

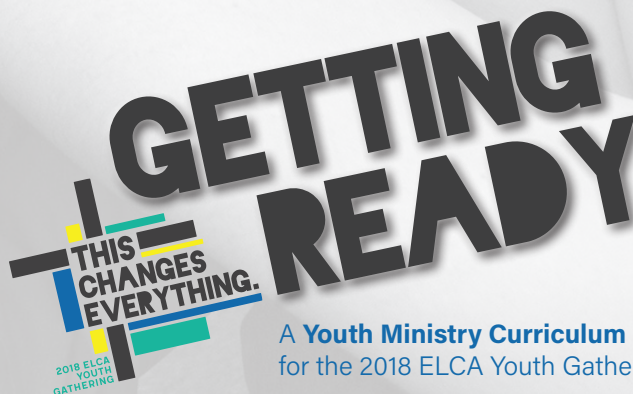
DECEMBER:

GATHERING FOR COMPASSION

PART 1



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.



GETTING READY

A **Youth Ministry Curriculum** ramping up
for the 2018 ELCA Youth Gathering

When youth are asked to share some hot topics that they are interested in, mental health seems to appear more times than not on the list. They are concerned about it, maybe living with a disorder themselves or know at least one person who is suffering with a disorder. Therefore, we are going to spend some time digging into mental health.

“Adolescence is a period of rapid physical, cognitive, psychological, social and emotional development.” Karen Ortloff, MS, LP, says in the winter 2017 Connect Journal of Children, Youth and Family Ministry. Ortloff writes, “The importance of psychological well-being in children and adolescents is well recognized. The growing mental concerns of today’s youth are contributing significantly to the social and economic burden of society. Prevention and early intervention contribute to improved resiliency and outcomes for youth and their families” (Page 13).

Mental health disorders continue to carry a stigma in our society. However, medical science has proven that mental illness is a health care issue and should be treated as such. This stigma regarding mental health disorders can stop teens and their families from getting the help that is needed. Quality treatments for mental health disorders, especially if started close to the onset of symptoms, can help lessen the effect on a teen’s life.

As a church, we need to help move beyond the stigma and misinformation to help youth with mental health disorders get the treatments they need. We can do this by teaching our youth about mental health disorders and how to help a friend, a family member or themselves when faced with mental health disorders.

MENTAL HEALTH BY THE NUMBERS:

The National Alliance on Mental Health webpage (nami.org) gives the following statistics (March 2017):

- **1 in 5 children** ages 13-18 have, or will have, a serious mental illness.
- **Suicide is the third leading cause of death in youth** ages 10-24; 90 percent of those who died by suicide had an underlying mental illness.
- **Half of all lifetime cases of mental illness begin by age 14** and 75 percent by age 24.
- A helpful pdf of these statistics can be found at this link: nami.org/getattachment/Learn-More/Mental-Health-by-the-Numbers/childrenmhfacts.pdf.



GATHERING CONNECTION:

At the Gathering we will be living in community, not just with those attending the Gathering but also with the residents of and visitors to Houston. Learning about mental health disorders is an important piece of our life together. By understanding, we grow compassion. By growing compassion, we are driven to empathy. Empathy brings us to loving others. The Gathering brings us in close proximity with a whole lot of people, many different from ourselves. Some of those might be experiencing mental health disorders.

There may be someone in your group struggling with mental health disorders. By becoming aware of mental health disorders, we help our youth and adult leaders better engage with people we meet at the Gathering and in our daily lives. This is not something to be feared but rather to be understood so we can respond in the way Christ wants us to.

Jesus came to show God's love for all the world. We are called to do the same. As Jesus changed everything, let that continue to shape how we engage with all people.

One way is to see this is to know yourself and prepare your mindset: Check out "The Official Gathering Handbook," Page 56, – the Gathering often stretches people to their max! It's important to take care of yourself.

Sleep! Eat well! Take a mental break to recharge! Being aware of mental health and mental health disorders are part of our life together at the Gathering and beyond.

MATERIALS NEEDED:

- Bible
- Christ Candle
- warm-up sheet in larger print
- markers

GATHER (15 MINUTES):

Warmup

As the youth enter the space, ask them to use the markers to write down signs and symptoms of "healthy mental health" on the large-print paper (or put them on sticky notes.) Ask them to also write down signs and symptoms of mental health disorders on the large print paper (or put them on sticky notes.)

Call the group together when you are ready to begin the session. Explain that you will be focusing on mental health. Look over the sticky notes and have the group make observations about what they see.

The Intro

After a few minutes of discussing the lists, watch the following YouTube video:

[youtube.com/watch?v=BHSONXBZOWI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BHSONXBZOWI) (2:54 min.)

