

12 Things Your Congregation Can Do in Mental Health Ministry

1. Don't go it alone

A ministry needs both champions and companions. Recruit two people who can support and encourage each other in initiating this ministry. Have them personally recruit others who are interested. Discover the gifts, perspectives, and experience present in our congregations.

2. Use the church newsletter/social media

Include articles each month to promote the ministry and provide education on some aspect of mental health or recovery. Articles from the ministry team and reflections on mental illness from the pastor on the front-page article can help raise awareness and dispel stigma.

3. Bring it into worship

Have a 3-5 minute “Moment for Mental Health” in worship each month. Always in a manner that protects confidentiality, pray for those living with mental health challenges and their families. In preaching, look for opportunities to discover how the scripture speaks to the lives of people living with mental health concerns and those who care for them. Develop a team of ‘ambassadors’ who can be intentional about offering hospitality to anyone with behavioral health needs.

4. Create a display with handouts

Whether near the church office, in the narthex, or in a well-travelled hallway, a display with a variety of educational brochures from the [National Alliance on Mental Illness \(NAMI\)](#) and [Mental Health America](#). Include information about local resources that can be accessed by members and visitors alike throughout the week.

5. Network with providers.

Reach out to mental health providers in your area to establish rapport and a connection for referrals, and to offer pastoral support. You might take a provider out for coffee. Listen to them. Professionals are in short supply, and COVID has increased client loads and stress.

6. Offer Sunday School courses

Annually lead 1-3 Sunday School courses of 4-8 weeks each on some aspect of mental health. The field is broad, the congregation may well have professionals in the field willing to teach, and the topics will draw different demographics of the church.

7. Host NAMI courses

Host [NAMI courses](#). The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) will send trained teachers to lead Peer-to-Peer (for adults with a mental illness diagnosis), Family-to-Family (for family members of adults with a diagnosis), and Basics (for family members of a minor with a diagnosis) courses at your church. Your church simply provides a good space for these 6-12-week courses to take place.

8. Annual Observances

Observe Mental Health Month (May), Suicide Prevention Month (September), and Mental Illness Awareness Week (first week in October). Learn about mental health, de-stigmatize mental illnesses, and equip your community to address mental health needs. [Mental Health Ministries E-Spotlight](#) and [Mental Health America](#) are excellent resources.

9. Plan a ‘longest night’ service in December

The holidays can be a particularly difficult time of the year for those experiencing loss, grief and pain during the joyous time of Advent and Christmas. A ‘longest night’ or ‘blue Christmas’ service that names their pain and yearning can be a helpful way of showing care during a season where they may feel disconnected from the joy being proclaimed.

10. Offer a Mental Health First Aid Course

[MHFA](#) training is designed to de-stigmatize mental health challenges and teach skills needed to reach out and provide initial help and support to someone who may be developing a mental health concern, substance use problem, or experiencing a crisis. Many presbyteries and congregations have organized trainings or sponsored individuals to be trained as MHFA trainers.

11. Offer Companionship Training

[Companionship](#) is a ministry of presence, a relational response to isolation and suffering and supportive of healing and recovery. [Companionship training](#) teaches skills for walking alongside when someone is experiencing emotional or mental health challenges. The Companionship model has five tenets: hospitality, neighboring, side-by-side, listening and accompaniment.

12. Raise suicide prevention awareness

Excellent resources are available from the [American Foundation for Suicide Awareness](#) and the [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#). [A series of five short videos on suicide prevention, intervention, and response for clergy and faith leaders](#) has been produced by the Interfaith Network on Mental Illness. Many congregations and presbyteries are making ‘gatekeeper’ training available. This teaches skills anyone can use to recognize and respond when someone is at risk of suicide. The [LivingWorks ASIST](#) model and [QPR](#) are two examples of suicide prevention training used by congregations and presbyteries.