

TENDING TO OUR COMMUNITY

A congregational guide to visiting
people who live with mental illness





www.jewishhealingcenter.org

Written by Rabbis Elliot Kukla and Eric Weiss, 2015

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Bay Area Jewish Healing Center thanks the Newhouse Fund of the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco, Marin and Sonoma Counties, and the Peninsula for their gracious tzedaka in support of those who live with mental illness.

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Illustrations of the nests and eggs of birds of Ohio. v.1.

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A SPIRITUAL APPROACH

Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground.

– Exodus 3:5

Visiting people with mental illness is entering sacred ground, as you are going into a place of great vulnerability. This pamphlet will help you walk that path by moving you through your own apprehensions, and by providing resources and tips for a successful visit. You do not need special skills or experience to visit people with mental illness; you just need your innate human kindness, empathy, humor, curiosity, and common sense.

Bikkur Holim (visiting the sick) is a mitzvah (sacred obligation) that is central to Jewish tradition, and applies to all forms of illness, whether physical or mental. Visiting those who are ill is a core part of every religious tradition. It touches on such spiritual issues as offering compassion, caring for the holiness of our bodies and minds, confronting mortality, and living out our communal values during hard times. Throughout our lives, we will be called upon to offer caring visits to those who are sick, and to receive the benefits of this mitzvah when we ourselves are ill.

One in four people will be impacted by mental illness during their lifetime, yet silence and stigma surround mental illness. Stigma and silence breed shame. This means that caring visits play a particularly important role: not only are they fulfilling the mitzvah of *Bikkur Cholim*, they also dispel stigma, break down isolation, and restore compassion and wholeness to our communities.

Before you visit someone with mental illness, you may feel both curious and anxious. You can use these emotional cues as powerful spiritual tools. Instead of trying to overcome your feelings of curiosity and apprehension, let these feelings guide you. Curiosity and fear are both natural human emotions, and Judaism embraces them fully. We are taught repeatedly in the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible) to have *yirah* (awe or fear) for holy and powerful experiences, and to seek *chochma* (wisdom or knowledge) about new and challenging experiences.

PREPARING FOR YOUR VISIT

- Set a specific time and length for your visit. For example, you might say, “I look forward to being with you for an hour when I come by at 11 o’clock in the morning.” Protect your time and energy by keeping the visit’s boundaries as clear as possible for both of you, and stick to those boundaries even if you are enjoying your visit and feel tempted to stay longer.
- Set a specific place for meeting. Visits can take place in the home, or you can go together to the synagogue, the library, or a park. Choose a location that is comfortable for both of you.
- Bring a small gift like cookies, challah (before Shabbat), or a favorite book. It helps to break the ice.
- Arrive relaxed by leaving time to take a few breaths before going into your visit. We have such busy lives, and so much can be unpredictable. When we take time to decompress before new experiences, it is easier to be open and curious.



TIPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL CARING VISIT

- **You are there to be a listening and caring companion, not to fix problems or be a therapist.** Don't offer solutions, and avoid being drawn into problem solving; instead, offer your companionship and empathy.
- **Know your own limits.** If the conversation is going in a direction that feels inappropriate or uncomfortable to you, redirect, end the visit, and get help from your rabbi or another caring professional before returning.
- Many people with mental illness may seem disorganized in their thinking and communication. Avoid asking too many questions or getting bogged down in clarification. **You don't need to understand someone to care for them.** You are there to offer unconditional support.
- If someone is saying things that are clearly not true and seem delusional, **look for the emotional truth in what they are disclosing.** For example, if someone reveals paranoid delusions about being spied on, you might say, "That sounds scary," or "You must be angry."
- **Don't be afraid of silence**, even if it is difficult silence. Much productive communication happens in silence, and shared quiet can be a precious gift for people who have trouble communicating with words.
- **Do not let people narrate or detail traumatic events**, such as specific war experiences, sexual or emotional abuse, or domestic violence, since this can be re-traumatizing for them and to you. If trauma comes up, redirect people to their emotions in the here and now; if they continue to narrate old wounds, end the conversation. You can say, "I think that this is re-traumatizing you, and we should stop talking today. I think you should call your therapist for some extra support on this." If people respond with anger or hurt to your ending the conversation, don't take it personally; you're protecting both of you individually, as well as your relationship.
- **Don't walk on eggshells or apologize repeatedly if you make mistakes** – we are all human.
- It is important to **take the time to self-reflect on your visit after you have left.** Ask yourself: are there things that surprised me? Did I feel a sense of growth? Are there areas I would like to know more about?

