

Starting a Spiritual Support Group for Mental Health and Wellness In Your Faith Community

*This document is based on the pioneering work done by the
First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Boulder, Colorado*

What is a Spiritual Support Group for Mental Health and Wellness?

It's a loving, supportive and confidential meeting place, held regularly and sponsored by a faith community where those challenged with mental illness – and/or their family members and friends – can share and hear how faith and reliance on a Higher Power can be helpful when coping with this disease.

Five reasons to offer a Spiritual Support Group for Mental Health and Wellness:

- 1 One out of every four people in every faith community is affected by a brain disorder.** That means 25% of your congregation is affected directly, in addition to their family members or loved ones who may need help coping with their loved one's illness. This percentage is based on research by the National Institute on Mental Health (NIMH.)
- 2 Being a faith community automatically means being compassionate,** or being a presence/channel for what is holy or sacred. Therefore, offering a spiritual support group is an out-growth of that presence: offering a safe place where people can meet and openly name how their spiritual life/faith can help with their mental health challenges.
- 3 Spiritual support groups affirm that each person does not have to be alone with his or her journey or struggles.** Hearing each others' stories and life experiences can be a liberating and welcome break in the silence that often surrounds mental illness/brain disorders and the burdens carried as a result. "Coming out" and speaking in a safe, non-judgmental place allows isolation to dissipate and community to be created.
- 4 A large percentage of people who live with a mental illness/brain disorder have had a negative experience with a faith community.** Unfortunately, most adults with mental illnesses can tell stories about someone in their faith community proclaiming "medications are not needed for mental illness – faith will heal." Or they tell of feeling avoided or shunned by fellow congregants because they looked "different" or seemed "peculiar" in some way.
- 5 A spiritual support group allows participants to share the strategies and disciplines that have helped, which may help others in the group.** In a sharing environment, participants learn that writing in a journal, praying and reading devotional material, going to groups for support, exercising, deep breathing practices, and paying attention to good nutrition, among other strategies, can make a substantial difference. Learning from others who are living with this challenge can be good medicine for others struggling with similar issues.

Helpful “How To’s” for Starting a Spiritual Support Group

1 Facilitators

We have found that it’s good to have two facilitators for every group. It can be a chaplain or an ordained person who has had some experience in pastoral care/counseling, and a therapist or someone trained in psychology who has particular skills facilitating support groups versus therapy groups. Each facilitator ought to be familiar with the resources of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) and Pathways to Promise or Mental Health First Aid. It is helpful if both of the facilitators have had direct experience with mental health challenges either themselves or with someone in their family. With two facilitators, there is a balance of perspectives. If a member of the group feels upset and needs to leave, one of the facilitators can leave the room to check on them. It is helpful to have another set of eyes and another attentive spirit to help guide the group.

2 Environment/setting

The environment in which the group meets is important. Lighting needs to be subdued but still bright. Chairs need to be comfortable and are best arranged in a circle, preferably with a low table in the center if possible, upon which the candle, guidelines, and refreshments can be placed. It’s welcoming to have hot tea, water, and simple munchies such as cookies or brownies.

3 Guidelines for the group

It’s critical to establish and begin each meeting with a set of guidelines for a spiritual support group. Guidelines should include confidentiality, respectful listening, and no judgments or advice-giving. These are to ensure a safe, sacred space that is conducive to conversation.

At the First Congregational Church in Boulder, we have developed 13 guidelines. You can download the guidelines from <http://www.interfaithnetworkonmentalillness.org/resources.html> and use them as is or adapt them to meet your needs.

4 Structure and rituals of the group

After reading the **guidelines** at the start of each meeting, we ask if there are any questions or additions. Having confirmed the guidelines, the second ritual is to **close the door of the room** to indicate that the space has been set aside for the group’s exclusive use. We then ask if anyone would like to **light the candle** in the center of the room. One of the facilitators then offers a **short poem or affirmation**. We invite the group to share one minute of **quiet time** during which they may want to think about something that is holy or sacred to them. This practice moves the meeting beyond conversation into a spiritual context. It also allows thoughts to be shifted and lets people become settled. We then invite participants to **introduce themselves** with first names and **say whatever they wish about what brings them to the group** that night. We encourage them to make their statements brief and let them know they will have a chance later to say more. If a person wishes, they can always say “pass.” Most participants give a short story about why they are in the group, which allows newcomers to feel the support of the group and the challenges that are experienced by others there. (For many, it may be the first time they have experienced such a break in the silence and stigma that has surrounded them related to their mental illnesses/brain disorders.)

