

# OpenTheo

## Don't Go It Alone: Mental Health Needs Company | Curt Thompson

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### The Veritas Forum

PART OF A SPECIAL 6-WEEK SERIES | Our communities can help us live “the good life.” But what about the people that tick us off? How do we form more resilient relationships that make us healthier and more connected? We discuss these things with Dr. Curt Thompson, psychiatrist and author of *The Soul of Shame*. He says that repairing broken relationships can actually usher us into a *\*greater\** connection with others than we had previously. Like what you heard? Rate and review us on Apple Podcasts to help more people discover our episodes. And, join the conversation on our Instagram, @veritasforum. You can see our full slate of speakers and learn more about our production team and co-sponsors at [beyondtheforum.org](https://beyondtheforum.org)

### Transcript

I make a living as a psychiatrist working in Washington DC, where I will never be out of a job. That's not really funny, it's right? Just the truth. That's my friend Kurt.

We always have fun when we get together. Or when he's at a forum with us, which is where he was in February, 2019 in that clip. And in all seriousness, he is an expert when it comes to mental health.

Which matters for our episode today because we're talking about the good life and mental health, especially given the last year. But even before the pandemic hit, Americans were facing a mental health crisis. Depression, suicidal ideation, loneliness, stress, anxiety, all of these things have increased in the United States over the last decade.

And if this surprises you, it's likely that you're older. The decline of mental health has not been uniform across all age groups. In fact, there's been no significant decline among older adults.

And researchers have even seen a slight improvement in mental health among people

over 65. So who is experiencing these things? Young people. Young people between the ages of 18 and 25.

From 2008 to 2017, there was a 71% increase in young adults experiencing serious psychological distress or major depression. And the rate of young adults with suicidal thoughts increased 47%. At the Veritas Forum, we talk with students who tell us that these numbers are absolutely representative of their communities.

And it has only gotten worse with the pandemic. So this is what we're talking about today, the good life and mental health. And how if you want either of those things, you need relationships with other people.

This is Beyond the Forum, a new podcast from the Veritas Forum and PRX that dives into life's biggest questions. For our first season, we're asking, "What is the good life and how can we live it?" And we're talking with some of our favorite thinkers. I'm your host, Bethany Jenkins.

I run the media and content work at the Veritas Forum, a Christian nonprofit that hosts conversations that matter across different worldviews. When ancient philosophers talked about the good life, mental health wasn't on their radar. Or at least not mental health as you and I might think about it.

Ancient medicine viewed psychological disorders as having purely biological causes. And while Plato, Aristotle, Kant, and other philosophers contributed to the philosophical discovery of the mind, it wasn't until the modern era with Freud and others that the fields of psychoanalytic thought and cognitive science were developed. But today, we can hardly think about the good life without talking about mental health.

It is an essential part of human flourishing. When I asked Kurt about mental health and how to define it, what he said surprised me. When I was in medical school and residency, I didn't have a single lecture, let alone a single course on what mental health actually is.

We have all kinds of information about what mental illness is. We know when things are wrong. We are primed and not just in the medical field, but as human beings, we are primed to be on the lookout for problems.

And let me be clear, we need to be able to do that because if I don't know how to change my flat tire, I'm going to be in trouble. I need to be able to know how do I fix that problem. But when we talk about mental health, we're not just talking about the absence of certain things.

We're talking about the active, engaged presence of things. But what types of things? In the forum, Kurt defined mental health. Not the absence of pathology.

It's the presence of effectively differentiated and linked systems. And for human brains,

human minds, it means that I am only going to be as effectively integrated by self. As I am integrated with you, I need interaction with you in order for my mind to effectively become what I wanted to be.

In other words, interaction with others, healthy relationships with others. Those things lead to my own mental health and integration. It's just like our first episode with Lydia, another vote for Better Community.

Okay, let's say I'm ready to be effectively integrated and pursue mental health. But I don't know where to begin. I mean, I'm the one who went to counseling, and when my counselor asked, "How did that make you feel?" I asked for a list of feelings to choose from.

That actually happened. So in order to understand the practical side of what he meant, I asked Kurt to pretend like I was his patient. If I came to him as my psychiatrist, what would he do with me to help improve my mental health? He said he would ask me two questions.

