

Resources

Out of the Shadows: Visiting People With Mental Illness

Information about mental illness is always changing. Keep up to date by looking at the Internet, reading articles, and engaging in conversation with others on this issue. As we learn about new developments on the scientific front, so too does our theological and spiritual exploration bring new vocabulary, concepts and understandings to this issue. These developments influence the political, social policy and other societal support systems of our culture. We encourage you to engage these as you gain more experience. Here are a few places to begin to look for information:

**Your own rabbi and synagogue
caring committee**

www.jewishhealingcenter.org

<http://www.nami.org/>

Union of Reform Judaism

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***Remove the sandals from your feet, for the
place on which you stand is holy ground.***

— Exodus 3:5



A Blessing

It is often helpful to open or end a visit with a blessing. Here is one you can read together at the end of each visit or use as an opener for conversation:

May the One who blessed our ancestors bless all who live with mental illness, our caregivers, families, and friends; May we walk in the footsteps of Jacob, King Saul, Miriam, Hannah, and Naomi, who struggled with dark moods, hopelessness, isolation, and terrors, but survived and led our people. Just as our father, Jacob, spent the night wrestling with an angel and prevailed, may all who live with mental illness be granted the endurance to wrestle with pain and prevail night upon night. Grace us with the faith to know that though, like Jacob, we may be wounded, shaped, and renamed by this struggle, still we will live on to continue an ever-unfolding, unpredictable path toward healing. May we not be alone on this path, but accompanied by our families, friends, caregivers, ancestors and the divine presence. Surround us with lovingkindness, grace, and companionship and spread over us a sukkat shalom, a shelter of peace and wholeness. And let us say: Amen.

—Rabbi Elliot Kukla

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talking today. I think you should call your therapist for some extra support on this.” If people respond with anger or hurt to your ending the conversation, don’t take it personally— you are protecting both of you and your relationship.

- Don’t walk on eggshells or overly apologize if you make mistakes—we are all human.
- It is important to take the time to self-reflect on your visit after you have left. Ask yourself: Are there things that surprised me? Did I feel a sense of growth? Are there areas I would like to know more about?

What if the topic is hopelessness?

Hopelessness and despair are common topics for people living with mental illness. Don’t try to cheer them up. It can ring false to tell people in deep pain that things will “look up” soon or to use overly cheery tones of voice or attitude. Statements like: “I see how much pain you are in right now” or “You are not alone; I/we/the congregation will walk with you in your suffering” are often helpful in the face of hopelessness. Offers of healing blessings or prayers are often welcome in these situations. In general, try to match the emotional tone of those you are visiting—if they are subdued, match that attitude, and if they are excited and hopeful, feel free to join in with them.

If you are worried that those you visit are feeling so hopeless that they may hurt themselves or others, refer them to suicide prevention. You can call 1-800-SUICIDE from anywhere in the country to get a trained 24/7 suicide prevention counselor.

Tips for A Successful. Caring Visit

A Spiritual Approach

- You are there to be a listening and caring companion, not to fix problems or to be a therapist. Don't offer solutions and avoid being drawn into problem solving; instead offer your companionship and empathy.
- Know your own limits. If the conversation is going in a direction that feels inappropriate or uncomfortable to you, redirect, end the visit, and get help from your rabbi or another caring professional before returning.
- Many people with mental illness may seem disorganized in their thinking and communication. Avoid asking too many questions or getting bogged down in clarification. You don't need to understand someone to care for them. You are there to offer unconditional support.
- If someone is saying things that are clearly not true and seem delusional, look for the emotional truth in what they are disclosing. For example, if someone reveals paranoid delusions about being spied on, "That sounds scary" or "You must be angry" is a good response.
- Don't be afraid of silence, even if it is difficult silence. Much productive communication happens in silence, and shared quiet can be a precious gift for people who have trouble communicating with words.
- Do not let people narrate or detail traumatic events, such as specific war experiences, sexual or emotional abuse or domestic violence, since this can be re-traumatizing for them and to you. If trauma comes up, redirect people to their emotions in the here and now; if they continue to narrate old wounds, end the conversation. You can say, "I think that this is re-traumatizing you and we should stop

Visiting people with mental illness is stepping onto sacred ground. This pamphlet will help you walk that path, moving past your own apprehensions and providing approaches for a successful visit.

Mental illness can kindle spiritual reflection, both for those who are ill and for those who accompany them. Visiting those who are ill is a core part of every religious tradition. It touches on such spiritual issues as confronting mortality, offering compassion, caring for the holiness of our bodies and minds, and living out our values during hard times.

Many of us will struggle with mental illness ourselves or in our families, and all of us will know someone who does. One in four families is impacted, but despite its prevalence, mental illness is often cloaked in secrecy. Silence creates stigma, preventing us from heeding the teachings of our tradition: do not abandon those who are in pain. Caring visits break the isolating walls of stigma.

Save me, God, for the waters are flooding me. I have sunk in deep mire, where there is no standing; I have come into deep waters, overcome by flood. I have grown weary crying out; from pining for God my throat has dried out, my eyes are exhausted.

—Psalms 69:1-4

What Does Jewish Tradition Say?

Judaism offers specific commandments to guide us: **bikur cholim** (visiting the sick), **hachnasat orchim** (extending hospitality to those in need), and **derech erez** (treating others with dignity). Throughout our lives we will be called upon to offer these acts of kindness to those who are sick, and to receive their benefits when we are ill ourselves.

The Bible recognizes that mental illness is a part of human life. In the Book of Samuel, we learn that King Saul is periodically and unpredictably overcome by a “bad spirit.” These rapid mood swings might be understood today as bipolar illness. In the **Rosh Hashanah Haftarah** (prophetic reading), when Hannah speaks out to the invisible divine presence in the Temple, the priests consider her delusional. In the Book of Ruth, Naomi is so grief-stricken after the deaths of her husband and sons that she asks to be called “Mara,” which means bitterness, an indication that she was suffering from what today we might call grief-triggered depression.

The social milieu of the Bible provides more room for these figures and their stories than we do today. Our tradition recognizes that while mental illness is terribly painful, it is also part of the human experience. The Bible provides us with examples of the power of telling and listening to stories of emotional distress, giving us the inspiration to find strength by sharing our own.

Preparing For Your Visit

- Before you visit someone with mental illness you may feel both curious and anxious. You can use these emotional cues as spiritual tools. When you think of something that is holy and awe-inspiring, chances you feel both a sense of attraction (curiosity) and a sense of foreboding (caution). This is how Moses felt at the burning bush and how all the Israelites felt at the foot of Sinai before the giving of the Torah. Instead of trying to overcome your feelings of curiosity and apprehension, let these feelings guide you as you prepare for your visit.
- Set a specific time and length for your visit. For example, you can say, “I look forward to being with you for an hour when I come by at 11 o’clock in the morning.” Listen to your feelings of caution and protect the limits on your time and energy.
- Set a specific place for meeting. Visits can take place in the home, or you can go together to synagogue, the library or a park. Use care in choosing a mutually comfortable location and use your curiosity to consider exploring new places together, like an art gallery or dog park.
- Bringing a small gift—homemade soup or cookies, a meal, or a favorite book—helps break the ice.
- Arrive relaxed. We have such busy lives and so much can be unpredictable. When we take time to decompress before new experiences, it is easier to be open and curious.