



## Long-term caring

Churches are often great at helping out in times of crisis. But particularly with mental health problems, we need to be prepared to help when illness or needs last longer term, and wise about what we offer.

Many churches are good at stepping in when there's a crisis. We work to support someone practically, emotionally and spiritually in their time of need. But what happens if weeks turn into months and years? When mental health challenges are long term, how can churches continue to support people?

Actively supporting somebody with a mental health need can be a great gift to both parties. We all love to see people grow and there are often huge mutual benefits from a long-term commitment to a friendship or a pastoral relationship. Equally, times of crisis can be testing and there may be other situations where we feel stretched beyond our expertise and resources.

### What might support look like?

Supporting someone with mental health challenges often starts informally, without any planning. But when thinking of providing long-term support, a little organisation really pays off. Long-term care often benefits from being intentionally connected with the pastoral care or leadership of the church. This enables someone to have a clear overview of who is providing what care to people in the congregation, safeguarding all involved. A clear pastoral structure in a church will be a helpful way of raising issues and providing specific or increased support when it's needed.

Everyone is different in terms of how they respond to their illness, and it's important to recognise this. Strategies may change based on factors such as experience, changing medication and the ability to access support networks. Many people living with mental health issues have highly developed skills in managing their lives and the impact of their condition, whilst others may struggle to find a way of maintaining balance. In every approach, it's worth considering the following question: 'How can I support this person in making their own choices, and to live the life they choose as much as possible?' An empowering offer of support will feel different from one that is directive.

Also, bear in mind that support may need to change in the long term, depending on life changes and medical interventions, as well as the natural cycles of illness. As we offer support to others, we must allow them to change and develop.

When offering the hand of friendship or support, it's worth considering our primary motivation. By way of preparation, we might ask ourselves the following questions:

- What am I hoping to achieve in this?
- Do I have the capacity to offer friendship and support? What might this



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commitment look like? How will this impact others around me?

- What sort of expectations might there be? Do these need to be discussed?
- Am I the sole contact, and if so, is there the possibility of involving others?
- If the person I am supporting becomes unwell, do I know who to contact to get help?

The degrees of support we feel able to offer will vary. For some, an intentional 'check-in' each week at church provides meaningful contact, but for others there may be a larger commitment. This could take the form of a regular time to meet, a chance to pray, or a naturally developed friendship based on mutual interests. Others of us may be happy to provide support at times of crisis, but for some this can feel beyond their capacity. It's good to consider what this might look like for you, and ideally discuss it. We need to recognise that we all have limits to our energy and expertise that may also change over time.

### Involving others

If the person you're supporting is regularly unwell, it is particularly important for others to be involved in their support, as agreed with the person in question. In a church situation, this should involve close contact with your church leadership. Equally, leaders should seek support from professionals when this is needed.

Responding to regular episodes of illness can place pressure on those providing support, so it's important to talk about these together with the person you are offering support to. It can be valuable to discuss what their expectations might be, so you can express what you feel able to offer should these times arise.

Encouraging access to broader networks of support and activities is crucial. Many self-support groups and NHS-run services can be helpful. Previous negative experiences can sometimes prevent the desire to access these, but it is worth bearing in mind that services often change and may be worth revisiting.

### Looking after yourself

Caring needs to be carried out with much more than instinct: it should come from wise planning, prayer and thought. None of us have limitless pools of energy, and we all have a responsibility for self-care. It's good to ensure there is somebody else looking out for you as you support others. If your



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offer of support regularly places pressure on you, it's important to have a place to share difficulties: if you have concerns, you can discuss them with somebody else before deciding on a course of action.

Awareness of boundaries is also key. We all have different boundaries depending on our life situations, needs and preferences, and it's important not to make comparisons with people who may have different capacities and approaches. There are times when we're able to be flexible in what we can offer, but at other points we may need to draw new boundaries and renegotiate what support we feel able to offer.

There may also be times where we need to take a break from responsibilities, and even friendships. Explaining this clearly is important, particularly as many people who have experienced mental health issues may have experienced some rejection in friendships. Consider what's realistic, and try to be clear in your communication about when you are able to be in contact again.

### The role of church

When a church can take a collective approach to supporting somebody, this should ensure sustainability, and prevent one person from becoming the 'go-to' person. If somebody has developed expertise in an area, then a good way of ensuring sustainability is for them to pass on their skills. Above all, work to ensure that whoever is being supported has a say in how this happens.

#### ➔ Helpful links:

The Circle of Support model, developed by Circles Network, provides a collective approach to support, placing one person at the heart of a group who agrees to meet with each person across the year. With one facilitator, and shared responsibilities, no one person carries all the responsibility for support:

➔ <https://tinyurl.com/circles-network>

More about boundaries: what they are and how they operate, particularly in pastoral care:

➔ <https://tinyurl.com/boundaries-mp3>

It is vital that our caring is wise. Here's more about how overbearing caring can sometimes prevent people moving on to the next stage in recovery:

➔ <https://tinyurl.com/overbearing-caring>



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Caring in a church setting is very different from working in a professional environment and some trained carers can find this hard. Find out more about the strengths - and challenges - of 'working in the grey areas':

➔ <https://tinyurl.com/the-grey-areas>