

## Mental Health Affects Us All – Even Religious

*Br. Fred Cabras, OFM Cap.*

*Originally published in Review for Religious online — March 17, 2026*

*In this essay, Br. Fred Cabras, OFM Cap., explores mental health challenges that can surface in religious life, along with the ways community and ministry can both strain and support those who struggle. He highlights common issues such as anxiety and burnout and offers practical means for seeking support and maintaining well-being.*

It is 2 AM, and once again, my mind has decided to reflect on a difficult conversation I had at ministry with an employee instead of sleeping. This is a common occurrence, especially for me, who has generalized anxiety disorder. Ministry for any religious can be challenging at times, but when you suffer from a mental health challenge, it becomes even more challenging especially in religious life. Mental health is not something that is often talked about and due to the challenges often faced in community and ministry, religious life can exacerbate these issues. It is important to also say, however, that religious life can be a source of strength and support for those who suffer with mental health challenges. Throughout this article I will share more of my personal story and offer some suggestions and coping skills to strengthen one's own mental health when living in religious life.

I was officially diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder when I was a novice, but I always knew that anxiety was challenging for me. As a teenager, I experienced bullying and feelings of insecurity and doubt. Depression and suicidal ideation were common “friends” during my time in high school, and at times felt like my only friend. When I entered the Capuchin Franciscans in 2011, I began to realize how debilitating my anxiety had become, so I sought help through a regular therapist and medication. These were a great source of support for me and, for the most part, have been enough to get me through the mental health challenges I have faced in ministry and community life.

Unfortunately, due to some medication changes and increased stress in my ministry, I needed to seek residential mental health support in 2021 and step away from my ministry and community. I spent 13 weeks at Southdown in Canada, where they were able to provide adjustments to my medication, weekly therapy, and group therapy. This was a much-needed time away to focus on myself and my mental health.

My story is not unique. Many people suffer from mental health challenges, and religious are not excluded from these challenges. Except for those with specific, rare mental health disorders, all humans experience emotions, including anxiety, sadness, insecurities, anger—and a myriad of other emotions. This is what makes us human, as a spiritual director of mine used to say to me when I felt strong emotions. Stigma, unfortunately, can make our expression of and dealing with our feelings so much more challenging. This is especially challenging for those of us who are religious.

Religious often hide our emotions, for a variety of reasons: the self-giving nature of religious life has no wish to be a burden on anyone or overwhelm them, or perhaps we think we can handle it alone, or sometimes we can even spiritualize the issue and think we just need to pray harder. I affirm that prayer and our faith in God are a great source of strength and an avenue of support, but add that they are not the only ones. The best way to fight stigma is to talk about what is happening and speak the truth about your feelings. Everyone's emotions are valid and are yours to share with whomever you wish, sharing emotions in a safe space can be a powerful way help name and cope with mental health challenges. This is where living in a community can come in handy because you have others you can share with, but when community members become the problem, this can be a challenge.

Living in a community, especially a male religious community, can add some extra challenges because you are dealing with a wide variety of different temperaments, personalities, and ways in which people express their emotions. Communication, honesty, empathy, and vulnerability can help break down these barriers of isolation and stigma. Knowing your own community helps: some are more capable of receiving these emotions and maintain trust than others. There is this running joke in our community: if you want the whole province to know, tell a certain friar. Gossip is a natural part for many in religious life.

Another challenge to mental health within the religious community, and especially when one is in active ministry, is that the religious, simply by being religious, is often seen as the leader of a ministry and turned to for answers. They are seen as the person you go to solve any problem you are experiencing. I am always amazed at the number of people who come to me for dating or relationship advice. I am a celibate friar living in a community! Yet in this and other instances, religious are often seen or expected to have it ALL together because of their strong faith and community support. Their work in ministry is seen as a positive and usually uplifting reflection of the work of God, yet anyone with ministerial experience knows this does not always make it easy, and we do not have all the answers. We struggle just as much as others; we don't know everything, and sometimes we need support.

