

Mental Health in a Jewish Context

An estimated one in five Americans suffers from some form of mental illness annually. There are many in the Jewish community who do not believe Jews suffer from mental illness at this rate. However, the truth is Jews suffer at the same rate as everyone else.

In the Torah, there are references to people who suffer from mental health issues. In some instances, having a mental health problem is seen as Divine Punishment. In others, madness is akin to sinfulness. For example, “*Shoteh*” is alternately a vagrant or someone who is psychotic. (*Parshat Ki Tavo*). Additionally, the Yiddish word *meshugganeh* derives from a word found in Deuteronomy – *shigoan* – meaning “crazy”. This suggests the stigma toward individuals with mental health challenges is not unique to present day in the Jewish community.

The Jewish people have a long history of trauma, persecution, and exile. Growing research indicates that historical persecution and multigenerational trauma evoke patterns of behavioral responses (epigenetic trauma). However, Jewish historical trauma has also left positive marks, including fierce determination and resilience.

Lest one imagines the Jewish response to mental illness is all negative, consider this quote from Howard Cooper, from Psychiatry and Religion: “Judaism attempts to honor the uniqueness of each individual human being – created, as Genesis puts it, in the ‘image and likeness of God’ – that it is endlessly curious about how human beings actually think, feel and function; and consequently, within Judaic thought there is a constant preparedness to call into question received ideas, conventional notions, accepted ways of thinking and categorizing.”

How Congregations Can Support Families Struggling with Mental Health

Make thoughtful, clear congregational choices

Create a statement about mental health and how it is part of your congregational mission to support those who struggle with mental health issues. Include this statement in newsletter/bulletin articles and in *D’verei Torah*.

Train professional and lay leaders

Clergy, staff and lay leaders should be trained on how to recognize signs and symptoms of mental health problems, as well as skills and language for interceding to prevent or address a mental health crisis.

Be a source of information

- Include contact information for mental health services on your website
- Ensure that books and articles about mental health are visible in clergy offices and available for borrowing from the synagogue’s library
- Bring someone with lived experience of mental illness in to speak on Shabbat
- Include mental illness and addiction education in youth curriculum

Formalize it

- Form a mental health resource committee to plan programming, including an annual Mental Health Shabbat
- Establish and train a volunteer committee to offer support for those who are facing mental health issues