how true, how sweet, how lovely, how mighty, how comforting God's Word is, wisdom beyond all wisdom...

As soon as God's Word takes root and grows in you, the devil will harry you, and will make a real doctor of you, and by his assaults will teach you to seek and to love God's Word. I myself (if you will permit, me mere mouse-dirt, to be mingled with pepper) am deeply indebted to my papists that through the devil's raging they have beaten, oppressed, and distressed me so much. That is to say, they have made a fairly good theologian of me, which I would not have become otherwise. (287)

Chapter Five: *Anfechtung* and Mental Illness, pp.57-67

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make straight your paths.

– Proverbs 3:5-6

13That very day two of them were going to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles^a from Jerusalem, 14and they were talking with each other about all these things that had happened. 15While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them. 16But their eyes were kept from recognizing him. 17And he said to them, “What is this conversation that you are holding with each other as you walk?” And they stood still, looking sad. 18Then one of them, named Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?” 19And he said to them, “What things?” And they said to him, “Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, a man who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, 20and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him. 21But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things happened. 22Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning, 23and when they did not find his body, they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that he was alive. 24Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see.” 25And he said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! 26Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” 27And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.

28So they drew near to the village to which they were going. He acted as if he were going farther, 29but they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent.” So he went in to stay with them. 30When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. 31And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And he vanished from their sight. 32They said to each other, “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?” 33And they rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem.

- Luke 24:13-33

Immediately the father of the child cried out^d and said, “I believe; help my unbelief!”

- Mark 9:24

Distinguishing *Anfechtung* and Mental Illness

[Luther] struggled to believe what he so openly – in the face of tremendous danger – taught and preached. Luther referred to these types of trials as his *Anfechtung*.

There is no direct English equivalent of the German word. In 1950, Roland H. Bainton described *Anfechtung* as “doubt, turmoil, pang, tremor, panic, despair, desolation, and desperation.” David Scaer acknowledged the many ways the word is translated, then stated, “*Anfechtung* is perhaps better understood not as one vocable in Luther’s vocabulary, but as a one-word theological concept. (57)

[Referencing the disciples on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24, Luther says:] *From this we learn, first, that weakness and defects remain even in those who are now Christians... Faith is not such a trifling or easy matter as foolish and inexperienced spirits imagine... Christians and believers experience – both in others and in themselves – confess, and lament their weakness... They have to fight and contend against their weakness all their lives...*

But look at how [Christ] intentionally accepts these two who are weak in faith, cares for them, and does everything to aid their weakness and to strengthen their faith. Because He sees and knows that they had gone away from the other apostles troubled and sad, not knowing what they should think or hope, He does not want to leave them stuck, remaining in such doubt and temptation. (58)

Luther distinguished *Anfechtung* and mental health problems. Luther taught that *Anfechtung* was essential to faith, even though it is emotionally distressing. It has the salubrious effect of driving us to Christ's cross to pray that the Holy Spirit strengthen our faith. We are the weeping disciple who fell to his knees and begged Jesus, "I believe; help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24). Luther wrote, "I would like to write a book about *Anfechtung*. Without it no man can rightly understand the Holy Scriptures or know what the fear and love of God is all about. In fact, without *Anfechtung* one does not really know what the spiritual life is." He is likewise recorded at the table by John Schlaginhausen on December 11, 1531: "God both loves and hates our afflictions. He loves them when they provoke us to prayer. He hates them when we are driven to despair by them." *Anfechtung* is inevitable, but it is not mental illness.

In the same way, mental illness is not an indication of spiritual problems... Consider the many persons in the Bible who talked directly with God but nonetheless had fear and sadness, including Abraham, Moses, Elijah, Jonah, Peter and so many others. (58-59)

The Depredations of the Theology of Glory

In the Heidelberg Disputation of 1518, Luther said the "theologian of glory" prefers "works to suffering, glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly, and, in general, good to evil." ... According to these false teachers, *Anfechtung* has no place in the life of a believer, nor does emotional suffering. Anyone who experiences either must say to themselves, "The reason for my suffering is my lack of faith," and their suffering is magnified by guilt... In the face of such terrible teaching and consequent fear, victims of this perverse theology might be compelled to stop believing. (61)

