

Common Barriers to Mental Health Ministry

Barriers to mental health ministry are typically barriers of *perception*. The easiest way to eliminate barriers is to answer factually to objections.

Listed below are common objections to mental health ministry, and how to overcome the barriers:

1. **Financial barriers.** Mental health ministry does not require expensive new programming or staff positions. Mental health ministry requires church leadership to be willing to talk openly about the realities of mental health needs and encourage lay leadership to provide the same supports for mental illness as the church currently provides for physical illness.
2. **Time barriers.** Church leaders and members may be resistant to mental health ministry because existing staff do not have time to take on additional responsibilities. Mental health ministry can be started and overseen by just one committed volunteer, known as the Mental Health Champion or Liaison. The Liaison needs the support of the church staff to initiate and fully implement mental health ministry. Mental health ministry will be a part of the existing church programming.
3. **Not enough demand or need.** Statistics say that one in five people has a mental illness. In every church, there are many people with mental health needs that may benefit from mental health ministry. Establishing a formal mental health ministry gives people permission to talk about what may be the hardest thing in their lives. People may be worried about circumstances, but mental illness is not merely worry. Mental illness is a diagnosable, treatable condition. Poor choices may lead to sadness and regret, but depression is not merely sadness.
4. **Too much work.** The heart of mental health ministry is the gift of friendship and presence. People living with a mental illness often isolate themselves, because that is the nature of the illness. People living with mental illness often isolate themselves for fear that other people won't understand their illness. Simply listening, offering friendship and responding to a person's most immediate practical needs are the basic elements that mental health ministry provides. Mental health ministry may create a way for churches to become more honest and transparent with one another, and deepen their individual relationships with Christ.
5. **Fear.** One of the cultural myths about mental illness is that mentally ill people are violent. The statistics say that people living with a mental illness are dramatically more likely to be victims of violence than perpetrators of violence. Some serious mental illness includes paranoia, but most mental illnesses do not lead to either paranoia or violent behavior.
6. **Sin.** It's uncomfortable to befriend the person who seems strange to you or has behavior outside of the norm. It takes time and effort to reach out to someone who does not naturally fit into the church group. But Jesus shared many parables, teachings and stories about going after the person who was lost, rejected, an outcast and unworthy of a place in society. If church isn't about reaching out to the person who needs to know the love of Jesus, by way of people who are willing to be the hands and feet of Christ, then church has become nothing more than a social club. Of all the barriers to mental health ministry, this one is probably the most common. The truth is that none of us like to be uncomfortable, and mental health ministry may make us uncomfortable.

Will you be courageous and take a stand for those who have been rejected?