

Mental Illness Awareness Week 2015
October 4-10, 2015
Some Thoughts on Pastoral Responses

In 1990, the U.S. Congress established the first full week of October as “Mental Illness Awareness Week” in recognition of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) efforts to raise awareness of Mental Illness. It’s difficult to imagine that 50% of all adults will develop some kind of mental illness in their lifetime (e.g. depression, anxiety, self-harm, eating disorders, bi-polar disorder, PTSD, etc.).

On the weekend of October 10-11, we have the opportunity to preach good news of hope and healing to our people, many of whom are either suffering with a mental illness or know someone who is. The particular Scriptures for the weekend don’t easily provide a context for such preaching; however, words of acknowledgment and a petition in the Prayers of the Faithful would be a gift for those who suffer with mental illness. Some thoughts are:

- The national theme for this year is **“Stigma Free”**. The word “stigma” is defined as “a mark, a sign indicating that something is not considered normal or standard.” For people who suffer with a mental illness (and for society at large), this stigma can prevent one from seeking appropriate treatment due to embarrassment or shame. We know that our illnesses do not define us; what defines us is our God given dignity as His beloved sons and daughters. Before God, we are all “stigma free”.
- Catholic social teaching calls us to recognize that each person has dignity and each life is sacred. As temples of the Holy Spirit, each of us is due respect and care, regardless of any illness.
- We are talking about “people with mental illness”.....not “mentally ill people”. This use of language preserves the dignity of people and counters negative imagery.
- Just as with all other illness, pastors and parish staff members can be frightened or awkward when ministering to people with mental illness. Conversations amongst staff members can help; as those called to serve our people, if we can admit our feelings, we can deal with them, put them aside, and be free to minister as would Jesus.
- Persons with mental illness and their families are in need and often come to the parish seeking help. Do our parishioners with mental illness find a welcome in our parishes? Do our parishes have appropriate referrals to give to those who come to us for help?
- The staggering reality of mental illness in our society can be confronted by the virtue of hope that church communities provide in prayer and with programs for those suffering and their families.
- Hope says you are not defined by your illness. Hope says your life has a purpose even when you don’t feel it. Hope says you are not alone.
- To acknowledge mental illness publicly within a liturgical setting (in homilies and petitions) can provide the atmosphere for people to come forward and seek help/guidance/assistance through the parish.
- Offering the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick to those suffering with mental illness is grace not only for the one who is ill, but a sign of love and acceptance for their families. This could be announced and offered right after Masses on this particular weekend.