

Ableism and Our Mental Health Crisis: Envisioning a New Garden

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Abstract

Our mental health crisis includes rising levels of anxiety, opioid overdose, suicide rates, and growing loneliness. The reasons for our high levels of distress are complex, and we are divided in our assessment of the root causes and potential solutions. Fear and bias against people with mental illness hinder our ability to respond, and affected individuals' ability to get help. This bias is part of a larger system of bias against the disabled, called ableism. The Garden of Eden story is read as an origin story of ableism. We cannot go back to the garden, to a pre-ableism world. We instead need to recognize others in their fullness, and see ableism where it is present in order to address it and move to greater inclusion and justice for people with mental health diagnoses.

Keywords

ableism, Bible, disability, Garden of Eden, mental health, stigma

Our mental health crisis

Mental health in the United States has been described as an “epidemic” for some time.¹ Youth and young adults are experiencing increasing levels of anxiety and stress.² Opioid

¹ Michael T. Compton and Ruth S. Shim (eds), *The Social Determinants of Mental Health* (Washington DC: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2015), 2.

² Patrick D McGorry, Christina Mei, Naeem Dalal, Mario Alvarez-Jimenez, Sarah-Jayne Blakemore, Vivienne Browne, Barbara Dooley, Ian B. Hickie, Peter B. Jones, David McDaid, Cathrine Mihalopoulos, Stephen J. Wood, Fatima Azzahra El Azzouzi, Jessica Fazio, Ella Gow, Sadam Hanjabam, Alan Hayes, Amelia Morris, Elina Pang, Keerthana Paramasivam, Isabella Quagliato Nogueira, Jimmy Tan, Steven Adelsheim, Matthew R. Broome, Mary Cannon, Andrew M. Chanen, Eric Y. H. Chen, Andrea Danese, Maryann Davis, Tamsin Ford, Pattie P. Gonsalves, Matthew P. Hamilton, Jo Henderson, Ann John, Frances Kay-Lambkin, Long K-D Le, Christian Kielsing, Niall Mac Dhonnagáin, Ashok Malla, Dorien H. Nieman, Debra Rickwood, Jo Robinson, Jai L. Shah, Swaran Singh, Ian Soosay, Karen Tee, Jean Twenge, Lucia Valmaggia, Therese van Amelsvoort, Swapna Verma, Jon Wilson, Alison Yung, Srividya N. Iyer, and Eóin Killackey, “The Lancet Psychiatry Commission on Youth Mental Health,” *Lancet Psychiatry* 11, no. 9 (2024): 731–774.

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addiction and overdose are alarmingly high.³ Suicide rates have been rising, with youth and older adults particularly of concern.⁴ In addition to formally diagnosable illnesses, loneliness, a condition involving disconnection, anxiety, and sometimes hopelessness, seems to be climbing at an alarming rate.⁵

The causes of our distress appear to be complex and systemic.⁶ They range from economic stress, to lingering and ongoing trauma from the COVID pandemic, to schoolchildren and teachers facing the threat of shootings, to Black and LGBTQ+ communities exposed to violence and hatred. As a psychiatrist and a priest, I see these stressors in action, and how they affect people in clinical settings and faith communities.

We are divided in our assessment and approach to these issues. Do we need more tax cuts? More affordable housing? Police education and oversight? Less policing in general? Gun restrictions? More intervention at the border? More resources for treatment? Diversity training? A return to traditional values? These proposed solutions inevitably come into the crosshairs of our ongoing culture wars. These fraught and fractured discussions of the underlying causes of our mental health crisis often lead away from better understanding and instead lead to more division, alienation, and a sense of hopelessness.

Adding to the complexity of the underlying causes and our inability to agree on root causes, another important factor affects our ability to analyze and address the current mental health crisis. That is our fundamental fear and bias against people with mental health diagnoses.

This fear and bias has been known as “stigma,” but we will see that it is better described as an example of ableism. Ableism is preventing us from addressing our mental health crisis and getting care to those who need it. Ableism is hurting our mental health.

Mental health “stigma”

Mental health professionals have long identified “stigma,” bias against people with mental illness, as limiting our ability to address mental health problems.⁷ Mental health and addiction treatment is not prioritized and goes under-resourced. Families and individuals often delay or avoid treatment due to shame and fear of being negatively labeled.

