

Mental Health: Out of the Darkness, Into the Light

Developed for NFCYM by Sean Van Gieson, Washington DC (October, 2015)

Introduction

October is Mental Health Awareness month where many organizations will work to raise awareness for mental health issues especially among youth and young adults who are at the critical age when many symptoms of mental illness will first appear. Did you know fifty percent of people who struggle with mental health conditions start developing these conditions by age fourteen? Help raise awareness for mental health conditions by hosting an event and start the conversation with the youth about mental health.

This session will assist leaders in raising awareness of mental health conditions among youth so they may become more comfortable talking about and addressing the issues. The National Alliance for Mental Illness (<https://www.nami.org/>) provides videos, statistics, resources, and tips on how to talk to youth about these issues.

Learning Outcomes

1. Youth will be able to identify signs/symptoms of teens with mental health conditions.
2. Youth will be equipped with some tools to talk to their peers who have mental health conditions.
3. Youth will be able to identify at least three places to which they can refer peers with mental health conditions.

Opening Prayer (Ask for one volunteer to read)

Reader: Psalms 23 (NAB)

The LORD is my shepherd, there is nothing I lack. In green pastures he makes me lie down; to still waters he leads me: he restores my soul. He guides me along right paths for the sake of his name.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff comfort me.

You set a table before me in front of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Indeed, goodness and mercy will pursue me all the days of my life; I will dwell in the house of the LORD for endless days.

(Silent prayer and reflection)

(Meditative music option) *Be Not Afraid* by John Michael Talbot:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dWpG7qHtB8g>

Leader: All powerful God, help us to understand that no matter how dark our days can get or however lonely we may feel, you will never leave us. We thank you for your never-ending love and comfort. We ask that you specifically bless those who are living with mental health conditions. Please guide our discussion this day, and grant us wisdom and understanding as we start the conversation about mental health conditions and help raise awareness for this cause. We ask that those who are struggling with these conditions may not feel stigmatized or unwelcomed, but rather loved and accepted. We ask for your grace and blessings as we respond to the call of Jesus Christ to serve our neighbor and answer the exhortation of our Holy Father, to keep moving forward. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord.
Amen.

Presentation

- Introduction:
Ask the youth: What do you think of when you hear the term "mental illness"? What type of person/stereotype does it bring to mind? Does anyone know someone with a mental illness? How does that person differ from the stereotypes we just mentioned?

- Opening Video: National Alliance on Mental Illness, *Say It Out Loud*
<https://vimeo.com/121071189>

This six-minute video talks about the warning signs of mental health conditions and gives three personal testimonies by three different teens who currently live with mental health conditions. This video is powerful because it connects with the youths' emotions and empowers them to say something. The three teens share their personal struggles with mental health conditions. They also share how each was helped because someone spoke up and said something to them about their mental health condition. The teens emphasize how they are not defined by their mental illness, but rather live in spite of the diagnosis. Their messages are personal, powerful, and life-giving.

- What is a Mental Illness?
A mental illness is a condition that impacts a person's thinking, feeling, or mood and may affect his or her ability to relate to others and function on a daily basis. Each person will have different experiences, even people with the same diagnosis. ([ADHD](#), [Anxiety Disorders](#), [Autism](#), [Bipolar Disorder](#), [Borderline Personality Disorder](#), [Depression](#), [Dissociative Disorders](#), [Eating Disorders](#), [Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder](#), [Posttraumatic Stress Disorder](#), [Schizoaffective Disorder](#), [Schizophrenia](#))

