

Suggestions for Clergy Helping Families of Persons With Mental Illness

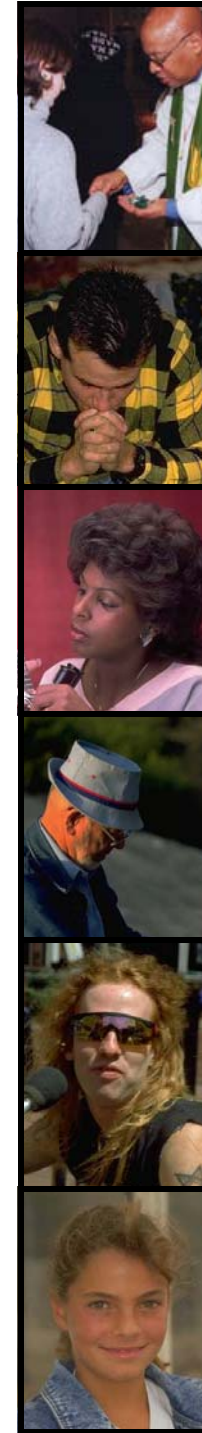
- Confidentiality rules apply with families as well as consumers of mental illness. Clergy should never assume it is OK to talk to family members or consumers about other conversations shared in confidence.
- Clergy should pray openly from the pulpit to comfort persons who suffer with a mental illness and their families in their congregations *only when they have their permission to do so.*
- Clergy should acquire the ability to use and model non-stigmatizing language with the congregation so that it can become welcoming and supportive.
- Be aware that there are sometimes “competing narratives” between persons with a mental illness diagnosis and their families. Careful listening to both without judgment may reveal that families will not always have the same goals for their loved ones that the consumer of mental health services has for themselves.
- When there is a mental illness in the parsonage, congregations who love and support their pastor and his or her family frequently want help from the church and will turn to pastoral supervisors and District Superintendents to learn what they can do to help their pastor and his or her family. They too should know how to help.

Suggestions for Referral and Working With Agencies

- Keep an up-to-date list of agencies frequently used. Cultivate a working relationship with key persons in these agencies.
- If you are planning to visit an agency just to get to know them, remember to call ahead, and if you arrive and the place seems particularly busy, be sensitive to their case-loads and talk to someone about coming back at another time.
- When dealing with agency personnel, try to put yourself in their shoes. (They probably have just as few resources as you do.)
- Remember that you may be asked at times to handle confidential or guarded information. Learn what it means to respect the wishes of those you relate to in other organizations.
- Use courtesy and good human relations skills and treat the agencies as you would like to be treated.
- When professionals are particularly supportive to you, persons you refer for aid, or to members of your church, write “Thank You” messages to them (with copies to their boss or supervisor).
- Give agencies feedback and be courageous enough to ask for feedback from them if they assisted you with a problem to help build a working relationship for problems that might arise in the future.



Clergy working with mental health professionals can help them understand the unique support the church can provide from a theological perspective within an integrated treatment approach.



Guidelines for Clergy Providing Pastoral Care to Persons With Mental Illness and Their Families

Congregations Called to Be Caring Communities



Persons with a mental illness have never been more visible in our congregations and communities or more in need of pastoral care than they are today.

Improvements in mental health care and access to new drugs,

treatments, and services help them live more productive lives.

With proper supports in place, these persons are able to live in the community, no longer confined to institutions for life.

Professionals who believe in holistic care see faith groups as one of these supports. Clergy need to educate themselves about mental illness so they can help their congregation provide appropriate support and friendship.

Faith groups called to become Caring Congregations, who seek to educate themselves about mental illness, are surprised to find that congregational stigma has roots that go deep into the ancient history of the Church.

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Clergy Need to Know About Mental Illness Ministry More Than Ever Before

- Surveys show that because of stigma, persons with mental illness and their families seek help from clergy more often than from mental health professionals. They see their faith community as a logical place to find support only to find that many clergy do not know how to understand their problems and support them in their struggle.
- Clergy are increasingly finding their seminary training inadequate for providing spiritual care to persons who have a mental illness or to their families.
- Other clergy do not know when or how to make referrals to mental health professionals or how to receive support from those professionals in their own pastoral role.
- Clergy who seek to educate themselves about mental illness also acquire theological expertise to break down stigma from prejudices that have affected congregational ministries over the centuries.
- Clergy who are in supervisory roles over other clergy especially need to be educated to the needs of their colleagues in ministry who have a mental illness themselves or when mental illness exists in a clergy family.

Clergy should understand how the church in history has perpetuated stigma against those with a mental illness and how that intolerance has affected congregational ministry.

Suggestions for Clergy Working With Mentally Ill Individuals

- Always be respectful of confidentiality issues. Confidentiality is not only necessary, in the case of mental illness, *it is the law!*
- Have a plan for what to do if ever faced with a crisis situation.
- Know how to reach the local Mental Health Crisis Response Teams in your area.
- Remember that police, sheriff, and fire departments are referral services also.
- When someone appears to be a danger to themselves or others, do not hesitate to call 911.
- Don't assume that all persons with a mental illness have the skills or mental capacity necessary to get the services they need.
- Educate yourself about various symptoms of mental illness so you know when a referral is advised.
- Clergy may not recognize at first that some requests for support from persons who have a mental illness are not appropriate. As with other members of your congregation, experience teaches how to provide appropriate support while at the same time setting limits and boundaries when requests become inappropriate.
- Educated clergy have the ability to recognize when religious practice is not theologically or mentally healthy so that they can respond to "Religious ideation" in persons with certain mental illness diagnoses.
- Be prepared to work with mental health professionals and community agencies to ensure that persons get the help they need.
- When a person with a mental illness comes to you for help, ask them about other services that they may be receiving to avoid duplication of services.