After going around the entire circle, we then continue the conversation by inviting those who might want to share more to do so. It may be about themselves, or it may be related to a loved one. Sometimes there is a subject that naturally arises, touched on by a couple people, and the facilitators can welcome more responses about this issue. In the quiet times, people are thinking and reflecting – which can be a welcomed peaceful space when held with acceptance. If the facilitators notice someone who has not spoken, the facilitator can ask that person if they would like to say more. The facilitator can also ask questions when appropriate. It is essential that the facilitators ensure that no one person dominates the group and that all are given an opportunity to speak.

Questions that may come up after listening to the check-in at the start:

- In what ways are you taking care of yourself?
- When did you come to embrace that you are a person of worth?
- What do you do when you are down?
- What do you do with your anger? Your sadness?
- In what do you put your trust?
- What are ways that you might receive support for your recovery in the realm of spirituality/faith?
- In what ways have you experienced isolation? What helps you come out of that?
- If we could provide support for your recovery, what would you like that to look like? What might be helpful from this group?

Questions to consider asking after everyone has checked-in:

- How important is religion/faith/spirituality in your life?
- Can you give me examples of how you practice religion/faith/spirituality in your life?
- Where has your spirituality helped or hindered you in what you are experiencing?
- What have you heard in your faith community (if you belong to one) that has not been helpful in your recovery? What has been helpful?
- Have you asked for support? From whom?

5 Ending the group

At the end of the group, people can be invited to have a minute of silence. We always ask participants to then share a word or phrase they heard or are thinking about that they can take back into their lives. One facilitator formally closes the sharing time. We then share: “As the candle light was lit when we begin in this group, we will collectively blow out the candle indicating that the light will not be gone, but will now be with and inside each one of us.” We each take a deep breath and we blow the candle out together.

If your faith community welcomes and offers support to congregants with mental illnesses and their families — whether through a support group, mental health ministry or other services — please register in INMI’s online directory of organizations operating at the intersection of faith/spirituality and mental health at

www.inmi.us/fwconn.html

A model used at First Congregational Church, Boulder

We set aside an hour and a half, twice a month for this supportive ministry. In our congregation, that is the 2nd and the 4th Monday of every month, 12 months of the year. Making the group known through the congregation's announcements and even putting it in the local newspaper (if there is a listing of religious services/programs) is a good way not only to provide help to others but is another way to break down the stigma that prevents conversation and support to those who are in need. It tells the community as well as the members of the congregation that this is a place where we face and seek to overcome stigma.

We have found many ways to help people discover our group, including announcements in the church's communication vehicles and the Religious Briefs in the local daily newspaper. (The announcements in the paper are free.) Our local NAMI organization sends out a list of classes and support groups that includes our group, and it is listed on the Interfaith Network on Mental Illness website. Many people learn of it by word of mouth when a neighbor or friend mentions the group to others in need. Therapists encourage clients to check it out. There are regular attendees; however, almost every meeting there are newcomers. The group is mostly composed of persons from the community and not from the congregation, and it always feels like an open group. There are persons who have attended the spiritual support group and have then become involved in the life of the congregation. That is not the goal of the group, but like other activities in a congregation, involvement in a small group can be a way to open the door to the full life of the congregation.

If you have any questions, you are invited to email Alan Johnson at alan.johnson@inmi.us. Alan is a member of First Congregational Church who helped launch the Spiritual Support Group for Mental Health and Wellness, and he is also an INMI board member.

Encouragement from Interfaith Network for Mental Illness (INMI)

Fortunately, there are people who live with mental illness who realize it is only because of his or her faith that they have made it at all. These people report that having their faith community praying for them has been significant. During worship services, when clergy or lay leaders pray for "those who are living with mental health challenges such as major depression, bipolar or anxiety disorders, or schizophrenia," stigma* is lessened. Bringing the subject into speech, in the context of listening without judgment, can be enormously healing to those suffering with this silent disease.

As we read and learn more and more of the importance of spirituality in a person's recovery and mental health, we encourage faith communities to develop an ongoing Spiritual Support Group for Mental Health and Wellness in their congregation. Check our website at www.caringclergyproject.org or feel free to call us at 720-301-0957.

** Stigma is a cluster of negative attitudes and beliefs that motivate the public to fear, reject, avoid, and discriminate against people with mental illnesses. Stigma is one of the biggest barriers to recovery. Fighting the stigma and shame associated with mental illness is often more difficult than battling the illness itself.-- Mental Health First Aid*

Watch a short video on starting a spiritual support group at www.caringclergyproject.org. Find more resources for faith communities at www.inmi.us.