

## **Peer Support**

Receiving support and companionship from someone who is in a similar circumstance or facing similar challenges can be very helpful for many people. For people with mental illness and their families, support from peers can be particularly beneficial in reducing isolation and building community. Within peer relationships each individual has the opportunity to share his or her unique gifts and experiences with the other. Parish communities are particularly suited to be places of peer support.

### **Who is a peer?**

- Another person with a mental illness
- Someone who has a family member with a mental illness
- People of similar age or background (including former classmates, neighbors, etc.)
- Individuals recognizing each other from Mass and parish events and activities

### **How might peers connect with one another?**

- Through introductions facilitated by parish staff, parishioners, and family members
- By initiating conversations after Mass or during other gatherings at the parish
- Through faith sharing groups for people with mental illnesses, family members, and other parishioners interested in sharing a spiritual journey
- By visiting people with mental illness who do not leave their homes or are hospitalized

### **What might a parish do to promote peer support?**

- Acknowledging openly that some parishioners have mental illness and/or loved ones with mental illness and fostering their more full participation in the life of the parish
- Inviting and encouraging people with mental illness to participate in parish functions where they can meet peers
- Sponsoring activities to bring peers together, providing a safe place to meet and helping with transportation and other logistical details to enable peers to come together
- Hosting workshops on peer support or The Way of Companionship (see resource list—Craig Rennebohm)
- Promoting an environment in which everyone can be comfortable sharing their experiences
- Emphasizing the value of peers being compassionate listeners when people with mental illness choose to tell their stories
- Praying for those who are affected by mental illness in any way
- Recommend group support programs such as CUSA

### **Example**

One urban parish designated one of its Lenten small faith sharing groups as being for people who were dealing with mental illness in themselves or in someone close to them. Informal personal invitations were extended to people likely interested in the group, and announcements in the parish's bulletin and in the bulletins of neighboring parishes helped promote the group. The parish provided a suitable space for the group to meet, and the facilitators assisted with hospitality, reminder telephone calls and emails, and coordination of schedules to accommodate those using public transportation. Because of the relationships forged in the group, the members and facilitators committed themselves to continuing the group throughout the year.

As a result of the visibility of the group, the parish as a whole started becoming more aware of the presence of people with mental illness. Seeing the notices in the bulletin, several people with mental illness began attending Mass at the parish more regularly, viewing it as a more welcoming place to worship.

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