

TALKING POINTS

MENTAL ILLNESS AS A BIOLOGICAL DISEASE

Mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety are brain-based, *biological* illnesses. They can be triggered by traumatic experiences or tragedy and/or by genetic predisposition. When we are physically healthy, emotionally resilient and have positive family and social relationships, we are in the best position to be mentally healthy. On the other hand, our best efforts to focus on the positive will not prevent some people from developing mental illness. Some types of mental illness are genetically transmitted. However, the factors that can help protect people from developing depression and anxiety also can be helpful for those already experiencing mental illness. Receiving appropriate medical and mental health treatment is crucial for recovery from mental illness. But being accepted, welcomed and valued by others is equally important in an individual's struggle to overcome illness and to maximize quality of life.

Mistaken beliefs that mental illness results from personal weakness or insufficient faith may serve as a barrier to getting the professional mental health treatment that is needed. The faith leader and faith community can help reduce the myths and stigma surrounding mental illness by talking about these issues openly, and by urging members to seek help when it is needed. Receiving help at the first onset of mental illness reduces an individual's suffering and often improves the outcome of treatment.

DEPRESSION VERSUS "A BAD DAY"

Depression is often misunderstood because "everyone experiences a bad day." Many people who have not experienced a serious depression mistakenly believe that depression is nothing more than feeling a little blue. In fact, people who have suffered from serious depression describe it as *physically and emotionally painful and debilitating*. One individual compares her experience with depression to her subsequent episode of breast cancer. For the latter, she had had surgery and chemotherapy, during which her survival was uncertain. Yet today she regards her depression as the more painful illness.

IMPACT OF MENTAL ILLNESS ON THE FAMILY

Family members (and the family as a whole) suffer along with the individual who experiences depression, anxiety or another mental illness. Everyone benefits when effective treatment is obtained. Family members may participate in therapy sessions to learn how to be supportive or to be effective caregivers. Otherwise, the isolation or shame that a person with mental illness may feel can increase his or her sense of hopelessness.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN UNTREATED DEPRESSION & SUICIDE

The importance of helping people seek and find effective treatment for depression is underscored by the fact that the greatest cause of suicide is untreated or undertreated depression. ***Depression is a treatable illness.*** Each year, about 31,000 people in the United States alone die by suicide – that's one person every 17 minutes.

THE DEVASTATING IMPACT OF SUICIDE ON FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

After a suicide occurs, the immediate family and closest friends of the deceased individual are at a *nine times greater risk* of dying by suicide than the general population. In other words, suicide begets suicide, leaving a tragic legacy that can be passed down from generation to generation.

FAITH AS A "PROTECTIVE" ELEMENT IN MENTAL HEALTH

In the mental health field it is common to talk about "risk factors" and "protective factors" that can lead an individual to become either more or less vulnerable to the development of mental illness. Faith communities offer acceptance, belonging and a sense of shared purpose or mission. Each of these qualities *"protects"* against mental illness. Feeling isolated and alienated from others is a risk factor, and can contribute to the development of mental illness. Feeling hopeless contributes to depression and anxiety. Having faith is protective, in part, because it offers hope beyond ourselves. As faith communities, we can focus on maximizing the protective factors contributing to the psychological or "emotional" well being of our members.