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## Supporting Parishioners with Mental Illness

The National Catholic Partnership on Disability hosted a webinar in 2007 in which Dr. Thomas Welch, a psychiatrist from Portland, OR, presented the following roadmap to support people with mental illness in your parish:

### Attend

Notice who is at Sunday Mass and who is missing. Observe how people interact with one another and with a new person, especially if they look or act differently.

### Welcome

Everyone in the pews can communicate hospitality; don't leave it up to greeters, ushers and clergy. Physical environment can also communicate welcome, for example, bulletin board announcements for mental health resources and support groups.

### Include

Personally invite people with mental illness to participate, volunteer, and minister in the parish. Offer companionship that extends beyond the church doors when needed.

### Accommodate

People with mental illness may exhibit atypical church behavior, such as pacing or self-talk. Tolerate these "disturbances" the same as you would someone with chronic lung disease who may cough or wheeze during Mass. Don't prejudge someone wearing earphones as disrespectful. They may need earphones to drown out hallucinatory voices which prevent them from paying attention at Mass. Seriously inappropriate or dangerous behavior is not permissible. It should be addressed respectfully, giving the person the opportunity to change their behavior.

### Pray

Pray with and for persons with mental illness in private and communal intentions. Spread the message of hope. Homilies can clarify Scripture passages that may associate demonic possession with mental illness.

### Learn & Teach

Collaborate with community resources to host workshops, health fairs, and/or support groups at your parish. Peace and justice committees can examine issues of poverty and homelessness that relate to persons with mental illness.

### Know

Locate local community mental health agencies when a referral is needed or in case of a crisis. Find out where group homes or other residences for people with mental illness are located within your parish so you can extend an invitation to them.

**Recommended reading:** *Souls in the Hands of a Tender God*, by Craig Rennebohm and David Paul, Beacon Press, 2008, ISBN # 978-0-8070-0042-7

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