Religious life, community living, daily prayer, and dedicated ministry helping those struggling with poverty, spiritual challenges, hunger, homelessness, marital issues, faith of children or grandchildren, and many more challenges can be difficult for religious, especially if they themselves struggle. Religious struggle with pride and arrogance, we struggle with irritation and annoyances, we struggle with frustrations and grievances, and most of all, we get burned out and overwhelmed. Ministry is a beautiful opportunity to live out the gospel and share the message of God's love with others, but it is also challenging because we have to say no at times; we cannot

always help everyone. And when this happens, often people do not understand why we would make such a decision. When you have a mental health diagnosis, such as anxiety, depression, or a personality disorder, it can make this even more challenging. When this happens, the critical thing is to seek the support you need.

Before we get into self-care and ways to help find the support one needs it is important to note that if one does not take the necessary steps to work through their challenges and take time for self-care, this is where one could make decisions that could cause scandal within the church. Our bodies and minds are not made to carry all the stress we experience. Consider it this way: when you are boiling water to make tea, there is an area where the steam can be released. If that was not there the steam and pressure would build up and eventually the steam would need to find a release and could cause damage. This is very similar to our bodies, if we do not find an outlet for our stress than eventually our minds and body will need to find a way to release and this could mean making extremely impulsive decisions that could cause scandal. A healthy way is needed to handle stress, and this involves self-care. So what is self-care?

Self-care is defined as taking time for yourself to rejuvenate or relax. You might look at this way: your life is a glass of water, every time one faces a challenge more water is added to your cup. Eventually if you don't empty out some of the water the glass will overflow and this is where people often become overwhelmed and poor decisions can be made. Self-care is taking the time to empty out some of the water from the cup so when faced with other situations you have room in the cup. Self-care looks different for each person; you must identify that practice that helps you to take the needed time to empty your cup.

Let me be clear: properly understood, self-care is not selfish, and taking time for yourself does not mean ignoring others or being self-centered. Here are some examples that people partake in for self-care: reading, visiting with friends, going out to dinner, going for a walk, meditation, prayer, daily mass, vacation or other things that take you away from stressful situations. Self-care is necessary and I encourage individuals to find time in their schedules daily to leave room for self-care. For myself, prayer, meditation, spending time with my brothers to go out for dinner or lunch or spending time video gaming with my friends are things that I do to provide myself some time for self-care. Other additional support for self-care that may not be a daily occurrence could things like having a spiritual director, therapist, medical doctor, or other professional to chat with about these struggles. I have a therapist that I meet with every other week and I keep my primary care physician up to date on any health concerns or increased anxiety.

Open communication with health care professionals is important to ensure that you are emptying the cup enough and they offer an unbiased perspective that can help you process your emotions and feelings in a judgment-free and safe environment. Having a close religious friend in your order or in another order to share your frustrations (vent, as they call it) and help you process through a response is essential, because they understand the dynamics of religious life and its many complexities that even professionals or family may not understand. These self-care moments can help you step away from any ministry or community challenges even if it is just an hour, a day or a couple days. Taking some time whatever that time looks like helps you to continue to be fully present to your ministry and community. In these moments, I can be Fred,

not brother or father or therapist or director or whatever other title people see instead of me. I can just be the person that God created me to be.

And this—being the person God created you to be—is at the heart of being a religious in ministry. Being yourself, being the child God created, accepting yourself for who you are, and allowing yourself to be seen. Whether you have a diagnosed mental health challenge or are feeling burned out in ministry or even just feeling frustrated and overwhelmed, it is essential to be honest about what you are experiencing with whoever you trust and find ways to get your support. Silence does not mean strength. You don't need to suffer because Christ suffered; you don't need to carry the cross alone, even Jesus had help carrying his cross. There is a lot of support out there, and many people who want to help you need to reach out.

**You may find the original posting of this essay, as well as the author's biographical and contact information, at**

**<https://www.reviewforreligious.com/essays/mental-health-affects-us-all>**