There are good reasons for people to fear being stigmatized. People presenting with active mental health symptoms, especially hallucinations or other psychosis, are often viewed as a threat to others, rather than a person in distress who needs help. We saw this

³ US Department of Health and Human Services, <https://www.hhs.gov/overdose-prevention/>.

⁴ Centers for Disease Control, <https://www.cdc.gov/suicide/facts/data.html>.

⁵ Matthew Shaer, “Why is the loneliness epidemic so hard to cure?” *New York Times Magazine*, August 27, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/27/magazine/loneliness-epidemic-cure.html>.

⁶ Compton and Shim, *Social Determinants*, xv–xvi.

⁷ American Psychiatric Association, <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/stigma-and-discrimination>.

in the tragic death of Sonya Massey,⁸ a black woman with schizophrenia who called police asking for help with an intruder in her home. She was shot to death by the responding officers when they interpreted a pot of boiling water from her stove as threatening.

Elijah McClain, not formally diagnosed with a mental disorder but likely on the autism spectrum, was similarly described as “sketchy” and perceived as menacing because of his different way of relating to officers. He was killed by the administration of a high dose sedative.⁹

At the same time, people experiencing less visible mental health symptoms may be perceived as faking or exaggerating their illness for attention or some other gain. This was the type of initial backlash experienced by Simone Biles when she made the decision to withdraw from the 2020 Tokyo Olympics,¹⁰ and Naomi Osaka when she skipped press events at the 2021 French Open.¹¹

People with mental illness may be assumed to be incapable in a global sense, unable to work or form lasting relationships. If a person with mental illness is not in the compensated workforce, this becomes one more reason to judge them. We tend to talk about, rather than with, people with mental illness. Even professionals with good intentions commonly exclude the person with lived experience when formulating treatment plans or policy.

Stigma is a type of ableism

Bias is a common lived experience for those with physical and mental disabilities. Stigma against those with mental illness is really a form of a larger system of bias against people with disabilities, known as ableism, the idea that “whole” or “able” bodies are privileged, and disabled people are negatively judged in comparison.¹²

In a similar way to those with mental health diagnoses, people with chronic illness and disability are often perceived as scary¹³ or threatening, such as a person with physical disfigurement or the shaking of cerebral palsy. The disabled may be talked about when they are present in a room, or treated as if their impairment is total—shouting at a

⁸ John O'Connor, “Body Camera video focused national attention on an Illinois deputy’s fatal shooting of Sonya Massey,” *AP News*, July 24, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/illinois-sonya-massey-deputy-shooting-grayson-01b91fa1731da8007cff693206cad2bc>.

⁹ Lucy Tompkins, “Here’s what you need to know about Elijah McClain’s death,” *The New York Times*, October 13, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/who-was-elijah-mcclain.html>.

¹⁰ Juliet Macur, “Simone Biles is done being judged,” *The New York Times*, July 28, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/28/world/olympics/simone-biles-olympic-gymnast.html#:~:text=More%20than%20ever%2C%20those%20critics,her%20disoriented%20in%20the%20air>.

¹¹ Christopher Clarey, “A shocking exit and a sad day for tennis,” *The New York Times*, May 31, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/31/sports/tennis/french-open-naomi-osaka-quits.html>.

¹² Deborah Beth Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 8, 25–27.

¹³ Julia Watts Belser, *Loving Our Own Bones: Disability Wisdom and the Subversiveness of Knowing Ourselves Whole* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2023), 169.

blind person, for example, or asking the friend next to the wheelchair user about the wheelchair user. People with waxing and waning symptoms or disabilities which are not obviously visible may be accused of “faking,” such as an intermittent wheelchair user who can walk short distances.¹⁴ People tend to assume that a disabled person wants to be cured of their disability, and people of faith may approach the person without permission to offer prayers of healing.¹⁵

Ableism intersects with racism, sexism, and anti-LGBTQ+ bias so that people with multiple stigmatized identities face compounded harm.¹⁶ As seen in the above examples, ableism and racism can form a deadly combination.

Ableism is not just about bias against individuals. It can also be about our systems of measurement, access, and accommodation.¹⁷ Devices that offer physical assistance are differently privileged and stigmatized. Why is it that a person who sees with the aid of corrective lenses is not considered disabled, but a person who walks with the aid of a cane is?

