

THE CAULDRON OF MENTAL HEALTH: INTERSECTIONS OF MAGICK & MENTAL HEALTH

by Matt Cormack

Imagine yourself as a cauldron, full of potion. Everything we do uses some potion. We need to refill the cauldron regularly, and self-care is a part of this. If we are constantly running low on potion or trying to give potion we don't have to others, it affects our mental health.

More and more Pagans are discussing mental health and spirituality, with many talks and discussions taking place on channels such as YouTube.^{1,2} Being a therapist and a Pagan it's no surprise that this resonates deeply with me. Over the last 15 years as a practising Pagan, my faith has helped my mental health during several periods in my own life; however, I wanted to know what evidence there is that faith or spirituality supports people's mental health.

There is a systematic review by Bonelli et al, suggesting that across different faiths, mental health can be supported by spirituality. It indicates that a person's spirituality helps with recovering from depression.³ The majority of studies looked at in this review (61%) found less depression or faster recovery in people who were spiritual or religious. One possible reason for this is regular involvement in faith or spiritual activity. It is important to note that some of the studies looked at in the systematic review found spiritually orientated interventions could be harmful. Overall, however, the research indicates potential benefits from spiritually informed mental health interventions. I have found little research specifically about Paganism supporting people's mental health, although there is some.

While there is more research needed into Pagan experiences of therapy and mental health services, we do see some trends in existing research. According to multiple pieces of research, many Pagans are worried that if they disclose their faith, they may be pathologised.^{4,5} There is a fear that, instead of viewing a person's faith as a valid part of

their life, mental health professionals will view their beliefs as a sign of mental illness. I can connect to this fear on a personal level as I am sure many reading this can. This fear can create a barrier for Pagans trying to access life-changing mental health services. Yet medication, therapy or other support can be massively beneficial for many people.

Mental health professionals should not discriminate against people because of their faith or spirituality. If, like me, they are a therapist registered with the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP), they should be cognisant of the fact that it is against the BACP Ethical Framework to not respect a client's autonomy and faith.⁶ There are many other Professional Standards Authority (PSA) accredited counselling bodies that have similar ethical frameworks. If a therapist is discriminating against you because of your faith, you can make a complaint to the counselling body they are registered with.⁷

Dr Vivienne Crowley highlights some of the needs Pagans may have when accessing therapy.⁸ This includes therapists becoming more aware of Paganism, having Pagan-friendly therapist lists and perhaps even including Paganism in counselling and psychotherapy training. Having some understanding enables clients to be more open, which is essential in therapy. Another study suggests that therapists need to recognise the stigma and isolation that many Pagans face and to not take Pagan beliefs out of context when making assessments about mental health.⁹ This ties into findings from recent surveys conducted by the Scottish Pagan Federation into stigma and discrimination experienced by Pagans.¹⁰

The needs of the Pagan community have been important for me to consider in my role as the Mental Health and Well-being Officer for the Scottish Pagan Federation. I currently run an online monthly mental health check-in



group for Pagans in Scotland to talk about mental health and spirituality. I am available to talk with people one to one online and I have a list of resources that people may find helpful. I have included some of these resources at the end of this article, along with my email.

With the research about spirituality supporting mental health in mind, let's turn to how we might connect mental health and Paganism in practical ways. Sigils are used by many in the Pagan community. There are seemingly endless ways to create a sigil with entire books dedicated to the various methods.¹¹ A mental health goal for a sigil, might be "I maintain healthy boundaries" or "I am compassionate with myself when feeling anxious." Empowering this sigil, then carrying it, will allow it to work your magick. These are not magical cures for mental illness. However, I do believe they can be a part of healing from or living with mental illness, particularly when working alongside a therapist or doctor.

In her book, *Counselling Skills for Working with Trauma*, Christiane Sanderson suggests clients create a small bag or box that can be

carried around.¹² This box can contain items that the client feels positive connections with. The theory is that, when the client is stressed, they can look at the items in this box, reflect on them and take comfort. This can support someone when emotions or memories cause distress, helping them to manage their feelings. Learning how to self-regulate emotions can be part of people reclaiming their lives following trauma. Looking at the items or touching them can have a soothing effect or release some tension or anxiety. In some Pagan practices you may have heard of people having a travel altar or crystals that they carry with them. A box of items that have been charged or blessed to support mental health is a way of combining these ideas.

Poppets are little dolls of people, often made from some kind of fabric and stuffed. Some people create poppets for healing. This is a form of sympathetic magick, where our actions on the poppet happen to the person the poppet represents. For many who have endured trauma, some emotions can be overwhelming and distressing.¹³ Creating a poppet of yourself to care for, look after and

talk to can be a way to offer compassion to yourself in a gentle way that is not overwhelming. This can be incredibly healing.

