



Faith at Home

Welcome to Faith at Home, our monthly resource for those seeking to develop children's faith at home. We know that raising the next generation of Jesus-followers isn't easy, but hopefully the ideas and stories inside these pages can help us all along the way. You could tear out these pages to give to parents you work with or point them in the direction of youthandchildrens.work/faithathome, where it's available to download for free (and won't hurt your beautiful magazine).

36 Family mental health
A father tells shares his journey of walking with his daughter through anorexia

40 Forming faith rituals
Making New Year plans

42 Story for home
Christmas



Bob's Bedtime Stories

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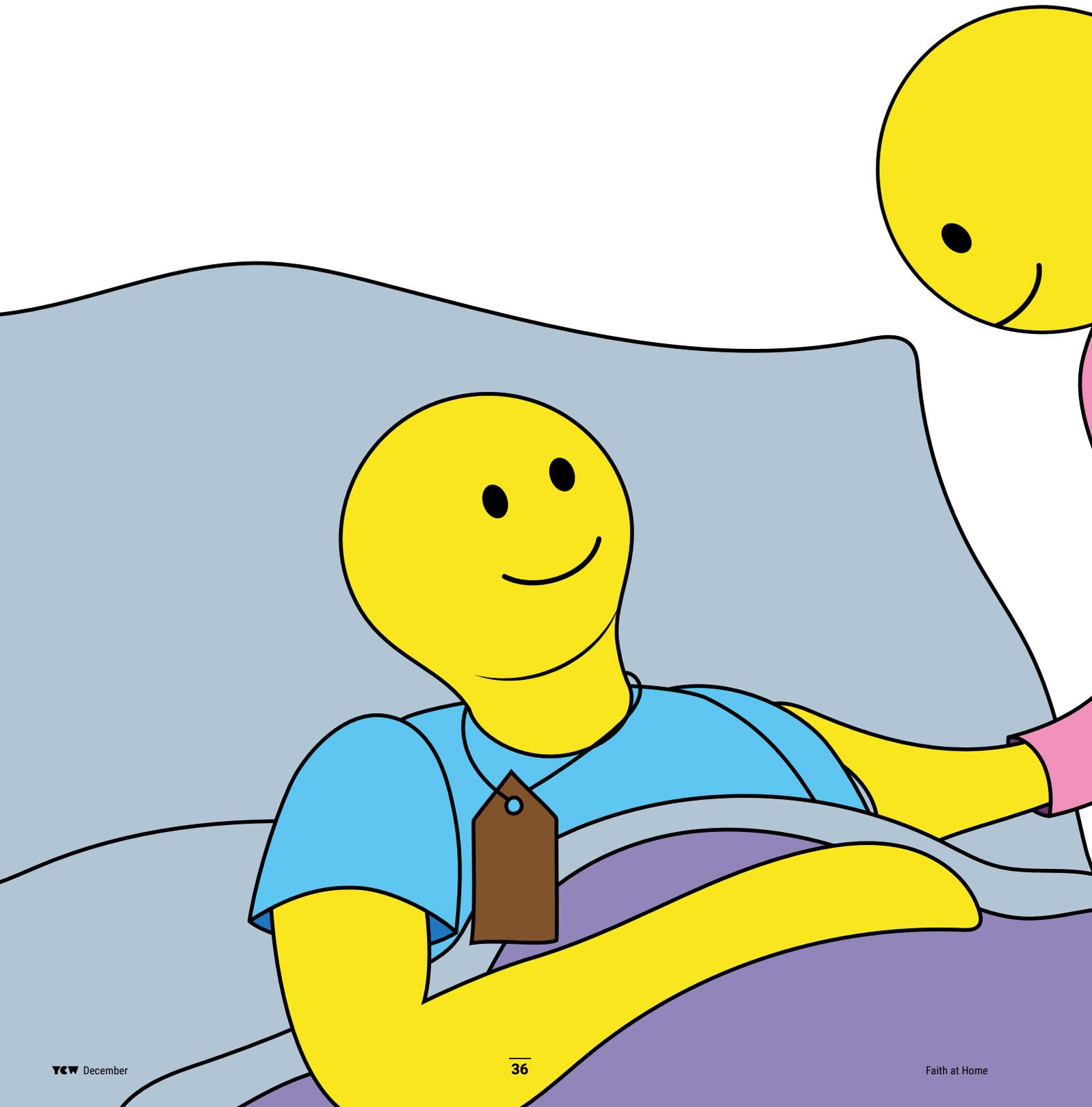
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Family mental health

A season filled with feasting and celebration can be difficult for those who are struggling with their mental health. Nick Pollard shares his experience of walking through an eating disorder with his daughter





“
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Be discerning about diagnoses

Parents are understandably shocked by the statistic that ten per cent of children aged 5 to 16 have a clinically diagnosed mental disorder (*Mental Health of Children and Young People in Great Britain 2004*). Naturally, if our children show signs of mental ill health, we feel we must go to the doctor for a diagnosis to provide a pathway to treatment.