Our structures and environments privilege certain kinds of bodies. For example, if ramps were the standard rather than stairs, and if sidewalks all had cuts, a person in a wheelchair might not be considered disabled.¹⁸

Part of ableism is the devaluing of people who are not productive according to traditional societal values—generally through work that earns money. We look askance at those not in the compensated workforce, yet it is difficult for those with limitations to be employed,¹⁹ despite improvements facilitated through laws like the Americans with Disabilities Act. We assume that someone with a diagnosis like Sonya Massey had is unable to work because of illness, instead of considering that the person might be unable to work because of inadequate health insurance provided by jobs available to them, bias by potential employers, or lack of work accommodations they need to stay employed.

As a psychiatrist, I have spent years working with people with serious mental illness, such as schizophrenia. Although people with schizophrenia achieve remission much more commonly than we believe,²⁰ the illness continues to be associated with great stigma, discrimination, and false beliefs. Mental health professionals ourselves, and society as a whole, still have a long way to go in terms of recovery and full inclusion for people with mental illness.

¹⁴ Amy Kenny, *My Body is Not a Prayer Request* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2022), 38–40.

¹⁵ Kenny, *My Body is NOT a Prayer Request*, 1–4.

¹⁶ Kimberle Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1 (1989): 139.

¹⁷ Kim E. Nielsen, *A Disability History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press Books, 2012), xiv–xvi.

¹⁸ Candida R. Moss, “Disability Criticism,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Steven L. McKenzie (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 226.

¹⁹ Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Persons with a disability: Labor force characteristics summary,” February 25, 2025, <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/disabl.nr0.htm>.

²⁰ Mary E. Barber, “Recovery as the New Medical Model for Psychiatry,” *Psychiatric Services* 63 no. 3 (2012): 177–78.

I also witnessed ableism firsthand as a child, through my uncle who had cerebral palsy. I saw how the limitations of the society in which he came of age, much more than his actual physical limitations, seriously constrained my uncle's life course. Disability is something that touches all of us, whether it is our own experience or that of a close loved one. If we are to truly address our current mental health crisis, we must look at our attitudes toward mental illness, and disabilities of all kinds, with more clarity.

Looking at scripture can help to open for us the origins of our ableism, and perhaps lead to reflection on a path to move beyond it.

The Garden of Eden story as an etiology of ableism

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves (Gen 3:6–7).²¹

The Genesis Garden of Eden story can be read as an etiology, a just-so story, of the origins of ableism, if we step back from reading it as describing “original sin.” This Christian interpretation by Augustine is valid, but is not the only truth embedded in the story. It is worth noting that the text does not mention sin, nor does it say anything about the snake being evil.

The snake is described as more *arum* than other animals (Gen 3:1), translated as “clever” or “crafty” but also the word for naked.²² (Indeed, the snake is more naked than other animals, since it does not have fur). The snake speaks with the woman, a conversation described as the first theological discussion in the Bible.²³ The woman exegetes God's command about the tree, which she did not hear first hand. She also does her own discernment about the fruit. She contemplates its potential as nourishment, its appearance, and what the snake has told her about its benefits. What does this show? The woman possesses wisdom and knowledge, and ability to reason, even before eating the fruit.

The man also appears to have pre-fruit-eating wisdom and discernment. He names the animals, and decides each time that the creature which God makes is not a suitable helper for him (Gen 2:19–20). It would appear that the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil is not necessary for the man and woman to have awareness of their world, capability to steward the garden (Gen 2:15), and ability to discern whether a food is good, or whether an animal would be a suitable partner.

The word *haskil* (Gen 3:6), meaning “enlighten” or “gain insight,” is a verb of perception rather than knowledge or understanding.²⁴ It is a particular type of insight,

²¹ All Bible references are the NRSV translation.

²² David M. Carr, *Genesis 1-11: International Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2021), 118.

²³ Kathleen M. O'Connor, *Smith & Helwys Bible Commentary: Genesis 1-25A* (Macon, GA: Smith & Helwys Publishing, 2018), 62.

