

How Your Church Can Address Mental Health - Part 2

I loved watching the Rankin-Bass stop-motion animated Christmas movies when I was a child.

OK, to be honest, I still love watching them. The animation was fun, and the songs catchy.

One song I still sing in my head when tough times come along is "[Put One Foot in Front of the Other](#)" from the Santa Claus is Coming to Town movie.

Such a simple concept for change - to put one foot in front of the other - but sometimes the simple steps are exactly what we need to do.

We all know that our churches can be hesitant, if not downright resistant at times, to change. Fear of the unknown causes most of us to freeze in our tracks, and our churches are no different.

However, over this past year I have noticed a conversation occurring more frequently in churches that I'm hopeful is an indicator of conquering the fear of the unknown and a sign of first steps for the church.

More frequently I am hearing of and having conversations with churches on the topic of mental health.

You may have heard the statistics before. [One in five individuals](#) will experience a mental health issue in a given year.

Quick math: How many people attend your church? Divide that number by five. Your answer is the number of people in your church that will likely experience or are experiencing a mental health issue this year.

If you factor in disasters or tragic events that have occurred in your area, the number you just calculated likely will be higher.

Many factors contribute to mental health issues, and no church members are immune to these struggles.

Therefore, when churches contact me to discuss thoughts of offering support groups, mental health education opportunities within the church walls, partnerships with professional counselors in the community, and questions about whether or not a counseling ministry is needed, I am encouraged because these are all signs that our churches are engaging in mental health discussions.

The challenge is to transform discussions into actual steps toward something.

Here are a few of my thoughts on how churches can increase understanding of mental health issues and formulate steps toward responding appropriately to identified needs.

1. Awareness

As you learn more about mental health issues, ask questions regarding your own community to help uncover gaps or unmet needs.

Questions like:

- How many professional counselors are in our community and where are they located?
- Does our community have a prevalent substance abuse problem?
- Have we recently experienced a natural disaster or community tragedy that has significantly impacted the mental and emotional climate of our community?
- Does our community have a large number of elderly or caregivers for aging family members?

Asking good questions about the demographics and issues in your community will

illuminate the needs and, subsequently, the resource gaps.

2. Education

Once you identify areas of need in your community or church, take initiative to educate yourself on the topic.

If you recognize substance abuse as a significant concern in your community, look for opportunities to attend trainings, speak with professionals or officials in your community and do whatever you can to learn more about the problems and possible solutions or treatment options available.

By educating yourself on the topic, you will have a firm base to assess the needs and resources in your community and a stronger sense of what is needed and how your church might be able to stand in those gaps.

3. Connections

Establish connections in your community to foster collaboration and expand resources.

For example, connect with national or local organizations to see if your church might be able to offer space for support groups to meet.

Connect with local mental health professionals to explore ways to partner or periodically offer mental health presentations to the community.

Talk with your church members or leadership about the potential of implementing a counseling ministry, Stephen's Ministry, Divorce Care, Grief Share and so on.

Talk with other faith leaders and churches in your community to explore partnership opportunities for providing resources, prevent duplication of resources and allow for shared responsibility of meeting community needs so no one church bears the load alone.

Many ways exist for a church to respond to mental health needs in the church and

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in the larger community. No one church can do it all, nor should they do it all, but we can all do something.

You just have to put one foot in front of the other - starting with awareness, education and connection - and soon, you'll be walking out the door to better serve the hurting and struggling individuals in your church and community.

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Editor's note: This is the second of a two-part series for World Mental Health Day 2017 (Oct. 10). Part one, by Ron Wachs, is available [here](#).