

Daily Steps...

Developing a holistic mental health care plan for your loved one.

The Grace Alliance

Anyone can RECOVER ... Everyone has a ROLE

The Grace Alliance

Mental Health Grace Alliance is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization that provides recovery programs, support groups, training, and collaborative partnerships to impact mental health care.

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Introduction

The Grace Alliance vision is to see the works of God displayed in individuals and families affected by mental illness. Anyone can recover and everyone has a role (John 9:1-3).

A holistic approach to mental health care relieves physical and psychological suffering with medication and psychotherapy, while revealing the unconditional love and limitless grace that is only available through a personal relationship with Jesus. The following resource was developed as a simple guide to help you design a mental health care plan for your loved one that takes into account all three aspects of their being: body, mind and spirit.

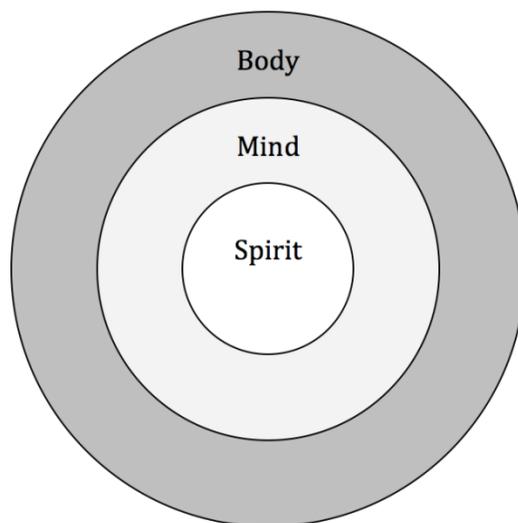
A Holistic Approach to Mental Health Care

We exist in a physical **BODY** so that we can interact with the material world around us. Our bodies have been specifically designed by God to take in information from the environment and relay it to our brains. We see, hear, taste, smell and touch the world around us. The processing of sensory information by our brains produces thoughts, feelings and emotions which then result in an outward behavioral display.

There is also an immaterial, nonphysical aspect to our being, what some would call our **MIND**. Our thoughts, feelings and emotions are more than simple neurochemical changes and electrical discharges in our brain. While the functioning of our brain is integral to the existence of our mind, that alone is not sufficient to explain it. Similarly, to imagine our mind as completely separate and unrelated to the physical is not correct either. Mind and body are intimately connected and each affects the other.

The scriptures teach us that we also have a third and even more amazing level of being, a **SPIRIT**. God created us as a three part being, much like Himself. In our inmost being, we are spirit, the very breath of God placed into a shell of dust. As a being with a spirit, it is possible for us to be in an intimate, spiritual union with our Creator who is also spirit.

The **figure** below shows the **BODY**, **MIND** and **SPIRIT** in relation to one another, each separate but interacting with the one above and/or below. The brain, via the body's sensory systems, is in contact with the earthly environment (outside) and the mind within. The middle circle is the mind which is connected to the body through the functions of the brain and nervous system but is also in contact with our immaterial spirit (the inner most circle). The body senses and reacts to the external environment and the mind uses that information to perceive, understand and interpret our surroundings. The mind also forms our thoughts and plans our actions. The spirit, when connected to God, works to transform the mind into the very image of Christ which results in an ever increasing display of godly behaviors through the body.



We are complex beings, unlike any other living creature: the union of a physical body with an immaterial mind and spirit. Because of this, the person struggling with a mental illness needs a **holistic approach** to “treatment” that takes into account all three aspects (body, mind and spirit) of his or her being. Treatments that focus solely on a single aspect of one’s being can bring only limited, short-term relief at best.

Structure and Routine

A daily structure and routine will help your loved one thrive. It is suggested that you take the physical, psychological and spiritual needs described on the following pages and explore ways you can build them into a daily or weekly routine/schedule for your loved one.

Don’t worry about the minute to minute but view the “needs” as broad general principles to be implemented. Involve your loved one in developing the routine. Adjust the schedule to what they prefer or what builds their confidence and helps them succeed. Keep it simple. If it isn’t simple for you, it won’t be simple for them. Take your time and don’t feel like you have to rush and get everything in place all at once.

Because of cognitive confusion and memory problems (due to their disorder and/or medication), some individuals living with mental illness may need to physically see a schedule of things they are going to do that day to be successful.

Everyone is different, so be patient and keep learning what works and doesn’t work for your loved one. This should be viewed as a process, not a quick fix. In relation to recovery, you should think in terms of months and years rather than days and weeks. As your loved one heals and gains more stability, they will be able to do more and will move beyond a highly structured daily routine or schedule. Adjust accordingly as they become more independent and successful at navigating daily life.

Needs of the Body

The physical needs associated with mental disorders go far beyond medication and include rest, nutrition and exercise. Keeping the body (and brain) healthy will help take the edge off of symptoms related to the disorder and can enhance the action of psychiatric medication.