²⁴ Carr, *International Exegetical Commentary*, 124.

self-consciousness,²⁵ that the human and the woman gain. On eating the fruit, they gain awareness *within themselves* of what they observe about themselves and others. They already had wisdom and discernment, but did not self-consciously realize it. They were in fact already clever (naked), but did not know that they were clever (naked).

It is this quality of self-consciousness that allows us to evaluate ourselves and others, to judge others and to judge ourselves. (This is what makes us check our own Zoom squares to make sure our hair is in place.) We see what we are mirrored in the other, and we see what we are *not*. We can take this self-other comparison and evaluation and use it to judge: to envy or repudiate that other, or both.

This new self-consciousness makes the man and the woman hide their bodies from each other and from God (Gen 3:7–8). It makes the man not just shy but “afraid” to be seen (3:10). We transition from a world of interconnectedness, from the human and woman as “one flesh,” in each others’ presence and not ashamed (2:24–25), to separate, afraid, alienated—from each other and from God.

Blame ensues. The human splits off his part in the fruit-eating, attributing it to “the woman, whom you gave to be with me (3:12),” implicating the woman and God. The woman blames the snake (3:13). Self-consciousness leads to a breakdown of connection—to alienation, separateness, disavowal, and dissociation.

The words *tob/ra*, have a broad range of meaning, from beautiful/ugly, to right/wrong, to good and evil.²⁶ These are the words paired in Isaiah 7:16²⁷ and also in the name of the forbidden tree (Gen 2:17; 3:5,22). Thus the humans’ new self-consciousness, their ability to discern differences in the other and reflect back on them with self-awareness, also gives power to judge morals and aesthetics. The man and the woman may now judge each other and themselves as good or bad, beautiful or ugly, whole or defective.

God responds to the man and woman with curses, the tragic consequences of this new self-consciousness. The snake will be the most cursed of the animals, going “on your belly” and eating dust (Gen 3:14). Raphael says that God “disables” the snake with this curse,²⁸ but we don’t know if the snake ever walked upright since this is not described in the text. Perhaps the most salient part of God’s curse on the snake is not its crawling, but the enmity between the snake and the humans (Gen 3:15). The snake is cursed not so much because it crawls, but because it will now be considered inferior by the humans (and by God who also walks, Gen 3:8) because it does not walk. The real curse is that humans will look at the snake as less-than; they will judge it negatively for its alternate method of locomotion.

God curses the woman with “toil in pregnancy,” bearing children with effort (3:16). The man is cursed with toil in his working the ground (3:17,19), the “dust” from which

²⁵ Carol A. Newsom, “Common Ground: An Ecological Reading of Genesis 2-3,” in *The Earth Story in Genesis*, ed. Norman C. Habel and Shirley Wurst (London: A&C Black, 2000), 68–69.

²⁶ Saul M. Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences* (New York: Cambridge Press, 2008), 21–22.

²⁷ *Before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good.* . .

²⁸ Rebecca Raphael, *Biblical Corpora: Representations of Disability in Hebrew Biblical Literature* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2008), 55–58.

he was created. In the Garden, both humans had the job of caring for creation, and food was freely available. After the fruit, they will work to survive, work divided by gender.

Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. Upon your belly you shall go. As a result of eating the fruit, people will assign value to bodies according to some standard of normalcy. *By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, until you return to the ground.* People will survive and be judged for their productivity, for their ability to work.

Judging our own and each others' bodies, and measuring ourselves according to ability to work are hallmarks of ableism.

The fall to ableism

The above text contains no overtly disabled characters. Nor are there explicit negative appraisals of disability as in other Hebrew Bible texts.²⁹ However, just as Estes has demonstrated that Genesis 2 contains themes of imperfection, vulnerability, and interdependence that relate to disability,³⁰ Genesis 3's themes of self-consciousness and the breakdown of interdependence and connectedness also have strong implications for those with mental and physical disabilities.

The real disability contained in Genesis 3 is the first humans' self-consciousness around each other, leading them to judge each other, and the snake. The self-consciousness they gain after eating the fruit sends them out of the garden, into a world of separateness and alienation from each other, from other animals, from the earth, and from God. They feel ashamed of their bodies and must clothe themselves. They are no longer in harmony with non-human animals, fearing the snake, and judging the snake for its inability to walk upright. They hide from God, and turn against each other and God.