In a letter to [Valentine Hausmann], dated June 24, 1532, Luther wrote, "Under no circumstances allow yourself to become impatient because you do not at once have strong faith." He cajoled, "God is not the kind of father who casts off sick and erring children; if He were, He would have no children." (62)

Session Four – Cognitive Approaches

Read Chapter 7 – pp. 76-98

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

-Philippians 4:8

Thinking in the Bible

Thoughts are a big topic in the Bible. What people think has big implications in matters of life and death, both temporal and eternal. The Bible's message is threefold: be aware of your thinking, beware of false thinking, and think correctly. (76)

- Proverbs
 - *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction. 1:7*
 - *Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. 3:5*
- Isaiah 55:8
 - *For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD.*
- 2 Corinthians 10:5
 - *We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ,*
- Romans 12:2-3
 - *Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.*
- Philippians 4:8 (quoted top of page)

Cognitions and Mental Health Problems

Cognitions include how we think presently, how we remember the past, how we perceive the present, and how we anticipate the future... If we think pessimistically about the future – expecting that things will not work out for us, that good things will turn bad – this can cause depression and anxiety.

In terms of fast and slow thinking, if someone thinks these ways often and long enough, he or she will soon “know” them to be true. The knowledge will make the person perpetually anxious and chronically depressed. It will also affect how he or she behaves. (78)

Cognitive Therapy for Mental Health Problems

Therapy about thinking is called cognitive therapy. Let's reiterate the principles of cognitive therapy. First, thinking can become habitual so that we become unaware of what we think. Second, thinking affects how we feel and what we do. Third, thinking can be wrong. Fourth, thinking is learned and thus, can be relearned. (79)

Psychoeducation – Psychoeducation is educating people about their psychological functioning. This is particularly important for persons in emotional distress...

Gentle Confrontation – Confrontation entails challenging the validity of thinking. This must be done gently because people do not enjoy learning that their thoughts are wrong. Confrontation involves showing them examples of how thinking can easily be wrong and gently pointing out examples of their incorrect thinking...

Acceptance – Acceptance is the opposite of resistance. It means accepting that one is prone to incorrect thinking. Once a person realizes this, he or she can contest and struggle against the thoughts... Mental health professionals utilize the strategies Luther utilized: normalization and depersonalization.

- **Normalization** – To normalize mental health problems, empathize with people in their distress. Talk about and name what they are experiencing, then express directly that there is nothing unusual about the experience of mental health problems.

- **Depersonalization** – Depersonalization is making foreign something afflicting us... If something is not part of us, it is easier to recognize it as alien, challenge it, despise it (as Luther would say), and defeat it... This is obvious with some medical illnesses... it is harder to with mental health problems because our thoughts and emotion are uniquely our own. (79-80)

Restructuring, Reframing, and Ignoring – After a habitual thought is pulled into awareness, examined, and found to be erroneous, its power over feelings and behavior can and must be diminished. Restructuring and reframing are strategies for changing thinking. An alternative strategy is simply ignoring such negative thoughts.

- **Restructuring** – A restructured thought acknowledges reality (“not everyone likes me”), but it is more balanced and realistic [than the initial thought of “no one likes me”].

- **Reframing** – Reframing is more drastic. We “frame” events and incidents by how we think about why they happened...

- **Ignoring** – At times, thoughts cannot be changed... They come unbidden and keep coming even if we try to change them... Fortunately, restructuring or reframing is not necessary to diminish the influence of thoughts. Someone who is aware of negative thoughts and recognizes them as erroneous can ignore them. He or she can tell himself or herself, “I may not be able to stop my negative thinking, but I do not have to believe my negative thinking.” (81-82)

Luther’s Use of Modern Cognitive Therapy Techniques

- Discuss your favorites... or your least favorites (82-90)

Common Types of Negative Thinking

All-or-Nothing Thinking – Perceiving events only at the extremes.

Perfectionism – Thinking that any event or performance that is not conducted perfectly is terrible.

Attending Only the Negative – Focusing on small problems or imperfections while ignoring overall success.

Catastrophizing – Greatly exaggerating...the importance of some minor problem or mistake.

