

Winnie the Pooh has an impulsivity with obsessive fixations condition. Piglet lives with generalized anxiety disorder. Owl struggles with dyslexia while Tigger displays behaviors consistent with someone living with attention deficit hyper-activity disorder. Christopher Robin presents classic symptoms of schizophrenia. Indeed, countless authors, bloggers, and therapists have written about the psychological conditions of the various residents of The Hundred Acre Wood.

Perhaps the most obvious example of mental illness on display in the characters of the Winnie the Pooh series is found in Eeyore. Dear Eeyore the donkey lives with chronic depression. His affect is flat, he doesn't get enthusiastic about anything, he sees the glass half empty, he is constantly expecting the next bad thing that is going to happen to him or his friends, and nearly every line attributed to him in A. A. Milne's books is described as having been said "gloomily." Eeyore, like an average of seven percent of the American population¹, is living with severe depression.

Some people have referred to going through a time of clinical depression as experiencing a "dark night of the soul." Indeed, the first part of a line from this morning's Psalm describes just such a night . . . *weeping may stay for the night*. While most of us have had a few sleepless nights filled with angst and tears, the thing about depression is that the night in which there is great weeping lasts so much longer than a night, seemingly eons longer than just eight hours when you're in the middle of it. Sometimes, for those living with depression, that "dark night" of weeping lasts for days, weeks, months, and maybe even for years. The metaphorical "night" of the depressed person can be a very, VERY long night, indeed.

And, when the depression becomes too severe or goes untreated, when it drags on and on, it can be hard to remember the promise of the second part of that line from the Psalmist, that though there are tears in the night, there will be *rejoicing in the morning*. Indeed, when you are depressed, it can feel impossible to even get out of bed in the morning, let alone rejoice in the morning. When you are depressed, to quote the Psalmist again, it feels like you have *fallen down into a pit* and the Good Lord is never going to *lift you out of the depths*, no matter how loudly and how often you call "*Hear, LORD, and be merciful to me; LORD, be my help.*"

And when those feelings of darkness and gloom drag on day after day after day after day and it feels like even our loving and merciful God has forsaken you . . . a person can lose hope. When you are depressed, it can be hard to remember what it felt like to be well. You look around and wonder how the people you see can be functioning and smiling and hugging their kids and walking their dogs and going to work and being, well, normal. When you are severely or chronically depressed, you wonder if you will ever be normal again.

When that happens, your thoughts can turn to just ending it all. When the choice is to live life feeling the deep heaviness of hopelessness, self-loathing, and meaninglessness day in and day out, feeling like you are a terrible burden to your family, your co-workers, and your friends . . . Or, the alternative is just ending your life and never having to feel that way, or causing other people pain, again . . . Sadly, in some cases, people who are depressed choose to die of suicide because it feels like there is no other way out of that pit, it feels like you'll never emerge from your long night of the soul.

Because here is a thing about depression, it is a great, big, huge, super-nasty, ugly liar. It tells you things about yourself that are not true. It tells you things about what other people think of you that are not true. It is an evil voice that lies to you about your worth, your beauty, and your purpose in this life. It tells you that you are not a beloved child of God with a right to be here and that, that my friends, is the biggest and most

¹ <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/health/statistics/major-depression.shtml>

horrible lie I know. EVERY PERSON YOU MEET, even the person you meet in your own bathroom mirror, is a beloved child of God with a right to be here.

