



Challenging the Stigma

A diagnosis of mental ill health often, wrongly, comes with a sense of shame. Whatever their cause or trigger, mental health difficulties can be exacerbated by this stigma, which can become internalised. Mental health is an issue in every community and should be high on every church's agenda. Understanding and awareness of mental health has increased over recent years, but sadly it is often still a taboo subject, swept under the carpet and ignored. This can perpetuate the stigma and make it even more painful for those who suffer and for their relatives.

One of the main aims of Being Alongsid is to raise awareness of mental health issues among church and other faith communities. We believe that the whole community, not just those who are in distress, will reap the benefits of openness and honesty.

There are many ways faith communities can raise awareness:

- Small group discussions or information meetings
- Talks or sermons
- Inclusion in prayers or intercessions
- Training for pastoral workers
- Accessible literature and information
- Articles in faith/parish magazines
- Positive attitudes and openness

A good start to increasing awareness might be to hold a seminar, open meeting or film evening. Our experiences show that there is a huge but often hidden interest in mental health. When people come together to discuss mental health, they often feel less isolated in their own experiences and become emboldened. If the speakers are open and honest about their own experiences, it can lead others in the audience to open up about their own thoughts or challenges.

Of course there are many different ways of doing things. You will soon find out what works in your context. Set out overleaf are some ideas and tips from our own experience. We hope they may be of some help. Please feel free to share this factsheet more widely.

Budget and Funding:

You will need to consider the cost of any venue, refreshments, speaker fees and expenses, literature and publicity in advance.

Planning:

It can be helpful to set up a planning group to consider:

- **Theme** – eg “Understanding Mental Health” or “Hope Through the Darkness”. You may wish to focus on particular disorders, the importance of friendship, and

challenging stigma. It is best to avoid “mental illness” as a phrase and focus on “mental health challenges” or “mental health difficulties”.

- **Speakers** – It is good to include at least one speaker with experience of mental distress. Local mental health teams may be able to provide a professional input too. A mix of professional and personal experience works well.
- **Format** – Consider showing a film or film clip with a mental health theme or listen to a podcast. You may wish to invite a speaker or two with the opportunity for questions, small discussion groups or an open discussion. You may wish to close with a time of worship or reflection. You may like to find ways to encourage those with mental health challenges to share their stories, art, music or poetry. A coffee break encourages mingling and conversation. You will also need to choose appropriate leaders/facilitators, decide on the composition of small groups and whether to set them questions, as well as to feed back to the wider group or not. Groups of 3-4 without a pre-determined leader and without pressure to feed back to a wider group tend to work best.
- **Chair/Facilitator** – this person should be able to encourage people to relax and speak openly without dominating proceedings. This can be difficult in a mental health context as some in emotional pain will feel the need to talk while others will prefer to remain silent. The opinions of all present should be acknowledged.
- **Venue** – Consider the size and accessibility of your venue, facilities for catering and the space to break out into small groups. Church halls often work well and are modestly priced. We would recommend a session not lasting longer than a couple of hours.
- **Publicity** – word of mouth often works best but fliers and posters on community/faith noticeboards or appropriate social media sites are useful sources of information and publicity. Be careful not to spread your net too wide initially.
- **Safeguarding** – Make clear in your publicity that the event is a discussion/information event rather than a service offering personal support to individuals. Also ensure that the Chair and other leaders are aware of key contact points within local statutory services, in the event that issues or concerns arise about an individual's wellbeing.
- **Booking arrangements** – consider whether to charge a fee for the session or ask for a suggested donation. Pre-booking can create extra work but is helpful for catering purposes. Joining instructions sent out in advance avoid confusion but should be kept simple. It can be useful to include contact details for further information as well as any publicity material/leaflets you may have.
- **Evaluation** – if you hope to hold future events, it can be useful to ask your attendees for feedback before they leave or hold a follow-up meeting between the organisers.