



**GRACE**  
for the  
**AFFLICTED**  
and  
**ELCA statement on**  
**Mental Illness**

Discussion  
Guide



## Introduction from “Grace for the Afflicted”

Whether you are sitting in the pew each week while silently living with a mental health challenge, trying to support someone who does, or believe mental illness doesn't affect you....this is for you. We wrote this guide to help individuals and churches not just broaden their perspective about mental health but USE their perspective to help themselves and others. We believe it will play an integral role in reducing stigma within yourself, your family, as well as your congregation and community.

### Group Rules

1. Any personal sharing in the group stays confidential in the group (unless the person wants to harm them-self or others).
2. Everyone has a voice at the table (be mindful of listening and talking)
3. We are all on this journey.....no one has all the answers & everyone has a right to their understanding and experiences.
4. Pray: at the beginning of group or at the end of group or both! Pray for compassion, understanding, acceptance. Pray for the Church. Pray for those in the community/world.

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# Goals for our St. John's Education about Mental Health

## **Learning Intention #1:**

The St. John's community will agree to a common set of beliefs regarding Mental Health/Wellness.

### Common Beliefs:

- Mental Health is a concern for all groups (demographic, gender, age, race, income level).
- Mental Health has stigma attached even though it is more readily acknowledged. (important to emphasize that Mental Health has a range from "healthy" to "debilitating".....we all experience movement on this range throughout our lives – problem is significant when it is debilitating/overwhelming life for extended time).
- Mental Health (can include: anxiety, depression, addiction, thought disorders, as well as ADHD, grief, caregiving burnout, social isolation...etc.)
- We, the Church, can have a positive response to Mental Health issues that support members of our Church, our community and our world.

## **Learning Intention #2:**

The St. John's community will increase their factual knowledge about Mental Illnesses in order to deepen their understanding and empathy.

### Facts:

- Mental illness can be defined as a health condition that changes a person's thinking feelings or behavior (or all three) and that causes the person distress and difficulty in functioning.
- One half of Americans will have a serious mental health condition in their lifetimes.
- Mental illness is the result of a complex integration of factors, including inherited traits, biological factors, life experiences and brain chemistry.

## **Learning Intention #3:**

The St. John's community will understand a common set of beliefs for Christian response to Mental Health, Mental Illness and Mental Wellness.

### Beliefs of Christian understanding and response:

- The presence of mental illness does NOT indicate particular sinfulness in the person who is affected.
- All people, including those living with the most profound mental illnesses, were created as an act of love and are worthy of loving and being loved.
- The world was created good, but not perfect and humans are part of God's ongoing creation.
- "The ELCA believes that this gracious God also endows human beings with insight and reasoning and calls human beings to help order and shape, nurture and promote the creation so that it may continue to flourish."
- The company of others eases the alienation and dis-grace that people living with mental illness experience. Answering this call is at the heart of the church's response to mental illness.

# Week 1: ELCA Statement

## Key Statements

“One of the most important correctives this church teaches is that the presence of mental illness does not indicate particular sinfulness in the person who is affected:

“People living with the most profound mental illnesses were created as an act of love and are worthy of loving and being loved.”

“The Church is called to challenge outdated views of mental illness and foster loving practices within our communities.”

## Discussion:

- **In their lifetimes, one-half of Americans will have a serious mental health condition with fewer than half receiving treatment.**

- Name 3 things you learned about mental illness. Was anything surprising?

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- What do people with mental illness need in order to function, recover, survive, be resilient?

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How are we the “Body of Christ” ?

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# Week 2: Chapter 15

## Key Statement

“Answering the call is at the heart of the church’s response to mental illness”.

Comparative Chart ELCA beliefs on Mental Wellness and the Book’s Conclusions or suppositions	
ELCA Statement	Grace for the Afflicted

## Discussion:

- **As quoted on page 233, Robert Frost believed that “the best way out is always through.”**

- How has this been true for you? How has your faith community played a part in helping you through battles you have faced?

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- **Page 246 describes how living in community helps meet your spiritual needs and emphasizes the importance of staying connected to life-giving relationships instead of being bogged down by large gatherings or events.**

- Who are the trustworthy and supportive people in your life, and how are these relationships life-giving? To whom can you reach out to in order to offer this kind of comfort and support?

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- **Whether you have a diagnosable mental disorder or not, we all can and should be on a journey to better ourselves.**

- List 5 things that you can do this week to meet your physical, mental, spiritual, or relational needs.

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# Week 3: Chapters 1-4

## Key Statement

Since God created us as a multipart being (spiritual, mental, physical, and relational), any dysfunction or disorder in one facet of ourselves negatively affects all levels of our being.

