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Importance of spiritual dimension of Orthodox faith in mental health

Introduction

Mental health is a fundamental component of our everyday life. In general terms, this concept is defined as the ability of the individual to maintain a balance between emotional and intellectual functions and to integrate with ease in social life.

When they hear the expression mental health, most people think of emotional and psychological diseases. However, mental health is more than just the absence of illness; it is a state of being that everyone desires to achieve, whether we know what it is or not. When we think about happiness, satisfaction, joy, peace of mind, and other positive emotions, we actually refer to mental health.

Often, researchers and practitioners find it difficult to differentiate between mental health and mental illness. For example, a person is experiencing fear of public speaking, does it mean he or she has a severe disorder or is he or she simply more emotional than the rest? Alternatively, if someone feels sad, is it a passing state or a symptom of depressive disorder?

Researchers and mental health professionals have been struggling with this dilemma for hundreds of years, and even today, the line between normal and pathological is unclear. That might be one of the reasons why psychology and psychiatry are shrouded in controversy.

As the World Health Organization pointed out at the beginning of this year, the number one cause of disability worldwide is depression. With over 300 million people struggling with various forms of depression, mental health today might be facing a severe crisis. On top of that we have anxiety disorders where, in 2013, prevalence ranged between 0.9% and 28.3%. (Baxter, Scott, & Whiteford, 2013)

When God is no longer a point of reference for goodness, holiness, and solid moral principles, the boundaries between good and bad, healthy and unhealthy, normal and abnormal become blurry. Without divine guidance, people get lost in their

own quest for meaning and well-being, which often results in a lot of frustration, disappointment, sorrow, and helplessness.

As therapists and mental health professionals, the real question we need to ask ourselves is what do people need (aside from what they already have) in order to maintain their mental health at optimal levels?

Spirituality - The forgotten (or overlooked) piece

One aspect that researchers and experts from various fields are beginning to pay increasing attention to is spirituality. Spiritual care in medical and psychological practice is an interdisciplinary approach that seeks to alleviate the pain and suffering associated with various medical or mental problems.

Spirituality is an important resource for adapting to mental and physical illness. Spiritual practices such as prayer can increase the effectiveness of medical or psychological interventions by mobilizing the patients' inner resources. Healing occurs more quickly if the spiritual aspects of the person are involved, and the psycho-emotional and physical parts are no longer seen as separate entities.

In the context of Christian Orthodoxy, spirituality represents man's quest for perfection in Christ, through repentance and the acquiring of Christian virtues. Spirituality is the channel through which humans cultivate and nurture their relationship with God.

According to recent studies, spirituality plays a pivotal role both in mental and physical health. Not only that this crucial dimension of life has a positive effect on the physical health of cancer patients (Jim. et al., 2015), but it is also positively correlated with health resilience (Womble, Labbé, & Cochran, 2013) which is a predictor of mental health. Moreover, US and UK students with higher spirituality scores report better health and life satisfaction (Varun, June, & Paramjit, 2015).

Unfortunately, recent technological advances in diagnosis and treatment overshadowed the more human element of medicine (Puchalski, Blatt, M, & Butler, 2014), resulting in a global spiritual crisis.

Although psychotherapists and mental health professionals are well aware of the relationship between spirituality and mental health, the biggest challenge is applying the knowledge that already exists, in a clinical setting. (Moreira-Almeida, Koenig, & Lucchetti, 2014)

In order to (re)integrate the spiritual dimension into the broad concept of mental health, man must first redefine his spiritual identity (Vlaicu, 2015) by following the model of Jesus and the Holy Parents who were also facing challenges that could have left a mark on their mental health. Furthermore, as one author puts it, researchers and scholars need to clarify the difference between the psychology of the mind, the psychology of the human, and Orthodox (Christian) psychology, which is the psychology of the life path. (Slobodchikov, 2016)

Love – the foundation of Orthodox spiritual life

In 1 John 4:8, the Holy Bible teaches us that "Anyone who does not love does not know God because God is love." Furthermore, the paramount role of love in the context of Orthodox faith is once again reiterated in Mathew 22:37 where Jesus urges believers to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind"; and in Mathew 22:38 where Jesus mentions the second greatest commandment which is to "Love your neighbor as yourself."

In short, the spiritual life of any orthodox Christian should revolve around the concept of love because love is God and God is love.

