

Ways to Support Those with Mental Illness

*“Hush! Say the families
We’d be embarrassed for others to know...
Hush! Says the minister.
Someone might feel uncomfortable, you know...
Pray for the mentally ill, my Lord did say.
I died for them, too, you know....
Love the mentally ill, my Lord did say....
My faith is sufficient for the task, you know.”*
—Louise Gladden Fisher*

The fact is one out of five families deals with the realities of ongoing mental illness. It transcends culture, race, age, gender, religious beliefs, and economic status. Mental illness has nothing to do with attitudes or haphazard self-control. It has everything to do with the reality that the brain is part of a biological organism, and along with any other body part, it is vulnerable to temporary or permanent sickness. Those with mental illness long to be healthy, whole, and able to embrace all that life has to offer—just like anyone else. But left untreated, the illnesses can be devastating to the person, and very stressful and frustrating for their loved ones.

Even as the church often willingly embraces and supports people with many forms of ill health, it has a responsibility to welcome and uphold those who deal with mental illness. Struggling with mental illness is a common challenge, deserving greater understanding and awareness. Be open and willing to inform people about what it is and isn’t. There are many good books and Web sites that can be helpful.

Resources and Suggestions

- The ELCA Division for Church in Society has information and support available at www.elca.org/dcs/epr/disability/mentalillness.html. A planning guide for observing an All-Lutheran Candle-lighting for Mental Illness event is available at the same Web site. Contact Pastor Lisa Cleaver 800/638-3522, ext. 2692, or e-mail lclever@elca.org for information about the Lutheran Network on Mental Illness.
- Our full-communion partners, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the Episcopal Church, have a variety of resources. To incorporate concerns related to mental illness during worship, check out www.pcusa.org/health/usa/resources/mental-illness.htm. For a guide to help begin a ministry for supporting people who are mentally ill, check out www.eminnews.org/form_a_committee.htm
- Call the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill help line at 800/950-6264 for information and support or go to www.nami.org. They also provide research and educational material.
- Encourage those who deal with specific illnesses. Contact community organizations to provide education, such as in an adult forum. Also consider offering your facilities for small group meetings.
- Provide ready references for learning about early warning signs. Search for resources in your library, such as the video *Stranger in Our Midst: The Church and People with Mental Illness*, available through Seraphim Communications (800/733-3413), and the book, *Souls are Made of Endurance: Surviving Mental Illness in the Family* by Stewart Govig, (Westminster John Knox Press, ISBN 1-5791-0892-X, www.wjkbooks.com).
- Augsburg Fortress has two titles in its “Difficult Times” series that can be helpful. *When Your Family is Living with Mental Illness* (ISBN 0-8066-4423-0) and *When You Are Depressed* (ISBN 0-8066-4420-6) can be ordered by calling 800/328-4648 (\$4.99 each, plus shipping).
- Most of all, pray for openness and genuine care for those who deal with heartaches related to mental illnesses. Pray for the Spirit’s guidance as to how you might support them, remembering that those who deal with mental illness could be any one of us.

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