

How to Develop a Mental Health Ministry in your Congregation

Joanne Kelly and Alan Johnson

Ten steps for developing a Mental Health Ministry in your congregation

(These steps are not necessarily sequential. Use the steps in the order that is appropriate in your situation.)

1. **Make a commitment** — Before you begin, do some soul searching. Starting a Mental Health Ministry may take considerable time. You need to decide if you are ready to take on a long-term project. It will probably involve disclosing why you are passionate about mental health. Make sure you and your family members are ready to “come out” to your congregation.
2. **Educate yourself** — Learn about mental illness. You probably already have “in the trenches” experience with mental illness, which will help you be understanding and compassionate with others. However, if you have not already done so, we recommend you take the NAMI “Family-to-Family” class if you are a family member or the NAMI Peer-to-Peer program if you are a consumer. You do not have to be an expert in mental illness to start a Mental Health Ministry, but it is helpful to have a basic understanding of the problems people are likely to face when they are dealing with various diagnoses.
3. **Get buy-in from your clergy/board of directors** — The decision-making chain is different in every congregation. If it is appropriate in your congregation, explain to your clergy and/or board of directors what you want to accomplish and ask for their support. You may need to educate them. It may take a while for them to grasp the importance of your mission, but don’t give up. It may be important to clarify the interface between your staff’s pastoral care work and the work of the Mental Health Ministry.
4. **Form a task force or ministry team** — Get the word out that you are creating a task force or ministry team on mental illness. Set a time and place for the first meeting and announce it in the weekly bulletin, in the monthly newsletter, on the bulletin board and other appropriate places. You may also extend personal invitations to some people. If appropriate, tell your story or your family’s story. Make sure you advertise the meeting far enough in advance that people can save the date. Invite people to show up to help you figure out a plan. Consider making your first meeting a potluck meal after your service.
5. **Decide with your team what you want to offer/accomplish** — Define who you want to serve and how you will go about it. Do you want to offer a support group? If so, will it be for consumers, family members or both? Do you want (and do you have the skills) to offer support for those who are in the midst of crises or will you refer those people elsewhere? Will you offer education? If so, what form will that take? Classes? Workshops? Do you want to create a resource center or library? Are your services just for your congregation or do you want to reach a wider community? Exactly what do you plan to include in the scope of your ministry? Will you cover just the major mental illnesses or do you want to include other brain differences like addictions, brain injuries, dementia, autism, etc.? After you have clarified what you want to do, write a concise mission statement, set some goals, and begin developing

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strategies to achieve the goals. Hold meetings regularly (monthly or bimonthly) to review recent events or programs, to decide on next steps and to share new resources.

6. **Define strategies for keeping the congregation, board and clergy involved** — Share the mission and goals you developed with your congregation, your board and your clergy, and ask for each group's blessing. Ask each group to help you be successful. You might ask the congregation to support you by attending your programs and classes. You might ask the clergy to support you by asking for healing for those with mental illnesses when they pray during services or talking about mental illness in their sermons. You might ask them to focus a whole worship service on mental health, especially during Mental Health Month (May) or Mental Health Awareness Week (in October.) You might ask the board to support you by allocating a small budget for your team's use (for speakers, handouts, etc.)
7. **Make an inventory of available resources** — Poll the members of your team and find out who they know who might be willing to speak at one of your programs. Talk to the therapists and psychiatrists in your congregation to see who will help. Ask your local NAMI affiliate for a list of resources they offer and leverage them. For example, your NAMI affiliate might offer support groups and classes you could refer people to, or they may be willing to train you to lead your own support group. Check out the resources available at NAMI FaithNET www.nami.org/namifaithnet and Mental Health Ministries www.MentalHealthMinistries.net. Contact the Interfaith Network on Mental Illness of Boulder and Broomfield Counties. Consider creating a resource notebook that members of your congregation can borrow.
8. **Join with other organizations** — Find out which congregations in your area have Mental Health Ministries and meet with them to share ideas. Meet with a representative of your local mental health center and let them know what you are doing. Network with other organizations that have similar goals.
9. **Communicate** — It is important that you continue to communicate about your Mental Health Ministry on an ongoing basis. Consider writing articles for your congregation's newsletters on the topics you offer in your classes/forums. Take notes at your classes/forums and post them on your congregation's Web site so people who didn't attend can still glean some insights. Announce your events in the church bulletin and even the local weekend edition of your newspaper if they are open to the public. Alert you local NAMI affiliate about your events and ask them to help you get the word out.
10. **Be prepared to nurture your ministry** — Creating a successful Mental Health Ministry takes more than passion. It also takes persistence. Don't get discouraged if you don't immediately see the results you had hoped for. Keep putting one foot in front of the other and you will succeed.