



Tips for faith-based organisations to support their members with mental health during the pandemic

1 Assume mental health issues are for everyone.

Don't be afraid to ask: "How is your mental health?" Think about how to talk about mental health with all ages. You might want to host specific mental health discussion for different groups: parents, older people, young people, 20-30s etc., so people can share common challenges and solutions. The Every Mind Matters campaign has some useful tips and resources to prompt discussion:

» <https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/>

2 Create opportunities for shared experiences

As Clap for Carers has shown, communal activities can still be socially distanced and give people a sense of connection and emotional boost. Consider hosting film evenings, when you all watch the same film at the same time and connect online afterwards to talk about it. Music, art and craft, book or discussion groups can all be run online and provide something positive to look forward to. They can spark connection between people who might otherwise feel they don't have anything to talk about.

3 Encourage one-to-one conversations as well as group activities online

If you are running events online, these are a fantastic way of continuing activities during the pandemic. Remember, however, to encourage one-to-one interactions too. In a phone call or individual video call, people will often feel most comfortable, sharing their feelings honestly and will be being energised by contact with people who know them best, or who they know are interested in them as individuals. A Zoom host can help by thinking about deliberate groupings in breakout rooms, where friends or people who may have common interests or experiences are put together.

4 Make it 'okay' to simply be present in an online meeting

If you are running online events, be comfortable welcoming those who don't want to turn on their cameras or interact. Allowing people space and time to get used to the online format, with some non-threatening opportunities to get involved if they wish, reduces anxiety and encourages them to actively engage later on. If someone is having a tough day with their mental health, they may want to come to an online activity without participating at all – that's okay too.

5 Help your team look after their own mental health

Take time to find out how your team are doing, not just focussing on how they are supporting others. Find time, for example, for a virtual coffee break and catch-up. Encouraging friendships between team members is important, so your team aren't always in the role of caring for others.

6 Actively encourage conversation about positive things

You might start conversations on social media or in person encouraging people to reflect on what they're thankful for, happy memories, things they are enjoying or looking forward to. You may simply help people find sources of reliable information, rather than worrying misinformation. You may share positive stories about the impact of the virus through communities helping one another and medical advances.

7 Empower people to connect in new ways through the necessary IT support

Getting people online can be challenging if they've not used the technology before. Take time to ask questions to understand the barriers, so you can offer the appropriate solution; e.g. is the barrier a lack of data? Unfamiliarity with the internet? Difficulty downloading Zoom? Or are they really worried that their children will be noisy and embarrass them in an online session? Activate volunteers in your place of worship or community organisation who can help people get online and, if the barrier is concern about interruptions from family, make it clear that's okay.

8 Establish a routine through the activities you offer

We are built for routine. It helps if you can offer activities at a regular time rather than ad-hoc. It can also help with a phone or a video call to plan it for a specific time, as it gives something to look forward to. Think about how you can encourage people to settle into regular rhythms in their day. Promote a break from screens before bed by leading by example to encourage good quality sleep and by not running activities late at night.

9 Run activities that are more likely to help someone who is not coping

If someone is not coping, the right sort of activity can help. It can also ease the intensity of interacting with others. Consider faith activities that promote a felt sense of safety. These might include calming, self-soothing exercises, drawing, writing, exercising, and breathing exercises. Faith activities that encourage noticing and being present can also help, again using creativity.

10 Create opportunities to give, not just to receive

Being able to help others is integral to our well-being. It's important to encourage people to think how they can help other's even when they are self-isolating, particularly if this is long term. For example, can they phone or write letters to people who may be lonely, even if they are feeling lonely themselves. Can children do a project interviewing older people by phone?

www.faithaction.net/friendlyplaces