It is well established that early intervention is valuable for a full and sustained recovery from mental health issues, and to reduce or avert the risk of chronicity, complications and comorbidities (the simultaneous presence of two chronic diseases or conditions). But medicalising through diagnosis brings its own challenges. Once we get a diagnosis we may feel that it is the responsibility of clinicians to fix the problem, just as they would if they diagnosed appendicitis or a broken leg. We might expect to watch passively from the sidelines, missing the opportunity for effective family-based, proactive self-care. Our children may experience their own sense of impotence, as they are labelled with what can feel like a permanent condition (on social media an increasing number of young people list diagnoses, such as ‘OCD’, ‘anxiety’ and ‘bipolar’ as if they are permanent descriptions that define them).

Mental health is as important as physical health, but it is not the same. Indeed, there is a strong argument against using the term ‘diagnosis’ at all in mental illness, since they are largely descriptive categories that clinicians use as shorthand to refer to their perception of patterns of symptoms. They are not equivalent to a blood test or a biopsy result.

Early in Lizzie’s recovery journey my wife and I decided that we would never describe her as ‘an anorexic’. She was Lizzie, a unique and beautiful person. Yes, she was living through an eating disorder, but there was much more to her than just this illness, and she had her whole life ahead of her. The diagnosis was indeed helpful in providing a pathway to treatment, but it did not define her.



The diagnosis was helpful in providing a pathway to treatment, but it did not define her

Be confident in your capacity

Research increasingly shows the value of self-help for mental health, especially within a context in which family members have been equipped with the skills to provide appropriate support. For example, the UK government’s *Transforming Children and Young People’s Mental Health Provision* said: “Evidence-based treatments for mild to moderate levels of mental health disorder can be delivered by trained non-clinical staff with adequate supervision, leading to outcomes comparable to those of trained therapists.” It went on to say: “The evidence highlights the important role of the family in ensuring successful interventions, with parental involvement improving the outcomes of many interventions.”

One of the key skills we learned as we supported Lizzie through this illness was how to act like coaches, believing in her and encouraging her that she could overcome the eating disorder. This wasn’t easy for me, in particular, because I am naturally a ‘fixer’. I couldn’t fight the illness for her. I had to love her, believe in her and help her believe in herself again. It was Lizzie who had the lead role in fighting this illness; I was just a supporting actor. But I still had a vital role to play.

This coaching stance was informed by the principles and practices of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), which recognises that our thoughts, feelings and actions are intimately linked. Therefore, helping people challenge and reassess their thoughts can produce positive changes in their feelings and behaviour.

Remain full of faith

Recent research from the Royal College of Psychiatrists found that “about half of our patients with a mental health condition are turning to spirituality and religion to help them get through their mental health crisis”. Indeed, the college now has a ‘Spirituality and Psychiatry’ special interest group. This is such an encouraging change from the 1970s, when I was studying psychology and was disappointed to discover that psychiatry and faith largely saw each other as enemies rather than allies.

There is a growing body of research into the mental health benefits of spirituality and religion. A systematic review of 22 research studies regarding eating disorders concluded that: “Strong and internalised religious beliefs coupled with having a secure and satisfying relationship with God were associated with lower levels of disordered eating, psychopathology and body image concern.”

In Lizzie’s case there were certainly significant steps forward in her recovery journey when we helped her see the illness through the eyes of her faith. In her recent book, *Life Hurts: A doctor’s personal journey through anorexia* (MD Publishing), she writes about a time when she was very ill in hospital: “Dad always carried a Bible in his jacket pocket and, as he sat on the bed, he would ask me if I wanted to read some of it with him and to pray. I always said yes, and one of those readings was another little insight for me. Dad read from John’s Gospel (chapter 10) in which Jesus said: ‘The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.’ I recall, after he read that verse, how he stopped and read it again, slowly and thoughtfully. We talked about it for quite a while and I remember it dawning on me that anorexia was like a thief, stealing my happiness and killing my joy. That night I wrote in my diary: ‘I must stop, otherwise the thief will destroy my life. This is not fair. God and my family love me and that’s all that matters.’”

Hang on to hope

When Lizzie was very ill, my wife and I felt as though we were in a dark tunnel without any hope. In fact, the tunnel felt so dark and long that we were tempted to despair, as if it were a cave with no exit. But the evidence shows that hope for recovery is a significant factor in helping people who are on a journey through a mental health condition. So how do we maintain hope when we feel despair?

