



Welcoming Congregations: Fact Sheet for Consumers

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.

What do we mean by Religion and Spirituality?

This includes an array of mainstream religious congregations (e.g., Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim), as well as a diverse array of spiritual groups from older traditions (e.g., Zen or Buddhism) and newer perspectives (e.g., contemporary meditation practices, breath work). All are organized around a core system of beliefs, with established memberships, leadership, rituals and practices. However, it is the combination of faith and fellowship these organizations offer that appeals so strongly to those with and without mental health conditions.

Why is it important?

Individuals with serious mental health conditions consider Religion and Spirituality important among life domains. Even if the religious aspect is not as important to you, many people connect to religious or spiritual organizations because they provide a sense of community. Recent research has found that spirituality and meaning making is important to one's mental health, provides greater opportunities for social connections, and contributes to one's recovery.

The Numbers

77% of those with serious mental illnesses say that going to religious events and ceremonies are important to them, and of those, 58% said that they would like to increase participation.

Barriers to Participation

The barriers to participation are often specific to the individual; however, these are common barriers that might prevent someone with a serious mental health condition from connecting to the community.

- **Anxiety**
 - Going to a new place or joining a new community can be difficult. When going to a religious or spiritual community for the first time, one might feel like an outsider and have concerns because it's a new place with new people, and unknown expectations.
- **Stigma or Discrimination**
 - Many consumers who participate (or wish to participate) in religious/spiritual communities carry a fear of prejudice or discrimination of disclosing mental health status. Some people in religious communities may also have misunderstandings about the cause of mental health conditions and may provide advice that contradicts how the consumer manages his or her symptoms.
- **Lack of awareness**
 - Religious leaders or other members of the community might not be educated about mental health issues. As a consumer, you may be unsure of how to approach these individuals for advice. A consumer might wish to speak with their religious/spiritual leader about symptoms

they're having and, potentially, be met with misinformation or even being told that symptoms are a result of moral/spiritual failure.

Strategies to Increase Participation

- **Educate mental health professionals**
 - If connecting to a religious or spiritual organization is a meaningful activity, it is important to share this goal with your mental health professional. They may be able to work with you to develop strategies that will help you be successful. Mental health professionals may be initially hesitant to discuss the topic of religion/spirituality. Expressing your interest in this area may increase their willingness to discuss this topic.
- **Educate religious communities**
 - Often religious/spiritual communities want to support their members, but may not know how. If you are in a community or know someone who is in a community that you would like to join, let them know what supports you might need. Share literature about existing programs such as WISE, which stands for **Welcoming, Inclusive, Supportive, and Engaged**. Other examples might include diversity programs, where consumers can speak to the community, or other programs to welcome all individuals.
- **Peer Support**
 - If you have a friend or family member who is connected to a religious or spiritual organization, ask if you can attend with that person. Going with someone who is already a member of the community may help reduce anxiety. If you don't know anyone who attends a religious organization, find out if there are Peer Support Specialists who might be willing to initially attend with you to help reduce anxiety.
- **Seek additional community connections**
 - Many religious/spiritual organizations have opportunities for members and visitors to make connections. New member meetings, small groups, volunteer opportunities, and even meals are often focused on helping people feel connected to the community. Reach out to the religious/spiritual organization to see what 'new member' opportunities there may be. Or work with your provider and/or peer support specialist to help make those connections.

Sources

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2. The Temple University Collaborative on Community Inclusion (2012). Helping People Connect to the Religious Congregations and Spiritual Groups of Their Choice: The Role of Peer Specialists: Temple University Collaborative on Community Inclusion of Individuals with Psychiatric Disabilities. [Available at www.tucollaborative.org](http://www.tucollaborative.org)
3. The Temple University Collaborative on Community Inclusion (2015). Developing Welcoming Faith Communities: Inspiring Examples of Faith-Based Initiatives to Help Individuals with Mental Health Conditions Participate Fully in the Life of Religious Congregations. [Available at www.tucollaborative.org](http://www.tucollaborative.org)
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