Sleep – Insomnia is a symptom of several mental disorders as well as a side effect of some psychiatric medications. Being appropriately rested is vital to maintaining daily stability. Sleep deprivation leads to irritability, agitation and stress which can trigger more serious symptoms of the disorder. Activities that can increase restfulness include having a set bedtime and routine, avoiding caffeine and nicotine, taking a nap in the afternoon and talking with the doctor to discuss the positive and negative effects of medications on sleep.

Medication – Educate yourself about the psychiatric medications that have been prescribed to your loved one. Know what they do, their potential side effects, interactions with food and other medications and how sensitive the effects of the drug are to missed doses or non-compliance. Organize their medications in such a way that they can be taken regularly and with ease (e.g., weekly pill dispensing boxes).

Relaxation – The physical symptoms of stress and anxiety (heart racing, sweating, shortness of breath, nausea) can be overwhelming. Relaxation techniques such as paced breathing can be helpful during these episodes of panic but can also help when done on a daily basis to bring down your loved one's general level of stress.

Diet and Nutrition – Evaluate your loved one's diet and eating habits. A healthy diet replenishes electrolytes and amino acids. This in turn affects neurotransmitters in the brain and can enhance the effects of medication. In some cases, nutritional supplements such as essential fatty acids may be helpful. These supplements should be used in addition to, but not in place of medication. Always check with your doctor before taking a nutritional supplement.

Exercise – Some sort of daily physical exercise is recommended for those living with a mental illness. This does not need to be an intense workout at the gym, but something that gets them moving and is easy to maintain (e.g., a 15-minute walk or 30-minutes working in the garden). The goal is to be regularly active in order to strengthen the body and help relieve anxiety and depressive symptoms.

Needs of the Mind

Mental disorders are often a battle between reality and wrong or negative thoughts that overwhelm a person's mind. A structured approach to psychological needs is just as important as physical needs and includes regular psychotherapy, enjoyable creative mental activities, and family members or friends who visit from time to time to provide a listening ear.

Psychotherapy – Talking therapy in conjunction with medication has been shown to be the most effective approach to treating mental illness. Psychotherapy is done by a licensed clinical psychologist and focuses on managing symptoms related to the disorder and improving an individual's general quality of life. It is recommended that a Christian seeking therapy find a therapist that affirms their faith tradition and/or shares the same faith.

Healthy Thinking – The development of simple tools to address ongoing negative and maladaptive thinking is essential for the recovery process. Helping to identify stressors and how they affect thoughts and feelings brings comfort and stability. Professional therapy works to develop these tools, while support and encouragement help reinforce healthy thinking.

Dealing with Problems – Learning positive and active ways to cope with problems helps to minimize stress and triggers that lead to debilitating symptoms. Positive coping strategies include planning and structure, humor, getting support from others, positive distractions, relaxation techniques, acceptance and faith. Negative coping strategies include venting, anger and aggression, denial, alcohol and substance use, avoidance, isolation and self-blame. Most negative coping strategies are passive not active.

Creative Mental Activities – Find mentally refreshing and stimulating activities that are enjoyed by your loved one. These could include painting, drawing, reading, photography, music, gardening, appropriate comedy outlets, word games or puzzles, or other hobbies. This type of activity is highly therapeutic and will help them feel good about themselves. Try different things. They may not last, but for a time it helps them experience normality and gain stability.

Cycles and Triggers – Understanding the patterns of how they tend to cycle through their specific symptoms (i.e., depression every winter) and knowing specific triggers (e.g., crowds, holidays) is key in managing ongoing stability.

Structure and Routine – Having a good structure and routine removes confusion and unpredictability which can trigger symptoms. Dialogue as a family or couple; what will help eliminate confusion and reduce stress (e.g., weekly menu, scheduled activities, sleep schedule)?

Support Group – Regularly attending a support group will allow your loved one to educate themselves about their disorder, learn practical skills and tools for navigating daily life and give them an opportunity to serve and support others who are dealing with similar circumstances.

Needs of the Spirit

The church has a significant role to play in the lives of those struggling with mental illness. Studies have shown that religious support offers resources to psychologically distress individuals that are unavailable from general social support. Religious support is vital to recovery and wholeness. More importantly we serve a God who loves us deeply, who hears our desperate cries and responds with sustaining mercy and grace.

Identity – Circumstances, struggles and disorders do not define who we are, God does. In Christ we were chosen before the foundation of the world; predestined for adoption as a son/daughter of the living God; purchased out of slavery to sin and death; loved completely and unconditionally; forgiven of all our sins, past, present and future; given spiritual wisdom and revelation; and marked as such until the day that we stand before Him holy and blameless. These are the truths your loved one must be continually reminded of so that they have a strong foundation on which to rebuild their life.

Spiritual Growth – When discussing God or studying scripture with your loved one, make it simple and the dialogue short. Use references about God's character and your loved one's identity and approval in Christ, not references that imply what they must do to get better. Meditating on a single verse of scripture or just praying with them is better than a long, detailed Bible study or devotional. It's time for them to be loved by God - not fight their illness (which they cannot cure on their own). Look past their disorder - encourage them and their faith.