Disqualifying the Positive – [Discounting] success as luck, good fortune as unusual, and praise and kindness as exceptions.

Mind Reading – Assuming to know what another person is thinking [particularly attributing bad feelings/thoughts] (90-91)

Applying Cognitive Strategies as Luther Did

- Discuss how to apply cognitive strategies in helping/supporting others (91-97)
 - Psychoeducation
 - Gentle but Firm Confrontation
 - Acceptance
 - Depersonalization
 - Normalization
 - Restructuring Thinking
 - Ignoring Thinking

Christ and Anxious Thinking

- Read and discuss Matthew 6:25-34

25 *“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? 26 Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? 27 And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? 28 And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, 29 yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. 30 But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? 31 Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ 32 For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. 33 But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.*

34 *“Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.*

Session Five – Behavioral Approaches

Read Chapter 8 – pp. 99-117

***For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.
- Romans 7:15***

Behavior in the Bible

The Bible is replete with advice about behavior, including the behavior of the righteous and the need to support others. It warns about the danger of isolation, encouraging instead community and fellowship. It also has many examples of the value of solitude. (99)

❖ Honorable Conduct (99-100):

- 1 Peter 2:12
 - ***Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.***
- Titus 2:7-8
 - ***Show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, dignity, and sound speech that cannot be condemned, so that an opponent may be put to shame, having nothing evil to say about us.***
- Philippians 1:27-28
 - ***Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents.***

❖ Isolation (100):

- Genesis 2:18
 - ***Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him."***
- Proverbs 18:1
 - ***Whoever isolates himself seeks his own desire; he breaks out against all sound judgment.***
- 1 Peter 5:8
 - ***Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.***

❖ Fellowship (100-101):

- Galatians 6:2
- ***Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.***

- Philippians 2:4
- ***Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.***

- Romans 15:1
- ***We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves.***

- Hebrews 10:24-25
- ***And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.***

❖ Quiet Time (101):

- Matthew 14:23
- ***And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone,***

- Mark 1:35
- ***And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed.***

- Luke 5:15-16
- ***But now even more the report about him went abroad, and great crowds gathered to hear him and to be healed of their infirmities. 16But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray.***

To summarize, the Bible tells us that being alone is bad, except when it is done for our good. Isolating ourselves is dangerous, and receiving the gifts of God's Word within the community of saints is central to life within the Body of Christ. Being alone at times for prayer and meditation, however, is also important to the life of faith. It can help us recover when we are wearied of our burdens. (102)

Behavior and Mental Health Problems

Behaviors that are particularly bad for mental health are social isolation and lack of participation in enjoyable activities, which leads to an unhealthy lifestyle. (102)

Social Withdrawal and Isolation – Persons with mental health problems almost inevitably withdraw from others. This is because they look to future events and cannot imagine that they will enjoy themselves... Persons with anxiety can get into similar vicious cycles. Due to thinking that they will be anxious in a situation, they avoid the situation. As a result, they do not learn that the situation is not as dangerous or as scary as they imagine. (102)

Enjoyable Things – Lack of enjoyment might be due to *anhedonia*, which translates as “without pleasure”. Someone with *anhedonia* will engage in behavior that previously gave them pleasure and find that they no longer enjoy it. Thus does Luther so often cajole those with depression and anxiety, “You must go do fun things, such as ride, play music, play games, and so forth.” Note that Luther was not saying, and you should not say, “You will have fun!” Rather, Luther was saying, as you should say, “Do it because it will be good for you.” (103)

Neglecting Health-Promoting Behavior – Persons with depression and anxiety will not engage properly in healthy behaviors. They will not exercise enough, they will not take the time to prepare healthy meals, and they may unintentionally develop poor sleep habits. (104)

Modern Life, the Business of the Family, and Being Too Busy for Fun – Modern life can cause depression because it is so busy that individuals, couples, and families neglect to do things that they enjoy... it is sensible and helpful to consider the joys of life as necessary to prevent or defeat depression and anxiety. (104)

Behavior Therapy for Mental Health Problems

Cognitive therapy is the dominant form of therapy because, like the eight-hundred-pound gorilla, it is powerful. It is the most widely studied and most widely practiced form of therapy. Behavior therapy, however, is also powerful and has some advantages over cognitive therapy. (105)

