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**NHS**  
**South West**  
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## CREATING A MORE WELCOMING AND SUPPORTIVE FAITH COMMUNITY

Mental health problems are very common, and affect how people think and feel about themselves and others, how they interpret events, how they cope with life events and how they develop and sustain relationships. Every faith community contains people who have experienced mental health problems, or family or friends of those who have been affected.

Spirit in Mind through its 'Friendly Faces' befriending service has compiled some practical ideas on how you could make your place of worship and faith community more inclusive and supportive of those who are going through pressure with their mental health.

We suggest that you go through the tips below and discuss:

- a) Does my faith group do this, or provide this?**
- b) Are there practical steps that we could do to make these things happen?**

### Places of worship

- Providing quiet spaces where people can sit by themselves.
- Keeping seats or spaces free at the back of the room so people can slip in and out during services or ceremonies.

## Providing opportunities for connection

- Providing mid-week opportunities to connect with others, e.g. sports evenings, curry clubs, shared meals, older people's groups and other community activities can contribute to mental wellbeing and help reduce social exclusion.
- Having a coffee time or other meeting opportunity around the service or meeting.
- Making it clear if there are particular people who can be approached to talk about mental health issues and making sure these people are visibly available to speak to after services or meetings.

## Being friendly and welcoming

- Having a greeting team at your place of worship – people that are able to notice others and to follow-up (with a conversation, for example) if needed.
- Making time for others – ensuring that there is spare capacity and space, rather than an atmosphere of busyness.
- Making sure each person has the opportunity to be part of some kind of small grouping, so if they are absent it is noticed and acted upon.
- Ensuring that there is a structure where each person in the community is 'seen' – even if a person does not regularly participate in social or community activities, there is someone to look out for them. Those with mental health problems may struggle to be open or to identify mental health problems – thus, depth of relationship and accountability is important in identifying underlying problems.

## Link people to mental health services

- For some people, a place of worship may be a first point of contact and can act as a link and referral system to statutory mental health services and other sources of support in the community. It may be useful to have resources easily available like; leaflets, books and information on local services.

## Accepting others as they are

- Listening more. Often people seem to be fine on the surface; it takes time to open up and to build trust. Make sure you are giving people time and space to speak.

- Not ‘reacting’ to people who are unusual to look at or struggle with their hygiene.
- Seeing past unhelpful behaviour and focusing on the person.
- Fostering an accepting, nurturing and person-centred atmosphere.
- Allowing others to be themselves.
- Being prepared to come alongside and support people with complex problems, so that they are not made to feel that they have to be ‘fixed’.

## Developing a support team

- Offering training for people who want to provide help to others.
- Having a team to look out for mental health issues, with a mix of people and skills, with good networks, educated in counselling approaches.
- Some places of worship offer support groups, others offer practical help such as respite services to allow carers to go shopping or to have time off.
- Help and support for people caring for those with mental health difficulties. Carers may be family members, neighbours or other friends – many carers experience isolation, physical ill-health and a sense of having to put their own life on hold. Their needs are often overlooked. A faith community can be a safe place where they can express their feelings openly.

## Raise awareness about mental health and challenging stigma

- Talking openly about the mental health needs of the whole community fosters understanding of the issues and dispels notions of ‘them and us’. Training or discussion groups help to raise awareness and dispel myths. Accepting and welcoming all people sends a powerful message to those who fear or mistrust others.
- A message or sermon from a faith leader, addressing mental health issues
- If your place of worship has space for telling stories – encouraging and supporting those with personal experience of mental health problems to share their story.
- Complicated problems are talked about, and not simplified or brushed under the carpet.
- Holding a seminar/open day or similar event

If you need any help and support Spirit in Mind can help you to link in with the right organisation email [azizur.rehman@swyt.nhs.uk](mailto:azizur.rehman@swyt.nhs.uk) or call 01924316280 or 01924 316282

You can also email [angela.barker@swyt.nhs.uk](mailto:angela.barker@swyt.nhs.uk) or call 01924 316281 regarding our Friendly Faces befriending service where you can become a volunteer or support your volunteers that may need some training and support.