16 Resources for Mental Health Ministry

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If you're in ministry, people come to you with all sorts of needs and concerns. We know you're no superhero, as much as you might want to fix all that troubles the folks in your care. Sometimes you don't even have answers. But most of time you know there's something you can offer: a prayer, a listening ear, wise counsel, an idea, a relevant Scripture passage, a call to the deacons and a check from the benevolence fund. But when someone is dealing with a mental health problem—their own or a loved one's—you might feel like a deer standing face-to-face with a particularly luminous set of headlights.

Chances are, you and your staff have frequent interactions with people who live with mental illness. You probably don't always recognize the problem for what it is; sometimes you see it very clearly. And you might wonder why people with this sort of problem keep finding their way to your church, of all places.

Well, wonder no more. It's not you, and it's not your church. Historically, a member of the clergy is the number-one place people go when they seek help for mental illness. This is true for a variety of reasons, including a mental health care system that is notoriously difficult to access and relies on people with brain-based disorders to manage their own care through that system. Other reasons are inherent in the nature of faith communities: they offer spiritual experiences, promises of peace and joy, opportunities for community and for communion with God. These elements of church life are understandably attractive to many people with mental illness. Churches have a special responsibility to recognize this and respond intentionally.

When it comes to mental health problems, church leaders are first responders—consciously or unconsciously. Yet most pastors are underequipped and either fearful or overconfident in responding to mental health issues. The good news is, resources are available. No pastor has to wonder what in the world to do to help. The resources below won't make you a mental health expert and won't take away the challenge and heartbreak of ministry to people in serious pain. But they will help you understand what people are up against, what they need, your limitations, and how you can help.

(Note: These resources are in no particular order.)

1. Mental Health Grace Alliance This organization, co-founded by Dr. Stanford and Joe Padilla, is a multi-faceted, Christ-centered resource for people with mental illness and their families. Their focus is on recovery and living well with a mental health challenge. They provide support groups for people with mental illness and their families, coaching for people who are working toward recovery from a mental health crisis, and training for leaders.

2. Fresh Hope This organization was founded by Pastor Brad Hoefs, who lives with bipolar disorder. He understands both the challenges of ministry and the difficulty of living with serious mental illness. This is a Christ-centered support group ministry that equips churches to establish peer support for people who have mental illness and their loved ones.

3. *Grace for the Afflicted: A Clinical and Biblical Perspective on Mental Illness* This is a book by Dr. Matthew Stanford (Biblica Publishing, 2008). Dr. Stanford is a neuroscientist, a researcher, and a leader with a passion for seeing the church do great ministry among people affected by mental illness. This resource presents detailed information about various types of disorders, with biblical perspective on each.

4. *Troubled Minds: Mental Illness and the Church's Mission* This is a book by Amy Simpson (me!) (InterVarsity Press, 2013), who grew up in a family profoundly affected by schizophrenia. This book contains stories of individuals and families touched by mental illness, helps readers understand some of the challenges they face, and calls the church to fulfill its mission and extend Christ's love specifically to people who live with mental illness and often feel marginalized and rejected.

5. Hope for Mental Health Starter Kit This resource from Saddleback Church contains various multimedia materials that churches, large and small, can use to launch their own ministry to people living with mental illness.

6. National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) "America's largest grassroots mental health organization dedicated to improving the lives of individuals and families affected by mental illness," NAMI provides information, advocacy, support groups, referrals, and more. While not a faith-based organization, NAMI exists in part to provide the kind of support churches and their leaders need.

7. Local professionals Every church should form a network of local psychiatrists, psychologists, therapists, and social workers who have various specialties. Refer people to them for professional mental health care and emotional support, and consider using them as a resource for yourself and your staff. Paying for an hour of their time could net you a wealth of information about how you can support people who are living with various forms of mental health problems.

8. National Institute of Mental Health This federal government agency's site is packed with information about mental health and specific mental disorders, mental health research, and links to more resources.

9. Mental Health First Aid This program trains people to act as effective first responders in mental health crises. Why not have at least one trained staff person in your church?

10. Pathways to Promise A broadly faith-based resource that exists "to facilitate the faith community's work in reaching out to those with mental illnesses and their families." They offer information and resources for congregations and their leaders, some of it geared specifically to Christian ministry.

11. *On Edge: Mental Illness in the Christian Context* This book is written by Kristen Kansiewicz (Freedom Workshop Series, 2014), who serves as an on-staff therapist at East Coast International Church in Lynn, MA. She draws on her professional training and her experiences in ministry to help equip Christian leaders to better understand and respond to mental health problems.

12. *The Recovery-Minded Church: Loving and Ministering to People with Addiction* This is a book (InterVarsity Press, 2016) by ordained minister and certified addictions professional Jonathan Benz, with Kristina Robb-Dover. It gives helpful, detailed information about addictions, a Christian theological framework, and practical advice for church leaders who want to do effective ministry among people struggling with addiction.

13. *Grieving a Suicide: A Loved One's Search for Comfort, Answers, and Hope* Many people don't realize suicide is a mental health issue, with up to 90 percent of such deaths ultimately caused by mental illness. Al Hsu's book (InterVarsity Press, 2002; updated 2017) helps Christians understand the experience of losing a loved one to suicide, and what is (and is not) helpful in response.

14. *Christians Get Depressed Too* In this book (Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), seminary professor David P. Murray affirms that Christians do, indeed, suffer from depression just like everyone else. His clarity on this question alone is worth the price of this small book, but he also provides a wealth information about depression and how church leaders can offer helpful support.

15. *Darkness Is My Only Companion: A Christian Response to Mental Illness* Written by theologian and priest Kathryn Greene-McCreight, this book (Brazos Press, 2015) helps readers understand the experience of living with mental illness and how they can help. Greene-McCreight lives with bipolar disorder and provides an honest approach informed by her own experiences.

16. *Delight in Disorder: Ministry, Madness, Mission* Another author who lives with bipolar disorder, Tony Roberts also has two decades of experience as a pastor. This book (A Way with Words Publishing, 2014) is a memoir that is both frank and undeniably hopeful.