Advantages of Advising about Behavior – Behavioral issues leading to mental health problems are easier to identify than cognitive errors... there is no “fast thinking” version of behavior... behavior is observable. Also, behaviors to combat mental health problems are straightforward... It is easy to evaluate whether someone has followed behavioral advice. (105)

Behavioral Activation – Modern mental health professionals routinely give two pieces of behavioral advice to persons with depression and anxiety: go out with others and do fun things... Implementing behavioral activation can be a challenge. This is because thinking (*It won't be fun*) and associated emotions (*I'm too down to do that*) are still at play when working to activate behavioral change. The strategies that mental health professionals use to increase the likelihood that someone will engage in behavioral activation focus, ironically, on thinking...

Helping persons recognize that the way they are acting is unhealthy for their mental health is essential... (so too) helping persons ignore thinking and emotions that encourage unhealthy behavior...(and) helping persons plan enjoyable activities. (106-107)

Luther's Modern Advice About Behavior

- ❖ Discuss your favorites... or your least favorites (107-111)

Applying Behavioral Principles

Luther’s helpful advice regarding behavior to combat depression and anxiety is straightforward. His advice is commonsensical, and you can and should offer the same advice; it is advice given by mental health professionals. To start, evaluate the person’s behavior, then enlighten him or her about the importance of behavior. Next, encourage and advise him or her to change his or her behavior. (111)

Socialization

The main behavioral goals to combat mental health problems are fun and socialization. They tend to go together. (114)

Note a focus on “fun” and face-to-face socialization.

Healthy and Unhealthy Behavior

Diet, exercise, stress, and sleep habits are not easy to change from unhealthy to healthy... An effective way to convince someone to care for himself is to remind him that his capacity to care for others is compromised if he is not first caring for himself. (116)

Session Six – Helping

Read Chapters 9-10 – pp. 118-151

Chapter Nine: Applying Luther’s Advice

Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

- 1 Corinthians 15:58

Strategies for helping someone in emotional distress change his or her thinking or behavior were reviewed in chapters 7 and 8. These strategies can be implemented within the context of “helpful conversations.” (118)

How Helpful Conversations Start

A person distressed by a mental health problem will most likely come directly to you, seeking assistance and consolation. The only preparation necessary for these conversations is not being surprised that the person coming to you is experiencing mental health problems...

There will be times when you will be obliged to approach someone about a mental health concern. (119)

Goals of a Helpful Conversation

A helpful conversation does not solve someone’s problems. That would be a wonderful thing to do, obviously, but it is very unlikely to be possible... A helpful conversation is helpful when it addresses with compassion and kindness what the person is experiencing. Some things are fairly safe to assume the person is experiencing. First, the person is distraught... Second, the person is confused... Third, the person is anxious about talking to you. (119-120)

The goals of a helpful conversation follow from this. When you listen with kindness and express understanding of her distress, you can alleviate her confusion and her shame... By expressing understanding, you signal that her distress is okay. By expressing understanding, you communicate that she is understandable, not confusing...

This sounds like a large task, but it is not. The task is mostly, if not completely, accomplished by the simple kindness of meeting, listening, and offering comfort and consolation. (120)

Emulate Luther’s Manner

Emulating Luther is not always a great idea, but his manner of dealing with persons in emotional distress is worth copying.

Kindness... Steadfastness... Hesitant Boldness (120-122)

Practical Considerations

A helpful conversation should happen in private...

A helpful conversation needs sufficient time...

Pay careful attention to physical space...

Finally, consider the issue of confidentiality. (123)

Nonverbal Communication

If we become aware of nonverbal communication, we can be intentional about what we communicate to others and use it to our advantage in a helpful conversation... (124)

Active Listening

Active listening entails verbal behaviors by the listener that encourage the other person to continue talking, expand on topics, and explore deeper...

