



What can I do? What can my parish do?

Welcomed and Valued: Building Faith Communities of Support and Hope with People with Mental Illness and Their Families

National Catholic Partnership on Disability, 2009 pp 26-27, 35, 39-40

Every parish has members who experience a serious mental illness or who have a close friend or family member who lives with the condition. With this reality in mind, parishes must thoughtfully consider how they can more fully welcome people affected by mental illness into the life of the community in a way that values their gifts and contributions to the church family.

Recognize

Recognizing that some people in the parish are affected by mental illness can help transform these usually-hidden conditions into acknowledged realities in the lives of parishioners, just like physical health problems.

Consider

Considering with people with mental illnesses and their loved ones how they experience Mass and other components of the life of the parish can lead to more meaningful participation. This process may reveal words or actions to be avoided because they stigmatize or exclude.

Facilitate Sense of Belonging

The formation of trusting relationships is basic to the experience of belonging. This can be accomplished in a number of ways: including the needs of persons with mental illness and their families in the Prayers of the Faithful (name personally only with permission), providing needed accommodations (i.e., allowing for movement for some people unable to tolerate staying in one place during an entire liturgy or parish event), inviting people who might be shy or withdrawn to participate in liturgical ministries or other roles within the parish, accompanying a parishioner with mental illness to parish activities and introducing them to others.

Encourage Encouraging all the members of the parish and its staff to ask questions and learn more about the effects of mental illness can increase the ability to respond in the most compassionate and pastorally appropriate manner.

Transform When a parish becomes more welcoming of parishioners with mental illness and more appreciative of their gifts, it is evident that the power of God is at work transforming the community.

Specific actions from their parish that families have found helpful include:

- Informative and supportive training on mental illness within the parish;
- Bringing together families to create a faith-based support group;
- Advocating on justice issues related to public social services for people with mental illness;
- Offering to visit the family member if hospitalized or at home;

Being aware of the impact mental illness has on siblings and learning from the family what might be some helpful ways to provide support;

Acknowledging a person's absence with a positive message (e.g., Tell Mike we missed him. How is he doing?);

Staying engaged with the family as they go through this challenging time

Providing meals, offers to shop, lawn mowing, etc.;

Inviting the individual or family member out for a meal or coffee;

Extending an invitation to parish activities;

Offering to accompany the family through the maze of the mental health system;

Being aware of community resources that might be supportive to the family

Parishes can be instrumental partners in the supportive companionship and possible recovery of people with a mental illness by engaging in the following actions:

Educate the parish community on mental illness through training which includes people and their families sharing their experience.

When speaking about the illness use person-first language, i.e., person with a mental illness rather than "the mentally ill".

Identify community resources. Prepare and post a list of contact numbers to respond to routine and emergency mental health needs.

Visit people with mental illness when they are unable to leave their homes or are hospitalized. - - Provide support with cards, bring the Eucharist, prepare meals.

Organize peer support and family support groups within the parish.

Include specific prayers for those affected by mental illness in the intercessory prayers at Mass. (Personalize only with the individual's permission.)

Incorporate mental illness in homilies. Include references to persons with mental illness and their concerns in homilies about social justice, caring for the poor, discrimination, and compassionate outreach to others. Avoid words or phrases that add to stigmatizing those who have mental illness.

Include people with mental illness in opportunities for healing prayer and services (i.e., Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick).

Raise awareness of mental health issues through the church bulletin or newsletter.

Offer the parish facilities and hospitality to host mental health support programs

Partner with mental health professionals, advocacy groups, and other churches for referrals, advocacy, and support groups.

Encourage the parish peace and justice ministry to address systemic problems that affect people with mental illness.

Encourage parishioners to consider utilizing their own businesses, housing, or work to support the housing and employment needs of people with mental illness.

Invite people with mental illness, family members, mental health professionals or advocacy groups to speak at meetings of parish organizations.