



THE **SANCTUARY** COURSE[®]

DISCUSSION GUIDE



LICENSING AND USAGE

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DISCUSSION GUIDE

Welcome to *The Sanctuary Course*. This course was born out of the conviction that informed and empathetic conversations about mental health challenges can transform communities of faith.

→ For a more detailed introduction to the course, please refer to the [Participant's Guide](#).

INFORMED

The Sanctuary Course has been developed in consultation with mental health professionals, theologians, and people with lived experience—all from diverse denominational, racial, and cultural backgrounds. There are eight sessions, and each one addresses a different mental health-related topic. You do not need to have any prior training or experience in the field of mental health in order to participate, however. The information presented in this course is introductory, and the mental health conversation is available to all community members.

→ *Lived experience* is a term used to refer to the personal experience of living with a mental health challenge or illness.

EMPATHETIC

Each session is accompanied by a film featuring the story of a person of faith with lived experience. It is important for individuals with mental health challenges to speak for themselves, and it is equally important for church communities to listen well. When you listen to someone's story, it can broaden your perspective, reframe your understanding, and awaken your empathy.



These discussion guides have been designed to shape your time together. They offer reflections on scripture, links to view the session films, discussion questions, summaries of coursebook content, original works of art exploring mental health themes, and group exercises. It is important to note that they are merely guides. You may decide to modify or remove certain components, spend more or less time on particular conversations, and make other adjustments based on your group's unique needs. With this in mind, here are a few helpful notes regarding the discussion guides:

→ While we recommend that each participant complete the coursebook reading in advance of the group meeting, we recognize that this is not always possible. The discussion guides and films will highlight the most important content, ensuring that everyone is able to participate in group conversations.

- You can read through the discussion guides out loud during your group meeting, pausing to watch the films and engage with the questions. This will facilitate a shared learning experience.
- While conversation is encouraged, there is no obligation to participate in discussions or answer every question. Only share when you are ready, and do not share more than you are comfortable with.
- Please make sure that the film descriptions are read out loud prior to viewing, and that group members who do not want to participate in the viewing are given time to exit the room or turn off their screens.
- Finally, your group may want to review the suggested group guidelines located in [Appendix A](#) before proceeding further.

Thank you again for investing your time in this course.





THE SANCTUARY COURSE®

SESSION 1

MENTAL HEALTH



OPENING PSALM

Each session will begin with a reading from Psalm 42. There are several ways your group can engage with the verses. You may want to sit in silence, taking a few moments to reflect on the psalm individually. You may choose to read the verses aloud and discuss them, sharing your questions and observations with one another. You may also incorporate the verses into a time of corporate prayer. Below the verses you will find a reflection that relates the psalm to the session content. This reflection can be read aloud.

*As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God. (Psalm 42:1-2, NRSV)*

Psalm 42 is a specific type of psalm known as lament. It contains both the raw and desperate prayers of those who are suffering, and the confident proclamation of hope in God's goodness. Although the psalmist is writing about the experience of exile, there are many analogies that can be drawn between the longing for a physical home and the longing for healing in mind, body, and spirit. In these opening verses, the psalmist voices a desperate need for God. There are many experiences in life that can produce desperation within us, including a mental health challenge or crisis. However, the psalmist finds comfort in calling out to a living God—a God who is real, and present, and listening. May the revelation of the living God be a source of comfort to you as well.



Discussion Question

- *How would you define mental health?*

→ These questions are not mandatory; they are simply invitations. Any member of the group is free to decline an invitation at any time, and the group as a whole may decide to skip over a question if it seems unhelpful.





VIEW FILM

Today you will meet Matthew, who lives with generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) and primarily obsessional obsessive-compulsive disorder (primarily obsessional OCD). The therapeutic interventions described in this film are not prescriptive. Please consult your doctor or counselor if you are seeking treatment for anxiety, depression, or OCD.