This is one interpretation of how we got to looking at mental health disorders in such a negative light. We're going to look a bit further into mental health.



SOCIAL MEDIA SHARING:

Let your friends know you are there for them. While your group journeys through this session, share this simple message: #IWillListen #YouAreLoved

Gathering Prayer

Let's pray.

God of presence, you promise you are with us always. Let us feel your presence. When we struggle with your promise, give us someone to be with us in that lost place. Let each of us be someone who bears your love to someone who is feeling darkness. We ask for strength and compassion as we learn about mental health. In your name, we pray. Amen.

Experiential Learning: Fact vs. Myth

Put the youth into pairs or small groups. Give each group an envelope with the 24 myths and fact cutouts. Instruct the youth to take all 24 cutouts and together decide which are myths and which are facts. Let them know this is not a test. Have the youth review what a myth is and a fact is before they start the exercise.

Tell them to put all the myths in a column on one side of their space and all the facts in a column on the right side of their space.

Give them five minutes to complete the task.

After they are done, use the list in the appendix to review the answers.

Thank you to walkinourshoes.org/myths-vs-facts for this resource.

Together discuss:

- Why do you think it is important to know the myths and facts about mental illness?
- How could it be hurtful for people to think that the myths of mental illness are facts?

WORD (30 MINUTES):

God's Story - Scripture

Credit to Elise Seyfried for segments from her session in the Connect Journal of Children, Youth and Family Ministry, Winter 2017.

Those experiencing mental health disorders can feel alone, forgotten or abandoned. These people may not share what's happening out of fear or they may believe that nobody cares. In biblical days, people suffering from illness (mental or physical) were often kept out of the community for fear of spreading their disease. As we will read in a moment, sometimes it was believed a person was infected with "demons" brought on by their sin. Jesus flipped that notion upside down!

Read together **Mark 5:1-20**.

- What does "legion" mean?
- How was the man treated for his mental illness?
- How does that compare with how we treat people today?

Now let's look at what Jesus has to say about illness and sin.

Read together **John 9:1-12**.

We see in this passage that Jesus did not blame people for getting sick. Jesus clearly states that their illness was not the result of anything they did wrong or any sin they committed.

- How did the disciples react to the man's blindness?
- How can we help people realize that their illness is not their fault?
- Jesus reached out to, defended and healed people with mental and physical disorders, even though the society he lived in forbade him to do so. How does our society treat those with mental health disorders?

Read together **1 Thessalonians 5:11**.

- Mental health disorders are difficult to live with.
- This passage reminds us how we are to be living examples of God's love in the world.
- Let's watch this video clip as another reminder of this passage.

Our Story - Having Compassion

LEARN:

Play this video:

youtu.be/vitUPDsWAGk?list=PLBXgZMI_zqfQO9h2X6x8XNoOU7V2v13He (1:00 min.)

Discuss what the group learned or discovered in this video.

LISTEN:

Break into small groups. Have half of the groups brainstorm a list of ideas on how they could seek help if they were suffering with a mental health disorder. Have the other half brainstorm a list of ideas on how they could help someone (a friend, family member, even a stranger) who has a mental health disorder. Come together and share the lists.

CONNECT:

Fill in any missing gaps from the lists by using the following links as a guide. You may want to print these and post them around your building.

nami.org/NAMI/media/NAMI-Media/Infographics/NAMI-Want-to-know-how-to-help-a-friend.pdf

nami.org/NAMI/media/NAMI-Media/Infographics/NAMI-Getting-the-Right-Start.pdf

ENGAGE:

Remind the youth that you and the other adult leaders are available if they need a safe person to talk with about a friend (or themselves) who is struggling with a mental health disorder. Remind them they are not alone in the darkness. Even though God has promised God's presence with us in all things, it can still feel pretty dark. Reach out; don't suffer in silence or alone.



Create signs to hang throughout your building with information on crisis hotlines and intervention numbers.



SENDING (5 MINUTES):

Gather around the Christ Candle and ask someone to share the following prayer.

Sending Prayer

God of comfort, relieve those who are troubled in mind and spirit.
Bring them hope, peace and the strength of a loving community.
Grant patience and courage to the families and friends of those who are ill.
Increase their ability to withstand as they face challenges for their loved one.
Protect and defend those living with mental health disorders from exploitation, addictions and abuse.
In your name, we pray. Amen.

Go and Do Likewise - (Blessing and Sending)

When I say, "Stand up," we all stand up. When I say, "Stand with," put your arm around your neighbor's shoulder. When I say, "Stand for," mark the sign of the cross on the forehead of someone beside you.

