



# Chronic Mental Illness: Loving Those Who Suffer long

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We are all created in the image of the triune God. After the fall, sin and death entered and we now inhabit a broken world where many people live with long-term suffering. Chronic mental illness is one form of long-term suffering, and those living with this struggle are not disqualified from redemption through Christ, no matter the condition they have or the symptoms and behaviors they exhibit.

Chronic mental illness is long-term with ongoing psychiatric symptoms. These symptoms severely impair a person's ability to function. Some examples are:

- Schizophrenia, major depressive disorder, and bipolar disorders
- Effects of chronic trauma
- Neurodivergence with mental health challenges, such as ADHD and Autism Spectrum Disorder

Chronic illness falls under the theological category of suffering more than sin and is embodied in nature. Symptoms involve many of the body's systems, e.g., gastrointestinal upset, lethargy, fatigue, and thought loops. It is not a result of a lack of effort or repentance but is genetic and chemical. For example, Charles Spurgeon had chronic depression his whole life despite his faithful dependence on the Lord.

Though long-term suffering may pose trials and temptation to sin, the mental health symptoms themselves are not from a character flaw or a need for greater spiritual growth. Some examples are:

- Major depressive disorder symptoms of fatigue and lack of interest in pleasurable activities can seem like a person is being lazy, unmotivated, or negative.
- Chronic trauma symptoms such as hyper-vigilance and avoidance of feared situations can seem like a person is "living in fear" and not trusting God.

Do not assume these symptoms are purely because of a lack of faith. Instead, be mindful and curious to learn about the person's experience and how you can support them. This tool highlights five ways of caring for someone with chronic mental illness.

# 1

## Check your own biases

### Ask yourself:

1. Do I have any biases against people with mental illnesses?
2. Am I being overly critical or harsh in my judgments of them?

3. Might I have misconceptions or misinformation about mental illness and the people who suffer from it? If so, how can I correct these?

Get some training in mental health issues. It is important to gain accurate knowledge about mental illness to best support those in your community. If you would like to connect with our training team, [submit a request](#).

# 2

## Check in regularly and assist with daily living

Helping can include babysitting, providing meals, shopping, or attending a support group with them. Recognize that people may blame themselves and need to work through the shame of asking for help. Avoid judging them for having symptoms, but treat them with compassion as you would if they had a different type of long-term illness like Parkinson's.

If they open up about having a mental illness ask: "Are there any challenges you face on a regular basis that I can help with?" Be aware that mental illness can be episodic and cyclical in nature. A person can seem fine for a season but may exhibit symptoms in another season, so touch base often.

# 3

## Help People Grieve

Those living with chronic mental illness often suffer many losses and struggle with sadness, regret, shame, and anger. Check to see how their chronic mental health condition has added to their suffering, such as job losses, inability to work, difficulties in relationships,

unmet goals, and serious limitations that sometimes are not readily apparent.

Their suffering has also likely affected their view of self. Seek to understand and gently challenge false or negative self-messages they believe, such as “I am damaged;” “I am defective;” and “I am worthless.” Remind them who they are in Christ. “I am loved;” “I am worthy;” “I am a child of God;” and “I am fearfully and wonderfully made.”

## 4

### **Help them move toward accepting what is**

Praying for healing is important, but many people are not supernaturally healed. Most people need to work on growing in acceptance of their limitations and learn to live as meaningful and fulfilling a life as is possible. We can help them focus on their strengths, celebrate small wins and big accomplishments, and provide genuine encouragement and support along the way.

## 5

### **Help them get the support they need**

Refer individuals to professionals if they are not currently working with one. Help them navigate insurance, make/keep appointments, and perhaps accompany them to their first appointment. Work on a Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP). A WRAP is a concrete recovery tool to use with friends or those in your care.

Some questions to ask are:

- What are some of your stressors and early warning signs of worsening symptoms?
- How can we plan for a crisis?
- How can we support you after a crisis?
- What are some healthy activities you can add to your life?

For a full Wellness Recovery Action Plan, there is a [short, 100-page book](#) that walks someone through developing a toolbox and daily plan chapter by chapter.

Have a list of resources available. Examples are: Mental Health America, Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance, local call lines and 988, counseling referrals. As someone serving people who have chronic, long-term conditions, you may also benefit from our August Toolkit, “[Easing Caregivers’ Burdens.](#)”

### **Remember to treat each person as a whole person, not a diagnosis.**

Be patient, not patronizing or paternalistic, but relate to people from a place of care, grace, and compassion, as Jesus did in the gospel accounts. As we reflect Christ to others and come alongside them in their long-term suffering, remember that the Gospel is good news for those with chronic mental illness. It provides His presence and comfort in this life and the promise of a future that includes complete spiritual, mental, relational, and physical restoration, our ultimate hope in Christ.