And that is why I say to you dear brothers and sisters in Christ, this church of people I love so much, this gathered group of beloved children of God who have a right to be here and who are welcome and wanted in this place, we must, we simply must be a voice that tells the truth of God's mercy, forgiveness, acceptance, and inclusion. Our voices must be louder than the voices that tell people that they are somehow unworthy of love. As children of God and followers of Christ we are called to minister to those living with depression and other forms of mental illness to assure them that they are loved and there is hope. This is an essential ministry right now because an estimated 60 percent of people who die of suicide have depression or some other mood disorder.²

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, between the years of 2001 and 2017, the suicide rate in America rose 31%. During that same time, suicide became the second leading cause of death among those ages 10-24. Indeed, in America today "more teenagers and young adults die from suicide than from cancer, heart disease, AIDS, birth defects, stroke, pneumonia, influenza, and chronic lung disease, COMBINED."³ Among GLBTQ+ youth, suicide attempts increase four to five times compared to their heterosexual peers. Friends, depression and suicide is a mental health crisis, a public health crisis, and perhaps, most of all, a spiritual crisis in our nation. As people who embrace the Living Christ who came that we would have life and have it abundantly, this is a call to action.

Indeed, it is time for the Church to speak up, reach out, and act in the midst of the spiritual crisis of mental illness. Ours is an awesome responsibility and opportunity because, as children of God and followers of Christ

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- We are called to use our voices to tell people they belong as we interrupt the voices that bully the innocent.
- We are called to sing our melodies of inclusion louder than the voices that tell people they aren't wanted.
- We are called to shout about God's love from the rooftops to drown out voices of hatred from below.
- We are called to create safe spaces of silence in which people can hear the still, small voice of God whispering words of love instead of the unfiltered, cowardly, hateful, and destructive voices that come across loud and clear in tweets, posts, snaps, chats, news clips, and sound bites.
- We are called to abide with all the children of God who are enduring a dark night of the soul, making it clear to them that we will stay with them until the long, dark night is over and they are once again ready for rejoicing in the morning.

And, here's the thing about that that we can learn from the rag tag group of fallible residents of The Hundred Acre Wood. They never, ever give up on Eeyore. As one author on the topic writes, "What [the Winnie the Pooh] books and the movies did really well was create a set of characters that understood how to cope with a depressive friend. Winnie the Pooh and the gang never once made fun of Eeyore for being sad. They never wrote him off as being crazy. In fact, they checked in on him. They invited him on every adventure even though they knew that he would probably say no or, if he did come, he would be a little grumpy. Eeyore had the best friends in the world! They understood that he was the way he was and that was nothing to be ashamed of. They took care of him even when it was inconvenient or difficult."⁴

These words about Eeyore's friends resonate with me strongly just now because this Thursday marks the fifteenth anniversary of the beginning of a mental breakdown that landed me in a psych ward under suicide

² <https://www.hhs.gov/answers/mental-health-and-substance-abuse/does-depression-increase-risk-of-suicide/index.html>

³ <http://prp.jasonfoundation.com/facts/youth-suicide-statistics/>

⁴ <https://www.theodysseyonline.com/depression-winnie-pooh>

watch. I included a little bit about the experience in a sermon a few months ago and I don't want to over tell the story. But, on this day, when I'm preaching about mental illness, I just want to tell you that I can tell you that story today because of the people who didn't give up on me back then.

I didn't drive myself to Munson on that bright, sunny summer afternoon, my then-husband drove me because he knew things were almost past the point of no return. I didn't come out of my suicidal haze in the psych ward by myself, I needed the help of doctors, nurses, the people who make psychotropic drugs, and fellow patients who were committed to me getting out of there. I didn't continue on the road to recovery and wholeness alone, I got better because of the people who loved me and checked in on me and welcomed me to worship with them and reminded me that I was a beloved child of God with a right to be here. I was inspired to get well because other people who had gotten well had the courage to tell me their stories which gave me hope and the belief that at some point, I would awake from the very, VERY long night and finally, FINALLY be able to rejoice in the morning. I got better because other people helped me to get that way. I am alive because no one ever, EVER gave up on me.

The Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that we will all, one day, be rejoicing in the morning again. The dark nights of the soul do come to an end because God loves us too much, no matter what, for it to be otherwise. God never, ever gives up on us.

You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent. LORD my God, I will praise you forever.