When healing from loss and grief, ritual can play an important role. Worden has a theory called the four tasks of mourning which I believe rituals help with.¹⁴ I have an article about this in *Thresholds*, a journal about spirituality and therapy (published October 2021). Like rituals, each person can experience therapy differently. Carl Rogers believed that we all exist within our own world of experience, what he called the phenomenal field, where we can only truly know our own experiences.¹⁵ This may offer a reason why two people can do a ritual together and come away with vastly different experiences or messages. The gods may choose to reveal themselves or their mysteries in a multitude of ways to participants of a ritual.

Working with a deity may be another way to support a person's mental health. We can call to a deity to commune with them, where our emotions can be heard. For me, this has led to some beautiful encounters with the gods. Hekate is a liminal deity, often referred to as a deity of crossroads and between worlds. A couple of her epithets are Dadouchos, the torchbearer, Enodia, of the ways, and Propolos, the companion.¹⁶ This leaves me with the idea of Hekate lighting and accompanying, but not leading, the way for people. The story of Persephone feels relevant here. Hekate accompanies Demeter as she searched for her daughter and was the only one to respond to Demeter's crying. Later in the story, Hekate becomes Persephone's companion on her annual journey to the underworld. I believe these myths suggest that Hekate is a goddess who we can approach for support with mental health.

In the UK, there are abysmally long waiting times for mental health treatment. Many charities try to provide support, counselling or helplines. However, some people may want to find a private therapist. If you are looking for a counsellor, therapist or psychotherapist there are a couple of things that are important to consider. Dr Astrid Coxon has a fantastic blog post outlining some of these.¹⁷

Paganism and mental health are compatible and can complement one another with a bit of work. Working with a mental health

professional who is open to people bringing faith into the room can be vastly rewarding. I hope I have given a little insight into how some Pagan practices can support good mental health. If you are struggling, please look at the resources below, and if you are in Scotland please come along to one of the SPF mental health groups. Supporting our mental health is important. We need to look after ourselves before we can look after others; we each need to find ways to refill our cauldrons as we cannot pour from an empty cauldron.

While I am a qualified mental health professional this article should not be used as a replacement for medical advice. Please consult a medical professional.



Resources

Organisations:

- **Samaritans** – 116 123 – samaritans.org
Samaritans offer a free confidential phone line for people to talk when they need to. They are open 24/7.
- **Anxiety UK** – 03444 775 774 – anxietyuk.org.uk
Supporting people who live with an anxiety disorder.
- **Cruse** – 0808 808 1677 – cruse.org.uk
Cruse offers support, advice and information when someone dies, and about grief.
- **Shout** – 85258 – giveusashout.org
A free 24/7 text number for anyone struggling to cope, to speak to someone by text.

Apps available to download:

- **Calm Harm**
- **Catch It**
- **DistrACT**

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² Mooney, T, 2021. *Yes, you can be a witch and struggle with mental illness*. [Online]. Available: [youtube.com/watch?v=uGy8fv-bpbc&list=LL&index=11&t=3s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uGy8fv-bpbc&list=LL&index=11&t=3s). [Accessed 01 09 2021].

³ Bonelli, R et al, 2012. "Religious and Spiritual Factors in Depression: Review and Integration of the Research" *Depression Research and Treatment*, vol. 2012, p 8.

⁴ Harris, K et al, 2016. "Paganism and Counseling: The Development of a Clinical Resource", *Open Theology*, pp 869-870.

⁵ Beckford, J, Hervey, S, Streidinger, S, 2018. *New Religious Movements and Counselling*. Oxfordshire: Routledge, pp 115-119.

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¹⁰ Scottish Pagan Federation, 2021. *The Pagan Discrimination Survey Initial Results*. [Online]. Available: [scottishpf.org/pdsResults.html](https://www.scottishpf.org/pdsResults.html). [Accessed 01 09 2021].

¹¹ Jackson, M, 2013. *Sigils, ciphers and scripts*. Somerset: Green Magic, p 48-50.

¹² Sanderson, C, 2013. *Counselling skills for working with trauma*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, pp 147-149, pp 154-156.

¹³ Van Der Kolk, B, 2014. *The Body Keeps the Score*. Penguin Random House, pp 96-98, pp 232-234, p 335.

¹⁴ Worden, W, 2010. *Grief Counselling and Grief Therapy*, 4th ed. London: Routledge, pp 39-53.

¹⁵ Rogers, C, 1951. *Client-Centered Therapy*. London: Constable and Company Limited, pp 483-487.

¹⁶ d'Este, S & Rankine, D, 2009. *Hekate liminal rites*. London: Avalonia, p 20.

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