

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)