

Suggestions for Clergy Helping Families of Individuals Living with Mental Health Conditions

- Confidentiality rules apply with families as well as the individual that is living with a mental health condition. Clergy should never assume it is OK to talk to family members, including the individual with a mental health condition, about other conversations shared in private.
- Clergy should pray openly from the pulpit to comfort individuals and families in their congregation whose lives are touched by mental health conditions *only when they have permission to do so*.
- Clergy should acquire the ability to use and model person-first language with the congregation so that it can become welcoming and supportive.
- Be aware that there are some “competing narratives” between individuals living with mental health conditions 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 individual with the mental health condition has for themselves.
- When a fellow clergy member is living with a mental health condition, 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.



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.

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. Use courtesy and good human relations skills.
- 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.
- 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.



Guidelines for Clergy

Providing Pastoral Care for Individuals and Families Living with Mental Health Conditions

Congregations Called to Be Caring Communities



Individuals living with mental health conditions 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 medications, treatments, and services help individuals with mental health conditions live more productive lives.

With proper supports in place, individuals are able to live in the community, no longer confined to institutions and homelessness for life.

Professionals who believe in holistic care see faith groups as one of these supports. Clergy need to educate themselves about mental health conditions 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 health conditions, are often surprised to find that congregational stigma has roots that go deep into the ancient history of the Church.

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

- Surveys show that because of stigma, individuals with mental health conditions 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 struggles and support them in their journey.
- Clergy are increasingly finding their seminary training inadequate for providing spiritual care to individuals and families whose lives have been touched by mental health conditions.
- 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 health conditions also acquire theological expertise utilizing acceptance and compassion when faced with stigma and 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 health condition themselves or within their own family.

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

Suggestions for Clergy Working With Individuals With Mental Health Conditions

- Always be respectful of confidentiality issues. Confidentiality is not only necessary, in the case of mental health, *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 individuals living with mental health conditions have the skills or capacity necessary to get the services they need.
- Educate yourself about various mental illnesses and their symptoms so you know when a referral is advised.
- Clergy may not recognize at first that some requests for support from individuals living with mental health conditions 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" sometimes experienced by individuals with some mental health conditions.
- Be prepared to work with mental health professionals and community agencies to ensure that individuals with mental health conditions get the help they need.
- When an individual with a mental health condition comes to you for help, ask them about other services that they may be receiving to avoid duplication of services.