Reflective listening/Verbal mirroring

Closed questions

Open-ended questions with gentle commands

Paraphrasing

Summarizing (125-126)

Empathy

Empathy means understanding and accepting how a person thinks and feels with no judgment or evaluation of his or her thoughts and feelings. It is not feeling what the speaker is feeling; that is sympathy. It is not agreeing with what the speaker is thinking, which might be impossible and unwise... Empathy encourages people to realize their emotions or thoughts, while unpleasant, distressing, and confusing are understandable. (127)

Behaviors That Derail a Helpful Conversation

Interrupting

“Why” Questions

Quick Reassurance

Quick Advice

Insistence on Disclosure (128-129)

Address Stigma Immediately and Directly

Helping Families

Family members of persons with mental illness also face burdens related to stigma and related to the struggle with the illness.

Burdens... Emotions and Thoughts... Courtesy Stigma... Self-Care Behaviors (131-134)

Churchwide Strategies

Persons and families said they wished their church talked more openly about mental illness, but most said that their church did not. This experience made them feel ignored, invisible, and unseen. In other words, they experienced stigma at their church. (134)

Chapter Ten: Helping vs. Referring

Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, as it goes well with your soul.

- 3 John 2

Determining the Severity of Mental Health Problems: Who Needs Referral?

Mental health lies on a continuum, and serious problems require referral. (139)

Indicators of severity:

1. Sudden and substantial changes
2. Emotional distress related to a recent and severe trauma
3. The intensity of distress
4. The duration of the problem
5. The impact of the problem on roles and relationships (140)

Suicidal Ideation and Intent

Most persons think about their own deaths at times... Thinking about suicide is much more serious, especially if it is the result of emotional distress... Anyone expressing suicide intent should be taken for immediate care. (141)

Domestic abuse must be referred

Domestic abuse is intentional acts of violence, threats, and control done by one person to another to intimidate and control the other person. Situations of domestic abuse are fraught with danger and risk, and the overarching concern is safety. (146-147)

Practice Discernment When Seeking a Mental Health Provider

Seek only licensed mental health professionals...

Seek someone with relevant competence...

Seek someone who explicitly recognizes the importance of religious beliefs.

If someone insists on seeing a Christian counselor, be sure that she is willing to state that she asks about her client's faith, is respectful of that faith, and will refer back to her client's pastor in issues of faith. (148-151)

PREFACE TO THE WITTENBERG EDITION OF LUTHER'S GERMAN WRITINGS

Dr. Martin Luther's Preface

I would have been quite content to see my books, one and all, remain in obscurity and go by the board. Among other reasons, I shudder to think of the example I am giving, for I am well aware how little the church has been profited since they have begun to collect many books and large libraries, in addition to and besides the Holy Scriptures, and especially since they have stored up, without discrimination, all sorts of writings by the church fathers, the councils, and teachers. Through this practice not only is precious time lost, which could be used for studying the Scriptures, but in the end the pure knowledge of the divine Word is also lost, so that the Bible lies forgotten in the dust under the bench (as happened to the book of Deuteronomy, in the time of the kings of Judah) (1) .

Although it has been profitable and necessary that the writings of some church fathers and councils have remained, as witnesses and histories, nevertheless I think, "*Est modus in rebus*," (2) and we need not regret that the books of many fathers and councils have, by God's grace, disappeared. If they had all remained in existence, no room would be left for anything but books; and yet all of them together would not have improved on what one finds in the Holy Scriptures.

It was also our intention and hope, when we ourselves began to translate the Bible into German, (3) that there should be less writing, and instead more studying and reading of the Scriptures. For all other writing is to lead the way into and point toward the Scriptures, as John the Baptist did toward Christ, saying, "He must increase, but I must decrease" [John 3:30], in order that each person may drink of the fresh spring himself, as all those fathers who wanted to accomplish something good had to do.

Neither councils, fathers, nor we, in spite of the greatest and best success possible, will do as well as the Holy Scriptures, that is, as well as God himself has done. (We must, of course, also have the Holy Spirit, faith, godly speech, and works, if we are to be saved.) Therefore it behooves us to let the prophets and apostles stand at the professor's lectern, while we, down below at their feet, listen to what they say. It is not they who must hear what we say.

