



Welcoming Congregations: Fact Sheet for Providers

Religious and spiritual involvements are often key components of community life, as they can be a source of hope, emotional and social support, and a tool for coping.

Why is this important?

For many people, religion can be integral to recovery and provide a sense of community. In fact, faith communities are often approached first by members experiencing mental illness and their families and 77.6% of individuals with psychiatric disabilities consider going to a church, synagogue, or other place of worship to be important. Yet, 58.9% of those individuals report engaging in religious activities less often than desired. Many times, religious leaders are not educated about mental health issues and people may worry that they may face discrimination if they are open about their challenges. Psychiatrists and other clinicians are often also hesitant to discuss religion or spirituality with their clients. While many religious communities have support groups, there are ways to foster a welcoming congregation for individuals with psychiatric disabilities, one that allows members with mental health challenges to fully engage in their community.

Potential Barriers to Participation

When supporting the individuals with whom you work to increase their participation in religious and/or spiritual organizations, it is important to identify potential barriers they may experience.

- **Stigma/Discrimination**
 - o Lack of knowledge of mental health can result in religious communities perpetuating stigma and members with mental illness may face discrimination. As you identify religious organizations the consumers you support would like to attend, offer to work with the consumer and religious leaders to increase their knowledge of mental health conditions to decrease the potential for stigma and/or discrimination.
- **Lack of training**
 - o Most theological training does not include knowledge of mental health interventions. However, there are organizations like Pathways to Promise, which has started a Mental Health Training Collaborative, that act to help faith communities empower peers and their families. The Caring Congregations Curriculum is another resource that can help congregations welcome and integrate peers and their families. Reach out to local religious organizations to either provide trainings or help them become aware of resources that exist and may benefit current and/or future members who experience serious mental health conditions.
- **Limited time and resources**
 - o Sometimes religious leaders may be overwhelmed by the variety of issues surrounding mental health and may lack the time or resources to adequately address them. Mental Health Ministries, and organizations like it, make short informational videos that can

work within busy schedules while providing information that can be used to support and include people with mental health conditions.

Strategies to support consumers

There are a variety of strategies providers may use when helping a client engage with their communities through religious organizations.

- **Develop a support plan**
 - Work to develop an individualized support plan with the consumer to identify strategies that would help him/her successfully engage with the congregation of choice. Supports might include developing a calendar with reminders, finding the best route to the location, identifying potential groups/supports within the religious/spiritual organization to help sustain participation, among others.
- **Supported participation**
 - Providers may act go along with a consumer, acting as a liaison between consumers and religious organizations. This allows the provider to better understand the role a religious organization has in the consumer's life and what they may be looking for. Going with someone may help reduce anxiety. Co-participation may also be an opportunity to work with the consumer to identify additional supports he or she might need to support continued participation.
- **Identify groups/events within the organization**
 - Religious organizations often times have many groups, events, and activities for enhancing community among its members. Providers can ask about various activities consumer could be involved with at a religious organization. There may be opportunities that are geared towards new members that might help answer any initial questions.
- **Draw from natural supports**
 - Encourage consumers to draw from natural supports that may be helpful as they find ways to engage with their community. Such supports can help one to develop a sense of social belonging, dignity and self-esteem. These natural supports like friends, family, neighbors, or other reciprocal (give-and-take) relationships in the community can help consumers participate more fully.

Sources:

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