GAD is characterized by excessive anxiety, lasting at least six months and accompanied by cognitive and physical symptoms such as irritability, fatigue, muscle aches, and difficulty sleeping. Primarily obsessional OCD occurs when individuals experience unwanted, recurring, and intrusive thoughts that cause distress, but do not necessarily lead to compulsive behaviors.



Discussion Questions

- *What stood out to you in Matthew's story?*
- *Were there elements of Matthew's story that surprised you or resonated with you?*

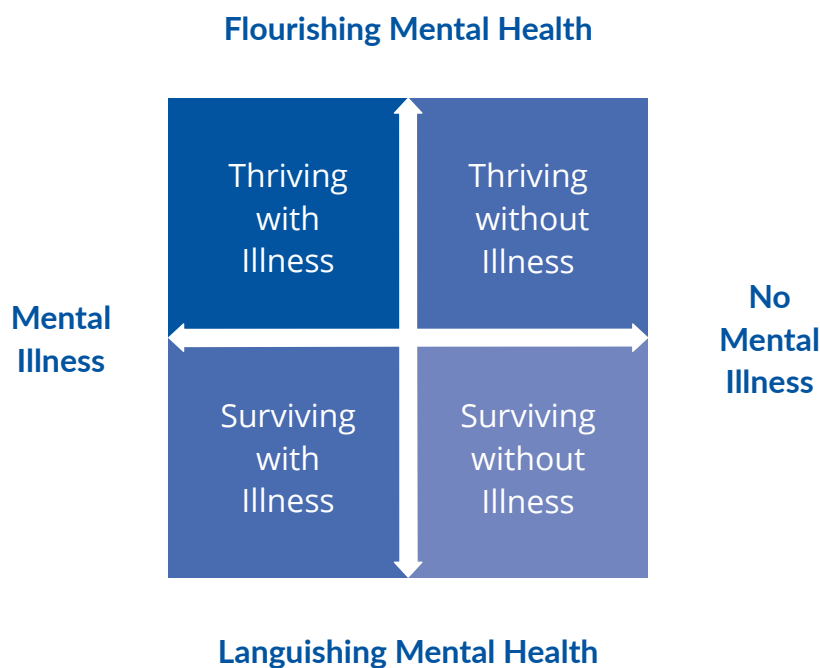




THE PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

It is important to think carefully about our understanding of mental health and illness. The mental health continuum (referenced by Jane Born in the film) helps us do just that. According to this model, mental illnesses are not the only factors that impact mental health. Other factors include the ability to feel good, think clearly, form positive relationships, engage in meaningful work, and connect to community. This means that everyone can experience flourishing and languishing, regardless of whether or not they live with a mental health challenge. Here is the mental health continuum:

→ Please see [Appendix B](#) for the definitions of mental health, mental illness, and other key terms.



Discussion Questions

- *What does this model show you about the relationship between health and illness?*
- *Why do you think that mental health is not defined as the absence of mental illness?*
- *Think back to a season of languishing or flourishing in your life. What were some of the contributing factors?*





