MENTAL HEALTH

KAI: A priest, a therapist and a Catholic walk into a bar. OK, let's try this again. A priest, a therapist and a Catholic walk into a bar. Which does the Catholic need most?

LIBBY: You may be waiting for a punchline, but this is no joke. The answer is sometimes the Catholic needs both the priest and the therapist.

KAI: Today we're going to talk about what the Catholic Church has to say about spirituality and mental health, and if you're suffering, what you can do about it.

CATHOLIC CENTRAL OPENING TITLES

LIBBY: Hey, I'm Libby.

KAI: And I'm Kai. Welcome to Catholic Central.

LIBBY: Have you ever felt sad or anxious or just in a bad mood?

KAI: Every time the barista uses the wrong milk in my latte.

LIBBY: That's not what we're talking about today. While it's normal to feel down every once in a while, sometimes people feel sadness, anxiety, and other symptoms that go much deeper and last a lot longer.

KAI: When this happens, medical professionals call it mental illness.

LIBBY: Mental illness refers to a wide range of disorders that affect how you feel, think and act, and interfere in the ability to cope with normal demands of life.

KAI: That can include depression, anxiety, schizophrenia and behaviors like obsessive-compulsive disorder.

LIBBY: The exact cause is unknown, but it can be a combination of genetic factors and triggers from loss, trauma or life circumstances.

KAI: Whatever the cause, thanks to modern science, we now know there's a physical component caused by complex processes in the brain.

LIBBY: Not necessarily the soul.

KAI: Right. Many saints, most famously John of the Cross, described an experience known as the *dark night of the soul*.

LIBBY: That's a feeling of emptiness, dryness and being abandoned by God.

KAI: It's different from depression, although the two can look and feel similar.

LIBBY: The dark night of the soul is one stage of the mystical journey, and the Church believes that sometimes God uses it to refine and mold people spiritually, because there are lessons you learn when you suffer through it.

KAI: True dark nights of the soul are rare though and usually happen for those who are spiritually advanced.

LIBBY: The way to see if you're having a dark night of the soul would be to seek out a spiritual counselor who can look at your experience in the context of your spiritual life.

KAI: When someone is mentally ill, though, there is something physically wrong that the Church believes should be treated. While treatments vary, it's not enough to say, "Cheer up. Get over it," or, "Don't worry."

LIBBY: And you can't just pray it away.

KAI: Not that prayer can't help, but if praying was all it took, shouldn't it have worked for Jesus during His intense mental and emotional anguish?

LIBBY: Yet the prophet Isaiah even referred to the Messiah as a “man of suffering, knowing pain.”

KAI: That may sound, well, depressing, but for Catholics this is actually hopeful news.

LIBBY: Because Jesus suffered, He's able to identify with us and help us in our own suffering.

KAI: Catholics believe that God listens to our cries and draws us closer to Himself, as we realize how dependent we are on Him and grow in trust.

LIBBY: Because of this constant relationship with God, Catholics have hope, because they know that the troubles of this world are not all there is. As St. Paul says, "The sufferings of this present time are as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed for us."

KAI: Even in the present time, though, Catholics believe that those struggling with mental illness are precious brothers and sisters created in the image of God, with their own unique gifts.

LIBBY: People with mental illness can be creative, insightful, loving and productive. Many of the world's great artists who suffered from mental illness have given us profound insight into the human condition.

KAI: Suffering can also help us to become more compassionate.

LIBBY: A deep capacity to suffer emotionally can be a gift.

KAI: Because it can be transformed into a deep capacity to love.

LIBBY: We see this in the lives of saints like Mother Teresa.

KAI: According to her own letters, she felt an intense depression that lasted for decades.

LIBBY: Yet, despite this, or well, maybe because of it, she was able to love deeply.

KAI: And Saint John of God was once admitted to a mental institution.

LIBBY: After that experience, he worked tirelessly to serve the poor, sick and stigmatized.

KAI: So, what should you do if you believe you're suffering from a mental illness?

LIBBY: First, see a doctor to rule out any other physical conditions or life circumstances that may be causing your symptoms.

KAI: It's also important to take care of yourself physically. Eat healthy and exercise. Even taking a short walk releases endorphins, chemicals that can boost your mood.

LIBBY: Also, surround yourself with supportive friends and family.

KAI: Catholics believed that when you're depressed, the Devil, the divider, wants you to stay isolated.

LIBBY: But being with other people who care about you can help.

KAI: As Catholics, it's also crucial to stay close to God through prayer, going to Mass and receiving the Sacraments.

LIBBY: The confessional isn't a substitute for therapy and medication.

KAI: But in the same way, medicine and therapy can't take away sins.

LIBBY: There are also many Catholic saints whom Catholics can turn to as their spiritual friends, who know what it's like.

KAI: Saints such as Ignatius of Loyola, who sometimes suffered from crippling depression and anxiety.

LIBBY: He also left us with some advice for coping with depression. One, never go back on a promise or commitment you've made.

KAI: Two, focus on your relationship with God, as well as meditation and good works.

LIBBY: And three, persevere in patience, knowing that God will give you relief in time.

KAI: These are all great suggestions.

LIBBY: Thanks.

KAI: But today, the Church would add a fourth to the list: get proper treatment and stick with it.

LIBBY: Before the 20th Century, we didn't have access to psychotherapy and medication like we do today.

KAI: Modern medicine is a gift from God and we should take advantage of it.

LIBBY: Going to therapy or taking medication doesn't mean you're weak.

KAI: Or that you don't have enough faith in God.

LIBBY: It just means you have an illness that needs to be treated in the same way a person with epilepsy or asthma takes medicine to manage their condition.

KAI: And like other physical illnesses, if left untreated, mental illness can be fatal.

LIBBY: Sometimes the illness becomes so overwhelming that those suffering end up taking their own lives.

KAI: Suicide is a tragedy for the victim, but it also leaves a hole in the lives of everyone who knew and loved them or might've met them in the future.

LIBBY: At its core, it violates the love of self, neighbor and God that are part of our obligations to maintain, especially since life is a gift that doesn't belong to us.

KAI: However, the Church recognizes that victims of suicide suffered from a grave sickness, and it is possible for them to go to Heaven through God's grace.

LIBBY: As the Catechism says, "We should not despair of the eternal salvation of persons who have taken their own lives. The Church prays for them."

KAI: We should, however, always do everything we can to help those in danger of taking their own lives.

LIBBY: If you think that you or someone you know may be suffering from mental illness, don't despair. Know that there is hope and help is available.

KAI: To learn more about mental illness, check out the links below. And if you're feeling suicidal, please call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at the number below, and get help right away.

LIBBY: No matter what you're going through, you are valuable to God and to others. God loves you and wants you to be happy and healthy in all areas of your life.

KAI: For Catholic Central, I'm Kai.

LIBBY: And I'm Libby. Thanks for watching.

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