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FAITH4ALL

Inclusive Times

Latest Edition:

We describe what you can do to welcome comfortably people living with brain disorders.

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Steps Toward Full Inclusion: Welcoming People with Mental Health Issues

In the Torah, Genesis 1:26, God says, “Let us make mankind in our image, after our likeness” ([NCV](#)). Jesus encouraged us to “love our neighbor as you love yourself”. However, when we think of those with mental illness especially those with serious mental illness whose behavior makes us uncomfortable and at times even scares us, we often shy away from these important and often-stated quotes from sacred scripture.

The stigma and misunderstanding surrounding mental illness create real barriers to the inclusion of those living with mental illness and substance abuse in our congregations. We often fail to recognize the commonality of mental illness. It is everywhere: it is estimated that more than one in five U.S. adults live with a mental illness ([National Institute of Mental Health](#)). Yet, mental illness is one of the least understood of all illnesses, and despite a campaign by the National Alliance for Mental Illness ([NAMI](#)), which called “mental illness an illness like any other.” Old stereotypes continue to exist.

Most individuals even those with serious mental illness are not violent: they are much more likely to be victims of violence. They are not the mass murders that society wants to paint as the cause of the horrific mass murders we experience in this country.

While many of the unhoused we see on our streets and parks live with mental illness, there are thousands more individuals who are part of the over fifty million Americans who suffer from some sort of mental illness. For many of those with mental illness, recovery is possible and the mechanisms by which it is accomplished are many: therapy, medications, employment, and perhaps most importantly a sense of belonging and community support. Spiritual communities are a vital conduit for such support; yet we often fail to offer such support.

There are simple things we can do to support those who live with mental health challenges or who are going through a difficult time.

- **Be a friend!** Listen without judgment, shame, and guilt. Respect their privacy. It is their story to tell. Bring a meal; give a ride; or offer to help with household chores.
- **Remember that words can hurt!** The adage, “sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me” is blatantly false. Words matter. Calling someone crazy, loco, psycho, or junky only reinforces stereotypes. None of those of us who live with a serious mental illness are I their illness, i.e., an individual is not bipolar; they have or live

with a bipolar disorder. We'd never say "I'm cancer." so regardless of the severity of the disease, no one living with a serious mental illness is fully described by that illness.

- **Stop perpetuating the stigma around mental illness!** Mental illness is one of the most stigmatized conditions/experiences we confront. Challenge those who assume the person sitting next to them who is talking to themselves is dangerous and violent. If possible, tell your story of living with a serious mental illness.
- **Educate yourself!** Learn the facts about mental illness so you can challenge your own beliefs and those of others around you. Such knowledge is crucial if we are to break the stigma surrounding mental illness.

As faith communities, we can do even more to extend an extravagant welcome to those with mental health challenges and their families. In 2015, the UCC adopted the [WISE Covenant for Mental Illness](#). It challenges us to be welcoming to those touched by mental health. We are called to be inclusive, supportive, and engaged with all those living with mental health challenges. We encourage every faith community to consider becoming a [WISE](#) congregation. Motivated inclusion teams of faithful institutions are given tools and guidance to help the community put the elements of the [WISE](#) covenant into practice.

When we welcome those with mental health issues into our communities, we need to ensure that they are included in **all** aspects of the life and work of the institution. Remember what Mother Theresa said, "I can do things you cannot, you can do things I cannot. Together, we can do great things."



For more information about including those in your congregation with mental health and substance abuse issues see the [UCC Mental Health Network](#) (www.mhn-ucc.com) or [National Alliance on Metal Illness \(NAMI\) Faithnet](#) (<https://my.nami.org/naminet/Outreach-Partnerships/NAMI-FaithNet>).

We hope you can find comfort and relaxation in this heat!

Future Inclusive Times Topics:

- **The Importance of Assessment**
- **Including People Who Are Deaf or Mute**



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