

Individuals who began by being so burdened by their own family problem that they had no time or energy for anything else, turn outward. They come to the realization that they can improve God's Kingdom on earth by working to improve the quality of life for those with mental illness. Some people become active in organizations such as the Alliance for the Mentally Ill\*, an organization dedicated to ending the nightmare of serious mental illness through medical research and to alleviating the suffering of the mentally ill and their families through sharing information and through the development of services and support groups.

#### Another Kind of Miracle

For many families who know the suffering of mental illness, faith has not brought a cure, but it has brought another kind of miracle. It is the miracle of serenity in the midst of tragedy, of courageous coping and compassionate caring. It was not a sudden miracle, but one that occurred in God's own time.

#### A Prayer

Oh God, Who cares about all Your children, grant us the gift of acceptance that we might find serenity and courage this day to cope with the mental illness in our family. Teach us the patience and understanding our loved ones who are mentally ill needs from us. Help us not to be stigmatized by the attitudes of the uninformed and uncaring. Strengthen us with gratitude for the love and understanding we receive from You and those who care. Enable us with wisdom and guidance, to do Your will in our family life and to serve those who suffer. AMEN

*Text by John Baggett, M.Div., M.A., Executive Director of the North Carolina Alliance for the Mentally Ill and the father of a son who has the mental illness of schizophrenia.*

\*National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, 2101 Wilson Blvd., Suite 302, Arlington, VA 22201 (703) 524-7600

#### SUGGESTED READING

Andreasen, Nancy, *THE BROKEN BRAIN: THE BIOLOGICAL REVOLUTION IN PSYCHIATRY*, (1984), Harper & Row.

Fowler, Ruth, *A STRANGER IN OUR MIDST: A CONGREGATIONAL STUDY ON PROLONGED MENTAL ILLNESSES*, Pathways to Promise, 131 West Monroe, Suite 8, St. Louis, MO 63122.

Franklin, Jon, *MOLECULES OF THE MIND*, (1987), Atheneum.

Hatfield, Agnes B., *COPING WITH MENTAL ILLNESS IN THE FAMILY*, (1985), National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, 1901 North Fort Myer Drive, Suite 500, Arlington, VA 22209.

Lane, Melodee, *MODELS OF CARE*, Pathways To Promise.

McElroy, Evelyn, *CHILDREN & ADOLESCENTS WITH MENTAL ILLNESS: A Parents Guide*, (1988), Woodbine House.

Papolos, D. and Papolos, Janice, *OVERCOMING DEPRESSION*, (1987), Harper & Row.

Torrey, E. Fuller, *SURVIVING SCHIZOPHRENIA: A Family Manual*, (1988) Harper & Row.

Walsh, Maryellen, *SCHIZOPHRENIA: STRAIGHT TALK FOR FAMILIES AND FRIENDS*, (1986) Warner Books.



**PATHWAYS TO PROMISE:**  
Interfaith Ministries and Prolonged Mental Illness

5400 Arsenal St.  
St. Louis, Missouri 63139  
(314) 644-8400

*Funded by a grant to the St. Louis Metro Alliance for the Mentally Ill from The Lutheran Charities foundation which is owned and operated by the sixty-four members of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.*

WHEN  
MENTAL  
ILLNESS  
STRIKES  
IN A  
FAMILY  
OF  
FAITH

## WHEN MENTAL ILLNESS STRIKES

When mental illness strikes in a family it is like being struck by lightning. It is unexpected and it is devastating. The experience is not unlike a death in the family. The family must cope with and adapt to a terrible loss. Because of society's misunderstanding of mental illness, it often can seem similar to the experience of some terrible humiliating event which brings shame to family members. It is a tragedy. Like all tragedies it raises profound human questions for those who are affected by it. For a religiously committed family, it may, as other tragedies often do, initiate a crisis of faith.

### The Experience of Suffering

There is a profound suffering in mental illness. When the illness carries with it a diagnosis such as depression, manic depression or schizophrenia, the experience of loss is substantial.