- Know the Facts:
One in five teens are affected by mental health conditions. Less than half of those are receiving treatment. The youth need to be made aware of the facts and become advocates for themselves and their peers. If possible, share a personal encounter with a person who had a mental health condition. <http://www.nami.org/Learn-More/Mental-Health-By-the-Numbers>
- Signs and Symptoms:
Promote awareness by educating the youth on the signs and symptoms of mental health conditions. Through educating the youth they will be able to identify different behaviors that could constitute a mental health condition. <http://www.nami.org/Learn-More/Know-the-Warning-Signs>
- Start the Conversation:
Equip the youth with the tools that are necessary to engage in an effective dialogue with those they are concerned about. Instruct them to use “I” statements, so their friend knows that they care about them and want them to get help.
 - “I’ve noticed you are (sleeping more, eating less, etc.). Is everything okay?”
 - “I’ve noticed that you have not been acting like yourself lately. Is something going on?”
 - “It worries me to hear you talking like this. Let’s talk to someone about it.”
 - “I want you to know that you are not alone; I am always here for you.”<http://www.nami.org/Find-Support/Teens-and-Young-Adults>
- Breaking Down the Barrier: Be Stigma Free
Promote the initiative started by National Alliance on Mental Illness on social media by encouraging the youth to contribute to the social media campaign such as, #IAmStigmaFree and #HopeStartsWithYou.
Introduce different celebrities who are doing fine in spite of their mental health illness and help the youth realize they are not alone in these struggles, and the illness does not have to define you. <http://www.nami.org/getattachment/Extranet/Education,-Training-and-Outreach-Programs/Outreach-and-Advocacy/Say-It-Out-Loud/Say-it-Out-Loud-Discussion-Group-Facilitation-Guide.pdf>

Catechesis

Mental health conditions encompass a lot of different issues. Use these three excerpts from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* to help structure a response to mental health conditions and their place within the Church. The three catechetical areas of focus are human solidarity, community, and charity.

- By promoting human solidarity and loving one's neighbor, the youth will be made aware of peoples' struggles with mental health conditions and the Christian call to serve the community through acts of charity.

The virtue of solidarity goes beyond material goods. In spreading the spiritual goods of the faith, the church has promoted, and often opened new paths for, the development of temporal goods as well. And so throughout the centuries has the Lord's saying been verified: "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well." (CCC 1942)

- All of us are created in the same image and likeness and endowed with the same human dignity. It is important to remember that we all have our different struggles, some greater and some smaller, but we are all called to help one another.

The equality of men rests essentially on their dignity as persons and the rights that flow from it. On coming into the world, man is not equipped with everything he needs for developing his bodily and spiritual life. He needs others. Differences appear tied to age, physical abilities, intellectual or moral aptitudes, the benefits derived from social commerce, and the distribution of wealth." (CCC 1935-1936)

- Christ calls us to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31). You can respond to this call to love by having these tough conversations with your friends or family members who may be struggling with mental health conditions. It is by understanding that these tough conversations are a way in which we can respond to Christ's call to serve our neighbor, that our conversations can then be easier to have and will bear greater fruit.

Such behavior will cease only through the charity that finds in every man a "neighbor," a brother. The duty of making oneself a neighbor to others and actively serving them becomes even more urgent when it involves the disadvantaged, in whatever area this may be. "As you did it to one of the least of these brethren, you did it to me." (CCC 1931-1932)

Advocacy

National Alliance on Mental Illness has launched several different social media advocacy programs that the youth can easily participate in. Encourage the youth to promote having tough conversations, breaking down the stigma, and becoming advocates for those who do not feel like they have a voice.

Discussion (Small Groups)

1. How do you think, as Christians, we can help our peers who are experiencing some difficulty with mental health?
2. What would be your response to seeing these signs in a friend or family member? Have you ever known anyone with a mental health illness? Share your story.
3. How can we, as a youth group, advocate for our peers with mental health conditions?

Closing Activity

Distribute small pieces of paper with the statement: "I pledge to... #HopeStartsWithYou". Have the youth complete the statement with something that they pledge to do for the month of October that will raise mental health awareness. Once completed, have the youth tape their statement to the wall of the youth center. Leave the statements up for the entire month of October.

(Additional option) Have the youth use their cell phones and tweet the same statement while using the hashtag.

Closing Prayer

Saint Dymphna, patron saint of mental illness.

Good Saint Dymphna, great wonder-worker in every affliction of mind and body, I humbly implore your powerful intercession with Jesus through Mary, the health of the sick, in my present need. (*Mention it.*) Saint Dymphna, martyr of purity, patroness of those who suffer with nervous and mental afflictions, beloved child of Jesus and Mary, pray to them for me and obtain my request.

Our Father...

Hail Mary...

Glory Be...

Saint Dymphna, Virgin and Martyr, pray for us.