

5. Advocacy

Mental illness is a social justice issue involving such basic human rights as access to medical care, stable housing, and job training. Once a congregation has developed a mental health ministry, a natural next step is to be involved in advocacy.

- Work for parity in health insurance for physical and mental illnesses.
- Be alert to current legislation and send letters or make calls on issue that affect the care and support services for persons affected by mental illness.
- Support funding for education and research through events like NAMI Walks.
- Encourage members to volunteer with local groups involved with prison and jail ministries, feeding programs, shelters, affordable housing, support for veterans, providing transportation and other justice outreach ministries.
- Partner with other organizations for community events to raise awareness about mental illness and support research.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

American Association of Pastoral Counselors
www.aapc.org

Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance (DBSA)
www.DBSAAlliance.org

Interfaith Network on Mental Illness (INMI)
www.interfaithnetworkonmentalillness.org

International Bipolar Foundation
www.IBPF.org

Mental Health America
www.mentalhealthamerica.net

Mental Health Ministries
www.MentalHealthMinistries.net

National Alliance for Mental Illness (NAMI)
www.nami.org

NAMI FaithNet
www.nami.org/namifaithnet

Pathways to Promise
www.Pathways2Promise.org

Mental Health Ministries Resources

Mental Health Ministries is an interfaith web-based ministry to provide educational resources to help erase the stigma of mental illness in our faith communities. Our mission is to help faith communities be caring congregations for people living with a mental illness and those who love and care for them.

Mental Health Ministries has created a wide variety of user friendly media and downloadable print resources with many of the print resources available in Spanish. The website (www.MentalHealthMinistries.net) also has training curriculums and other resources developed by denominations and national groups working in the area of spirituality/faith and mental illness. Congregations can choose from this “menu” of resources and adapt them to the unique needs of each faith community.

The video resources are available for viewing on the website through YouTube. Topics include:

- *Creating Caring Congregations*
- *Understanding Depression*
- *Teenage Depression and Suicide*
- *Overcoming Stigma, Finding Hope*
- *Addiction and Depression*
- *Mental Illness and Older Adults*
- *Eating Disorders*
- *Anxiety: Overcoming Fear*
- *Mental Illness and Families of Faith (Christian and Jewish)*
- *A Couple's Journey with Mental Illness*
- *Postpartum Depression*
- *PTSD: Finding Hope and Healing*
- *Transforming Trauma*
- *Suicide*

People with mental problems are our neighbors. They are members of our congregations, members of our families; they are everywhere in this country. If we ignore their cries for help, we will be continuing to participate in the anguish from which those cries of help come. A problem of this magnitude will not go away, and because of our spiritual commitments, we are compelled to take action.

—Rosalynn Carter

Mental Illness and Families of Faith

Creating Caring Congregations

Mental Health Ministries

To Erase the Stigma of Mental Illness

Rev. Susan Gregg-Schroeder, Coordinator

www.MentalHealthMinistries.net

Mental Illness and Families of Faith Creating Caring Congregations

A Five-Step Program

Based on the findings of the Surgeon General's report on the magnitude of mental illness in this country, we know that one in four families has a family member dealing with mental illness. Because of the stigma and shame surrounding mental illness, many of these people are suffering in silence. More than half of people with a mental health issue turn first to their faith leader for help. Unfortunately many clergy are ill equipped to provide appropriate support and referrals to mental health providers in the community.

We need to equip our clergy and faith communities to begin or expand a ministry to and with persons with a mental illness and their families. The caring congregations model uses a five step approach. These five steps include education, commitment, welcome, support and advocacy.

These steps are not linear. Rather the process of becoming a caring congregation is dynamic and unique to each community. Some congregations have developed models of ministry based on the specific needs of their community. Hopefully our faith communities will become involved in an ongoing process of education, commitment, welcome, support and advocacy for a just mental health delivery system.

1. Education

The first step in creating caring congregations is education. If clergy and congregations are not educated about mental illness, they will not be able to recognize the symptoms to provide support and to make appropriate referrals to mental health providers.

- Get educational material and community referral information from groups like the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), local mental health agencies and websites listed in this brochure.
- Invite a speaker or offer a workshop to teach people that mental illnesses are treatable brain disorders and not a moral or spiritual failure.
- Invite persons from the congregation or from programs like NAMI's In Our Own Voice to share their stories.

- Offer classes and study groups to recognize the symptoms of different types of mental illnesses.
- Use bulletin inserts and newsletters to educate about serious mental illness especially during Mental Health Month in May and Mental Illness Awareness Week in October.
- Offer space for mental health educational and support groups to meet at no charge.

2. Commitment

Commitment means that the community pledges to be intentional in seeking ways to become a caring congregation. It is often concerned lay persons who initiate this process. Most successful programs have come from the "bottom up." Commitment also involves networking, collaborating and partnering with community based groups to educate and offer support for persons and families living with mental illness.

- Involve clergy, family members, consumers and other members of the congregation in developing a task force or leadership team to assess the needs of your congregation and develop feasible and practical plans and goals based on a congregational assessment.
- Request congregational leadership committees or boards to adopt a statement endorsing a program of education and outreach to welcome persons with a serious mental illness and their families fully into the life of the congregation.
- Find ways to become a part of the "support team" for persons with a mental illness.

3. Welcome

The third step of welcome involves seeking ways to integrate persons with a mental illness into the faith community. Hospitality is a core value of all major religions...Muslim, Jewish and Christian. Hospitality means literally extending our hand to another, touching another and getting close enough to recognize our mutual vulnerability to things in this life. When this happens the barriers between "us" and "them" begin to break down.

- Post specific words of welcome in worship bulletins and newsletters.

- Be inclusive of persons with a mental illness in prayers, liturgies and sermon illustrations.
- Provide training for ushers and greeters to be welcoming and supportive of all persons.
- Challenge negative media images and stigmatizing language about persons with a mental illness.
- Partner with organizations in your area like the Ecumenical or Interfaith Council to identify persons who are looking for a caring and supportive congregation.

4. Support

Faith communities can be "vessels of hope" for persons who may have lost hope and feel disconnected and alone. In modeling God's acceptance and love for all persons, congregations can offer care and compassion without judgment. Spiritual support involves caring for the whole person and the holy through building a relationship with God and with others in the community.

- Be intentional to include persons with a severe mental illness in the life of the congregation. Be a friend and accompany them to social gatherings, mission projects and invite them to join you in a meal.
- Train persons to be supportive companions on the journey toward healing, wholeness and recovery and to practice the "ministry of presence."
- Start spiritual support groups for persons living with a mental illness and for family members.
- Find ways to support family members and offer respite care if needed.
- Have a referral list of mental health services in your community. Work with mental health providers to become part of a person's support network.
- Provide prayer quilts, care baskets or other tokens of support to persons who are in the hospital or a residential facility to let them know they are not forgotten.
- Provide counseling services through a sliding scale or voucher program.