

Caring for Your Church's Mental Health

Mental health is an important issue that affects many people, including those in church communities. The church has an important role to play in addressing mental health challenges by providing support, resources, and care to those who are struggling. By acknowledging mental health struggles and promoting awareness, the church can help reduce the stigma surrounding mental illness and create a safe and supportive environment where people can find healing and hope. Here are six ways you can navigate this effectively.

1. Compassion: Lead with grace.

The way we show up matters. When people are vulnerable about their grief, sorrow, fears, and traumas, we should meet them with compassion. As they start to share, you may quickly see areas of needed growth or sinful patterns, but be slow to point out sin. Listening with empathy without judgment helps build trust and allows the relationship to keep moving forward. Jesus modeled this pattern—He met people with grace and compassion even though he knew their sin issues.

So, how can you lead with grace? Let people know that you see their hurt and brokenness and be tender towards them. Recognize that their suffering comes from the brokenness of the world as well as their own. Take time to listen and grieve with them. Do not force them to be a certain person or arrive at a certain place in their journey immediately.

They are in the process of being made new and having their story redeemed. Your compassionate response can play a vital role in their journey.

2. Communication: Talk about mental health struggles from the pulpit.

One powerful way to engage with the needs of the people you serve is to normalize discussions around mental health. Weaving mental health topics into sermons, sharing your struggles vulnerably, and offering counseling seminars for the church on topics such as anxiety and depression go a long way in reducing the stigma. The more you normalize conversations around these issues, the more you cultivate a culture of safety and connection in your community and the more you help people find the courage to seek the care they need.

For resources on integrating mental health topics into sermons or small groups, I recommend [*Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*](#) by Pete Scazzero.

3. Curiosity: Value the story behind the person.

Our life experiences, both the things that hurt us and the things that are positive, impact our view of self, others, and God. Move toward people with curiosity and start to see how their past experiences affect them. As you understand them better, you can provide counsel that is relevant and meaningful to their specific story. With a better understanding of their own stories, they also can connect to God in a new way and get a deeper understanding of how He cares for them.

We can start with prompts or questions such as:

- Tell me more about what you are experiencing.
- Tell me more about why that was hurtful or why it made you angry.
- When else have you experienced similar emotions or reactions in the past?
- How does what you experienced make you feel about yourself? About other people? About God?

Even if their response doesn't make sense to us, whether it feels like an overreaction or illogical, it is important to listen and hear where they are coming from. Attentive listening and patience can help us connect their thoughts and feelings with their overall story.

4. Complexity: Consider the whole person and do not oversimplify to the spiritual.

When you take the time to learn about someone's story, you gain a better understanding of the complex emotions and experiences they may be going through. As humans, we are not just spiritual beings but also physical beings intricately designed by God.

Often, when people express they are struggling with their thoughts and feelings, it is easy to categorize those things as merely heart or spiritual issues. However, it is essential to recognize that their nervous system and physical body also play a critical role in their emotional responses.

Failing to recognize the complexity behind the nervous system and emotions may lead you to try to fix the person too quickly, only to find the solution ineffective. If you feel unsure about how to handle this complexity, you can learn more about trauma-informed care or refer to professional counseling. By doing so, you can approach others with empathy and understanding, and help them find the support they need.

5. Care: Provide a thoughtful structure for appropriate level of care.

You can support the person with pastoral counseling if your church feels equipped to do so. If the complexity of the situation or the person's needs require additional care, you can refer them to professional counseling. It is helpful to build a referral list and to consider having a fund through the church to sponsor sessions.

Consider developing a pastoral response team or identify a few church members who can continue to check in with people as they seek professional care. You do not want to make people feel that they are being outsourced, but that counseling is an added layer of care they can receive.

6. Christ: Trust in Christ as you embrace your limitations.

Lastly, trust Christ and rely on Him as you care for those around you because He is the one who ultimately heals. Knowing that healing lies with Jesus, embrace your limitations and humbly recognize that you can only do so much to bring about change and healing in others. This should liberate you instead of invoking fear. You can cast your cares on Him when the need or the suffering seems too much. You can walk with Him as He leads you in meeting people where they are and as He brings them into greater healing and transformation. God is redeeming all of our stories and making all things new.