True stories of other people’s recovery journeys can help, which is why Lizzie wrote her book. However, we must remember that every person is different. Each individual has a personal journey into and out of a mental health condition (indeed, the same ‘diagnosis’ can describe many different types of underlying issues).

For those of us who believe that the Bible can speak to all people, there are biblical principles that can offer practical advice. I found Psalm 30 a particular help. It contains a great promise: “Weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in morning.” I wrestled with that promise in the darkest moments of Lizzie’s illness. I kept asking God when that morning of rejoicing would come. But as Lizzie gradually progressed through the illness, I discovered that I should not be living for one sudden morning of great joy. Rather, there were many mornings of small joys, and I learned to be thankful for each one. I celebrated each little step along her recovery journey, and I held on to the faith that there was hope and a future.

NICK POLLARD

is chairman of Family Mental Wealth, a social-enterprise working in collaboration with King’s College London and the University of Southampton to facilitate family-based proactive self-care for mental health and wellbeing ((FamilyMentalWealth.com). You can read more of their story in *Life Hurts: A doctor’s personal journey through anorexia* by Elizabeth McNaught.



Hope for recovery is a significant factor in helping people who are on a journey through a mental health condition

Visit FamilyMentalWealth.com/Christmas to access a free activity to help families.



Making New Year plans

Last year, I read a blog post between Christmas and New Year that suggested asking your family four questions as a launch pad for planning your year. The questions were things like: where would you like to go this year? What would you like to learn? What would you like to achieve? What would you like to do more of?

When I asked my daughters where they would like to go, my 7-year-old said: “To see a Shakespeare play.” My 6-year-old said: “To McDonald’s!” I am happy to report that we achieved both of these this year...

I wonder if this would be a good process in connection with our faith.

Before I had children, I read a few books about being a Christian parent. Two of these stood out because they were very practical in the way they talked about being clear on long-term goals and then creating a plan for the short term based on these. (The books were *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions* by George Barna and *Parenting Children for a Life of Faith* by Rachel Turner.) Each book challenged me to think about our goals for raising Christian children, about what we wanted our children to be like as adults, about the godly character and about Christian skill sets we wanted them to have.

If you’ve never done this, take a few minutes to try it now:

- What godly attributes would I like my children to have?
- How would I like to be able to describe them?
- Which Christian skills would I like my children to have?
- What would I like them to be able to do?

For me, the key characteristics include being generous, kind, courageous and forgiving. I want my children to be able to navigate the Bible and to know a range of Christian rituals, such as different ways of praying and worshipping.

The books recommended using our long-term goals to make plans for the next season (under 5s, 5-8s, 8-11s, 11-14s, 14-18s) and also to make a plan for this year or this season, detailing the specific elements of skill and character we wanted to help our children develop. For example, you could say: “By the time our children are school age we would like them to know that the Bible is a precious book full of stories that help us get to know God. Therefore, we will buy Bible storybooks this year and read Bible stories to our children regularly as well as letting them see us reading the Bible. And we will chat with them when the occasion arises about what the Bible is and why we value it.”



We are in it for the long haul, so we can let some things slide and wait for the right season to work on them

Or you could say: “By the time our children are teenagers we would like them to have relationships with other Christians who can help them navigate the teen years. Therefore, this year we will plan opportunities for them to develop relationships with their Christian aunts and uncles, godparents and other older Christians at church by inviting them over for meals at our house and encouraging them to be part of our lives.”

This might seem obvious, but articulating what we would like to see happen helps us make plans for how we can help our children get there. Then we can make short-term goals to help us move intentionally in the direction of our long-term goals. It also helps to remember that this is a marathon not a sprint, so what happens today and this week is not the end goal. We are in it for the long haul, so we can let some things slide and wait for the right season to work on them while allowing other things take priority now.

Let's also remember that these are not meant to be plans to beat ourselves up with, but pointers to help us move intentionally through the seasons of being Christian parents. As we look forward to a new year, why not think about this for you and for your family?

While it would be helpful to spend time in prayer on your own and with your partner about this, a more challenging and therefore probably more effective way would be to have a family discussion. Gather some cake and warm drinks, then invite everyone to chat about what you would like to do this year to grow in your faith together.

If you're thinking about this as a parent, you might like to start with question one below to help give you direction for the other questions. However, this may be too abstract, especially for younger family members, so it might be easier to start with question two.

1. Which area of our faith would we like to grow this year?

For example Bible knowledge, prayer life, blessing others, private prayer, public prayer, showing God's love to others, sharing faith with others, private or public worship, getting involved in serving in a new area at church or looking for opportunities to use gifts of teaching / leading worship / serving others / hospitality.

2. Which faith activity would we like to do more of this year?

For example reading the Bible, praying, being still with God, meeting God through nature, remembering baptism birthdays, going to church groups, meeting people who aren't Christians, being hospitable or celebrating church feasts such as Lent.

