

Tips for Getting Ready for Mental Health Sunday

*By Rev. Leah Robberts-Mosser, Community UCC, Champaign, Illinois
and Dr. Ken Gilbert, psychiatrist*

Thanks for sharing the Good News! Whenever we speak openly and honestly about mental health, we lessen the stigma surrounding it and beckon people into the wholeness of New Life in Christ. By celebrating Mental Health Sunday as a church, you participate in this important, life-giving Gospel work.

Tips for Mental Health Sunday:

1. **Don't do it alone:** get the congregation involved. Work in partnership with your Worship Team to plan and prepare this service. Invite people to participate. For instance, when Community UCC, Champaign, Illinois, decided to host a Mental Health Sunday, a simple invitation was issued to the congregation asking people to take part. "There are a variety of ways you can participate in leading this important worship service – from reading prayers and liturgy, to telling a story from your life experience about mental health/mental illness." After this invitation was issued, the pastor worked with volunteers to match their gifts, skills, and interests with the opportunities available. Those who have had experience with mental illness are a rich resource for the work and worship of the church! Tap this resource.

2. **Work with your people who feel called to speak about their experience:**
Remember, you are asking people to speak in the face of great stigma. About a quarter of all Americans are directly impacted by mental illness because of either their experience mental illness or their relationship with some who lives with it, and yet, we continue to be silent. You may need to create a variety of ways people can participate, meeting their comfort levels.

- **Option 1: telling their stories:** People who feel led to tell their story may be talking publically about their experience for the very first time. Create a model for sharing their experience that is user friendly. Coach people as they prepare. Here is a helpful model to offer your volunteer speakers. Via email or a planning meeting, offer this framework for preparation:

Would you be willing to write and share your "mental health autobiography"? Between now and Mental Health Sunday (or the practice date), write your story down, then time yourself reading it out loud – keep it under 4 minutes. Let it alone for a few days. Go back to it and make changes, if you want. Be sure you are sharing things you are comfortable sharing.

Offer an opportunity for people giving these testimonies to gather together, in the space where they will be given to practice and listen to one another prior to your Mental Health Sunday. Practice doesn't make perfect – it makes a difficult thing easier.

- **Option 2: being visible:** If your congregation does not have people willing to share their

story, you may have persons willing to be visible about their life with mental illness. Assign these folks an element of worship to lead, prefaced by a simple introduction that uplifts who they are as a whole person. For instance, ask Mary Smith, who is willing to name herself as someone living with bipolar disorder, to lead the call to worship. Mary's script might look like this:

Good morning. My name is Mary Smith. I am a grandmother, a teacher at Anytown USA Middle School, a lover of nature, an avid baker, and I live with bipolar disorder. Would you join me in the Call to Worship?

Personalize a simple script for each person. Gather folks together, with their introduction scripts and their parts for worship to practice prior to worship.

3. **Behold the power of naming it:** Jesus named the unnamable things all the time and new life abounded! When we name mental illness as part of our lives, instead of hiding behind the walls created by it, we lessen the power of stigma. Remember that almost all mental illnesses are chronic. They wax and wane in severity. Typically no casseroles, no prayers, and no cards of encouragement from the congregation come when that happens. Stigma and the silence that accompanies it leave those with mental illness suffering from isolation. Putting names and faces on mental illness make it possible for people to mention their illness and ask for support when they need it.

4. **Be mindful of language:** pick hymns, choose scriptures and craft liturgy carefully. Don't talk about "the mentally ill" but, rather, talk about persons with mental illness. Affirm the humanity of people, rather than creating more boundaries between them. Check out the worship planning resource offered by our Mental Health Network to jumpstart your creativity.

Expect New Life!

Hear from Ken Gilbert, local UCC member and psychiatrist, about the impact of his church's Mental Illness Sunday.

"My own congregation decided to invite persons who have a history of mental illness themselves to fill in the role of liturgist for the day. The four volunteers were assigned various parts of the service normally done by the liturgist. Before their part, each person told a quick story, no more than 3 minutes, about their experience of mental illness. An amazing thing happened! It was obvious, suddenly, that these people, people who live with mental illness, were part of the work and worship of our congregation! For each of them, this was the first time that they had felt able to openly talk about their history. There was a sense of the sacred in the sanctuary as these powerful but brief stories were shared. Later, I checked with our pastor to see how the service was received. Several people approached her with request to be the ones who get to share their stories the next time we do Mental Health Sunday."

Miracles abound. New life springs forth. Walls that divide are broken down and the stone gets rolled away. Thanks for hosting a Mental Health Sunday.