First question is going to be, "What do you want?" You might come to me with any number of different problems. You have depression, you have anxiety, panic attacks, you have a history of sexual abuse and trauma. Or maybe someone has bipolar disorder or a broken marriage or alcoholism.

Any number of things that we in psychiatry treat, and I'm going to ask you, "What do you want?" And many people's first response is kind of like my request for a list of feelings. He says most people ask, "What's the right answer to that question?" But the only right answer is the honest one, because it's only honesty that leads to healthy relationships, which leads to mental health. And the reason I'm going to ask that is because human desire is driving everything that we do.

And what gets us into trouble, what ends up creating problems for us, such that you end up coming to see the psychiatrists in the first place, has a lot to do with misdirected and wounded desire. One of the things that we alert people to when we ask this question, "What do you want?" We alert people to the reality that there are barricades to answering this, and there are a number of them. The first barricade he tells me is a fear to want.

This fear often presents itself when people say, "I'm not sure what I want." He says, "That's usually not true." The reality is that we're usually afraid or ashamed of wanting. Sometimes I'm afraid that what I want somehow isn't going to be okay to want. I'm already anticipating that somebody's going to say, "You don't need that."

You shouldn't want that. There's a whole range of ways which I'm going to be shamed." And some of that comes from our own developmental years. It's also often the case that

a desire has been developmentally linked with painful experiences.

And so to name a desire would perhaps necessarily also evoke a certain sense of shame or pain or fear. And so to protect against feeling ashamed or afraid, I practice not looking at what I want. And I can often be afraid that what I want is going to be like, "Well, somebody's going to think I'm demanding too much of them.

I'm going to want this and it's going to be too much." Another barricade to answering, "What do you want?" Is that even if you can name what you want, there's usually some want that's deeper and more real. But what they want, if you were to ask them then, "Tell me more about why you want that." Not accusatory, but just like, "Tell me more about what's behind that." Now they're not quite so sure because they haven't really recognized that the body that I want, which is why I'm in the gym two hours, five days a week, is because I'm terrified of the least bit of fat showing up that just really resonates with how awful it was for me to be an adolescent. And so I say, "This is what I want, but what I really want is I want to be confident and comfortable in my own skin." That's what I really want.

But instead, I say that I want to have the most effectively developed body on the planet. And so in some respects, I can even name what I want, but even that is hiding from other things that are deeper that are attached to some of my griefs. Which brings us to a second question for me as a patient.

And that question's going to be, "What is your grief? What is the thing that breaks your heart? What are you most sad about? What are you most angry about? What are you most ashamed of?" We're going to want to name those things because part of telling our story more truly includes not just talking about what we are longing for. What I want my life to be, what I want the world to be. What I want my relationship to be with my mother who is driving me crazy or with my 13-year-old son who's driving me crazy or my husband or my wife or my boss or whoever this is or my history.

I'm going to want to be able to name what I want with those, but as soon as I do that, I'm going to be able to be talking about what are the griefs that have to do with these things. Part of what Kurt talks about with his patients is this idea of embodiment and how important it is to living the good life and how much it's opposite, disembodiment creates grief. Especially in the last four to five hundred years, we've become increasingly abstract and disconnected from the embodied earth world that we talk about.

By embodiment, Kurt means that we're not just our minds or our ideas or our words. We are bodies too, and our bodies play a big role in our relationships. And especially in the last year with COVID, with our disembodied states, we have a lot more experience of not having the opportunity to be connected to each other in direct ways.

Kurt wrote an article last April on this idea of disembodiment. He talked about how living

and working virtually was exhausting to our brains because our brains want to be in the same place as one another. He wrote, "Like a cell phone that keeps looking for cell surface that isn't there will drain the battery that much quicker.

So we are much more tired when our bodies can't find each other in real time and space." And this is just one type of grief that we've experienced this past year. His main point was that many of our griefs arise from our deeply rooted and formative relationships with other people in our real, non-virtual lives. Our griefs take place in the context of trauma that happens in embodied relationships.

And after those two questions, what do you want and what are your griefs? He's going to invite me to work out those questions, not just with him, but with other people too. If I want to be mentally healthy, if I want to live the good life, I need help from others, not just him. Because those other people, my friends, my family, coworkers, classmates, even strangers on the street, these people who I might find disagreeable or hard to love at times, I need them in my life to strengthen me and to push my brain to its limits so that I become resilient.

