

Ministry, Mental Illness, and Communities of Faith

Religious communities are in a unique position to combat stigma and provide a message of acceptance and hope

Serious mental illnesses are diseases of the brain that cause disturbances in a person's thinking, feeling, moods, and ability to relate to others. They can diminish a person's capacity for coping with the regular demands of ordinary life and can place tremendous burdens on family members and loved ones.

Unfortunately, both ignorance and fear continue to play leading roles in perpetuating the stigma that those with these no-fault brain disorders face. This stigma leads to underfunding of government programs for public mental health services, discrimination by insurance companies, lack of appropriate housing and employment options, and pervasive media portrayals of persons with mental illnesses as violent, dangerous, or hopeless.

And yet, mental illnesses do not discriminate. These disorders affect people of every race, ethnic heritage, gender, language, age, and religious orientation. According to the U.S. Center for Mental Health Services (CMHS), at any given moment more than 48 million Americans are suffering from a "diagnosable" mental illness, and 11 million are suffering from a "severe" mental illness.

Persons with mental illnesses are our neighbors, our coworkers, our siblings, our friends. They are even members of our churches, synagogues, and other faith communities.

Religious communities are in a unique position to combat stigma and provide a message of acceptance and hope. Proclaiming the values of social justice, respect for all persons, and non-discrimination, faith communities can reach out to individuals and families affected by mental illness in many helpful ways. Sharing the message that all persons are worthy in the eyes of God, a faith community may be the only place where a person with a mental illness truly feels accepted, valued, and loved.

For people who find no other welcome in the larger community, being welcomed in a house of prayer by a concerned and caring community can make a critical difference for consumers with mental illnesses and their families. Churches, synagogues, and other

places of worship can spread the message that serious mental illnesses are "diseases of the brain" and help families understand that "it's not their fault." They can open their doors and their hearts to consumers and be a supportive presence in their on-going recovery.

Outreach ideas for your community of faith:

- Contact the [NAMI local affiliate](#) in your community and welcome them to your church, synagogue, mosque or temple.
- Promote workshops and forums in your congregation to teach people that mental illnesses are brain disorders. Use [materials and resources](#) available from or recommended by NAMI.
- Use stories and parables from your sacred scriptures as "teachable moments" in religious education programs to teach children about mental illness and acceptance of those who seem different.
- Provide space for [support group meetings](#) for family members and consumers with serious mental illnesses.
- In liturgies and public worship services, pray for those who are hospitalized with serious mental illnesses, their family members and friends.
- Have annual memorial liturgical services for persons in your community who have died as a result of mental illness, lack of treatment, homelessness, or societal neglect.
- In preaching, encourage members of your community to be open-minded and welcoming towards community-based services -- including residential facilities in local neighborhoods
- Use congregational bulletins and newsletters to educate your members about serious mental illness during the annual [Mental Illness Awareness Week](#) each October.
- Adopt resolutions affirming your faith community's ministry and mission to help those suffering from serious mental illnesses.
- Contact your denominational headquarters for resource materials on mental illness. If none exist, offer to help prepare them.

Further Resources:

- **NAMI:** individuals may contact the *NAMI Helpline* at **1-800-950-NAMI** [6264] or visit the NAMI Web site at www.nami.org to receive free information on serious mental illnesses such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, major depression, OCD, and anxiety disorders, as well as information on NAMI programs and support groups nationwide.
- **NAMI's FaithNet** (<http://faithnet.nami.org>)
- **NAMI-North Carolina** distributes *Creating a Circle of Caring: The Church and the Mentally Ill*, which may be obtained by writing 309 W. Millbrook Rd. Suite 121, Raleigh NC 27609 or calling (919)788-0801.
- **Pathways to Promise:** an interfaith technical assistance and resource center offering liturgical and educational materials, program models, and networking

information to promote caring ministry with people with mental illness and their families. 5400 Arsenal St. Louis, MO 63139 (314) 644-8400; www.pathways2promise.org.

- **American Psychiatric Association** produces *Mental Illness Awareness Guide* for clergy and other spiritual leaders, available through the Division of Public Affairs, 1400 K St., NW, Washington, DC 20002 (202) 682-6220; www.psych.org.
- **National Organization on Disability** provides resources through their Religion and Disability Program to promote persons with disabilities as full and participating members of religious communities. 910 Sixteenth St., NW, Washington, DC 20006; (202) 293-5960; www.nod.org.

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