I cannot, however, prevent them from wanting to collect and publish my works through the press (small honor to me), although it is not my will. I have no choice but to let them risk the labor and the expense of this project. My consolation is that, in time, my books will lie forgotten in the dust anyhow, especially if I (by God's grace) have written anything good. *Non ere melior Patribus meis*. (4) He who comes second should indeed be the first one forgotten. Inasmuch as they have been capable of leaving the Bible itself lying under the bench, and have also forgotten the fathers and the councils—the better ones all the faster—accordingly there is a good hope, once the overzealousness of this time has abated, that my books also will not last long. There is especially good hope of this, since it has begun to rain and snow books and teachers, many of which already lie there forgotten and moldering. Even their names are not remembered any more, despite their confident hope that they would eternally be on sale in the market and rule churches.

Very well, so let the undertaking proceed in the name of God, except that I make the friendly request of anyone who wishes to have my books at this time, not to let them on any account hinder him from studying the Scriptures themselves. Let him put them to use as I put the excrees and excretals (5) of the pope to use, and the books of the sophists. That is, if I occasionally wish to see what they have done, or if I wish to ponder the historical facts of the time, I use them. But I do not study in them or act

in perfect accord with what they deemed good. I do not treat the books of the fathers and the councils much differently.

Herein I follow the example of St. Augustine, (6) who was, among other things, the first and almost the only one who determined to be subject to the Holy Scriptures alone, and independent of the books of all the fathers and saints. On account of that he got into a fierce fight with St. Jerome, who reproached him by pointing to the books of his forefathers; but he did not turn to them. And if the example of St. Augustine had been followed, the pope would not have become Antichrist, and that countless mass of books, which is like a crawling swarm of vermin, would not have found its way into the church, and the Bible would have remained on the pulpit.

Moreover, I want to point out to you a correct way of studying theology, for I have had practice in that. If you keep to it, you will become so learned that you yourself could (if it were necessary) write books just as good as those of the fathers and councils, even as I (in God) dare to presume and boast, without arrogance and lying, that in the matter of writing books I do not stand much behind some of the fathers. Of my life I can by no means make the same boast. This is the way taught by holy King David (and doubtlessly used also by all the patriarchs and prophets) in the one hundred nineteenth Psalm. There you will find three rules, amply presented throughout the whole Psalm. They are *Oratio*, *Meditatio*, *Tentatio*. (7)

Firstly, you should know that the Holy Scriptures constitute a book which turns the wisdom of all other books into foolishness, because not one teaches about eternal life except this one alone. Therefore you should straightway despair of your reason and understanding. With them you will not attain eternal life, but, on the contrary, your presumptuousness will plunge you and others with you out of heaven (as happened to Lucifer) into the abyss of hell. But kneel down in your little room [Matt. 6:6] and pray to God with real humility and earnestness, that he through his dear Son may give you his Holy Spirit, who will enlighten you, lead you, and give you understanding.

Thus you see how David keeps praying in the above-mentioned Psalm, "Teach me, Lord, instruct me, lead me, show me," (8) and many more words like these. Although he well knew and daily heard and read the text of Moses and other books besides, still he wants to lay hold of the real teacher of the Scriptures himself, so that he may not seize upon them pell-mell with his reason and become his own teacher. For such practice gives rise to factious spirits who allow themselves to nurture the delusion that the Scriptures are subject to them and can be easily grasped with their reason, as if they were Markolf (9) or Aesop's Fables, for which no Holy Spirit and no prayers are needed.

Secondly, you should meditate, that is, not only in your heart, but also externally, by actually (10) repeating and comparing oral speech and literal words of the book, reading and rereading them with diligent attention and reflection, so that you may see what the Holy Spirit means by them. And take care that you do not grow weary or think that you have done enough when you have read, heard, and spoken them once or twice, and that you then have complete understanding. You will never be a particularly good theologian if you do that, for you will be like untimely fruit which falls to the ground before it is haft ripe.

Thus you see in this same Psalm how David constantly boasts that he will talk, meditate, speak, sing, hear, read, by day and night and always, about nothing except God's Word and commandments. For God will not give you his Spirit without the external (11) Word; so take your cue from that. His command to write, preach, read, hear, sing, speak, etc., outwardly (12) was not given in vain.