The onset of these diseases occurs frequently in late adolescence or early adulthood. There is a major change in personality and in ability to function socially and to cope with every day problems. The victim is frequently tortured by disturbing thoughts and feelings that cannot be escaped. For the family, it often seems that the person they once knew, loved, and for whom they had so many dreams, no longer exists. In that familiar person's place is a stranger whose behavior is unbearable. As time goes on, unlike some tragedies, this one seems unending. The family lives in constant anxiety, often moving from crisis to crisis without respite.

### The Power of Faith for Coping

Many families with relatives who are mentally ill have found that their religious faith has been challenged. Their faith has grown as they struggled with the tragedy of mental illness. The result is they show remarkable evidence, in their personal courageous journeys, of the power of religious belief to help them cope with serious mental illness. Their individual journeys are unique and their religious traditions varied, but there are discernable common elements to their experiences.

Many religiously committed families have grown from a faith that pleaded with God to entirely remove the tragedy to one that asked God for the serenity, the courage and the wisdom to cope with the tragedy. It is natural to hope for a miracle that will restore things as they were before the illness struck. But most families have discovered that the miracle they have been given is the ability to withstand more emotional pain than they ever would have thought possible; to feel more peace in the midst of daily turmoil than was often felt in more tranquil pasts; and a sense of being led by a wisdom greater than their own as they wind their way through the maze of decisions that confront families who care for a person who is mentally ill.

### A Preoccupation with Responsibility

Religiously committed families grow from a faith that was preoccupied with responsibility to one focused on acceptance. When something terrible happens, it is normal to seek an appropriate source to blame. Most families go through periods of blaming the mentally ill person for becoming ill and not getting better; the friends of the ill relative for being a bad influence or for abandoning the victim; the mental health professionals for not having a cure or giving helpful advice. Most of all, family members blame themselves for "causing" the problem or not being able to "fix it." It is not unusual for them to go through intensive self-searching in an attempt to discover the "mistakes" or "sins" for which they feel they are being punished.

The preoccupation with responsibility frequently goes further. This takes the form of an obsessive concern about "doing the right thing" in relation to the care and treatment of the person who is mentally ill. The caretaking family will agonize over every decision. They burden themselves with guilt each time things do not turn out as hoped.

### A Painful Time of Change

It is normal to be come angry with God. Like all tragedies which human beings experience as senseless and unfair, mental illness can shake one's confidence in God. For some, it can lead to

doubts about God's reality. Such times are deeply unhappy moments. All the old securities and certainties of belief are severely shaken. Thankfully, for most religious committed families who struggle with the problem of serious mental illness, this time of doubt is not the final stage of the journey. Such times, as agonizing as they are, are often a time of preparation for a more mature and meaningful relationship with God.

### Acceptance is the Key

The serious mental illnesses are diseases of the brain. They are not anyone's fault. The issue for faith is not who to blame, but how to cope with and adapt to the tragic reality. Acceptance is the key. As long as family members seek to escape their suffering through denial, through frantic searches for magical cures, or through blame, they condemn themselves, and usually the mentally ill loved one, to additional needless misery. Acceptance is not easy. It may not even be humanly possible.

For the religiously committed family acceptance is experienced as a gift from God. Acceptance means the ability to face the reality of the illness; learn about it; to learn about treatment; to live with compassion toward the person who is mentally ill; and the patience and forgiveness toward those who do not understand. Acceptance means the courage to no longer be ashamed of the illness and a willingness to teach others that they might become more understanding and compassionate. Acceptance means "getting on with one's own life," and not allowing the tragedy to totally consume all the energies and resources of the family. It means not constantly neglecting the needs of other family members who are not ill. Most of all, acceptance means accepting God's will. It means trusting that one's own imperfect efforts are acceptable; that the suffering itself is meaningful.

When acceptance happens, it is experienced as a restoration of a fellowship with God that seemed broken by the tragedy. God is experienced as near instead of absent, as a friend rather than an enemy, and as a daily guide rather than an enigma.