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Help us identify mental illness as the disease it is, that we might have courage and wisdom in the face of ignorance and stigma. Inspire us as we seek to overcome fear, acquire knowledge, and advocate for compassionate and enlightened treatment and services. As we move out into the world let us:

Stand up – against the stigma of mental health disorders.

Stand with – those who suffer with a mental health disorder.

Stand for – better treatment options and accessible care for all in need.

St. Paul reminded the community of the Ephesians: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God." This changes everything!

Amen.

Go in peace. Serve the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

MYTHS VS. FACTS OF MENTAL HEALTH DISORDERS

From walkinginourshoes.org (March 2017)

MYTH:	FACT:
Kids can't get depression and anxiety disorders, only adults can.	Kids can develop a mental disorder, like depression and anxiety disorders. This can happen to anyone at any age.
Kids only get mental disorders because they have bad parents.	Mental disorder is not caused by doing something wrong. You can't cause someone to have a mental disorder. Doctors think that it is caused by a mix of what's going on in your body and what's happening around you.
Mental disorder is the same as being mentally disabled (sometimes called by the awful term mental retardation).	Mental disorder has nothing to do with how smart you are. A mental disability is a "cognitive disability," which means it's a different journey with different challenges.
Having a mental disorder means you're a wimp who can't handle life.	Your personality or ability to handle your feelings does not cause mental disorders. It isn't just "in your head" or something that goes away if you try hard. Once treatment is figured out, most people with a mental disorder live healthy, full lives.
People with mental health disorders have to take special tests to get a job or go to college.	People with mental health disorders do not have to take special tests to go to college, buy a house or get a job. They can work and learn and do all the things that people without mental health disorders can do.
People with mental health disorders have trouble handling school work, a job and daily tasks.	It is common for all people to sometimes struggle at work, in school or at home and feel sometimes like they don't know what to do. No matter what, it's good to talk to others and learn what works best for you.
If you have a mental disorder, it will be harder to get an apartment or house once you grow up and you won't be able to live on your own.	All mental disorders are different, but being diagnosed with one will not keep you from being able to grow up, learn how to take care of yourself, and get an apartment or house like everyone else.
When people have mental disorders, they will never get better.	People diagnosed with mental disorders can get better. Every disorder is different. Some people feel better when they talk to someone or take medication. Most people need help from friends and family to figure out how to live with their disorder. Not all people have to take medicine or see a therapist for the rest of their lives.
Talking about your mental health challenge is a waste of time. It's better to just take medicine.	If you have a broken leg, it will not get better with just aspirin. It also takes time and exercise and hard work. In a way, having a mental disorder is the same. You have to be patient, get help, and talk about it and you'll start to feel better soon.
People with mental health disorders are dangerous and violent.	Most people diagnosed with mental disorders are not violent. Most violence in the world is not caused by people with mental disorders.
Mental disorders are more common in some racial groups than others.	Mental disorders can happen to anyone. It doesn't matter what you look like, where you live or where you are from.
I can't help someone with a mental disorder. Only a doctor can.	You can help someone. Don't call people words like "crazy" or "mental." If you know people with mental health disorders, try to get to know them and notice their talents and skills, not just the disorder. Learn about mental wellness and share it with others.



DECEMBER:

GATHERING FOR COMPASSION

**PART 2:
GOING
DEEPER**

December can be a difficult month for those suffering with a mental health disorder. The crazy schedules of the holidays, expectations to enjoy a variety of gatherings, changes in weather, shorter days, the list goes on as to why this month can be particularly tough. We want to be aware and compassionate with those who may not fully enjoy the “most wonderful time of the year.”

This session will get your group thinking about how they can add a bit of light in what can be a dark time for some people.



GATHERING CONNECTION:

Jesus was a living example of compassion.

Read the story of the woman at the well in **John 4:1-42**. The love of God through

Jesus changes everything – how we are with people and how we engage with people. Empathy is a practice, not just feeling sorry for someone (that’s sympathy). Empathy is an awareness of another’s situation, feelings and the

impact the situation is having on their life.

It’s a relationship, not just a feeling. This month is difficult for so many suffering with depression and other mental health disorders. By remembering the compassion and love Jesus showed, we

too are to be Christ in the world. The

Gathering challenges us to look beyond ourselves and build empathy for others so we are moved to action.

MATERIALS NEEDED:

- Bible
- Christ Candle
- warm-up sheet in large print
- markers or sticky notes

GATHER (15 MINUTES):

Warmup

Have the youth post some of their favorite things about the holidays on the large sheet on the wall using the markers or sticky notes.

Call the group together when you are ready to begin the session. Ask them to share what they wrote on the paper and why these are some favorite things.

