

Mental Wellness and Older Adults

An Older Adult Ministries Resource

Introduction



Every person has been affected by mental health challenges in some way. Yet individuals and families continue to suffer in silence or stop coming to their church because they are not receiving the support they so desperately need. They become detached from their faith community and their spirituality, which is an important source of healing, wholeness and hope in times of personal darkness. But, THERE IS HOPE!

Faith communities who focus on a peer support model and less on a medical assessment model are able to empathize with, and reach out to others as peers. When focusing on the person, not the illness, we are able to appreciate specific needs. A peer asks questions, not assuming the answers. A doctor or nurse is more apt to give an assessment based only on medical criteria. The peer approach helps churches to be more "WISE" in ways that are beneficial to all.

The United Church of Christ's Mental Health Network "works to reduce stigma and promote the inclusion of people with mental illnesses/brain disorders and their families in the life, leadership and work of congregations, synagogues, and organizations." Their [toolkit](#) is free for churches to use.



United Church of Christ
MENTAL HEALTH NETWORK™



The UCC's [Guide to Becoming a WISE \(welcoming, inclusive, supportive and engaged\) Congregation](#) helps churches begin or continue to become a haven that focuses on how to be most welcoming, inclusive, supportive, and engaged with those who are affected by mental health challenges. The Guide also includes a [WISE checklist for churches](#).

The [Interfaith Network on Mental Illness](#) offers [Ten Steps for Developing a Mental Health Ministry in your Congregation](#).



Caregiving Support Strategies

- Understand caregiving is a long-term and very challenging vocation. Stay in touch even when the family is not able to attend worship.
- Listen carefully and ask what support is needed. Help in problem solving. Offer support groups and resources as well as transportation, shopping, meals, respite, etc.
- Offer prayers and time to be involved in their lives by visiting, phoning and being truly present. Stay connected and help to create community.



When welcoming worshipers who have cognitive loss, consider this checklist:

- Are name tags used, and each person greeted warmly by name?
 - Are greeters aware of body language, smiling and making eye contact?
 - Is signage clear for public building locations?
 - Are one or two people prepared to assist with visits to the restroom or other needs?
 - Is the caregiver assured that their loved one is welcome and included?
- Are familiar hymns, prayers, and texts included when possible in the worship service?
 - Has the congregation been educated about dementia and the fear and stigma that can accompany it?

Neuro-sensitivity checklist

Neuro-sensitivity is caused by an aberration of the brain or central nervous system. This may be experienced at any age, in those who have had traumatic brain injuries or have some type of dementia. These sensitivities can affect emotion, learning ability, self-control, and memory. These include autism spectrum disorder, communication, speech and language disorders, Down syndrome, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and forms of dementia.

- Are there separate allocated areas in the sanctuary and just outside the sanctuary, for people with neuro-sensitivities? Ideally audio volume could be adjusted by the member, with easy access to the exit door, as well as any assistive technology or equipment to prevent overstimulation.
- Do you offer clearly marked access to quiet spaces? Certain noises (especially loud, high pitched, or sudden noises) affect people with neuro-sensitivity more severely.
- Do you provide sound maps of the space, highlighting the average sound levels of each area, allowing attendees to choose their seating?
- Do you use visual aids such as pictures, graphics, and videos?
- Do you use soft, steady lighting to create calm environments? Bright or flickering lights can exacerbate sensory issues.



Tips on listening

Intentional listening is a vital factor for helping those with challenges or sensitivities feel welcomed in your church.

- It is a gift to simply listen
- Listen for feelings and themes
- Listen to yourself
- Take care to respond with sensitivity
- Listening is a long-term requisite for understanding
- Listen for the words of faith, hope and love
- Be open to a person's spiritual story

Suggestions for Active Support

Create a Mental Health Community Resource List with information for those needing services. Resources can include:

- Your local [NAMI](#) affiliate (National Alliance on Mental Illness)
- Crisis hotlines
- National Suicide Prevent Lifeline (1-800-273-8255)
- Mental Health clinics
- Drop-in Centers
- County Mental Health Department services
- Legal Aid
- Addiction services
- Counseling centers
- Mobile Crisis Units
- Dementia Care Specialists in every WI county Aging and Disability Resource Center

Additional Resources:

Ministry with Persons with Mental Illness and Their Families. Robert H Albers, 2019.

Mental Health and the Church: A Ministry Handbook for Including Children and Adults with ADHD, Anxiety, Mood Disorders, and Other Common Mental Health Conditions. Stephen Grcevich, MD, 2018.

[Loneliness in a Nutshell](#), video 10:52 mins.

[Interfaith Network on Mental Illness](#)

[Pathways to Promise Companionship Movement](#) - The Program of a Practice of Presence

Creating [Dementia Friendly Faith Communities](#)

The [UCC Mental Health Dementia and Alzheimer's Congregational toolkit](#)