

Corporal Works of Mercy – Respecting Life through “Caring for the Sick”

“For I was sick and you cared for me.” (Matthew 25:36)

Caring for the sick is one of the Corporal Works of Mercy we are called to practice. While we most often associate this Corporal Work with caring for those who are physically ill, we can also see this Corporal Work as calling us to care for those suffering from mental illness. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), “Mental illnesses are medical conditions that compromise a person's thinking, feeling, mood, ability to relate to others and daily functioning.”

Mental illness is a common human problem. The National Institute of Mental Health, NAMI and the U. S, Surgeon General provide information regarding the prevalence of the problem. The National Institute of Mental Health reports that one in four Americans has a mental illness. Even though mental illness is widespread, serious and persistent mental illness, which can be disabling, is concentrated in a much smaller proportion of the population. One in 17, or 6% of the population, has a serious mental illness such as major depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, panic disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, or borderline personality disorder (NAMI). In addition, the U.S. Surgeon General reports that 10 percent of our nation's children and adolescents suffer from serious emotional and mental disorders (NAMI).

“Without treatment the consequences of mental illness for the individual and society are staggering: unnecessary disability, unemployment, substance abuse, homelessness, inappropriate incarceration, suicide and wasted lives. The economic cost of untreated mental illness is more than 100 billion dollars each year in the United States.” (NAMI)

It is important for us to understand and to help those around us to understand that mental illnesses are serious medical conditions. NAMI reminds us that mental illness cannot be overcome through will power and mental illness is not related to a person's character. Many in the Catholic Church believe the practices of the Church reflect the mixed feelings in society about mental illness. We recognize the research which clearly indicates mental illness is a physical illness of the brain but at the same time we continue to shame and stigmatize those with mental illness. While Catholic Agencies are leaders in providing services to those with mental illness, we need to do more to provide compassion and understanding for those who struggle with mental health difficulties.

There are many ways to address matters of charity and justice related to mental illness.

- Learn more about mental illness.
- Make an effort to practice compassion with those who have mental illness.
- Avoid practices that stigmatize those with mental health problems.
- Support programs which give aid to those suffering from mental illness.
- Support research in the field.

- Support appropriate legislation to provide a safety net for those with mental illness.

Additional information can be obtained from:

The National Institute on Mental Health <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/index.shtml> and

The NAMI http://www.nami.org/template.cfm?section=about_mental_illness