We're going to be in a relationship. If we're in a relationship long enough, I'm going to tick you off. I'm going to upset you.

And you're not going to be happy with me. And when that happens, we have to decide if we're going to repair that rupture. And this is where the beauty comes into that even when things are broken, the repair of ruptures neurobiologically leads to a strengthening of the neural networks that is even greater than that which they had before the rupture.

And so we see that integration, wholeness, flourishing, health, the creation of it requires intentionality that we are going to come for people. We are going to do this work on purpose. It's not going to happen on its own.

It's not going to happen magically. But what he was saying seemed impossible to me. After all, aren't other people often the problem, not the solution? I thought about this in particular in relation to all this talk about cancel culture and the idea that that which does not kill you makes you weaker, not stronger, where the goal is to distance from problematic people.

Was Kurt saying that leaning toward, not away from other people, even sometimes disagreeable people would make me more mentally healthy? Is that what you're saying? I am saying that indeed. I don't think our technology is to be let off the hook in this regard. We are far more disembodied in our communication than ever before.

People's minds are being formed in disembodied ways such that the whole notion of being in the room with someone with whom I disagree, I don't have a construct. I don't have a template whereby which I could imagine that you and I could be mad at each

other and like an hour from now, we're going to be okay. Because we have ways in which we can actually ask certain kinds of questions.

This is hard work. There's no question that it's hard work. You've read the great divorce, I'm sure, in the opening chapter where Lewis talks about hell as a place where people are building their houses further and further apart from each other.

And this is exactly what we are doing, further and further and further away from each other. But he says it's in these broken places where we have created distance from each other, where we have heard each other, that we find the greatest opportunities for beauty. Because it's when these broken places are repaired that we discover new depths of love and goodness.

One of the things that we're asking them is what is the thing that you want to create that's most beautiful? Like what's the artifact of beauty that you want to create? And of course this doesn't make any sense to people because I'm here with my panic disorder. Like I'm not here to create anything. I'm here to get my panic stop.

Thank you very much. And of course we want to do that. But we also know that anytime that we're solving problems, we as human beings believe as followers of Jesus.

We believe that we have been created to create beauty and goodness in the world. Like I want to be known by you so that we can partner together to create beauty and I want to do it in the very places where at least seems likely to show up, including my marriage and my this and my that and so forth and so on. And Kurt tells me that good Friday, the day when Jesus was mocked, spit upon and killed.

A day that could be described as the opposite of the good life is what encourages him that this type of change can happen. I mean this is good Friday, right? This is God coming and saying, because I know about Easter, right? This is God knowing about Easter. I'm going to come right into the middle of all that's bad about the world.

And I'm not just going to heal it. I'm not just going to fix a problem. I'm going to use that very space as the very thing to create beauty and goodness in the world.

But I as a person like I can't do this by myself. And part of what's difficult is it's hard to expect college students to imagine doing this if they don't have much practical embodied practice doing it even in small ways. I can't expect them to go after Everest if like they've never been to the foothills.

And so this is challenging for us. He's right. You can't run a marathon if you haven't run a mile.

Or I suppose you could, but it would be really, really painful. So I asked him what practical steps people might take to start the process, especially if they don't have a

psychiatrist. And not surprisingly, all of them involve other people.

One thing would be I want to practice telling my story to somebody else and I want to invite them to tell their story to me. What Kurt means by telling your story is recounting what happened in your life as close to the truth as possible. The good, the bad, and the ugly.

Even when it's about yourself. I don't just mean telling your stories according to the facts. That's part of what truth means.

But also to tell our stories faithfully. Because even our rendition of the facts is subject to a lot of things that are driven by our emotional states, driven by our attachment processes. And in fact, might not be factual if I were to understand my story more truly.

And he says that you can start with just one or two people that you know and trust. Tell your story in 20 minutes. Take no more than 20 minutes to do it.

And you're like, "Gosh, I can tell my story. I don't know how 20 minutes. That's what we give patients." When they first start, you get 20 minutes to tell your story.

Because it kind of forces you to think hard about like what's important and what's not important. Okay, that's a place to start. Another question that's helpful when you have those relationships would be this.

I would invite you to have the courage to ask, "What is it like for you to live with me?" And just take a breath and say, "I want you to tell me the truth. I want you to tell me the truth about what it's like for you to live with me. What is it like for you to be my friend?" What are the things that you really love about? What are the things that are really hard? What are the things that you long for with us? What are the things that you grieve between us? What are the things that really delight you about me? What are the things that really drive you nuts about me? Because here's the thing.