The Intro

Explain that December is a month that can be very difficult for people who suffer with mental health disorders. This session will look at how we can be with people in their dark places and not necessarily expect them to find the joy we do in the holiday season.

Gathering Prayer

Invite someone to lead the gathering prayer.

Comfort those who live with the darkness of mental health disorders. May we be a light in the darkness for them. Teach us to avoid false cheerfulness, and, instead, give us wisdom to know how to help our friends and family who struggle in this way to come up for air. To see, again, your goodness. Lord, we pray this in your name. Amen.

Experiential Learning: Slam Cards

Print out enough of the slam cards from the appendix for each small group of three to four people. Explain that there is an insensitive statement on the card. They are to come up with a sensitive way to make the statement. Give them 10 minutes to complete this.

Have groups come back together and share their sensitive statements. Give positive feedback to each of the responses that are sensitive.

Share that it is our calling to share compassion with those who are hurting.

WORD (30 MINUTES):

God's Story - Scripture

Have youth look at **Isaiah 43:2**.

Discuss:

- How might this verse offer some comfort to someone suffering from a mental health disorder?
- Can it help? How or how not?

We often use trite responses to people as we just learned. These are not necessarily helpful, nor are Bible verses that promise strength and comfort. We can't just "pray away" a mental health disorder. Prayer is our communication mode with God, but telling someone to pray about it and God will make it better isn't the way to approach mental health disorders. It can cause even more harm when the person feels that God has abandoned them in this disorder or that they must not be faithful enough or God would not give them this disorder to deal with. We can stand in the place of Jesus when we offer comfort, our presence or a safe place to be when someone is suffering in their mental health disorder. If someone can't find comfort in God's promises at this time, they are not to be shamed or have their faith questioned. We are to dwell with them in the hard times, being the light of Christ as we are able.

Our Story - Service Learning

LEARN:

We learned earlier in the session about slams that can be hurtful. Let's look again at things that are helpful:

WHAT HELPS:

I know you have a real illness and that's what causes these thoughts and feelings.

I may not be able to understand exactly how you feel, but I care about you and want to help.

**You are important to me.
Your life is important to me.**

**Tell me what I can do now to help you.
You might not believe it now, but the way you're feeling will change.**

You are not alone in this. I'm here for you.

Talk to me. I'm listening.

**I am here for you.
We will get through this together.**

WHAT HURTS:

It's all in your head.

We all go through times like this.

You have so much to live for - why do you want to die?

**What do you want me to do?
I can't do anything about your situation.**

**Just snap out of it.
Look on the bright side.**

You'll be fine. Stop worrying.

Here's my advice ...

**What's wrong with you?
Shouldn't you be better by now?**

LISTEN:

One of the most helpful things you can do for someone suffering with a mental health disorder is to just listen to them. Ask questions that let them see you are concerned and that you are there to support them.

CONNECT:

There is a reason security blankets comfort kids, and there is a reason “touch stones” are a common mindfulness technique. Both help create a feeling of centeredness and calm. When we have an object that’s sole purpose is to comfort or ground us, it’s very effective at making that happen. Anything from a stress ball to a seashell to a piece of fabric can work.

When you use a grounding object, the point is to carry it with you into stressful situations (or have it on you all the time). Ideally, it should be able to fit into your pocket so it’s something you can hold or touch discreetly when you need to remind yourself that everything is, or will be, OK. It’s a great way to distract yourself from any present anxiety and stress.



Have each youth create two “grounding objects”; give one to a congregation member and one to a friend.

As a group, brainstorm ideas on creating “grounding objects” to hand out to people over the holidays.

Some ideas:

- It can be as simple as small stones with the word “hope” written on it.
- Do you have a knitters group? Work with them to create a pocket prayer blanket.
- Find seashells and write “breathe” on them.
- The ideas are endless. Find something that your group can do in a simple, easy way to show support and compassion this time of year.

ENGAGE:

Make a presentation to your congregation, sharing with them the “grounding objects” you created and encourage them to take some with them out into the world. Teach them about mental health disorders and how to dwell with people who are suffering this season. Remind them to offer comfort not trite statements.

SENDING (5 MINUTES):

Sending Prayer

Gather around the Christ Candle and ask someone to share the following prayer.

Tender God, your gentle and kind-hearted love waits for us in the darkness and shields us from the light when it feels too overwhelming. We remember today all those who live in the depths of mental health disorders. Continue to cherish us all when we find it so difficult to cherish ourselves. Amen.

Go and Do Likewise - (Blessing and Sending)

When I say, "Stand up," we all stand up. When I say, "Stand with," put your arm around your neighbor's shoulder. When I say, "Stand for," mark the sign of the cross on the forehead of someone beside you.

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