

READ – Session Introduction (read each session)

STARTER

How do you know that someone else cares about you?
(share examples from your life)

WATCH (session 1 video)

In our first video we meet a few of the people who will share the real-life stories that help us understand the way mental health struggles look and feel. In these videos we'll meet a total of 25 survivors, 9 pastors, and 12 Christian mental health professionals who have generously shared their experience and expertise in order to help you through this curriculum.

READ & DISCUSS

What is one thing that stood out to you from the video?

A Lack of Understanding

Nancy presents a common issue faced by people who struggle with some aspect of mental health. Her family was crumbling and other people in their lives didn't understand or know what to say so they ignored the problem. Nancy's family needed someone to simply come alongside them. When that did not happen, they felt isolated in their suffering and the effects of her son's mental illness started to spread to others in the family.

What are some reasons we might choose to "ignore" mental health problems that are faced by people in our lives? Have you ever felt ignored because of some challenge you were facing?

We Move Away From Things That Are Scary!

A number of the people we heard from described mental health struggles that were hard for even them to understand. We tend to fear things we don't understand. Our instincts naturally tell us to move away from things that seem dangerous.

Why and how does fear affect the way we respond to people who are suffering with something we may not understand? What steps could we take to overcome our fear and discomfort?

You Don't Need To Know Everything

Even though it's sometimes easy to see that something is "wrong", it's often hard to know how to help. Acknowledging our lack of understanding is a great starting point in becoming part of a community that provides authentic and effective care.

What could you say or do to help someone know that you don't understand what they are going through but that you care?

Feeling Unequipped

Our lack of understanding can make us believe that we are not equipped to respond when we know of someone who is struggling. It's easy to say that there must be someone else who can respond better than I can, so we often give ourselves a "pass" for not stepping in to support others who are in the midst of something we don't understand.

Apply The Word – read Exodus 3:1-10

God has seen the misery of his people and he's come to let Moses in on his plan to deliver his people out of Egypt. Take a look at the way Moses responds to God's plan in the following verses:

- “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” 3:11
- “What if they do not believe me or listen to me and say, ‘The Lord did not appear to you?’” 4:1
- “Pardon your servant, Lord. I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue.” 4:10
- “Pardon your servant, Lord. Please send someone else.”

Even though God was angry with Moses, and sent Aaron to take up some of the work, Moses was obedient and God delivered his people through Moses in the end.

How can Moses' experience in these verses help us with our own attitude towards things we don't understand, or times when we feel unequipped to respond?

Care Note

Understanding mental health struggles is complicated. People who struggle with their mental health are often affected by similar struggles in very different ways. Sometimes well-meaning people (even pastors and counselors) feel the need to come up with answers for others. Often, what may be a perfectly good answer for one person is wrong for another. Sometimes we can be tempted to answer questions that are best left to professionals or that only God can answer.

Empathy vs. Sympathy

When we want to support someone who is suffering it's important to recognize the difference between sympathy and empathy. These two ways of responding to others

can “feel” different to the sufferer. **Sympathy** is a feeling of sincere sorrow or pity for the situation that someone else is in. When communicated in a loving way, sympathy can be helpful and provide real support. Without authenticity, sympathy can seem impersonal and create feelings of separation or judgement. **Empathy** creates the sense that you have been there, or that you can at some level understand the feelings of others. Empathy doesn't mean that you have necessarily experienced the exact situation, but that some aspect of your experience gives you the ability to “walk in the shoes” of another person.

Healing Takes Time and Care

Therapists Jess and Susan encourage us to be curious about the struggles people are facing and to not push people to “just get over it.” Susan emphasizes the need for deep listening to gain more knowledge in order to understand how to help.

What could another person do or say to convince you that they are really listening to you?

It's All Around Us

Pastor Paul says that there are many people in our churches going through something that's very important in their own life. Things like divorce, job loss, financial issues, grief, and isolation all create trauma and each of us see that trauma differently. Paul encourages us to see those situations as Christ saw them, with compassion because that's what God has called us to do. Paul shares a miracle story from John.

The Numbers

1 in 5 Americans currently suffers from mental illness.

Apply The Word – read John 5:1-9

Jesus healed a man who had been an invalid for 38 years. He had been trying to get in the pool *but he had no one to help him*. Apparently he was such a common sight at the pool that others chose to ignore him or, stopped seeing him altogether.

The first thing Jesus did for the invalid was to simply to see him and recognize his suffering. What is one practical way you can be more like Jesus this week in the way you see others?

PRAY & ACT

This week thank God for your own mental health and ask him to prompt and equip you to respond when you see others in need of support. Look for opportunities to apply the ideas discussed in this session. Write down thoughts or questions that come up for next session.

Note: We are grateful for the generosity of the people who have shared their stories to make this curriculum possible. As your group progresses you'll get to hear more about these stories. They serve as an excellent example of the way God can take terrible things and use them for his purpose.