

## Mental Health & Well Being

There are many examples of the stigma and shame regarding mental health issues. In 2007 Britney Spears had a breakdown caused by crippling anxiety. Media pounced on the story with headlines asking, essentially, 'what's wrong with her?' and labels such as 'problem parent' or 'deranged diva'.<sup>1</sup> We could compare this with the coverage of Kylie Minogue and her diagnosis of breast cancer in 2005 as the media stood side by side with her, quite rightly, and described her brave battle with the cruel disease. Perhaps we could argue that times have changed given the amount of celebrities who have spoken about their mental health challenges<sup>2</sup> – Ellie Goulding, a young, successful and talented singer wrote:

*"I started having panic attacks, and the scariest part was it could be triggered by anything. I used to cover my face with a pillow whenever I had to walk outside from the car to the studio. My new life as a pop star certainly wasn't as glamorous as all my friends from home thought. Secretly, I was really struggling physically and emotionally."*

Prince Harry, very recently, on a podcast [Mad World] said:

*"I've spent most of my life saying, 'I'm fine'. I can safely say that losing my mum at the age of 12 and therefore shutting down all of my emotions for the last 20 years has had a quite serious effect not only on my personal life but also my work as well... I have probably been very close to a complete breakdown on numerous occasions."*

Dr Jeffrey Liberman who is a psychiatrist and delivered a TEDx talk on the stigma of mental health, gave us a test to see whether we stigmatise mental health. Imagine, he says, that the boss of the company you work for asks you to deliver

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2017/09/britney-spears-2007-anniversary>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.buzzfeed.com/annaborges/celeb-mental-health-2017?utm\\_term=.tnWRzlggD#.miqRgMqXo](https://www.buzzfeed.com/annaborges/celeb-mental-health-2017?utm_term=.tnWRzlggD#.miqRgMqXo)

an important speech at an event. Would you rather call up and say, 'I have a kidney stone' or 'I'm depressed and having suicidal thoughts'? Or would you rather say, 'I threw my back out' or 'I'm having a panic attack.' If you chose the former, he says, you are alive to the stigma of mental health in our society.<sup>3</sup>

JAMI, the Jewish Mental Health Service states that it is not always the illness itself that can be destructive but rather the stigma and discrimination that flows from it.<sup>4</sup> So what is the treatment for such stigma? To talk about mental health and normalise it. To realise that one in four of us in the UK, according to the charity Mind<sup>5</sup>, experience a mental health problem each year. And 1 in 6 of us in England report experiencing a common mental health problem (such as anxiety and depression) in any given week.

There is a spectrum from mild to severe, and in this regard, we all have mental health, just as we have physical health – and we need to talk about it and protect it. Talking about mental health, protecting and safeguarding our wellbeing, is vital. Just as the conversations around cancer have changed from silence to defiance we too can change our conversations around mental health. The charity JAMI says that we need to educate ourselves from a young age. 1 in 10 children and young people, aged 5 to 16 years old, suffer from a diagnosable mental health disorder. And most adults living with mental illness experienced their first mental health problems at a young age. 'If young people' JAMI writes, 'know that support is available for their mental health and they know where they can get this support, we help build the foundations for a better future.' And Reform Judaism, our national movement, is making a difference in this area as they have appointed their first Young People's Mental Health Welfare Officer.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WrbTbB9tTtA&t=589s>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.jamiuk.org/>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/statistics-and-facts-about-mental-health/#.WmJc\\_6hl82w](https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/statistics-and-facts-about-mental-health/#.WmJc_6hl82w)

The welfare officer Mark is hoping to come to Jackson's Row in March where we'll talk more about these issues.

In our siddur, as part of our healing prayer, we quote Hillel, the 1<sup>st</sup> century sage, who enjoined us to not separate ourselves from our community. Not only are we obliged as a community to talk about mental health as something that affects us all but we need to encourage each other to talk rather than isolate. 'If you broke your ankle you would not wait to see if it could get better on its own. We should take the same approach with our mental health'. And a community, which by nature, is predicated on relationships should be able to recognise when someone is isolated and offer assistance and ensure they are getting the right professional help if necessary. This is our duty – our sacred task.

At the Torah breakfast this morning we spoke about the creation story which begins with the earth being unformed and void – *tohu vavohu* – a true darkness with no life, no energy and no hope. But in the next breath we hear God sweeping across the earth and light is born. It is only from the formless void/the darkness – *tohu vavohu*, that light is possible. It's only when we talk about these issues that we bring light to them and help banish the stigma and shame around mental health. May we talk about mental health, may we protect our mental health and wellbeing and may we build a strong community that champions the importance of mental health. Ken Yehi Ratzon. May this be God's will. Amen.

**Sermon**  
**Bo – Mental Health Awareness Shabbat**  
**19 January 2018/4 Shevat 5778**  
**Rabbi Robyn Ashworth-Steen<sup>6</sup>**

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<sup>6</sup> Grateful to JAMI for excellent training through Leo Baeck College in November 2014.