



Mental Health Matters

Part One: Overview of mental health issues that affect older adults

Introduction

Older adults are particularly vulnerable to mental health concerns because of a number of factors: loss of independence, loss of a job, loss of a home, loss of a spouse or physical illness. Too many older adults suffer in silence. Faith communities are uniquely positioned to provide spiritual and emotional support for older adults experiencing challenging times.

Background

Mental illness affects 20% of the American population in any given year. That's one person in every pew. Fifty percent of the older adult population may suffer from depression at some point after the age of 65.

Contrary to popular belief, depression is not a natural part of aging. It is a condition that can be treated. Securing medical attention is important, when needed. In addition, social, emotional and spiritual support can help relieve symptoms and reduce feelings of loneliness. Gentle, reliable social contact, supportive connections, someone who understands the way depression can undermine spiritual and mental health are important parts of restoring wholeness. Having someone near who understands the language of faith is very meaningful. That relationship can help another person feel like they are accepted just as they are, to feel like they belong.

Churches cultivate a culture of caring, compassion, and service. Lay people can communicate how to gently communicate the power of faith and hope during challenging times.

In addition, the **COVID pandemic** has added additional layers of stress onto older adults. Social distancing and isolation may cause a deeper sense of loneliness than many have experienced before, and the fear of contracting or of having loved ones succumb to COVID can cause people to feel anxious and overwhelmed.

All of these stresses are compounded when social supports are stripped away. There are fewer visits with family and friends, missed holidays and birthdays, and the loss of fellowship at one's church community can leave one feeling empty. The additional weight of these losses can create free-floating anxiety which chisels away at your feelings of security.

These pressures and changes in one's daily life can cause lots of uncomfortable feelings: sadness, anger, fear, irritability, loneliness, helplessness or hopelessness. Without any relief, people can get stuck. Then these emotions can become precursors for anxiety, depression, or other mental illnesses.

Two thirds of older adults do not seek medical treatment when they are struggling with mental health challenges. Registering for a telehealth appointment online with a doctor they may not know is more than many older adults can handle.

One remarkable benefit this pandemic has caused is that lay people are being more intentional about reaching out and caring for others. Being willing to come support someone who is lonely and provide reflective listening can be healing.

Threats to mental health

Denial and stigma are barriers which interfere with one's ability to get help. Faith communities can help congregants recognize these barriers and address them.

Denial: Older adults frequently put on a stiff upper lip, denying emotions that may be too difficult to acknowledge. Men are more likely to push through mental health challenges by themselves. Women are more likely to have friendships with other women where sharing is a part of their relationship.

Denial interferes with a person's ability to recognize the emotional strain they are under. Because those feelings may be buried, that person may push others away.

Stigma: This issue can be addressed by an entire faith community. Stigma regarding mental health issues is an unspoken judgment of people who have mental health challenges. Older adults may stigmatize themselves which blocks others from reaching out and connecting.

Stigma is expressed in silence and is therefore difficult to unearth. Your church can provide education on how to identify stigma and unpack it wherever it exists.

Stories of Hope

National example: England discovered from their public records that an alarming number of older adults die of **loneliness**. So, they created a position in the government called the Minister of Loneliness.

This department tracked data from their public employees who delivered meals and did a quick check of the mental status of older adults. Many contributing factors to loneliness were easy to identify: lack of social contact, smaller circle of connections, limited transportation among many others. But the most troubling fact that many of the employees reported was that the only contact their clients had was with the person who brought them meals once a week. Otherwise, the TV was on all day to keep them company.

The Ministry of Loneliness started a public health campaign to raise awareness and reduce the stigma surrounding loneliness. They used social media and started a campaign called [#LetsTalkLoneliness](#) week. People contributed their feelings and their experience of loneliness during the week. Then, on the weekend, people could respond to the hashtag, which said [#GreatGetTogetherWeekend](#). This stimulated conversation and normalized the experience of loneliness. It helped people become more comfortable talking about their feelings which had previously been denied.

Denominational example: Presbyterian Mental Health Network (PMHN) is a new churchwide, independent grass roots network of the PCUSA. Its purpose is to facilitate networking, conversation, and the sharing of stories and models for mental health ministry across the church. Sign up on the website to register and be a part of the network. <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/compassion-peace-justice/mental-health-ministry/mental-health-network-sign-up-form/>

Personal example: Ray Conner is a barber in Johnson City, Tennessee. He became a barber because, as a kid growing up in Detroit, he watched his mother battle drug use disorder and he was abused. To get away, he would go down to the *Cut Above* barber shop for a fresh cut and some companionship from his barber, Jessie. Ray remembers that the relationship he had with Jessie carried him through some of the darkest days of his life. Jessie gave him hope.

When Ray grew up, he became a barber so he could give to others what Jessie gave to him. He developed relationships with his clients. He said it was remarkable to find adult men embrace their vulnerabilities.

These examples illustrate how simply reaching out to others can make a huge difference. A safe space can allow stories to be shared. Being with another can reduce loneliness and create a sense of belonging. The power of empathy has a deep and mysterious quality that is hard to describe but it can change people's lives.

Summary

Everyone has times in their life when they experience anxiety, depression, loneliness, loss or grief. These emotions are part of the human condition. Having someone who is available as a non-anxious presence can restore one's faith and hope for the future.

Those who reach out to individuals who are struggling, put compassion into action. Their faith is being strengthened too.

Mental health matters.

There are over 9,000 Presbyterian (PCUSA) churches with over a million members. imagine what a difference a mental health initiative would make. It would wake a sleeping giant.

Here are resources for Part One. You will find more resources at the end of Part Two.

- **Compassion in Action Toolkit** which highlights principles for faith communities addressing mental illness and resources to support action implementing those principles. It is available at <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/compassion-in-action.pdf>
- **Stigma-** article. <https://churchandmentalhealth.com/10-free-ways-your-church-can-stop-mental-health-stigma/>

Part Two:

BRIDGE OVER TROUBLED WATERS

Practical steps churches and individuals can take to support mental health
(Available late March 2021)

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

Presbyterian Older Adults Ministry Network: <https://poamn.org/>

February 2021



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