Part of what enables people to do hard things from the time we are born to the time we die is when we find ourselves in a community of people who are bearing witness to our doing a hard thing and they are confident that we can do this. They're not confident that we will be perfect to whatever this thing is, but they are confident that whatever this thing is that we're going to do, we're going to be okay at the end of the day. Hi all, I'm Carly Uschelman, the assistant producer of Beyond the Forum.

If you're loving the podcast so far, we want to invite you to continue these important conversations on our Instagram account at Veritas Forum. Follow us throughout our podcast season to access behind the scenes content, exciting giveaways and conversations with other podcast listeners like you. Thanks for tuning in and enjoy the rest of the show.

This past year has been incredibly tough on so many fronts, especially the mental health and relationships front. As I mentioned in the last episode, instead of spending the first months of COVID alone in my one bedroom apartment in New York, I lived with my friends in Seattle. And although living with friends for four months sounds like summer camp, it wasn't all fun and games, though we did play cotton, do puzzles and go on hikes.

We also misunderstood each other. At times we didn't assume the best of one another, we disagreed, and sometimes we even fought. There was so much going on below the surface that we often joked that something in normal life that was like a three was an eight or nine during quarantine.

Everything was heightened. But we did some things that helped us endure, and at times even thrive a bit. We created rituals.

First, on Sundays we ordered breakfast from a local bakery and did online church, where we prayed, read scripture and sang songs. Even though the toddler, my god daughter, would ask us to stop because she hated hearing anyone but Elsa or Anna sing. Second, we leaned into conflict instead of away from it.

More than once I booked a flight back home because I was angry about something. But then within the airlines 24 hour grace period, I canceled it because we had sat down and decided not to get up until we understood each other. And third, each night as we sat around the table for dinner, each of us answered three questions.

These are actually questions that Kurt suggested to me last summer when things were particularly tough, and there are questions anyone can ask. You don't need a psychiatrist to ask them, but you do need other people. The three questions were first.

What do you want to thank the others around this table for today? Kurt says to make sure that your thanks is specific and rooted in the here and now. Sometimes it was for taking out the trash. Other times it was for offering wisdom about a tricky situation we were facing.

Second, what are you grieving? Sometimes the answer was having missed a birthday celebration. One time I lamented how I was starting to see people as dangerous as threats to my own health, and I wanted to fight against that badly. And third, what can we praise God for today? Whether it was a beautiful sunset or the meal in front of us or simply having one another and this time together, we did not want to miss the beauty and the brokenness that was happening right in front of us.

These rituals didn't magically solve our problems, and I absolutely believe there is a time and a place for medicine to help. But these rituals did shape our lives together as we began to realize that they weren't just for pandemic life, but for everyday life. Life is hard, even the good life, and into that hardness we can speak words of thankfulness,



grief, and praise.

Admittedly, this work was done in the context of friends where we each had a love for each other at the core. But what happens when someone hates you and they don't even know you? Should leaning toward that type of person make you more durable and resilient and beautiful? That's what we'll talk about next week when I interview Daryl Davis, a jazz musician who has worked with Chuck Berry, Jerry Lewis, BB King, and more. He's also a black man who has convinced over 200 Klansmen to leave and denounce the KKK as a result of their friendship with him.

You won't want to miss it.

[MUSIC] Hi again, this is assistant producer Carly Eshelman. We at Beyond the Forum want to take time to say thanks to all the folks who helped us get this episode together.

Our first thanks goes to our guest Kurt Thompson. Kurt actually took time away from his own podcast to Beyond Ours. You can listen to his show, The Be Known Podcast, by checking out [bknownpodcast.com](http://bknownpodcast.com). We also want to thank our amazing production team at PRX.

That's Jocelyn Gonzalez, Genevieve Sponseler, Morgan Flannery, and Jason Saldana. And thanks to our great colleagues at the Veritas Forum for being our biggest fans and a great team to work with. And of course, we want to thank the John Templeton Foundation and all of our donors for their generous support of our conversation.

And a final thanks goes to our launch team and co-sponsors. It's so great to have your support and help as we produce these shows. That's all for this episode.

Thanks for listening to Beyond the Forum.

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