

Being a Welcoming Place for Persons Living with Mental Illness

- **Always keep in mind that a person living with a mental illness is a person first.** Never define them by their illness.
- **Check-in with the person or their family.** Do not assume that the person wants to be included. A person might feel strongly about maintaining their privacy. If that's the case you can continue to check-in with them because what they need later may change.
- **Ask them what would be the most helpful.** They may have a certain kind of help in mind that they could use from the congregation, so it may be beneficial to ask.
- **Invite the family to sit with you at church services and events.**
- **Making an effort to talk to them and show that you care and understand.** People living with mental illness often feel isolated and talking with them alone can make a difference.
 - **Instead of trying to fix their problems, just listen.** Many people just need to be heard, taking the time to listen to someone will show that you care without having to come up with a solution for them.
 - **Don't belittle someone's mental illness.** Everyone has occasional anxiety, depression, or some small form of a mental health condition, but this is not the same thing as living with a mental health condition. Don't tell someone that everyone goes through what they're going through, or that you know exactly how they feel. Also, if someone is expressing their problems, never tell them to 'suck it up,' it is hurtful and shows that you don't care how they are feeling.
- **Offer to pray with them and for them.** With their permission, add them to the prayer list. Showing them that they are in your thoughts and prayers.
- **Offer a place to belong, a small spiritual support/fellowship group.** Having a network of supportive friends can make a huge difference to someone living with a mental illness.
- **Offer to cook a meal, run an errand or any other helpful task.** If a person is going through a hard time you can help them while simultaneously showing that you care.

- **Plan a home visit.** Mental illness can sometimes prevent people from leaving their home, which may make them feel even further isolated. Having someone come to their home and interact with them can significantly uplift their mood and spirit. They will become more comfortable with you and therefore the congregation you represent.
- **Learn about mental health.** The topic of mental health is often avoided and considered taboo to talk about. Be open about learning more without joking about it or using insensitive language.
 - **Invite local mental health leaders to speak with your congregation.** Stigma often comes from a lack of understanding. If the entire congregation can learn about mental illness from a NAMI leader or other mental health leader, they may be more likely to feel comfortable welcoming and interacting with community members who live with a mental health condition.
 - **Learn to recognize symptoms.**
- **Convey a message of acceptance and compassion.**