3. Where could we go that would help us grow in our faith?

For example a local cathedral, a homeless charity, a different church, a place of pilgrimage, a Bible college open day, a Christian

conference, a remote island, a local food bank or MakeLunch kitchen, a saint's birthplace, a Christian bookshop, a local hospital or an old people's home.

4. Which resources might help us grow in our faith?

For example new Bibles, new worship albums or playlists, Bible commentary, atlas or infographic books, books written by conference or podcast speakers, DVDs or online films, podcasts or online courses.

5. Who could we ask to help us grow in our faith?

For example grandparents, godparents, church leaders, group leaders, teachers, book authors, conference speakers or friends.

Discussing your goals is a great way to focus on your direction, so don't be surprised if the answers take longer to get to, or if you don't agree on any as a family. It might be that you each have one or two answers that are personal, and one or two that are for you all as a family. This is good, and it reflects the personal and corporate nature of your faith together.

If you do discover things you'd like to do this year, write them down and put the list somewhere you'll remember it. I find it helpful to review my goals each month, as the weeks spin by so quickly and it's easy to forget those good intentions you made only a few months ago.

Once you have set your goals, it will probably be helpful to come back to them in a few days or weeks and chat about what you might do in the month ahead to work towards them. Sometimes, like with my daughter's goal of going to McDonald's, it doesn't take much planning. In fact, I left this one until much later in the year when we were moving house and needed a quick-fix meal. Others, like watching Shakespeare, might need more planning. We bought a book of a play and watched versions of it on YouTube, and I researched lots of different places we could go and see it before settling on an outdoor performance, where we could eat a picnic throughout the performance!

You might need to save up to pay for a trip or to buy resources. You might need to book a conference for later in the year or plan something you want to do for Lent or for Easter. Agree on your plans and put them in the calendar. That way they are far more likely to actually happen.

VICTORIA BEECH

runs GodVenture to inspire family faith at home. You can find lots more ideas on her website (GodVenture.co.uk) as well as on her Facebook and Instagram pages: @GodVenture.

Here is a story for you to tell at home, perhaps at bedtime or as part of a God time during the day. You could also use it as part of a children's session. To read some of Bob's other stories, download our **FREE** ebook at youthandchildrens.work/stories.

A Christmas riddle



So who was the first to recognise him,
Jesus, God's only son,
To leap and to jump for joy at the coming
Of God's promised, special one?

Was it the wise men, led by a star,
Travelling from the east,
Laying before the child the gifts
Borne on the back of their beasts?

It wasn't the wise men, sadly, not them,
Travelling from the east.
They were, as it happens, late to the party.
The child was a year old, at least!

So who was the first to recognise him,
Jesus, God's only son,
To leap and to jump for joy at the coming
Of God's promised, special one?

Was it old Simeon, stood in the temple,
Watching and waiting each day,
Promised by God that he would not die,
Till that special child came his way?

It wasn't old Simeon, sadly, not him,
Although the Lord's promise came true.
For, holding the child in his arms, he rejoiced
At everything Jesus would do.

So who was the first to recognise him,
Jesus, God's only son,
To leap and to jump for joy at the coming
Of God's promised, special one?

Was it the shepherds, sat on a hillside,
Watching their flocks by night,
Sent into town by an angel from heaven,
Who'd given them quite a fright?

It wasn't the shepherds, sadly, not them,
Shocked by that angel bright,
Who shouted their way back from Bethlehem
And woke up the town that night.

So who was the first to recognise him,
Jesus, God's only son,
To leap and to jump for joy at the coming
Of God's promised, special one?

Then surely it was his own mother Mary,
And Joseph stood by her side,
There with the animals, there at his birth,
There when he cried his first cry.

It wasn't young Mary, sadly, not her
Nor Joseph, her husband true
But Mary was there when it happened, of course,
And her loyal husband, too.

So who was the first to recognise him,
Jesus, God's only son,
To leap and to jump for joy at the coming
Of God's promised, special one?

Elizabeth's yet-to-be-born baby, John,
Leaped in her womb for joy.
For when pregnant Mary came for a visit
He recognised her baby boy!

Out from the mouths of babes comes praise
And, I guess, from the feet of babes, too!
For John gave a kick, and that did the trick,
And Elizabeth knew what he knew:

That there in their presence, in young Mary's womb
Lay the saviour God promised would come.
And they all rejoiced, mother, cousin and child
At the coming of God's special one.

For John was the first to recognise him,
Jesus, God's only son,
To leap and to jump for joy at the coming
Of God's promised, special one!

BOB HARTMAN

is an author and performance storyteller, who has spent many years writing and telling stories.