They go out into a world where they will judge themselves and each other, based not on their ability to care for each other and the world, but by their ability to produce from their bodies (the woman) and the earth (the man). The breakdown of interconnection and community, into separateness, self-consciousness, alienation, and individual outlook, is the consequence, the curse, the disability, that falls on the human and the woman after eating the fruit.

The Garden of Eden story gives us a way to describe how we humans became self-conscious, and that consciousness led to ableism. But what does this mean for us? Where do we go with this story?

Seeing each other as God sees

Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked.

We can't go back to the garden. And we don't want to go back to a place of not seeing our differences. If we do not see the other person's differences, including disability, we

²⁹ Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible*, 4–10.

³⁰ Joel D. Estes, "Imperfection in Paradise: Reading Genesis 2 through the Lens of Disability and a Theology of Limits," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 38 (2016): 20–21.

are not really seeing them at all.³¹ Or as Held puts it, “separateness is what makes genuine relatedness possible.”³² Only by understanding the other as distinct and separate from us can we love them as something other than ourself. Only by seeing the full diversity of others can we begin to appreciate the breadth and diversity of God’s image.

We can’t, and don’t want to return to a place of unawareness, of not seeing each other. To address our present mental health crisis, we urgently need to see each other, and hear each other. We need to see the young person in distress, to listen to their story. We need to not look away from the person suffering with addiction or psychosis. We need to move beyond shame and fear in reaching out to others, and in recognizing when we need help.

We need to see each other and ourselves as God sees, each of us different and beautifully created in God’s image.³³

The gifts of disability

If we can begin to really look and listen, we might find we have much to learn from people with disabilities. Our often overworked society could learn about the need for Sabbath rest, the need to pace ourselves,³⁴ what the disability community calls “crip time.”³⁵ We all benefit from assistive devices, including GPS (global positioning system), apps that read text, and ramps—which help parents of infants and shoppers with carts alongside wheelchair users.

More accommodation (grace) in our workplaces and schools, through valuing differences in process, allowing for extra time for tasks, and mental health days, would benefit not just people with mental health diagnoses but everybody. Above all, the disability community reminds us that our self-image of independence is an illusion—we are all interdependent, and can embrace our connectedness and need for help rather than deny it.

A new vision of justice

We also need to be able to perceive ableism itself in action, on an interpersonal level and also in our systems. Only when we can see and judge ourselves and our systems can we know how to move toward greater healing and justice. Only when our eyes are opened from the complacency of “the way things have always been” can we imagine what might be.

Why are mental health services always underfunded, and what could we do differently? Why do individuals and families coping with suicide feel isolated rather than embraced? Why are police the first called to respond for people in mental health crisis? And why are we generally, even those of us without a clinical psychiatric condition,

³¹ Belser, *Loving our Own Bones*, 168.

³² Shai Held, *Judaism is About Love: Recovering the Heart of Jewish Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2024), 81.

³³ Genesis 1:27.

³⁴ Belser, *Loving our Own Bones*, 52–53, 197–213.

³⁵ Kenny, *My Body is NOT a Prayer Request*, 161–65.

feeling so disconnected and lonely? We need to ask these hard questions, to look at these things with judgment and discernment, in order to get to a better place.

Our ableism, as individuals and as a society, is hurting our mental health. Our ableism makes us judge and separate ourselves from “those people,” rather than acknowledging that mental illness affects our family members, our neighbors, and us. Our ableism keeps us from fully including people with different needs, and celebrating all of our gifts. Our ableism is a stumbling block to effectively assessing and addressing our mental health crisis:

Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked.

We can't go back to the garden, and we don't want to. Instead, we need to get to a new garden, where we see and celebrate our diversity. To a new garden, where we see our brokenness and wholeness as necessary parts of our interdependent and communal being. To a new garden, where we see injustice where it exists so that we can move toward justice. To a place where we move toward greater healing, inclusion, and wholeness, for those of us with and without a psychiatric diagnosis.

This is our call. To truly address our present mental health crisis, we need to give the story of the Garden a new ending. We need to say:

Then the eyes of both were opened, and they saw that they were different, and beautiful, and they celebrated their diversity.

Then the eyes of both were opened, and they saw that there was injustice, and they worked to make things right.

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