

Archdiocesan Commission on Mental Illness (Chicago)

HOLY LISTENING <http://www.miministry.org/support.htm>

Holy listening, that is, listening in the context of the healing presence of God, means hearing what a person tells us and letting their story unfold at their pace. It affirms a person's dignity and value. Their story is a sacred story. We respond and react to their story in a non-judgmental way with an unconditional love for the person. Holy listening allows and encourages people to relate their experiences in a supportive atmosphere that leads to comfort and healing. Holy listening brings one to a richer understanding of God's unconditional love for us through our acceptance of one another. It leads to a mutuality of understanding that allows the person who is ministering to another to begin to see that they are being ministered to as well. This supportive process leads to solidarity and mutuality that enriches faith and hope. The listener also becomes the learner and both journey the path together to wholeness and holiness. We are not leading or following each other, we are walking side by side.

Such mutuality of understanding creates an environment that gives a person "permission" to tell their story, which they may otherwise feel too uncomfortable or too embarrassed or too stigmatized to tell. It's about creating a safe place for people to share their story.

When someone comes to share his or her story of joy or pain it is a very intimate conversation. We should not intrude on their story except for clarifications. Gradually the trust level is built and the conversations deepen.

People come to us searching for answers, finding the why in suffering, what did I do wrong, is God punishing me, does God listen to me? We know illness does not come from God, and God loves us unconditionally. However it can take time for us to come to a better understanding of that. Healing takes time so we do not rush. We allow the healing process to unfold.

Listening with a sense of sacredness for the person's life makes the sharing a Holy experience, allowing for God's healing presence.

SOME KEY UNDERSTANDINGS

First - We are accompanying people and are not counselors. We are not mental health professionals who treat the symptoms of mental illness just as we are not oncologists who discuss remedies for a person with cancer. We are spiritual friends and companions who journey in faith with those who are in need or suffering and often isolated by their illness. Praying with and for people with mental illnesses and their families is very important. How do we know God loves us? In a very tangible way it is when we show our love for one another.

Second - When interacting with people with a mental illness we need to recognize that each person has dignity, each person has gifts, each person has a unique relationship with God.

Sometimes we are helping the person discover or bring to light the gifts they have. People w/MI live in a society that often looks down on them, or make them feel inadequate, yet I have discovered what people with mental illness can teach us about life and what gifts they have is amazing.

Third - We need to recognize in ourselves any preconceived negative images or prejudices that we may have toward people with mental illnesses. Acknowledging these and learning more about mental illnesses will improve the ability to communicate with the person with the mental illness.

Fourth - It is natural to want to problem solve, but listening is not problem solving. Holy listening should be supportive and affirming. Many people have poor images of themselves again due

to stigma. We have an opportunity to reaffirm their goodness and their dignity.

Fifth - People with mental illness should not be defined by the disease they have but by the person they are. When we start labeling people as a disease, we see them as problems rather than a person. It is important to separate the illness and symptoms from the person.

Sixth - Each illness carries with it symptoms that may affect how people interact with us and we with them. The intensity and severity of the illness impacts one's ability to communicate. Mental illness can affect a person's ability to think sequentially, to manage emotions or mood swings, and to be in relationship with others. Medications can present the same communication hurdles.

Understanding the symptoms of the particular mental illness of the person will help us to better communicate, minister, advocate, and pray with people with mental illness. For example, someone with depression may seem uninterested or distant. That is a symptom to be recognized but not indicative of the person they are outside the illness. A person with schizophrenia may hear voices or experience hallucinations, which are very real to them and is their reality. It is important not to deny that they are experiencing those symptoms and that you are willing to learn more about what they are going through. A person who has a panic disorder may be uncomfortable in Church or at meetings so it is important to be sensitive to the person's need for space or need to get up and move around.

Seventh - Boundaries are an important part of listening. Setting limits on how often and how long one can meet will lead to more productive meetings. As family and friends we need to care for ourselves if we are to be effective caregivers for one another. We need to care for ourselves in order to be caregivers.

As we listen to a person's story, an individual may begin to name specific needs – shelter, medical help, food, transportation, counseling, clothing, financial assistance. A companion could become quickly exhausted and overwhelmed trying to meet all of a person's needs. But we are companions not providers of services. Our role as companions is to support a person in finding resources in the community and building an ongoing circle of care.

Eighth - Journaling is important tool both for the person who has the mental illness and the person who is companioning that person. Journaling gives us a sense of where we have been and where we are going. That way we can build on what has been discussed.

Ninth - Understand that Holy Listening is a process that takes time. We have to be committed for the long haul as mental illnesses are often chronic and persistent.

Tenth - Always have a sense of Hope that is rooted in Christ message to us all. The joy of life is knowing we are loved by God and one another. We are a people of the resurrection, the joyful expression of the outcome of Christ's suffering. Rather than being imprisoned by suffering we can know true joy when we use our suffering to help others. The experience we have helping others can lighten the load others are experiencing.