THE SOCIAL PERSPECTIVE

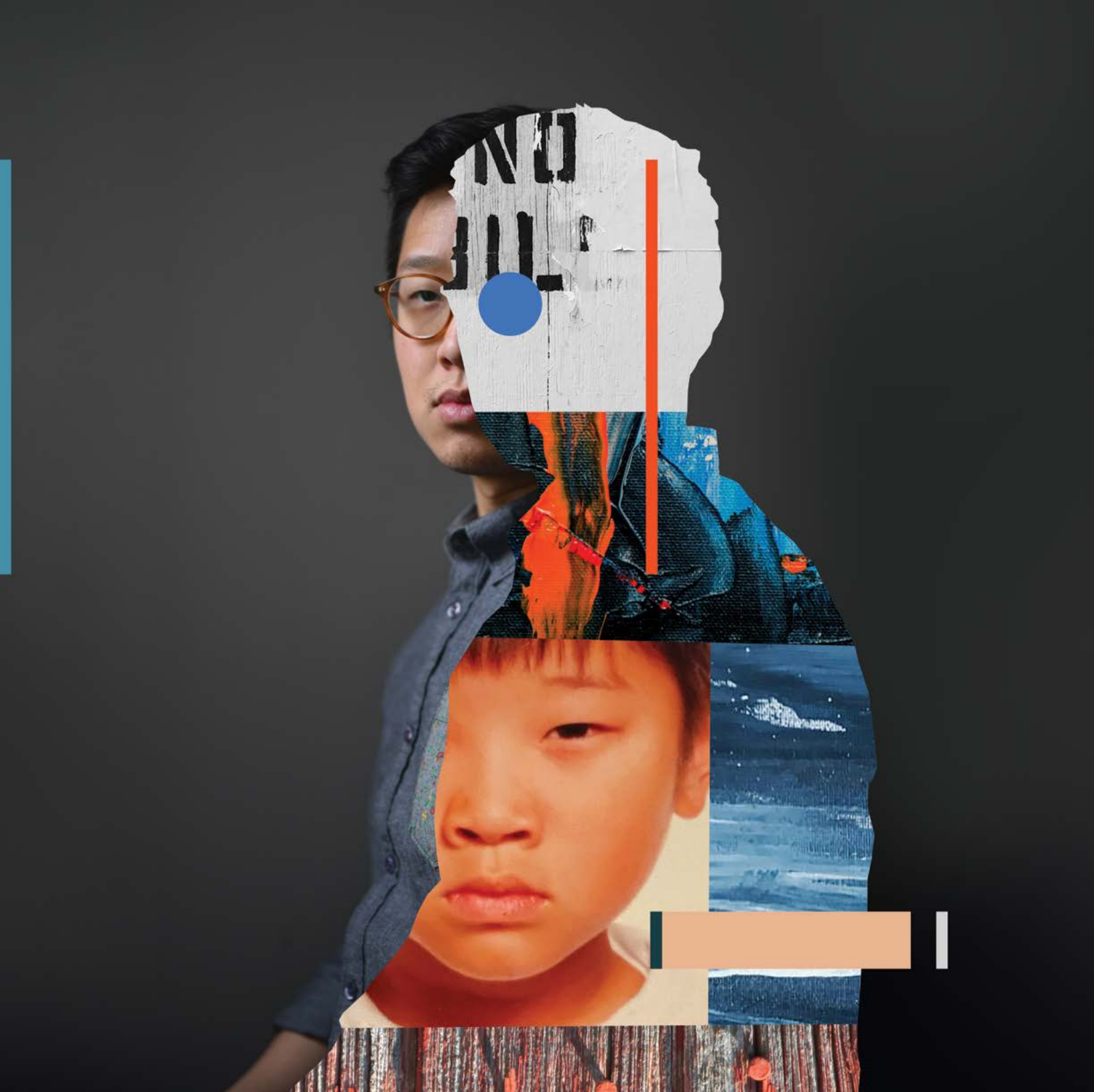
The coursebook highlights the important role that community can play in promoting mental health and supporting recovery. Research shows that social support is critical when it comes to coping with stress, and the reduction of stress can have a significant impact on recovery. Some studies even suggest that faith communities are particularly effective when it comes to cultivating resilience and promoting recovery. These studies have found that in addition to providing social support, faith communities equip individuals with coping techniques rooted in spiritual practices, and offer a sense of comfort, hope, and meaning in the midst of crisis.



Discussion Questions

- *What role did community play in Matthew's mental health journey?*
- *Psychologist Hillary McBride states that when it comes to mental health, the Church is called to be a place of healing, love, and compassion. What do you think about this statement?*





THE MAN I'VE BECOME

Brian Liu





ART REFLECTION

The Man I've Become, by [Brian Liu](#), is a meditation on identity, mental health, and faith. Liu reflects on childhood experiences of discrimination and bullying, the realities of living with anxiety and depression, and the fact that Jesus knows what it is like to feel different and be rejected.



