



Spiritually Supporting Young Folks With Mental Illness

Our spiritual communities are at their best when we support one another. In order to support young adults with mental illness well, we need to fight the stigma, watch for signs, reach out proactively, and maintain healthy boundaries.

Stigma

The stigma and shame surrounding mental illness make it difficult to access care and support. It's important to talk about mental illness openly and not use stereotypes when discussing it.

- If you're a youth or young adult you could share in joys and sorrows about people in your life who have mental illness or your own mental health struggles. Remember to maintain healthy boundaries and confidentiality, and not go into inappropriate details.
- If you're an advisor you can calmly acknowledge mental illness when it comes up in discussion and watch out for stereotypes, [such as people attributing gun violence to mentally ill people](#) after a shooting incident in the news.
- If you're a religious educator - talk about it with teachers, parents and advisors
- If you're a minister, preach about mental illness or support a young person in sharing their story appropriately in worship.
- Be careful with language! There are some great [non-ableist alternatives](#) to saying things like "That's crazy!" or "I'm so OCD about..."

Watch for signs

While adolescence is often a stage with many changes, don't necessarily write off dramatic changes in personality, behavior or action as being "a moody teenager." Here are some things to watch out for from a [Pastoral Care Webinar](#):

- Dramatic change in emotional state
- Giving away possessions
- Connecting with people with a pattern of significant behavioral health issues, particularly suicidal ideation
- Indicating high levels of stress
- Physical withdrawal
- Clothing to intentionally cover up evidence of self-harm or extreme weight loss

If you notice any of these signs, here are some things you can do to attend to these warning signs:

- Advisor: Proactively create a plan for when young people share very personal things during youth group or go deeper than you anticipated. Know who to include in their circle of support.
- Parent: Follow your instinct and check in with your child, offer unconditional love.
- Peer: Don't take responsibility for your peer's problems but do offer to listen without judgment and identify who can help. See the section on maintaining healthy boundaries below.



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Reach out proactively

It can be really hard for young people to admit they are struggling or to ask for help. Sometimes they will be more likely to open up to a friend or religious professional than their own parents. Remember that particularly when people are depressed they might be unresponsive to messages, cancel plans or stay home. So you may have to reach out again!

Some simple ways to reach out:

Peer to peer:

“Hey we missed you at church today! Can we catch up soon? I’m free on Wednesday”

“You seem really stressed out, you wanna talk about it?”

Advisor to youth:

“We missed you at youth group today. I always appreciate your sense of humor and presence in the group. Can I help you figure out a ride for next week?”

“You said in check in that you’re so stressed you can’t sleep. That sounds rough, can we talk more about what’s going on?”

“Eliza is in the hospital recovering from an eating disorder right now. She and her parents gave me permission to tell you all. Let’s write her a card and send her a care package.”

Maintain healthy boundaries

Spiritual communities are vital and it’s also important to be clear that they aren’t a therapy office, a medical establishment or the place to get all needs met. We can love and support people best when we are clear about our role and make sure to care for ourselves as well.

Peers can:

- Refer people to advisors, religious educators, ministers or other trusted professionals
- Remind people that there are peer support groups out there and they can try to find one in the community with the help of someone they trust
- Tell people what you can and can’t do (“I’m so glad you’re sharing with me, but i need to study now so i have to stop texting. Let’s talk more tomorrow.” or “I can’t take you to therapy tomorrow but I can text you encouragement before you go”)

Youth advisors can:

- Accept that youth may reach out to you at a time when it’s impossible to follow your safe congregations policy. For example, they may text or call you in distress when your congregation has a policy of no one-on-one, private communication between youth and adults. Respond to the crisis and ensure the youth is safe, then let them know you want to loop your supervisor or another trusted adult into the conversation.
- Preface difficult conversations with youth by reminding them of your role as a mandatory reporter and your desire to expand their circle of confidentiality and support.
- Tell people clearly what you can and can’t do (“I’m so glad you’re sharing with me. Since I’m not a therapist, let’s talk with our DRE to see if they can refer you to a good one,” “this is really important, I want to make sure you have the support you need, I can’t keep this a secret,” or “I can help you find a peer support group in the community.”)



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Young Adult and Campus Ministry Leaders can:

- Maintain a list of trusted people and organizations to refer young folks to. If you're on campus, ask around about on campus services. Is the health center good? Are they trans friendly? Supportive to students of color? If not on campus, get to know mental health organizations in town. What places have sliding scale rates? What places have queer, trans and person of color practitioners and/or anti-oppressive lenses? Peer support groups can be especially helpful, so finding young adult focused or friendly peer support groups in your community to recommend is great.
- Tell people clearly what you can and can't do ("I'm so glad you're sharing with me. I can talk with you until 2:00 pm" or "I'm not able to drive you to that support group, but I can connect you with the caring team at the congregation to see if a volunteer can offer that support.")
- Make sure you're doing your own work on any ongoing mental health issues and on any past issues from when you were young. It can be powerful to draw on our own stories for solidarity, but we also need to keep the focus on them and their story.