

Surgeon General's Perspectives

A SEASON OF HOPE, A SEASON OF ACTION: ADDRESSING MENTAL HEALTH THROUGH FAITH COMMUNITIES

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As I write this column, the leaves are turning orange and yellow, reminding me of the coming holidays. Thanksgiving was a special holiday in the Murthy house. My parents, immigrants to the United States from India, were keen to absorb the traditions of their new land, and with it the joys of this unique American holiday. My favorite part of Thanksgiving was the chance to go home to Miami to see my parents, sister, and other family and friends—to celebrate, to reconnect, and to renew.

As a doctor practicing medicine in an urban hospital, I learned early on that the holidays are not joyous for everyone. For many individuals, the holidays elicited feelings of despair, isolation, and loneliness. Among the 43.6 million adults living with depression and other mental illnesses, family gatherings may stir up feelings of shame.¹ This subject is especially personal to my family because we lost an uncle living with an untreated mental illness to suicide.

Mental health has been an important issue for the Office of the Surgeon General dating back to 1999, when my predecessor, Dr. David Satcher, released the landmark *Surgeon General's Report on Mental Health*. In a given year, fewer than half of people diagnosed with mental illness receive treatment. The unmet need for mental health services is greatest among underserved groups, including people who are elderly, in racial/ethnic minority groups, low income, without health insurance, and residents of rural areas.² Two years ago, President Barack Obama called for a “national conversation to increase understanding about mental health.” Since then, more than 250 communities across the nation have taken up the charge, laying the groundwork for enhanced understanding to address their specific mental health needs.³ As Surgeon General, I am making it a priority to continue this dialogue, increase awareness, and further engage both new and existing partners.

Faith-based organizations are important partners to engage in the mental health conversation. I have



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seen how faith leaders can serve as trusted messengers in our communities. They can bring messages of acceptance and reassurance, and a spirit of healing and openness. Faith leaders and organizations have direct access to their communities. With such access, clergy and congregations can help ensure that people with mental illness follow their treatment plans to improve outcomes. They can provide safe spaces and use ongoing relationships with their congregants to open a dialogue about mental illness and put an end to the unacceptable stigma that keeps too many people from getting the help they need. Leaders from temples, churches, mosques, synagogues, and other houses of worship can help build bridges to the medical community and forge lasting partnerships. In addition, they can advocate for mental health parity by dispelling common misconceptions, playing a positive role in recovery, and collaborating with policy makers.⁴⁻⁶ These efforts help to make certain that everyone can receive the care they need.

Many faith-based organizations are already powerful voices for mental health best practices and for reducing the stigma, prejudice, and discrimination often associated with mental illness. Examples include:

- **Sunshine Connection.** This local, peer-run mental health program in Topeka, Kansas, has partnered with Faith Lutheran Church. Peers (i.e., people with lived experience of mental illness) from Sunshine Connection attend services and join groups along with other congregants. Many people from Sunshine Connection volunteer in the parish as ushers, collecting donations and leading groups. Several peers work at Vacation Bible School.⁷
- **The Institute of Muslim Mental Health.** This national network of professionals provides community outreach, research, and education on the mental health needs of the Muslim American community. It partners with Muslim faith leaders, mental health professionals, and others to support the mental health and well-being of Muslim communities through prevention and intervention. Each year, the organization hosts a conference with Michigan State University's Department of Psychiatry that raises awareness of the particular mental health issues facing the Muslim community, provides a forum for Muslim mental health stakeholders to meet and collaborate, and publicizes current research in the field.⁷ (www.muslimmentalhealth.com)
- **Saul's Circle.** This outreach program, based at Congregation Beth El-Keser Israel in New Haven, Connecticut, is for adults who use mental health services. The program grew out of a perceived need in the community to address the Jewish communal and religious needs for those adults using mental health services in New Haven. Local mental health service programs refer individuals and their families to the congregation. By lending its skills and talents, Saul's Circle facilitates understanding and helps serve members and others in the community with mental health conditions.

As Surgeon General, I want to initiate a collaborative effort with leaders from all faith traditions. No matter where or how you worship, the message about mental health and emotional well-being should be the same: end the stigma, support one another, and get

treatment. Fortunately, we know that with the right treatment and supports, people can recover from mental illness and live full and successful lives. As we gather together during this holiday season, I ask that we reflect on the role each of us can play in being messengers of goodwill and hope.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration offers a fact sheet on mental health to help faith-based organizations raise awareness about mental health issues and emphasize the importance of help seeking. See Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (US). Everyone can play a role in the conversation about mental health [cited 2015 Sep 23]. Available from: URL: <http://store.samhsa.gov/product/everyone-can-play-a-role-in-the-conversation-about-mental-health/PEP14-FAITHFS>

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