

From Stigma to Support

Changing the community's response to mental illness

When Cynthia Piltch, Ph.D., was hospitalized eight years ago, she allowed her husband to call their rabbi to arrange a visit. It was Cynthia's second major depressive incident and the first time she dared tell anyone outside the family about her illness.

"I was terrified, but I let my husband make the call to Rabbi (Howard) Jaffe," Cynthia recalls. "When he came, I told him it's not right for people to be so afraid about getting help. Mental illness happens to Jewish people, too."

That visit marked a turning point for Cynthia and for Temple Isaiah in Lexington. The following year, with support from the clergy and congregation, Cynthia founded Temple Isaiah's Mental Health Initiative, which she has chaired ever since.

The initiative works to bring mental health issues to the forefront by hosting educational [programs](#) for the congregation and Greater Boston community, providing opportunities for advocacy, and conducting training on issues such as how to fight the stigma of mental illness.

Because the initiative is an essential component of Temple Isaiah's inclusion efforts, one initiative team member also serves on the temple's Inclusion Committee.

"We embrace the same goals," says Dolly Sadow, Ph.D., a board-certified psychologist who represents the Mental Health Initiative on the Inclusion Committee. "We want an open, welcoming community for all of us. Nothing hurts as much as a cold shoulder or a community that's closed to you so you feel alone with your issues."

The Mental Health Initiative has helped reduce that sense of isolation by shining a spotlight on sensitive topics, including addiction, depression, dementia, body image and eating disorders, resilience, and the stigma of mental illness. The goal is to provide education, raise consciousness and, perhaps most of all, "to change the culture so people can be open when they need to," Cynthia says.

"Things have changed," she adds. "People talk more comfortably about mental health issues. They are willing to share intimate stories of pain and hope. When you're suffering, there's nothing more powerful than hearing someone say, 'This touches me, too.'"

The Mental Health Initiative's recent spring event, Body Image and Eating Disorders, is an excellent example. Team members view the event as a milestone in becoming a more open, trusting community. For the first time, all panelists were members of Temple Isaiah, willing to be honest about their experience--for their own sake and that of fellow congregants.

Similar experiences

At Temple Beth Elohim (TBE) in Wellesley, congregants point to Rabbi Rachel Saphire's Kol Nidre [sermon](#) in 2015 as a defining moment. The sermon was prompted, in part, by her conversation with a congregant who questioned why the community responds differently to physical and mental illness.

“When someone is at McLean, which specializes in psychiatric care,’ the congregant said, ‘we do nothing,’” Rabbi Saphire recalls. “I realized that he’s right, and it was gut-wrenching.”

Since then, TBE has moved from silence to [action](#). TBE’s Mental Health Initiative has created a resource guide, held education, prayer and healing programs, engaged in advocacy and reached out to partner organizations, including the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI).

Congregation Shaarei Tefillah in Newton has also embraced the challenge of addressing mental health as an area of disability and a focus of the shul’s inclusion efforts.

“We know there are many families in every congregation who struggle with someone living with a mental health problem,” says Esther Kletter, a licensed clinical social worker who co-chairs Shaarei Tefillah’s Inclusion Committee. “My hope is that people can become increasingly sensitive and comfortable with the fact that this is an illness.”

Shaarei Tefillah looked to NAMI and its “In Our Own Voices” program so members could hear firsthand from individuals who are living with mental illness. With support from the kahal and Rabbi Benjamin Samuels, a congregant offered his perspective, giving the first d’var Torah to focus on a family’s experience with mental illness. Other events brought the community together, provided education and advanced the conversation.

Shaarei Tefillah also shares information about resources and community services; publicizes information on exhibits, lectures, articles and TED Talks; and posts “bathroom flyers” on mental illness next to the more familiar flyers on domestic violence.

“The biggest challenge is the stigma and the fear that people will feel outed,” Esther says. “The more we can keep the conversation going, the more we will be able to support one another.”

Esther’s experience at Shaarei Tefillah is similar to that at TBE and Temple Isaiah. At all three congregations, there is an increased awareness and a shift in attitude—a greater willingness to discuss what many still find uncomfortable. Perhaps even more important, all three congregations are determined to keep moving forward, to strengthen their efforts to care for the soul as well as the body.

“This is the Lord’s work,” Dolly says. “It’s Jewish work.”