

So What do We do From Here?

by Barton and Laura Gray

One of the most difficult challenges we face in ministering to families affected by chronic mental illness is to overcome the stigma associated with the illness. Some false perceptions about people with mental illness include demon possession, character weakness, and bad parenting as the cause of the illness. Because of these and other false perceptions, the stigma (an invisible mark of disgrace or dishonor) remains. But mental illnesses are caused by physical disorders or chemical imbalances. Just as disorders of the heart, lungs, kidneys, or liver affect the ability of the body to function, so brain disorders affect the ability to perceive, process, and to judge information accurately. And just as disorders of the heart, lungs, kidneys, or liver are treatable, so are brain disorders. It is important that pastors and other church workers recognize that mental illness is a brain disorder. Recognizing this, where do we go from here?

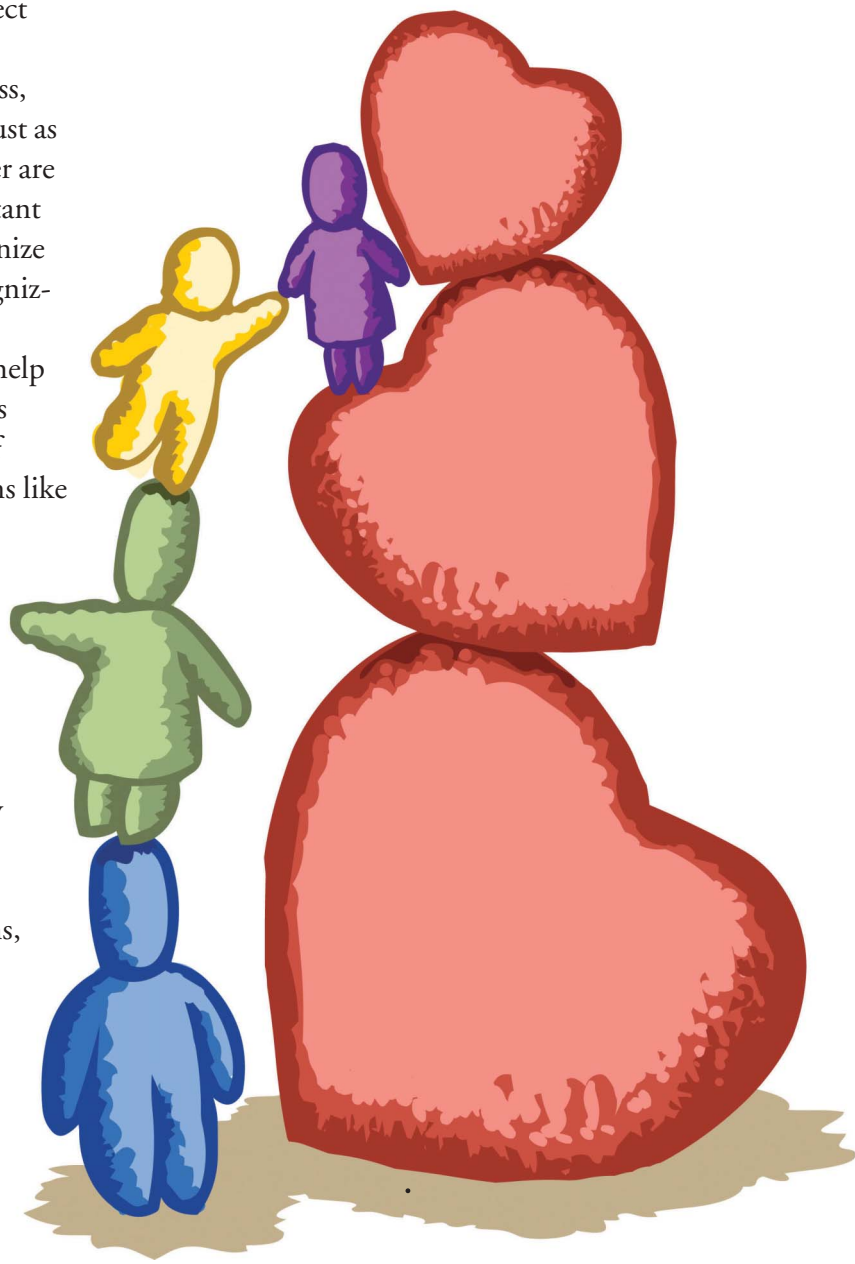
Much can be done by congregations to help the mentally ill and their families. First, it is important that we recognize the isolation of people with mental illness. Simple questions like “How are you?” show care. Empathizing, visiting, praying with and encouraging participation in the congregation show concern for individuals and families rather than isolating them.

Be sensitive to the financial and social burdens of the family affected by mental illness. By word and deed, assure the family that they are not alone. Encourage and help families to talk about their struggle without fear of rejection. “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” (Galatians 6:2)

Congregations and pastors can do many things to provide awareness, under-

standing, and help. Members of congregations can ask their pastors to include the mentally ill in the prayers during the worship service at least once a month. The first week in October is designated by The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) as Mental Illness Awareness Week. A general prayer for all people affected by mental illness and an appropriate liturgy is available from the Michigan District Committee on Mental Illness. Congregations can hold a

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seminar using the DVD based resource, **YOU ARE NOT ALONE**, provided by LCMS World Relief and Human Care at lcms.worldrelief@lcms.org, or at 800.248.1930, extension 1380. Pastors and other church workers can use this excellent resource in their circuit or regional meetings as discussion topics. Congregations can also put up a bulletin board showing resources and local NAMI numbers and community mental health or private clinic numbers during Mental Illness Awareness Week.

The Michigan District Committee on Mental Illness continues to seek ways of providing information and resources for the pastors and congregations of our district. We hope to hold regional meetings once a year to share information and generate ideas that will help congregations minister to families affected by mental illness. We ask for your prayers and continued support as we seek to help congregations reflect the compassion of our Lord Jesus Christ for the mentally ill and their families.

As sinful human beings, God's grace in Jesus

is extended to all believers offering forgiveness and help through Word and Sacrament. Responding to God's love and care we share it with people who are struggling so they can rejoice in His grace and hope we have in Him.

Rev. Barton Gray and his wife, Laura, serve on the Michigan District Committee on Mental Illness and the Lutheran Network for Mental Illness/Brain Disorders. Laura is a past president of National Alliance on Mental Illness Northeast Michigan. Barton has served as an Intentional Interim Pastor since his retirement from full-time ministry in 2003. They now live in Alpena and have five adult children and ten grandchildren.