



May 1, 2006

Dear Faith Leader:

The World Health Organization reports that by the year 2020, depression will rank as the illness that represents the world's single largest cost to society. Left undiagnosed or untreated, too many people who suffer from depression go on to attempt or complete suicide. Every year, about 30,000 people of all ages kill themselves in this country alone. The problem among our young people is particularly acute. According to the *American Journal of Psychiatry*, only about 21 percent of children in the United States who need mental health services actually receive them. The American Association of Suicidology reports that somewhere in the United States, every two hours, a young person takes his or her own life. **In the state of Virginia, an average of one teen per week dies from suicide.**

In your role as a faith leader, you are able to put faces to these startling statistics. You also undoubtedly have been able to help many of these people. Research has shown that spiritual practice can help maintain good overall health, and that a strong sense of spirituality can be a vital factor in a person's recovery from mental illness. But given the urgency of the problem – is there *more* that you can do?

Since its inception in 2004, the Youth Suicide and Depression Task Force (YSAD), an initiative of the Fairfax Partnership for Youth, has been working to educate the public about the signs of depression and suicide, particularly as they relate to youth, and what should be done when these signs are recognized. As part of these efforts, YSAD decided to partner with the Fairfax County faith community, in an attempt to connect with families that may not be reached through more traditional outreach efforts.

The response has been extremely positive and enthusiastic. So positive, in fact, that we responded in March of 2005 by assembling an ***Interfaith Mental Wellness Tool Kit***. Its purpose was to heighten awareness about the importance of mental health for people of all ages, and to reduce the stigma associated with mental illness. In addition, in partnership with CrisisLink, our local suicide hotline, and through a grant from the Virginia Department of Health, this past June we held a conference entitled "Bridging the Gap: An Interfaith Conference on Mental Health and Suicide Prevention." With only three months' preparation, more than 200 people attended this conference from a wide array of faith groups representing several cultures. Evaluations were overwhelmingly positive. **Currently, we are preparing for our second annual "Bridging the Gap" Conference, scheduled for Thursday, May 4, 2006.** Our conference theme this year is "Linking Hands and Hearts."

In addition, during the week of **Monday, May 15 through Sunday, May 21, 2006** we will be bringing Fairfax County together for the first **Annual Interfaith Mental Wellness Observance Week**. Faith communities will be encouraged to sponsor mental health educational activities during this week, and to incorporate mental health and mental wellness messages into their communications. We have created the 2006 version of the ***Interfaith Mental Wellness Tool Kit*** to facilitate those initiatives and activities.





Please review the materials and information provided electronically, and consider forwarding this Tool Kit to other faith leaders, incorporating the messages into your communications, conducting a mental health-focused activity within your faith group, or distributing some of the one-page educational materials, for example. It is our hope that you will join us this May in promoting mental health as a vital aspect of total wellness in the communities with which you work.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jennifer Heffron".

Jennifer Heffron, Esquire
Chair
Youth Suicide and Depression Task Force
Fairfax Partnership for Youth

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fran Gatlin".

Fran Gatlin, Ed.S.
Interfaith Mental Wellness Initiative
Youth Suicide and Depression Task Force
Fairfax Partnership for Youth

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mary L. Azoy".

Mary L. Azoy, LPC, CPT
Interfaith Mental Wellness Initiative
Youth Suicide and Depression Task Force
Fairfax Partnership for Youth

