

# MAY IS MENTAL HEALTH MONTH

## Steps Pastors and Congregations Can Take to Prepare for the Mental Health Impacts of COVID-19

- 1. NORMALIZE MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES.** Mental health challenges are very common in ordinary times. Around half of us will have a diagnosable mental health condition at some point in our lives. In times of crisis and prolonged stress, mental health vulnerability increases for everyone, and pre-existing issues can be exacerbated. Relationships may become strained, increasing a risk of violence in partner and parent-child relationships. In this pandemic many people, such as front-line health workers, first responders, essential service workers, and people who lose loved ones or are separated from them, have added exposure to traumatic stress. Pre-existing exposure to chronic stress and trauma is compounded for people of color already living with the impacts of structural racism who are now disproportionately at risk of dying from COVID-19, as well as for adults and children already lacking secure access to food, shelter and health care before the pandemic, along with other vulnerable groups.
- 2. TALK ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH.** Make mental health a safe topic to talk about in your congregation by talking about it in sermons and lifting it up in prayer. During Mental Health Month, consider writing a pastoral email/letter about the importance of caring for mental health and including links to resources that members may find helpful for themselves or someone they know. Local service links could be provided along with a link to [COVID-19 Mental Health Resources](#) on the Presbyterian Mental Health Ministry website, which includes national helplines and selected resources for adults, children, faith leaders and people with pre-existing mental health concerns. It can be accessed in multiple languages.
- 3. CONNECT, CONNECT, CONNECT AND LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND.** Isolation and loneliness are enemies of mental health. Close and caring relationships, and communities of support and belonging, are among our most powerful tools for reducing risk, preventing relapse, and supporting healing and recovery. Digital spaces can be used to host prayer and peer support groups, study groups, and community groups like AA and NAMI Family-to-Family meetings. Card-writing and calling networks can reach out to people without internet access or skills.
- 4. PRACTICE AND ENCOURAGE STRESS MANAGEMENT AND SELF-CARE.** Building Resilience Webinars, produced by Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, are excellent one-hour programs designed to increase participants' understanding of their own signs of stress and to teach in-the-moment tools to engage the relaxation response in body and mind. There are two versions, (general audiences, faith leaders). The webinars can be [downloaded](#) and used by individuals or groups or can be offered live upon request.

One in four people who seek help for mental health concerns turn to faith leaders before they seek help from clinical professionals.<sup>1</sup>



1. P.S. Wang, P.A. Bergland, & R.C. Kessler, 2003. "Patterns and correlates of contacting clergy for mental disorders in the United States," *Health Services Research*, 38(2), 647-673. [more info](#).

**5. TAKE ADVANTAGE OF ONLINE “FIRST RESPONDER” TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES** in the skills of mental health first aid and suicide prevention. Virtual trainings can enable ministers and others to acquire or “refresh” the basic knowledge and skills needed to understand and intervene in a helpful and role-appropriate way when someone is experiencing a mental health concern or crisis. Like medical first aid training, they do not equip someone to diagnose or treat and are not a substitute for appropriate professional support. [Mental Health First Aid Training](#) (coming soon in a virtual option) is highly respected training that covers basic information about common mental health issues and a five-step action plan for intervening. [QPR Suicide Prevention Training](#) is available online in a one-hour module for general audiences. [Psychological First Aid Online](#), developed by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, is focused on trauma and the principles of psychological first aid in the context of a disaster and would be appropriate for clergy or volunteers in a disaster agency. The [Trauma Pastoral Care Series](#) (15 training videos produced by PDA) is intended for pastors caring for those experiencing human-caused trauma or experiencing trauma themselves, so not all videos will apply to the current context, but they provide helpful information about the dynamics of trauma, compassion fatigue and resilience. Congregations and mid councils may wish to apply for a Mental Health Ministry grant to make funding for training available.

**6. RECRUIT SEVERAL MEMBERS WITH A PASSION FOR MENTAL HEALTH** to help the congregation focus on becoming more “mental health friendly” and equipped. Include people with lived experience of mental health challenges who are open to talking about their experience and might help write newsletter articles or be available for peer conversations.

**7. REACH BEYOND YOUR CHURCH WALLS.** Times of crisis present opportunities to transcend divisions and come together in collective expressions of caring, compassion, gratitude and solidarity that help everyone to feel less alone, more supported and empowered, including children. Communities are ringing bells, clapping from porches and windows, and lighting landmarks in bright blue to show appreciation for health-care workers. Chalk drawings of rainbows and messages of hope and gratitude are appearing on sidewalks. People are sewing masks, delivering meals and shopping for neighbors, and musicians across the world are coming together online to make music that connects and uplifts. Green lights are appearing in neighborhood windows and porches to express compassion, renewal and unity. Encourage members to start or join efforts in your community.

**8. CONSIDER APPLYING FOR A MENTAL HEALTH MINISTRY GRANT** PC(USA) congregations, mid councils and seminaries are eligible to apply for one-time mental health ministry seed grants.

[More information and an application](#)

“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.” *Isaiah 40:1*

