

Pointers For Successful Conversations About Mental Health

Conversations about mental health, both public and private, sometimes can be complicated and difficult, especially in a religious context. Below are some Do's and Don'ts that may help.

DO:

- Be careful to respect your congregants' confidentiality. Many people with mental illness have endured stigma for many years. They may not want others to know they have mental health challenges, substance use disorder, neurodevelopmental difference, or other brain disorder, so always check with the person before talking about their condition publicly.
- Watch your language. Avoid stigmatizing words like "crazy," "nuts" and "psycho."
- Listen without being judgmental or offering advice.
- Talk to others of God's unconditional love for them and your care and concern for them.
- Pray for balance in their lives and tolerance in yours.
- Gently educate those who spread misinformation about mental health challenges, substance use disorders, and brain differences, or perpetuate negative stereotypes.
- Treat persons affected by mental health challenges and their families with compassion, not condescension. Most don't want pity, just understanding and the ability to bring their whole selves and their stories to the congregation.
- Educate yourself about mental health challenges, understanding that some individuals may need more than spiritual counseling. Refer them to appropriate mental health professionals while continuing to support them as a spiritual friend.

DON'T:

- Don't tell a person with a mental health challenge or substance use disorder to just pray harder. That would not be appropriate advice for someone with cancer or a heart condition, and it is not appropriate for someone with mental illness. Mental illnesses are biological conditions that may have environmental triggers, and frequently respond well to therapies and/or medications, just like other disorders.
- Don't use shame or guilt as a motivator. For many who suffer from mental health challenges and substance use disorders, shame and inappropriate guilt may exacerbate their problems.
- Don't look down on persons with mental illness or substance use disorders for using medications to control their symptoms. Someone with depression using antidepressants is no different from someone with diabetes using insulin.
- Don't forget to find simple ways to support family members and friends of people living with a mental illness. A card, a meal, and your supportive listening can be healing.
- Don't shy away from talking with a person who has let it be known they are living with a mental health challenge, substance use disorder, or brain difference.

Some of the above content was adapted from an article by Jan Lutz, "The 'Do's and 'Don'ts of Ministry," published by NAMI Faith-Net.