Discussion Questions

- *What does this piece of art evoke for you?*
- *The film and the coursebook both emphasize the importance of the bio/psycho/social/spiritual model of mental illness. In what ways does Liu's self-portrait explore or illustrate this model?*
- *Think about a time when you had a physical injury or illness. In what ways did it affect your emotions, your thoughts, your activities, and your relationships?*

→ The bio/psycho/social/spiritual model represents the idea that mental health challenges are more than just medical or biological experiences. They are psychological, involving thoughts, feelings, and behaviors; they are social, impacting relationships; and they are spiritual, affecting the way people perceive God and engage in their faith. These "layers" are present in all experiences of mental health challenges, no matter how different those experiences may be.





THE THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Theologian John Swinton observes that psalms of lament give us a language to articulate our sadness and our brokenness. He describes the structure of lament psalms in the following way:

It begins with a big outburst of anger and frustration: God seems to have broken the covenant, this person's been damaged... But then in most of the psalms—not all of the psalms, but most of the psalms—you come to a middle section where something seems to have changed. The psalmist sees things from a different angle and recognizes God's unending love in the midst of the situation. The situation is not transformed, but hope is introduced.

This is one of the ways that our faith can help us understand and process experiences of suffering. Lament lets us acknowledge the realities of injustice, fear, loneliness, pain, and death—all while holding on to the hope that God is listening to our cries, and that he cares.



Discussion Questions

- *What role has your faith played in seasons of suffering?*
- *Do you engage in lament as a spiritual practice? What does lament look like in your life?*
- *Are there biblical perspectives on suffering that you have found either helpful or unhelpful?*

→ For an overview of several biblical perspectives on suffering, see pages 26-27 in the coursebook.





LISTENING EXERCISE

One of the ways that churches can support individuals with lived experience is by making space to listen to their stories. (In the film, Matthew’s pastor provided an excellent example of listening.) This exercise is intended to help you get to know one another and practice active listening at the same time. Depending on your group size, you may want to break into smaller groups or select a few volunteers to model sharing and listening. The person who is sharing should take two to three minutes to discuss their reason for participating in *The Sanctuary Course*. The person who is listening should follow these guidelines:

- Be aware that listening wholly and attentively is a gift you offer to others.
- Be aware of your body language. Sit in a way that communicates openness and displays your willingness to listen.
- Listen not only to the words being spoken, but to the emotions being expressed.
- Don’t rush to come up with a response. Slow down and focus on simply understanding.

After the speaker is done sharing, the listener may ask one to two questions. Follow these guidelines for framing questions:

- The best questions are simple, brief, and to the point.
- Avoid asking questions with right or wrong answers. Instead, keep things open-ended by asking “how,” “what,” or “why” questions. These encourage the speaker to uncover deeper meaning.
- It can be helpful to summarize and reflect back to the speaker what you have heard.
- Embrace moments of silence. Leave space between questions and answers to encourage further reflection and listening.



CLOSING PRAYER

This prayer by Cameron Bellm reflects the journey we hope to take in the coming weeks. May these words inspire you and direct your vision for this course.

When silence shrouds the topic of mental health,
It invites the darkness,
And isolation is soon to follow,
Making us feel so painfully alone—
Alone in our suffering, alone in our struggles.
But these are sorrows and challenges
That were never meant to be borne alone.

It's hard to see sometimes,
But there is an intricate web that binds us,
All members of the human family,
And it is a holy thing to listen,
Equally holy to invite someone in,
To make space for another shoulder
Under the heavy burden we heft.

God, in your mercy, give us the courage
To reach out our hands,
To allow others to walk alongside us
As we seek treatment, healing, and peace.
God, in your mercy, give us the strength
To light the match, to speak the word,
To banish the darkness.

And when your sacred light surrounds us,
May it illuminate every shimmering thread
That connects us,
Heart to heart, and hand to hand.
Amen.¹



ENDNOTES

1. Cameron Bellm is an author and poet. To learn more about her work and the devotionals she has published, follow her on Instagram: [@cameronbellm](https://www.instagram.com/cameronbellm).

