

# MENTAL HEALTH LITERACY GUIDE

Produced by the NCPD Council on Mental Illness

“Christ took all human suffering on himself; even mental illness . . . whoever suffers from mental illness “always” bears God’s image and likeness in himself.... mental illness does not create insurmountable distances.”

- Saint John Paul II

As members of Christ’s Body, the Church, we are called to encounter the living Christ in all persons. Among the people we meet, **many suffer from mental illness**. We are called to encounter and to accompany persons with mental illness. Whether you are an ordained or lay minister, professed religious, or faithful Catholic, this message is for you.

Mental illness is all around and all of us experience it in some way, regardless of creed, color, orientation, or age. **Some disabilities can be seen but, many are hidden**. Sometimes people are open to disclosing their own personal difficulties; however, many are not because of the discrimination and stigma they may experience in society, in their homes, at work and even in faith communities. Together we can make our Church a more welcoming place for people living with mental illness. It begins with knowledge.

We are called to listen, advocate, believe, include, and most importantly, to pray.

Many may have been living with the chronic ups and downs of mental illness for most of their lives, while others are still learning to manage their symptoms. This is nothing to be ashamed of. You are not alone. We can face these challenges together.

For many, accompaniment involves walking with persons on their faith-filled journey; others may need a referral to a mental health professional, or in extreme cases a call to 911. It is our hope that this guide will help you understand how to accompany persons who experience mental illness.





## MENTAL HEALTH: FINDING A WAY FORWARD

Mental health and mental illness are complex and highly variable from person to person and throughout the course of a person's life. Some common symptoms you may encounter when accompanying a person with mental illness are:

### Psychological

- May make reference to active delusions
- May have a flat or blunted affect; may not smile when expected
- May feel anxious or nervous
- May talk about feelings of hopelessness

### Spiritual

- May want to know why God did this to them
- May feel that God did this to them and that God can take it away
- May feel they have special powers

### Biological

- Weight gain due to medication
- May have sensitivity or pain in body parts

### Social

- May avoid eye contact because they feel ashamed
- May talk about their history of mood swings: highs vs. lows

## Key elements to know when referring someone to a mental health professional.<sup>1</sup>

- Communication is key: be clear and transparent
  - Inform them why you are making the referral
  - Clarify the difference between spiritual support and clinical support.
- Collaborate: work together with the individual, include other supports if helpful.
- If going to emergency room, make sure they are not alone, you or family should accompany them.
- Follow-up: reach out, visit, but make sure to check in after some time.
- Consider adding community supports: available resources, support groups, seminars.

For more information regarding mental health, visit

[ncpd.org/disability-ministry/mental-illness](http://ncpd.org/disability-ministry/mental-illness)

---

<sup>1</sup> 1: American Psychiatric Association Foundation: Mental Health: A Guide for Faith Leaders. Arlington, VA, American Psychiatric Association Foundation, 2016.



## WHEN DO I REFER?

These signs and symptoms may help to know when to make the call.

### Psychological

- Responding to internal stimuli
- Thoughts feel clouded or disorganized
- Thoughts of wanting to hurt themselves, even if they do not have intent

### Spiritual

- Hyper-religiosity: where it negatively impacts their daily living
- A parishioner may stop participating in usual activities for unknown reasons (anhedonia)

### Biological

- Trouble with sleep: too much or very little
- Change in appetite
- Hearing or seeing things or voices

### Social

- Change in interaction with peers: isolating
- Change in productivity at work/school
- Change in use of substance

### Emergency Care

Seek immediate assistance if a person poses a danger to self or others: call 911 and request a person with Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) training.

### When to Call

- Person says they want to hurt themselves or another person and have a plan and the means to do so

- Person is harming themselves: such as cutting, burning, or hitting self
- Person is becoming aggressive or not redirectable

## HELPFUL RESOURCES

### Crisis

Suicide hotline number: 1-800-273-8255 or Text 741741

### NCPD Resources

A Pastoral Response to Mental Illness:

[ncpd.org/resources\\_and\\_toolkits/pastoral-response-persons-mental-illness](https://ncpd.org/resources_and_toolkits/pastoral-response-persons-mental-illness)

- Mental Illness Theological Framework:  
[https://ncpd.org/resources\\_and\\_toolkits/mental-illness-theological-framework](https://ncpd.org/resources_and_toolkits/mental-illness-theological-framework)
- Welcomed and Valued:  
[https://ncpd.org/resources\\_and\\_toolkits/purchase-resources](https://ncpd.org/resources_and_toolkits/purchase-resources)

### Additional Resources

- Association of Catholic Mental Health Ministers – [catholicmhm.org](http://catholicmhm.org)
- NAMI’s Warning Signs and Symptoms:  
[www.nami.org/About-Mental-Illness/Warning-Signs-and-Symptoms](http://www.nami.org/About-Mental-Illness/Warning-Signs-and-Symptoms)
- APA’s Quick Reference Guide on Mental Health for Faith Leaders:  
[network.crcna.org/sites/default/files/documents/6-15\\_FaithToolKit-QuickRefGuide.pdf](http://network.crcna.org/sites/default/files/documents/6-15_FaithToolKit-QuickRefGuide.pdf)
- Compassion in Action: A Guide for Faith Communities Serving People Experiencing Mental Illness and Their Caregivers:  
[hhs.gov/sites/default/files/compassion-in-action.pdf](http://hhs.gov/sites/default/files/compassion-in-action.pdf)
- NAMI FaithNet: [www.nami.org/Get-involved/NAMI-FaithNet](http://www.nami.org/Get-involved/NAMI-FaithNet)
- Pathways to Promise: [www.pathways2promise.org/](http://www.pathways2promise.org/)
- The Center for Faith and Opportunity Initiatives:  
[www.hhs.gov/about/agencies/iea/partnerships/index.html](http://www.hhs.gov/about/agencies/iea/partnerships/index.html)



Rev. 1/22