Suggested scriptures on our identity and approval in Christ (John 15:15; Romans 8:1, 8:15; 1 Corinthians 12:27; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 1:7, 1:14, 2:10; Colossians 3:12; 1 John 5:18)

Suggested scriptures on the character of God (Exodus 34:6; Psalm 34:8, 36:5-9; 139:1-6; Jeremiah 32:27; Lamentations 3:22-23; Ephesians 2:4-5; Hebrews 13:8; 1 John 1:5; 4:8)

Stigma and Shame – Learning to accept this condition will be challenged by secular and spiritual stigma. This can cause great discouragement. Take time to research other great men and women, like Mother Theresa, Charles Spurgeon, and Martin Luther, who suffered from debilitating mental health difficulties, but who still lived out God's purpose for their life and made a significant impact for the Kingdom.

Opportunities to Serve – As stability is regained, look for simple ways to serve and bless others. Whether it is at home, a neighbor, or at church, serving provides a healthy way to look beyond personal difficulties and engage with compassion for others. This is also healing as it reinforces personal value and worth (He who waters, he himself will be watered ... Proverbs 11:25).

Community – Because of their difficulties your loved one may tend to avoid going out or initiating contact with others and lean towards isolation. Some individuals may not be able to handle large crowds or noise. It is important that you find simple ways for them to keep interacting with supportive family and friends. The goal is to avoid isolation. In addition, comfort, encouragement and support from those in the church are vitally important in the healing

and recovery process. Actively seek out a faith community that can encourage and support you and your loved one. An active and supportive faith community cultivates life while isolation brings frustration and fatigue.

Additional Needs

Specific Encouragements – Your loved one is more than a disorder. Be intentional at encouraging and building them up. Regularly remind them what it is that you appreciate about them. This will help deepen your relationship with them, bring hope and increase confidence.

Prayer – Men and women living with mental illness often feel separated and unable to connect with God. Take time to pray for and with your loved one. At times they may not be able to pray themselves, but they can agree with you in spirit as you pray. The important thing is to be present with them before the Lord.

Listen – One of the simplest and most effective things you and/or supportive friends and relatives can do is just be present with the person and listen. Talking through what is going on in one's mind can be very therapeutic. Individuals living with mental illness often need this outlet.

Humor and Joy – Just because you are going through a difficult time doesn't mean life has to be sour or serious. You and your loved one need humor and joy. Try and keep the "drama" of life to a minimum and relate to one another with joy. Lighthearted fun (such as reminiscing about funny family stories, telling a joke or watching a comical movie or comedian) will distract both of you from the struggles of living with mental illness as well as relieve stress.

Celebrate Progress – At times it may be difficult for your loved one to recognize or see the positive progress that they are making. It is important for them to hear from you how they are improving. Helping them learn to recognize improvement, no matter how small, will build their confidence and strengthen them to fight through the difficult times.

Home Life – Individuals living with mental illness often struggle to meet their daily family responsibilities (e.g., mowing the yard, buying groceries, transporting children to school). These duties then fall to the spouse or another family member, who is often struggling to keep his or her own head above water. Seek assistance with these tasks from supportive friends, relatives and the church.

Income – Individuals living with mental illness may have trouble holding a job at different times. This becomes particularly difficult when they are the primary provider in a family. It is important for the family to determine how they will handle this potential loss of income. Possible sources of financial assistance include a church's benevolence fund and government entitlement programs such as SSI and SSDI.

Employment – As their condition improves and they have extended periods of stability, your loved one may want to find a job. It is important that you help them find a job in which they can thrive and be successful without escalating their condition. If they want to return to their career,

take it step by step. If they jump back in too quickly, they could find themselves overwhelmed. Take it slow, don't push them.

Power of Attorney / Guardianship – In some cases, an individual's disorder may be so severe that they are unable to make proper decisions about their finances and care. In these situations, it is important to talk with an attorney about the possibility of obtaining a power of attorney or guardianship of your loved one so that you can assist them in making financial and legal decisions.

Challenges

People living with mental illness can behave in strange and bizarre ways. Their perception of the world and those around them is very different than yours. They may even perceive your attempts to help them as a threat. They may deny that they have a problem. They may refuse to be involved in treatment. These are difficult issues — long-term, messy and requiring a steadfast commitment on your part. Don't expect appreciation; in fact, you might receive just the opposite.

Remember that God has called us to *“rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.”* (Romans 12:15). This is as much your trial as it is that of the person with the disorder. God wants to use it to draw you and your loved one closer to Him.

There are no easy answers, and there is no quick fix. This is real life, and sometimes it will seem like you are feeling your way in the dark, but you are not alone. God is present in the midst of this storm and He will provide sustaining grace as you and your loved one walk toward recovery and healing.

Online Resources

The Grace Alliance (www.mentalhealthgracealliance.org)

National Alliance on Mental Illness (www.nami.org)

National Institute of Mental Health (www.nimh.nih.gov)

WebMD (www.webmd.com)