WHAT IF SOMEONE FEELS HOPELESS?

Hopelessness and despair are common feelings for people living with mental illness. Don't try to cheer them up. It can ring false to tell people in deep pain that things will "look up" soon, or to display an overly cheery attitude/tone of voice.

Statements like: "I see how much pain you're in right now," or "You are not alone; I/we/the congregation will walk with you in your suffering," are often helpful in the face of hopelessness.

Offers of healing blessings or prayers are often welcome in these situations. In general, try to match the emotional tone of those you are visiting – if they are subdued, match that attitude, and if they are excited and hopeful, feel free to join in with them.

If you are worried that those you visit are feeling so hopeless that they may hurt themselves or others, refer them to suicide prevention. You can call **1-800-suicide** from anywhere in the country, 24 hours a day/7 days a week, to speak with a trained suicide prevention counselor.

WHAT DOES JEWISH TRADITION SAY?

Our tradition recognizes that while mental illness is terribly painful, it is also part of the human experience. The Tanakh (Hebrew Bible) provides us with examples of the power of telling and listening to stories of emotional distress, inspiring us to find strength by sharing our own.

In the Book of Samuel, we learn that King Saul is periodically overcome by a "bad spirit." These rapid mood swings might be understood today as Bipolar Disorder. In the Rosh Hashanah *Hafarah* (prophetic reading), when Hannah speaks out to the invisible divine presence in the Temple, the priests consider her delusional. In the Book of Ruth, Naomi is so grief-stricken after the deaths of her husband and sons that she asks to be called "Mara," which means bitterness, an indication that she was suffering from what we might now call grief-triggered depression.

These stories have been read out loud and studied throughout Jewish history, and all around the globe. Surviving our own moments of emotional suffering and finding the strength to walk with others through pain are ancient and sacred tasks.

A BLESSING

It is often helpful to open or close a visit with a blessing. Here is one you can read together at the end of each visit, or use as an opener for conversation:

May the One who blessed our ancestors bless all who live with mental illness, our caregivers, families, and friends; may we walk in the footsteps of Jacob, King Saul, Miriam, Hannah, and Naomi, who struggled with dark moods, hopelessness, isolation, and terrors, but survived and led our people. Just as our father, Jacob, spent the night wrestling with an angel and prevailed, may all who live with mental illness be granted the endurance to wrestle with pain and prevail night upon night. Grace us with the faith to know that though, like Jacob, we may be wounded, shaped, and renamed by this struggle, still we will live on to continue on an ever-unfolding, unpredictable path toward healing. May we not be alone on this path, but accompanied by our families, friends, caregivers, ancestors and the divine presence. Surround us with loving kindness, grace, and companionship, and spread over us a sukkat shalom, a shelter of peace and wholeness. And let us say: Amen.

– Rabbi Elliot Kukla, copyright 2011,
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Pl. XVII.
MIMUS CAROLINENSIS.
CATBIRD.

FOR MORE INFORMATION AND SUPPORT:

- For national information, support, and referral go to the National Alliance on Mental Illness which serves consumers, families, and friends www.nami.org
- For Jewish and spiritual resources The Bay Area Jewish Healing Center www.jewishhealingcenter.org
- For local support, go to your own rabbi or synagogue caring committee.