

When Mental Illness Strikes

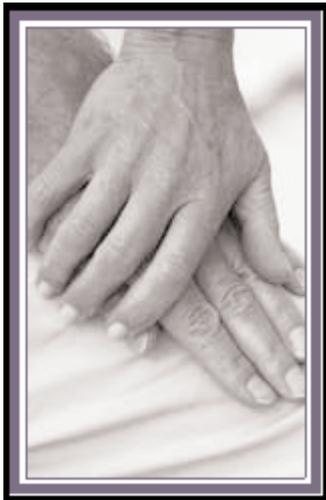
ANOTHER KIND OF MIRACLE

For many families who have experienced the suffering of mental illness, faith has not brought a cure, but it has brought another kind of miracle. It is the miracle of serenity in the midst of tragedy, of courageous coping and compassionate caring. It was not a sudden miracle, but one that occurred in God's own time.

A PRAYER

"Oh God, grant us the gift of acceptance that we might find serenity and courage today to cope with the mental illness in our midst. Help us learn the patience needed by our loved one(s) who is mentally ill. Help us not to victimize with uninformed and uncaring attitudes those who suffer, but strengthen us to have the love and understanding to care and nurture those people in need. Enable us to undertake Your will in our family life and to serve those who suffer. Amen."

Adapted by Rabbi Jeffrey Cohen from original material by John Baggett, M.Div., M.A., whose son has the mental illness of schizophrenia.



SUGGESTED READING

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In a Jewish Family



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WHEN MENTAL ILLNESS STRIKES

When mental illness strikes a family, it's like being struck by lightning - it's both unexpected and devastating. In fact, the experience is not all that unlike a death in the family as they must cope with and adapt to a terrible loss.

However, unlike a death, society's view of mental illness often can seem similar to the experience of some terrible humiliating event which brings shame to all family members. It is a tragedy and like all tragedies it raises profound human questions for those who are impacted by it. For a religiously committed family it may, as other tragedies often do, initiate a crisis of faith.

THE EXPERIENCE OF SUFFERING

There is a profound suffering in mental illness and when the illness carries with it a diagnosis such as depression, manic depression and/or schizophrenia, the experience of loss is substantial.

The onset of these diseases occurs frequently in late adolescence or early adulthood. There is a major change in personality, in ability to function socially and to cope with every day problems. The victim is frequently tortured by disturbing thoughts and feelings that cannot be escaped. For the family, it often seems that the person they once knew and loved, and for whom they had so many dreams, no longer exists. In that familiar person's place is a stranger whose behaviour is incomprehensible and unbearable. As time goes on, unlike other tragedies, this one seems unending. The family lives in constant anxiety, often moving from crisis to crisis without respite.

THE POWER OF COPING

Many families with relatives who are mentally ill have found that their spiritual faith has been challenged. Often they show remarkable evidence, in their personal courageous journeys, of the power of spiritual belief to help them cope with serious mental illness. While their individual journeys are unique and their religious traditions varied, there are still many discernable common elements to their experiences.

Many Jewish families have grown from a faith that pleaded with God to entirely remove the tragedy to one that asked God for the serenity, courage and wisdom to help cope with

the tragedy. It is natural to hope for a miracle that will restore things to the way they once were before the illness struck. However, most families have discovered that the miracle they have been given is the ability to withstand more emotional pain than they ever would have thought possible; to feel more peace in the midst of daily turmoil than was often felt in more tranquil times; and, a sense of being led by a wisdom greater than their own as they wind their way through the maze of decisions that confront families who care for a person who is mentally ill.

A PREOCCUPATION WITH RESPONSIBILITY

When something terrible happens, it is normal to seek a source to blame. Most families go through periods of blaming the mentally ill person for becoming ill and not getting better; the friends of the ill relative for being a bad influence or for abandoning the person; the mental health professionals for not having a cure or giving helpful advice. Most of all, family members blame themselves for "causing" the problem or not being able to "fix it". It is not unusual for them to go through intensive self-searching in an attempt to discover the "mistakes" or "sins" for which they feel they are being punished.

The preoccupation with responsibility frequently goes further, taking the form of an obsessive concern about "doing the right thing" in relation to the care and treatment of the mentally ill person. The caretaking family will agonize over every decision. They burden themselves with guilt each time things do not turn out as hoped.

A PAINFUL TIME OF CHANGE

In such circumstances, it is normal to "become angry with God". Like all tragedies, that seem senseless and unfair; mental illness can shake one's confidence in the Lord. For some, it can lead to doubts about God. Such times are deeply unhappy. All the old securities and certainties of belief are severely shaken. Sometimes we turn to rituals and observances to give us stability. Thankfully, for most religious families who struggle with the problem of serious mental illness, this time of doubt is not the final stage of the journey. Such times, as agonizing as they are, are often a time of preparation for a more mature and meaningful relationship with God.

ACCEPTANCE IS THE KEY

Serious mental illnesses are diseases of the brain. They are not anyone's fault. The issue for faith is not looking for someone to blame, rather it is how to cope with and adapt to the tragic reality. Acceptance is the key!

As long as family members seek to escape their suffering through denial, frantic searches for "magical cures" or blame, they condemn themselves and usually the mental ill person as well, to additional needless misery. Acceptance is not easy - in some cases, it may not even be humanly possible.

Acceptance is a gift from God. Acceptance means the ability to face the reality of the illness; learn about it; learn about treatment options; live with compassion toward the person who is mentally ill; and, the patience and forgiveness toward those who do not understand. Acceptance means having the courage to no longer be ashamed of the illness and a willingness to teach others that they should be more understanding and compassionate. Acceptance means "getting on with one's own life" and not allowing the tragedy to totally consume all the energies and resources of the family. It means not constantly neglecting the needs of other family members who are not ill. Most of all, it means accepting God's will. It means trusting that one's own imperfect efforts are acceptable and that the suffering itself is meaningful.

When acceptance finally takes place, it is experienced as a restoration of a fellowship with God that seemed broken by the tragedy. God is experienced as being near instead of absent; as a friend rather than an enemy; and, as a daily guide rather than an enigma.

Individuals often begin by being so focused on their family problem that they have no time or energy for anything else. Acceptance commences when they start to turn outward. They come to the realization that they can improve God's Kingdom on earth by working to improve the quality of life for those with mental illness. Some people become active in organizations like the Alliance for the Mentally Ill, a support organization for families of people with mental illness that provides support groups, referrals, education and advocacy services.