Thirdly, there is *tentatio, Anfechtung*. This is the touchstone which teaches you not only to know and understand, but also to experience how right, how true, how sweet, how lovely, how mighty, how comforting God's Word is, wisdom beyond all wisdom.

Thus you see how David, in the Psalm mentioned, complains so often about all kinds of enemies, arrogant princes or tyrants, false spirits and factions, whom he must tolerate because he meditates, that is, because he is occupied with God's Word (as has been said) in all manner of ways. For as soon as God's Word takes root and grows in you, the devil will harry you, and will make a real doctor of you, and by his assaults (13) will teach you to seek and love God's Word. I myself (if you will permit me, mere mouse-dirt, to be mingled with pepper) am deeply indebted to my papists that through the devil's raging they have beaten, oppressed, and distressed me so much. That is to say, they have made a fairly good theologian of me, which I would not have become otherwise. And I heartily grant them what they have won in return for making this of me, honor, victory, and triumph, for that's the way they wanted it.

There now, with that you have David's rules. If you study hard in accord with his example, then you will also sing and boast with him in the Psalm, "The law of thy mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces" [Ps. 119:72]. Also, "Thy commandment makes me wiser than my enemies, for it is ever with me. I have more understanding than all my teachers, for thy testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the aged, for I keep thy precepts," etc. [Ps. 119:98–100]. And it will be your experience that the books of the fathers will taste stale and putrid to you in comparison. You will not only despise the books written by adversaries, but the longer you write and teach the less you will be pleased with yourself. When you have reached this point, then do not be afraid to hope that you have begun to become a real theologian, who can teach not only the young and imperfect Christians, but also the maturing and perfect ones. For indeed, Christ's church has all kinds of Christians in it who are young, old, weak, sick, healthy, strong, energetic, lazy, simple, wise, etc.

If, however, you feel and are inclined to think you have made it, flattering yourself with your own little books, teaching, or writing, because you have done it beautifully and preached excellently; if you are highly pleased when someone praises you in the presence of others; if you perhaps look for praise, and would sulk or quit what you are doing if you did not get it—if you are of that stripe, dear friend, then take yourself by the ears, and if you do this in the right way you will find a beautiful pair of big, long, shaggy donkey ears. Then do not spare any expense! Decorate them with golden bells, so that people will be able to hear you wherever you go, point their fingers at you, and say, "See, See! There goes that clever beast, who can write such exquisite books and preach so remarkably well." That very moment you will be blessed and blessed beyond measure in the kingdom of heaven. Yes, in that heaven where hellfire is ready for the devil and his angels. To sum up: Let us be proud and seek honor in the places where we can. But in this book the honor is God's alone, as it is said, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble" [1 Pet. 5:5]; to whom be glory, world without end, Amen. (14)

¹ Cf. II Kings 22:8. In Luther's German Bible, Deuteronomy is referred to as "the fifth book of Moses."

² "There is a reason for the way things happen." Horace *Satires* I, 1, 106.

³ Luther began to translate the Bible into German during his confinement to the Wartburg. In a letter to Johann Lang, December 18, 1521, he announced his intention to translate the New Testament into German. *WA*, Br 2, 413. This letter contains the first reference to Luther's intention to translate the Bible.

⁴ I Kings 19:4. "I am no better than my fathers."

⁵ That is, "decrees and decretals." The translator has attempted to render Luther's pun "*Drecket und Drecketal*" in English.

⁶ *Epistola* 82. Migne 33, 277.

⁷ Prayer, meditation, *Anfechtung*.

⁸ Ps. 119:26 *et al.*

⁹ The very popular medieval legend of Solomon and Markolf was treated in a verse epic, chapbooks, dialogues, and farces. The figure of Markolf, a sly and unprincipled rogue, was known in Germany as early as the tenth century.

¹⁰ *Eusserlich*.

¹¹ *Eusserlich*.

¹² *Eusserlich*. The correspondence Luther intends to show between actual (*eusserlich*) study of the Bible in its outward (*eusserlich*) form and the external (*eusserlich*) Word as a medium of God's address cannot be rendered in idiomatic English by translating *eusserlich* with one word.

¹³ *Anfechtungen*.

¹⁴ The last two sentences are in Latin in the original text.

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