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community

## Mental Health Awareness Week - 2022

In Judaism, care for mental health is a moral imperative. The Jewish sages believe the mind to be the seat of the soul. They taught that all human error can be attributed to a lapse in mental health<sup>1</sup>. The Talmud suggested the “talking cure” to help ease mental angst: “If there is worry in a person’s heart, he should speak it to another.”<sup>2</sup>

Human beings have always been somewhat conscious of how our minds affect the quality of our lives. As the Hungarian-American psychoanalyst Franz Alexander wrote: “Everyone who tries to encourage a despondent friend or to reassure a panicky child practices psychotherapy.”<sup>3</sup>

Thankfully, the field of psychotherapy has undergone exponential growth and development in our lifetimes. We have come to better understand how to address the challenges of our own psychology. We have learned to focus more on our minds’ health and fitness and how we can best provide help and care for mental illness.

Yet, whilst our psychotherapeutic wisdom and practice has grown, our openness to accepting it or seeking it for ourselves has yet to catch up. Unfortunately, one of the greatest obstacles to properly treating mental health is the stigma still seemingly attached to it. Our minds are central to all that we are and do so, when they function in a less than optimal way, we are often ashamed to admit it. We are scared to be deemed out of touch with reality, unable to control our own thoughts, or simply odd.

Keeping quiet means we don’t seek the help we need. But, by learning to deepen our empathy and broaden our acceptance of the real challenges and struggles that mental health presents, we can radically help ourselves and each other. We do this by learning, sharing and speaking about it, however intimidating that might appear at first!

We must also genuinely recognise the difficulties that mental disorders—no matter how light or severe—can bring to our daily lives. It is estimated that one in seven of us has a mental health issue at any one time. If we’ve come down with flu, it is expected and accepted that we take time off from school, work and normal activities to care for ourselves and heal. But if we are struggling with depression or anxiety, we feel the pressure to neither consider ourselves genuinely unwell nor to regard it as something that requires the same level of effort and attention to manage and heal. But the human being is comprised of body and mind. Both must be well and cared for.

I wish I had known earlier in my work as a communal rabbi that, providing a welcoming, non-judgmental space for people who are struggling with their mental health, is itself a major step in healing. And while it is essential to make sure people are directed to the appropriate care and therapy, facilitating the ability to share, be seen, understood, and validated, especially when struggling with such things, helps to bring an otherwise isolating and lonely circumstance into a connected and supported environment.

It is Mental Health Awareness Week, during which we are encouraged to pay attention to the state of our mental well-being and confront the obstacles for seeking help. It is a time to properly prioritise our mental fitness as at least as important as our physical fitness; to diminish the stigma and normalise care.

An unhealthy mind can be an extraordinarily unhappy place to be in. It can also be profoundly lonely. The fabric of a people gains greater integrity when the state of their mental health is strong and cared for. As Jewish teaching suggests, the soul of a nation shines brightest when the minds of its people are well and healthy. And bringing such issues of importance out of the shadows is the first step to achieving this.

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<sup>1</sup> Sota, 3a

<sup>2</sup> Yoma, 27a

<sup>3</sup> Alexander, F. (1957) *Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy*, London: Allen & Unwin.