



Mental Health Matters

Part II: Bridge Over Troubled Water

Many factors in our American culture cause people to be at risk for mental illness. The layers of unrelenting stress brought on by Covid-19 has added more stress and has nearly overwhelmed our capacity to cope.

Loneliness may not sound like a mental health challenge, but it is surfacing as the most prevalent mental health issue in America. Recent studies show that one third of Americans report experiencing loneliness and feelings of isolation which causes them to withdraw from any social contact and that can lead to depression. Loneliness is exasperated by social distancing, isolation, quarantining and lockdowns. The loss of contact with family, relatives, friends, and members of one's church community has had a profound impact. People living with physical or mental health conditions are especially vulnerable to experiencing mental health challenges.

Our faith tradition values our desire to care for others in need. This value gives us meaning and purpose when we reach out to people living with loneliness or mental health conditions. To do this well, it is good to have some skills.

How can we be a *bridge over troubled water* when it comes to mental health concerns?

There are several ways to engage matters of mental health. One way is to be willing to learn new ways of speaking and then, to become aware of those in your midst who may feel they are in "troubled water". Learning new ways of speaking and having a willingness to address stigma will help create an environment where people living with a mental health condition feel included. It will help people feel less stigmatized.

Using inclusive language shows respect and models appropriate language to others. Mental illness is an illness like diabetes or cancer, not a character defect or a weakness. Being clear about that will help dispel stigma. Here are some examples of ways to change our language that will help create a more welcoming environment and reduce stigma. It is better to say, "What's going on?" or "What's happening?" than to say, "What's wrong?". Say "he has a mental illness" rather than "He is mentally ill." Say "She has bipolar disorder." rather than "She is bipolar."

Stigma is hard to identify and counter. Changing the ways we think and speak is a process and takes time, but it is worth it. It helps people feel included. It can dispel the sting of stigma.

Find information and more examples of inclusive language for mental health, at this website.

<https://wellways.imgix.net/stampede/documents/language-guide.pdf>

***"When you're down and out
I will comfort you."***

Compassion

When you reach out to comfort another person, there is a closeness there. This is an expression of compassion. The meaning of compassion is to literally suffer with another, coming from the Latin "com" which means "with or together" + "pati" which means to "suffer". Sympathy, empathy and compassion are oftentimes confused.

Sympathy means you can *understand* what the other person is feeling. Empathy means that you *feel* what a person is feeling. Compassion is the willingness to *get involved* to relieve the suffering of another. You might find you use all three of these expressions in different circumstances.

Compassion might be expressed in a desire to understand what the other person is going through and asking deeper questions. It can mean exploring the feelings of loneliness with another.

Learning how to ask **open-ended questions** is a key skill at this level of engagement. You are willing to get involved at a deeper level. When starting a conversation, use open-ended questions which invites a deeper exchange. For instance, you might ask someone who has shared their sadness with you by asking, “How long have you been feeling that way?” Someone else might talk about how it feels to be alone most of the time. You might say, “Could you tell me more about this?” Open-ended questions are questions that evoke more than a yes or no answer. The responses come more from the heart. Practice asking open-ended questions. This skill is useful in all circumstances. Knowing how to ask open-ended questions opens windows for a meaningful exchange. It only takes one meaningful exchange to create the space for a future relationship to grow.

You will find examples of open-ended questions here. <https://examples.yourdictionary.com/examples-of-open-ended-and-closed-ended-questions.html>

*“If you need a friend
I’m sailing right behind.”*

Companionship

Companionship moves your outreach efforts to another level. The key skill here is **reflective listening**. Listening to another in a reflective way means to respond to the other in ways that reflect what they have said, not what you have said.

Attentively listening to the person you are with is key. You should also listen to yourself. Pay attention to what makes you uncomfortable. Address your feelings later. Your feelings are not the focus in this conversation. Remember that this person may not be in the same emotional place tomorrow. What triggered your reaction may be a momentary expression of the person you are with. Simply be attentive and present and listen.

Reflective listening can create an opportunity for growth. Connecting frequently over time can create a sense of safety and trust that goes both ways. Reflecting back to this person what you hear in their words is a great opportunity for them to see their life through a different pair of eyes. Listen for themes and feelings in what they say and share them. It feels good to be heard and understood.

This relationship may not become a friendship, but this phrase from the song, “Bridge Over Troubled Water”, describes a way a companionship relationship might go. The two are sailing in the same direction with a space between. They are in the same place but not tethered one to other. There is a willingness to move alongside the other, assuring that person that you will be there to offer support.

You will find more companionship skills in “The Companionship Movement: A Practice of Presence” guidebook. <https://www.thecompanionshipmovement.org/practices-of-companionship>.

*“Like a bridge over troubled water,
I will ease your mind.”*

Connection

When relating to someone living with loneliness or a mental health condition, it is helpful to know yourself well. You will be better equipped to relate to another person based on knowledge and experience of yourself. You can help ease the distress of another.

Connection includes a desire to explore your own emotional landscape. Anxiety, loneliness, loss, grief, and depression are part of the human condition. All of us can get stuck with any of these emotions from time to time. Digging deep into these topics takes courage. However, looking at these strong emotions with others opens new ways of seeing.

Here are two examples of what might come from one's own discovery. Exploring your own experience with anxiety may help you see that peace can come after it. And learning that the opposite of depression is not happiness but vitality is freeing. Experiencing these life-giving epiphanies with others releases blocks one might have and restores wholeness.

Restoring Wholeness: Spiritual Support for Mental Health is a curriculum that provides an opportunity to explore one's own emotions and receive the surprising insights that come from that work in a small group setting. There is also a version for individual use called "Wholeness". Both resources are available at www.fhgmh.org.

Summary

Learning how to approach people living with loneliness or mental health challenges offers opportunities to learn new ways of outreach and new skills. You will learn about the power of language. You will gain an understanding of the sting of stigma. You can learn how to ask open-ended questions and offer reflective listening. You may learn new ways of relating. And you will learn about yourself which will help you reach out to those living with loneliness or a mental health condition.

Excerpts from the song, "Bridge Over Troubled Water" by Simon and Garfunkel.

Mental Health Matters, Part I: An Overview of Mental Health Issues that affect Older Adults is available at <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/resource/mental-health-matters-part-one/>

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Office of Christian Formation: <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/formation/>

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Office of Christian
Formation

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