



Photo illustration by Kathleen Barry for United Methodist Communications

Breaking the taboo: how the church can help people with mental illness

By Tricia Brown

How do you tell your pastor not to rush to the ER again, that your mother's "life-threatening illnesses" are really just ailments she has imagined? How do you explain to the youth leader that your daughter comes home every day and makes herself vomit because she thinks she is fat? How do you share with your Sunday school class that you don't have money for groceries because your husband is too depressed to get out of bed? How do you tell your prayer group that your teenage son talks to himself or that you struggle with thoughts of suicide?

It shouldn't be hard. After all, churches are places of refuge. Church members are spiritual families. Still, it is more difficult than it seems. There is just something very quieting about mental illness, something that condemns people to suffer alone — even though they are not alone.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that about a quarter of all American adults have a mental disorder, and almost half will develop at least one during their lifetime. Still, when you listen in to the prayer requests offered in most church services, you are not likely to hear the term "mentally ill." Although some churches have managed to bring the needs of people living with mental illness to light, a great deal of stigma continues to be associated with

mental health issues, especially among the religious community.

Since about one in four people in the United States will suffer some sort of mental illness this year, at least one person sitting in your pew this week is probably among them. The United Methodist Church's statement of beliefs regarding ministries in mental illness encourages churches to love, welcome and pray for all individuals, especially those who are suffering. The church can be an agent of change through education and encouragement.

Educate

Get the facts. Much of the misconception regarding mental illness begins with ignorance. According to the Mayo Clinic, "Mental illness refers to a wide range of mental health conditions — disorders that affect your mood, thinking and behavior." While many people can experience mental health issues, mental illness occurs when the symptoms cause frequent stress or begin interfering with the normal functions of everyday life. While the most common mental disorders are anxiety or depression-related, the spectrum is very wide and includes addictive personalities, eating disorders, schizophrenia and bipolar mood disorder as well as many others. Help inform your church.

- Ask a mental health professional to attend a leaders' meeting and discuss how to understand mental illness and how to know when intervention is needed.
- Use resources such as the Congregational Resource Guide and Creating Caring Congregations to educate church leaders on the importance of helping people with mental illness.
- Download and print infographics and fact sheets about mental illness. Post them in offices and in Sunday school classrooms throughout your church.
- Make sure that everyone knows when, where and how to get help. Post numbers for suicide helplines, support groups and local mental health organizations. See if mental health professionals in your church will take referrals.

Recognize the symptoms. The consequences of untreated mental illness are devastating. However, the initial symptoms can be relatively unnoticeable to the average person. Only when the problem becomes severe does it also become very hard to ignore. In order to help individuals and families suffering from the effects of mental illness, pastors, Sunday school teachers and other church leaders should be aware of the symptoms. Although each mental disorder will have different characteristics, here are some general symptoms of mental illness that can indicate a person needs help:

- Excessive emotional responses (extreme worry, sadness, anger) or extreme mood swings
- Confused thinking or an inability to concentrate
- Social withdrawal or the inability to relate to other people
- Changes or difficulties in sleeping or eating
- Difficulty perceiving reality (delusions, hallucinations, paranoia)
- Multiple physical ailments without a physical cause
- Inability to do daily tasks

Obviously, the better you know someone, the more likely you are to recognize symptoms. But it helps to know what you are looking for. The National Alliance on Mental Illness reports that "one in five children ages 13-18 have, or will have a serious mental illness" and approximately 50 percent of all lifetime cases of mental illness begin by age 14. This makes it is very important for youth leaders and teachers to know and recognize these signs in children.

Intervene when necessary. People with mental illness often do not understand that they need help. Sometimes they do not want help, even when they recognize that a problem exists. However, monitoring mental illness is important because untreated mental illness is associated with a higher occurrence of certain physical illnesses, loss of income, homelessness, substance abuse, criminal tendencies and suicide. Just as some people live with certain physical illnesses for a lifetime, some people also live and function with a mental illness for a lifetime. Not everyone who has a mental illness needs your intervention, but some will. While it can lead to awkward situations, it is imperative that church leaders know when to try and how to help someone with a mental health problem. If you believe intervention is necessary, you may want to begin with the following steps:

1. Address your concerns with the individual in a private, loving, nonjudgmental way.

2. Provide practical information on where and how the person might obtain help. Offer to go with him or her to an appointment with a health-care professional.
3. If the person does not seem open to your intervention, cautiously consider talking with a family member, close friend or loved one about the situation.
4. Always remember that if you believe an individual is a danger to himself or herself or anyone else, you must call 9-1-1.

Maintain confidentiality and compassion. Even as you open the doors for communication, make sure to keep a tight lid on anything that might be construed as gossip or hate speech. Never share anything that has been told to you in confidence. Mental illness is devastating and often results in embarrassing situations. Be discreet in how details are discussed in public situations, even among families and friends.

Encourage

Create an open dialogue. Don't be afraid to use the term "mentally ill." Talk openly about mental illness in classes and services. If you have a personal experience that you are willing to share, do so. Simply knowing that someone else relates can be the key to opening a discussion. As you request prayer concerns, specifically ask, "Are there any mental illness issues that we need to pray about?" Make sure your congregation is not afraid to talk about mental illness.

Support families and friends. Mental illness brings about a profound sense of loneliness, not just for the one who is ill, but also for family and friends also. Children do not understand why their "eccentric" father picks them up from school in his bathrobe. Teenagers get angry at their mother who lies on the couch for days. Friends are embarrassed by the one person in the group who says the most inappropriate things in the loudest possible voice at the most inopportune times. Parents struggle to deal with the child who is always acting out. Sometimes it is very hard for families to get help for those they love. These families and friends need the church's love, help and support. Just as do families with physically ill members, they have many needs.

- They may benefit from having a meal or a food basket brought to them.
- They may need financial assistance when a breadwinner is out of work or when dealing with additional medical bills.
- They may need help with household tasks, transportation issues or childcare.
- They definitely need people to understand, to be their friends, to listen and to pray.

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Remember even caregivers need caring. Be especially sensitive to the needs of children. Find ways to support the siblings of those with special needs.

In years past, people with mental illness were ostracized, alienated and even abused. Today, most would agree that mental illness is better understood and better treated. However, some of the contempt and cruelty of the past has been replaced with silence and indifference in the present. It is time for the church to step up and make a difference, to move beyond the taboo and reach out to people who suffer from mental illness.

