

10 Things Faith Community Leaders Can Do to Make The World a Better Place for People with Mental Illnesses

- 1** Make sure you know **when** to refer people to mental health professionals and **where** to refer them when the need arises. Learn more at www.CaringClergyProject.org/makingreferrals.html. You can also refer congregants and family members to a variety of support groups and classes.
- 2** Stay in touch with the person with mental illness and his or her family after you make a referral. People with mental illness and their family members need your ongoing support.
- 3** Encourage your congregation to treat people with mental illnesses the same way they treat people with other illnesses. Offer to visit them when they are hospitalized. With their permission, ask your members to send them cards and bring them casseroles when they are ill.
- 4** Plan a specific day to focus on mental health (perhaps in conjunction with Mental Health Month in May or Mental Illness Awareness Week in October). Say specific prayers for people with schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, anxiety disorders, depression and other mental illnesses.
- 5** Talk about mental illness in your sermons, classes, and adult forums, especially when you are addressing compassionate outreach, social justice and erasing stigma and discrimination. Talking openly about mental illnesses reduces the grip of stigma. Emphasize the biological nature of brain disorders and remind your congregations that they can affect anyone, regardless of age, race, religion or income. Mental illnesses are not the result of personal weakness, lack of character or poor upbringing.
- 6** Pay attention to the words you use. Avoid stigmatizing language and encourage everyone in your congregation to do the same. Do not refer to people as "crazy," "psycho," "lunatic" or "mental." Use phrases like "people with mental illnesses" rather than "the mentally ill."
- 7** Educate your congregation. Bring in speakers from NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness), the medical community and your local mental health center. Run a series of articles in your congregation's newsletter. Show videos on the subject and then encourage your congregation to discuss the issues raised.
- 8** If you have a peace and justice ministry, encourage them to get involved in the systemic problems that affect people with mental illness. More people with mental illnesses are in jails and prisons than are in mental hospitals. Programs for people with mental illnesses are underfunded and axed quickly when budgets need to be cut. Many chronically homeless people have chronic mental illnesses.
- 9** Housing and jobs are critical to the recovery process. Encourage members of your community to help find jobs and provide housing options for people with mental illnesses.
- 10** Start a spiritual support group in your faith community for people with mental health challenges and their families. For resources that will help you structure the support group, go to www.inmi.us/resources.html.