



▶ Questions:

- One of the issues in mental health is the life-long nature of many problems. How can we help to care for those who care?
- Is your church sensitive to issues of mental health? How can your church become more "mental health friendly"?
- Sometimes in churches we suggest that those struggling with depression or other mental health issues should "trust more in God to see them through". Is this fair or helpful?

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The Church of Scotland
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Mental Health Issues



Discussion Points



Mental Health Issues

What makes a church a good one to belong to if you are struggling with your mental health? Is it the fact they have a Counsellor on staff or have an annual Depression Awareness Day? Or is it that they are aware enough to care, small enough to notice and moving slowly enough to actually deliver? How can we assist those who wish to take that first perilous step of crossing the threshold one Sunday morning to see if the Peace really is shared!'

The term 'mental health problem' covers a wide range of problems which affect a person's ability to get on with their daily life. Mental health problems can affect anyone, of any age and background, and have an impact on the people around them such as their family, friends and carers. They take many different forms and affect people in different ways. There is no single cause of mental health problems and the reasons they develop are complex². Mental health impacts on all aspects of life, including our social status, our employment status, our relationships with those round about us, and on our status within the church.

Mental health problems can develop as a result of difficult life events, such as moving house, losing a job or the death of someone close. It is generally accepted that, on average, one in four people experience some kind of mental health problem. Of these, however, only a relatively small number experience a serious and enduring mental health problem. Some forms of mental illness present as an exaggeration of the normal emotions and moods which we all experience. However, it is when this interferes with a person's ability to cope with every-day life that they may be experiencing a mental health problem or illness.



Some people experience debilitating anxiety and panic attacks, while others may have disorders of mood, either serious depression or inappropriate elation and euphoria that is often accompanied by frenzied hyperactivity. There is no universally agreed demarcation between normal behaviour and behaviour associated with mental illness. Schizophrenia and personality disorders are also types of mental health problem. Diseases such as dementia generally develop in old age, whereas eating disorders are more common in young people. In serious illnesses, such as disorders of mood or schizophrenia, people can lose touch with reality and experience delusions (false beliefs) or hallucinations (false perceptions, such as seeing sights or hearing voices that don't exist). This can cause them to feel frightened or angry and appear to be acting (or reacting) irrationally. The label 'mental illness' is highly stigmatising. The burden which must be carried by those affected by mental health problems, and those who care for them, is not only heavy, but can be life-long. How can we support people through dark times? One of the best ways of dealing with mental health issues is through healthy relationships. Our churches should surely be places where everybody can be sure of

having someone to listen, somebody who cares and values each and every man, woman and child. The presence of the church as a community of people who care and who can simply 'be there' can be very important in times of need. At parish level, individual and congregational prayer is powerful. Support from pastoral care teams can provide invaluable ministry, promoting self esteem and a sense that a person's and family's journey and burden are shared. As Paul reminds us in his letter to the church in Galatia:

"Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ." (Galatians 6:2)

Next Steps

It is important to recognise that professional psychiatric, in addition to pastoral, support may be necessary, in which case the person should be advised to contact their GP or a member of the specialist healthcare team. Resources are available to help members of pastoral care teams to learn about mental illness and to help them to be a listening ear to people who are struggling with mental health problems, for example:

See Me... (www.seemescotland.org)

A national organisation working to challenge the stigma of mental ill- health

Breathing Space (www.breathingspacescotland.co.uk)

A free and confidential helpline targeted at people experiencing low mood, depression or extreme worry

Samaritans (www.samaritans.org)

A confidential emotional support service available 24 hours a day for people who are experiencing feelings of distress or despair

¹ Mental Health and the Friendly Church, Waller, R, Seedall, S and T Wood, Accord (Magazine of the Association of Christian Counsellors) January 2011

² Mental Health Foundation. www.mentalhealth.org.uk/information/mental-health-overview/mental-health-problems/ accessed 18/01/2015.