

Making Choices for a Balanced Life

By Kay Rittenhouse

Persons with a mental illness, their family and their friends need to plan carefully for mental health options. One person living with a mental illness put it this way: “I must pay particular attention to my diet, my exercise, my stress level and my recreation or the illness will cycle back.”

The diagnosis of schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, clinical depression or panic disorder brings those involved to a crossroads. One option is to choose denial and pretend this particular challenge has not come to your family or church. Another choice is to accept the challenge and plan for a hopeful response.

Our Master Teacher did not avoid the challenges of life. He gave examples of healthy, hopeful responses. Below are four such responses when learning to live with a severe and persistent mental illness.

Time to Reflect

Jesus withdrew to the wilderness to reflect after his baptism. He came from a fishing village and had worked in a carpenter’s shop. Life would be different now. Choices must be made. Jesus withdrew to the Mount of Olives to reflect on his coming death. He asked for the support of friends at this difficult time. Many with mental illness are now asking for the support of their church.

Persons with a mental illness,

their family and their friends know too that life will be different now. Difficult choices must be made. Treatment is costly and there are many gaps in services. Carefully made plans and preparations may no longer be an option. Many friends and resources will be withdrawn and new support systems must be established. Nothing in our society has prepared people for understanding mental illnesses and what is not understood is usually feared. How can one avoid being paralyzed by fear? Time to reflect thoughtfully, prayerfully and realistically is part of a hopeful response.

Letting Go

Jesus gave us many examples of “letting go” of past beliefs or practices. The Ten Commandments were fulfilled as he taught followers to love God and to love others as themselves. According to law, the adulterous woman should be stoned but none of her accusers would claim to be sinless and cast the first stone.

Persons with a mental illness, their family and their friends must painfully “let go” of shattered dreams, of important social contacts who can’t be bothered, and of carefree living. A person and family must also be willing to “let go” of some favorite traditions and practices if they are no longer helpful. How to “let go” and what to “let go” require thoughtful reflection.

As a person and family learn

Many times families living with mental illnesses are unable to express their pain, sorrow and spiritual needs because churches do not realize the prevalence of mental illness and sometimes perpetuate the stigma associated with having a mental illness.

The National Alliance on Mental Illness states that one in four families in the United States live with mental illness. One church of 50 families reported that 15 families were living with mental illness.

Voice: Mental Illness Ministry of the Association of Brethren Caregivers seeks to educate congregations about mental illness and to remove stigmas that prevent individuals and families from seeking the support of a church community.

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**Association of
Brethren Caregivers**
1451 Dundee Ave., Elgin, IL 60120
(847) 742-5100, (800) 323-8039
www.brethren-caregivers.org

how to live with mental illness and how to make healthy, hopeful responses they also must “let go” of the burden of guilt. Guilt is not a burden often discussed but hangs heavy on the hearts of those dealing with mental illness. The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) reminds all concerned that “You can’t know what no one has told you.”

Walking in Faith Together

“Follow me” was the call given to disciples beside the Sea of Galilee and it is the call given to Christians today. We are not asked to walk alone but to be in a faith community. Jesus knew the importance of spending time with his friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus. He entrusted his message to a few chosen followers.

Persons with a mental illness, their family and their friends must build bonds of friendship and confidentiality. To walk alone means one is among strangers, often in strange environments, with the possible threat of suicide. To discuss a mental illness openly in the present climate of stigma might mean the loss of health insurance, the loss of a job, the loss of family. Individuals in a faith community who choose to walk with someone who has a mental illness must respect the privacy and confidentiality of that person. The person with a mental illness is the one who “breaks the silence,” except in situations where his/her life is in danger.

Walking in faith together literally means feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, helping the sick and visiting those in prison. When someone has an

untreated mental illness, they are often hungry, thirsty, acting strangely, without adequate clothing, sick and/or in the criminal justice system.

Creative Problem Solving

Jesus advised putting new wine in new wineskins. He turned water into wine for an embarrassed host. He lived a life of love and the powers of might could not overcome it.

Persons with a mental illness, their family and friends must constantly be considering new options for solving problems. The illness brings so many unknowns. Often one sees ahead only a step at a time. One must “let go” of what has not worked in the past, reflect on possibilities for the present, and counsel with trusted friends before making choices. Options might include such simple actions as having medicine at two different places while traveling. They may be as complex as working through an Advance Directive so those making decisions when the illness is most severe will follow the ill person’s wishes.

In conclusion, the diagnosis of a mental illness is not a death sentence. Treatment works. People with mental illness, families, churches and communities are banding together to learn how to give effective support. As we learn, we gain enormous respect for the person with a mental illness who faces life bravely and courageously. As families and as church fellowships we stand at the crossroads. When someone dealing with the issues of mental illness invites us to walk in faith with them, let us respond with hope in love.

Offering Hope: The Church’s Role with Mental Illness

This year’s Health Promotion Sunday (May 21) theme is “Offering Hope: The Church’s Role in Mental Illness.”

Many worship, awareness-raising and educational materials will be provided on this theme for Church of the Brethren congregations to use for Health Promotion Sunday. These materials will be available March 1 for downloading from ABC’s website at www.brethren-caregivers.org. Individuals or congregations wanting printed materials should call ABC at (800) 323-8039 or e-mail this request to: nminer_abc@brethren.org.

About the Author

Kay Rittenhouse is a family member of a person with mental illness. She serves as a NAMI State Trainer for Family-to-Family Teachers and Support Group Facilitators and as a national trainer for State Support Group Trainers. Kay also volunteers with the NAMI St. Louis affiliate and NAMI Missouri.

She serves the Church of the Brethren by working on Voice: Mental Illness Ministry of the Association of Brethren Caregivers.