



What is life like if you or someone in your family has mental health problems? And what can your parish do to make a difference?

What is Life Like?

I came home, 'I can't work any more'. I was suffering from anxiety depression. Soon my wife, Liz and I experienced extreme isolation. Several parishioners said to her, 'I would not stay with him'. Priests and friends said 'We can not visit any more. There is too much pain here'. "Why can't he pull himself together?"

"I'm in a black tunnel. The light at the end is dimmer. I don't want to die, but I don't want to live like this. Help me, Mam," my daughter pleads. I feel helpless. There must be other families going through this. Where are they? I feel so empty and broken. Where are you God?

My husband suffers from mental illness. I contacted my priest to explain my family situation. He said he could not offer any support. My husband had previously contacted him during an episode of illness, so he was not happy with us. My children did not attend Catholic school or receive any other sacraments. This makes me feel guilty and very sad.

One day he snapped and became abusive and violent during Mass. We had to obtain professional advice and work with the priest and parishioners to bring about reconciliation with those who had been hurt.

Although his behaviour was sometimes unpredictable the priest let him read at Mass. An ambition fulfilled! After that he felt able to shake hands with parishioners at the sign of peace - acceptance given and respect shown!

Challenges for the Parish

"In our parishes, people are not coming to the Altar of the Lord because they suffer from mental illness and do not feel accepted."

Those who suffer from mental illness (and their carers) experience isolation and lack of support from their parish. 1 in 5 suffer from mental illness but most of us have very little understanding of what it is like or the effect it has on the carer and their family.

Even among Catholics there is stigma concerning mental health which can create feelings of unworthiness and reluctance to share the truth that a family member is suffering. So what can parishes do? Here are some ideas:

- Form a mental health pastoral support group. Invite people who are sensitive to the needs and who have personal or professional experience.
- Visit the website of the [Bishops' Mental Health Project](#) for a range of resources and contacts.
- Look especially at the Welcome Me As I Am training and awareness raising resource
- Commit to showing that the parish cares about those with mental illness and their families through concrete activities. Be especially alert to the voices of the isolated.
- Raise awareness and create sensitivity in the parish perhaps by organising an open evening (where at least two people share their experience) or invite someone to speak at a Sunday Mass.
- Establish what local professional resources are available including Christian Counsellors. Have a list of useful numbers to hand and on the parish noticeboard.
- Set up a spiritual and friendship group for sufferers, carers and their families as appropriate.
- Create links with local schools to ensure a confidential exchange of information when this is appropriate.
- Ensure that appropriate language is used by people and in print within the parish
- The [Association of Pastoral Care in Mental Health](#) website contains guidance for many of these activities.

Also contact your Family Ministry [diocesan coordinator](#)

Practical Actions

Home-centred care

- Offer a listening ministry
- Bring the Eucharist or simply pray
- Find out how the parish can help, no matter how small a need:
"Someone walked to Mass with me every day."

Parish-centred care

- Arrange regular healing services for sufferers and their carers
- Involve them in the Sunday liturgy
- Mention sufferers and carers in the prayers of intercession
- Be prepared to accept unusual behaviour in church

Community-focussed care

- Keep the Church open as much as possible as a place of peace
- Encourage community groups to use Church facilities for meetings

Prayer and Liturgical Opportunities

Scripture

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? (Matt 27:46)

Do not be afraid for I have redeemed you (Isaiah 43:1)

Come to me all you who are weary and over burdened and I will give you rest. (Matt 11:28)

See also Isaiah 53: 9-10; Jeremiah 29: 11-13; John 14:1; John 14:27 & Matt 25:31-46

Prayers

May people affected in any way by mental illness, know that the Lord is there alongside them, sharing their pain and suffering, and may God's Church be there for them too. Amen

Helpful Resources

www.mentalhealthproject.co.uk

Other web sites

www.welcomemeasiam.org.uk/

www.rethink.org/

[www.carersinthecommunity.org.u](http://www.carersinthecommunity.org.uk)
k

www.youngminds.org.uk/pis/

www.sane.org.uk/

www.mind.org.uk/

www.csan.org.uk

This leaflet is one of a series devised to assist parishes to become more welcoming, friendly and family-sensitive.

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