

U.C.C. WELLNESS MINISTRIES TOOLKIT
Section 3

EXEMPLARS OF WELLNESS MINISTRIES ACTIVITIES

Mental Health and Wellness

Title: *Understanding Mental Illness and Suicide Prevention*

Age groups served: Youth and Adults

Reason for development and implementation:

When not adequately treated, mental illness can cause such pain and suffering that an individual may consider suicide. Suicide is defined as death caused by self-directed injurious behavior with the intent to die as a result of the behavior. Based on death certificate information, suicide is the second leading cause of death for those ages 10 to 24, with more than 6,500 children and young adults dying yearly. The suicide of a youth from within the congregation has broad repercussions for the whole church family.

Youth suicidal ideation, attempt, and completion are on the rise. Suicide ideation refers to thinking about, considering, or planning suicide. A suicide attempt is a self-directed, potentially injurious behavior with the intent to die as a result of the behavior. Suicidal thoughts or actions are signs of extreme distress, not a harmless bid for attention, and should not be ignored. Specific data is available state by state. www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/suicide.shtml

Suicidal behavior is complex, and there is no single cause. Prevention efforts include providing education within the congregation so that mental illness is better understood and it becomes as safe to talk about mental illness as it is to discuss physical illness. Suicide rates can be reduced by: (1) knowing the signs, (2) making it more difficult to act on the desire, (3) developing connections to adults who understand and (4) working on expanding access to mental health resources.

Sharing the Story: Providing a safe place to discuss mental illness

After the state reported a rise in suicide attempts and death rates among teens, the Minister of Wellness collaborated with the local National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Chapter and youth leaders of several congregations to develop an event. The purpose was to: (1) provide youth with the opportunity to learn and be more comfortable talking about mental illness and (2) educate all attendees about the mental illnesses, the warning signs for those at risk for suicide, and how to respond appropriately.

All youth groups within the UCC Association, their parents, and the church leaders were invited to a Sunday afternoon event at a centrally located church.

- An overview of the program was provided, and the youth were encouraged to offer possible adaptations as the afternoon proceeded.
- NAMI's three college-age speakers took 30 minutes to speak about mental illnesses and then shared their personal journey.
- During questions and answers, the youth shared concerns about their friends and family members and their feelings of helplessness in how to help. The speakers addressed their concerns and provided concrete suggestions.
- After a refreshment break, the youth each chose one of the planned small group sessions: (1) a discussion with one of the presenters, (2) an arts and crafts room making information posters for their churches, or (3) a letter-writing campaign to legislators in support of current bills related to care of those with mental illness.
 - The majority of the teens chose further conversation with the speakers
 - The remainder decided to make informational signs for their churches. While making the signs, they shared their questions and concerns. A trained advisor enabled this to be a safe place for this conversation
 - Several youths took sample letters with the intent of writing their state legislators.
- After an hour, all the attendees reconvened, and many shared their new insights.
- Goody bags (colorful paper lunch bags) containing snacks and educational materials provided by NAMI were given to each attendee.

Evaluation:

- That evening one of the youth leaders received a call from a teen who had attended the program. The teen had received a text from a friend talking about suicide and was home alone. While keeping her friend in a text conversation, the teen told her mom and called the youth leader. They met at the home of the distressed girl and stayed with her until her mother was located and returned. We will never know how many other lives were positively affected because of the knowledge and awareness gained by the attendees.

Next steps:

- Continue to offer the program periodically. Two churches that had not sent their youth groups to the original session requested that the program now be provided for them and this was accomplished.

Resources:

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) www.NAMI.org

United Church of Christ Mental Health Network www.mhn-ucc.org has a Suicide Prevention Awareness page www.mhn-ucc.org/suicide-prevention-awareness/