Love is about sacrificing ourselves for the sake and well-being of our family, neighbours, friends, coworkers or any other person and refraining from doing anything that we might find unpleasant or undesirable. It was out of love that God sent His only Son to suffer and die for the sins of humanity so that anyone who repents of their sins will be saved. In other words, orthodox faith, like many therapeutic approaches designed to improve mental health, stresses the importance of accepting our flaws and shortcomings as part of our imperfect, sinful nature.

The absence of God, therefore the lack of authentic, selfless love from a person's life, can make mental and spiritual suffering difficult to overcome (Lefter, 2015)

Once people confess their sins, which are often the cause of unhappiness and poor mental health, and choose to love God with all their heart, soul, and mind, the burden of shame, disappointment, self-loathing slowly becomes lighter. As soon as people let go of their emotional and spiritual "baggage," God's love begins to take root resulting in a gradual improvement in mental health.

God as the ultimate healer

As we previously discussed, God's principles for stable and lasting physical, mental and spiritual health are often consistent with modern psychotherapy concepts. For example, let's look at how Jesus described a common emotional problem that can affect one's mental health.

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can anyone of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?" (Matthew 6:25-27)

Right from the start, Jesus reveals the irrational and fruitless core of anxiety and worry. Furthermore, He once again emphasizes the unmeasurable love that God has for His creation and how such love has the power to heal a worried soul.

By urging people to love each other as they love themselves and highlighting the importance of the church as the Body of Christ, Our Lord sets the foundation for close, meaningful relationships. As a result, people following the spiritual principles of

orthodox faith develop a higher sense of coherence which acts as an effective stress management technique. (Merakou, et al., 2017)

Another concept that holds value in the context of Orthodox faith and has beneficial effects on mental health and well-being is humility. Being humble, which is in complete contradiction with the secular views, refers to an attitude characterised by modesty and a deep understanding of personal limits. It also means being honest with oneself and having the desire and power to make others better.

Often, humility is considered a feature of the weak and "pathetic." However, those who practice a modest, humble attitude are in fact extremely powerful and in control of their lives.

Although humility does not have a direct impact on mental health, this attitude diminishes the magnitude of the negative relationship between stressful events and life satisfaction. (Krause, Pargament, Hill, & Ironson, 2016) In other words, a humble attitude makes life's hardships easier to endure, thus leading to fewer severe emotional issues.

Another concept that is part of the spiritual dimension of Orthodox faith is forgiveness. Forgiveness, toward oneself and others, is among the most delicate aspects of Orthodox faith. Even Jesus Christ, who was the embodiment of human perfection, had both devoted friends and enemies who conspired against Him. The existence of adversaries or "enemies" is, therefore, an evil that cannot be avoided, so it makes sense to find ways to cohabitate with the people that are less tolerant, loving, and friendly.

Fortunately, Orthodox faith offers a beneficial solution to this seemingly complicated problem that occurs in every Christian's spiritual life – forgiveness. We know for a fact that Orthodox Christianity is a religion of love and forgiveness and since God should be man's ideal of perfection and spiritual fulfilment, maybe these two concepts represent the key to a harmonious and holy life. In fact, some researchers are already exploring ways to use forgiveness as a spiritual intervention that facilitates recovery and promotes mental health. (Tuck & Anderson, 2014)

Conclusion: A promising future

Although the arduous debates regarding mental health do not seem to approach a definitive conclusion, hope is not yet lost. Using the fundamental principles of Orthodox faith and putting God at the centre of the healing process, Orthodox psychotherapists can help their patients rediscover their spirituality and apply God's infinite wisdom in their everyday lives. Also, by taking in account the spiritual dimension of faith, Orthodox Psychotherapy succeeds in treating the patient as a whole – mind, body, and spirit.

This relatively new and promising therapeutic approach relies on three basic principles. First, the confession of the Christian faith on the part of the therapist himself which he must bring into the therapeutic framework so that he can then refer to the soul of the patient as to the image of God. Second, the establishment of a therapeutic approach based on patristic grounds that allows the patient to acquire

moral education and spiritual skills. Third, the exclusion of techniques and methods that lower man, which is a physical, mental and spiritual being, to the level of a purely biological machine.

Orthodox psychotherapy is addressed to people who are experiencing helplessness, anger, depression, anxiety, loneliness, difficulties in pre-conjugal and family relationships, pain associated with the loss of a close family member, etc.

By internalising the fundamentals of Orthodox faith and learning to apply God's solid moral principles in their everyday life, patients who receive Orthodox psychotherapy develop a strong spiritual foundation that will help them keep their composure even in the face of adversity.

Once we start treating patients as a whole – mind, body, spirit – extraordinary results will follow.

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