

OUT of SOLITARY PLACES

4 1 in 4 British adults experience at least one diagnosable mental health problem in any one year, and one in six experiences this at any given time.

GOOD MENTAL HEALTH

– or emotional and spiritual wellbeing – enables us to enjoy life to the full and cope with changes and difficulties. It helps us to recognise our own self-worth and the worth of others.

Every church community contains people who have experienced mental health problems or whose families or friends have been affected. Most of us will experience pressures on our mental wellbeing at some points in our lives.

In the Bible we read how Jesus cured Legion, a man whose mental distress took an extreme form and which had driven him out of his community to “solitary places”. Jesus recognised his humanity, healed his inner distress and restored him to his community.

How are churches called to respond to mental ill-health in our society? This leaflet aims to help churches to begin to become more aware of mental health and offers suggestions and signposts.

HOW CAN CHURCHES RESPOND?

Churches can be helpful places for people experiencing mental health difficulties. Many people turn to the support of a religious faith at a time of crisis (though others will feel their faith is under threat). Churches can provide routines and activities which aid stability, as well as offering a place of belonging and acceptance where people can encounter a healing relationship with Jesus.

RAISE AWARENESS OF MENTAL HEALTH

Every church will contain people who have mental health problems or have experienced them in the past, as well as people who are affected as family members, friends or carers. Churches frequently have contact with people at times of life changes, adversity or crisis; events which can trigger mental health problems. Mental wellbeing is an issue for all of us. How can we tackle the stigma that surrounds it?

BE AWARE OF SIGNS OF MENTAL DISTRESS, BUT DON'T TRY TO DIAGNOSE OR CURE IT

People with mental health problems need to be supported, affirmed and given space. Be patient, non-judgemental and

encourage them to take responsibility with whatever support they need. If they are in contact with health services, and with their permission, help them to keep in touch with their GP, social worker or community psychiatric nurse.

MAKE LINKS WITH MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Who should you contact if someone is in crisis? Who can advise what churches could do? Find out what voluntary and statutory groups exist locally – eg Mind or a Mental Health Forum. What can your church learn from them or offer to them?

OFFER A WELCOME TO PEOPLE EXPERIENCING MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

How welcoming is your church? Are you a “safe place” for people who may be distressed? Are you able to offer friendship, support, empathy and a listening ear? Relationships and activities offered through churches and other community groups can be crucial in helping sustain people during times of crisis, or to identifying if a person is experiencing a relapse.

Jean is a member at our church. She would disappear for weeks on end and we really worried about her. She did not answer her door and we assumed that she had gone away. Eventually we found out that Jean was suffering from agoraphobia and couldn't leave her home or cope with visitors. We kept praying for Jean and putting church newsletters and notices through her door. The times when she is well enough to be with us she tells us how much this matters. We are learning to give her space and try to be sensitive in the questions we ask.

OFFER SUPPORT AT KEY POINTS IN LIFE

Experiences of birth, death or family breakdown can trigger episodes of mental distress. Church-run bereavement counselling and support groups can help identify people who are at risk of mental health problems, offer support and encourage them to get in touch with health professionals

PROMOTE MENTAL HEALTH OF WHOLE COMMUNITY

Mental illness is not just an individual experience. It can be experienced when whole communities are isolated and excluded. Churches can offer activities, social support and practical help to enable communities recover their sense of wellbeing.

Sally was very happy when she found she was pregnant with her first baby. Things seemed to go really well but a few weeks after Olivia was born Sally didn't seem to be coping. Our Minister wondered if she was suffering with post natal depression and was able to spend time with Sally offering support and encouraged people at church to help baby-sit from time to time. We couldn't help deal with the medical cause of Sally's depression but we were able to help out whilst she had treatment and began to get better. The baby's baptism was a really special time and included thanksgiving for Sally's health.

Winston has a son called Wes who is very unwell. He's been diagnosed as suffering from schizophrenia. Winston didn't tell anyone at church for ages but finally felt able to tell his pastoral visitor. It turns out that there are a lot of families in our neighbourhood with children coping with this illness. So we've set up a club called 'Time Out'. There's a lot on offer in our community for those with mental health problems but little support for their families. So we open our church for a morning and an evening a week, serving coffee and providing space for people to share how things are for them.

CARE FOR CARERS

What help and support is needed by people caring for those with mental health difficulties? Some churches offer support groups, others offer practical help such as respite services to allow carers to go shopping or to have time off.

CAMPAIGN

Find out about current issues in mental health policy and funding, and consider writing to your MP or campaigning for change. See overleaf for details.

RESOURCES AND SUPPORT

NHS Direct – 0845 4647

24 hour access to healthcare and advice provided by the NHS.

Samaritans – 08457 909 090

24 hour service offering confidential emotional support for people in distress.

MIND – 0845 766 01 63 www.mind.org.uk

Charity supporting people experiencing mental health problems and offering advice to sufferers, carers and professionals.

Alzheimer’s Society – 0845 300 03 36 www.alzheimers.org.uk

Charity offering care, support and information to sufferers of dementia related illness.

Rethink – 020 8974 68 14 www.rethink.org

Offers information, services and support to people affected by severe mental illness.

Mental Health Alliance www.mentalhealthalliance.org.uk

A coalition of organisations campaigning for better mental health legislation.

WEB BASED RESOURCES

For a very informative document that dispels some of the myths around mental health go to the link below.

www.mla.gov.uk/resources/assets//W/Working234_10346.pdf

The Church of England has produced a comprehensive document offering information, workshop sessions, practical advice and signposting to helpful resources. This can be found at:

www.cofe.anglican.org/info/socialpublic/homeaffairs/mentalhealth/parishresource.pdf

TRAINING FOR PASTORAL VISITORS

Encircled in Care is a new training resource for those involved in pastoral care in the church and community. It includes a module on Mental Health.

Available (Sept 07) from mph, 4 John Wesley Road, Peterborough PE4 6ZP.

01733 325002 **www.mph.org.uk**

For further information contact;

The Methodist Church, 25 Marylebone Road, London NW1 5JR