## Key Scripture:

Psalm 139:14

Luke 2:52

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

1 Samuel 21:12-15

John 10:20

2 Kings 20:1-7

Mark 7:32-35

Colossians 1:16-17

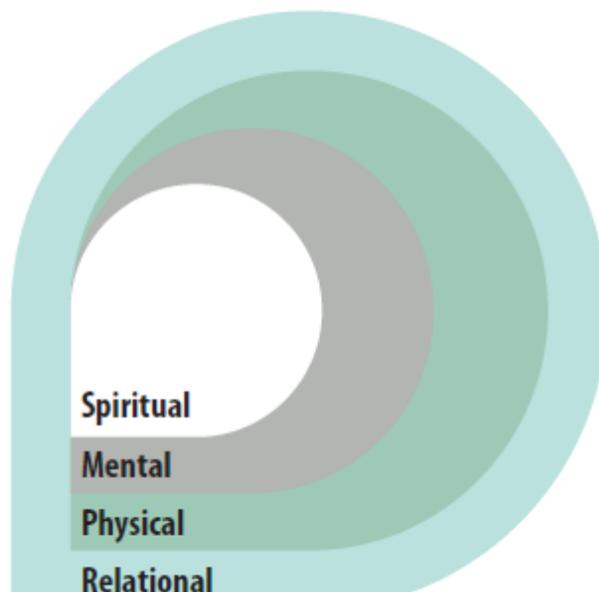
James 1:2-4

## What to read:

Chapter 1 – pages 1-18

Chapter 3 – pages 33-41

Chapter 4 – page 48-57



## Discussion:

- **Psalm 139 is a beautiful illustration of our intimate relationship with our Heavenly Father.** Read it in its entirety, and list 3 things this passage states about God’s greatest creation, mankind.
  - 1.
  - 2.
  - 3.
- **Read the following quote from Chapter 1: “Biological defects and weaknesses do not go away by themselves, no matter how much we want them to or have faith that they will” (page 14).**
  - What have you wanted to will away? What does it look like to give that up to God and trust? How can you embrace it and grow?

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- **Read the following quote from Chapter 1: “The Scriptures tell us that in Christ we have everything we need for life and godliness”**

- Explain to why Anna’s bipolar disorder and her dependence on medication is not an issue of weak faith or sin?” (page 3).

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- What was your first reaction to the question? What preconceived ideas or beliefs do you have about mental illness?

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- **Read Luke 2:52. This verse outlines the four facets of the self: Physical, Mental, Spiritual, and Relational.**

- How can you actively love God with all facets of yourself? What can your faith community do to holistically care for all facets of the self?
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- **Read 2 Corinthians 12:7-10.**

- How have you seen God’s power work through your weaknesses? How did your faith grow? What does this portion of Scripture teach us about handling the difficult areas in our lives and in others?
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- **Read Ephesians Chapter 1**

- What are 3 key truths we can give to our fellow believers who are living with mental illness?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

- **After reading this chapter, especially the section titled “How the Mentally Ill Were Viewed in Biblical Times” (page 38)**

- Do you think our society’s attitude about mental health has shifted from Jesus’ time? Why or why not?
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- **The author states on page 38, “The simple fact is that Christians develop mental illness at the same rates seen in the general population and admonitions such as ‘you need to pray more’ or ‘this is just the result of a lack of faith’ are ineffective in dealing with this problem.”**

- What would it look like for the church to deal with this more effectively?

- **Discuss the section on pages 39-40 titled, “Scientific Fact and Biblical Truth.”**

- What is an accurate understanding of the relationship between scientific fact and Biblical truth?

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- **Read the story in 1 Samuel 21:12-15 about David pretending to be what the biblical authors describe as “a madman.” Notice King Achish’s response.**

- How is the stigma of mental illness present in this story? How is his response similar/different to our society’s treatment of those who live with mental illness?

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- **Read John 10:1-21. After Jesus spoke these truths, in verses 19-21 the Jewish people were divided in their opinion of him, some even accusing him of being “mad”.**

- Why did they assume he was “mad”? How do our own biases lead us to judge a person’s thoughts and behaviors, even with the presence of mental illness?

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- **Read the story of Hezekiah’s illness and recovery in 2 Kings 20:1-7. Notice how Hezekiah was not alone in his illness. The prophet Isaiah came to visit him. Although Isaiah initially came with “bad news,” he heard a word from the Lord and became an instrument (along with Hezekiah’s servants) in God’s plan to heal Hezekiah. People living with mental illness often suffer from loneliness and hopelessness and could benefit from the loving presence of fellow believers who walk alongside them in their journey.**
  - List 3 ways you can be a healing presence in the life of someone living with mental illness.
    - 1.
    - 2.
    - 3.
  
- **The author provided an example of a disorder that has a solely biological origin, Alzheimer’s disease. Even though this disease is not a mental illness, it impacts people in a similar way - causing physical damage to the brain, which then affects a person’s behavior.**
  - How can we be as compassionate toward those with mental illness as we are toward those with Alzheimer’s disease?

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- **Read James 1:2-4.** What does this passage teach us about persevering through life’s challenges, especially when it relates to illness and suffering?

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## Week 4: Chapters 5-10

### How to prepare:

Week 4 will be a discussion of Chapters 5-10. Divide reading assignments amongst your group. Give each group member the related chapter guide to assist them in discussion. No one is expected to read all chapters, just come prepared to talk about the one you read.

### Key Statement:

“The presence of a mental illness does not alter or thwart the perfect purpose and plan God has for a person’s life”

### Key Scripture:

Daniel 5:21

1 Samuel 22:17

Psalms 6:6-7

Psalms 38:6-10

Psalms 13:1-3

Psalms 94:19

Isaiah 21:3-4

Psalms 55

Deuteronomy 28:34

Genesis 37:35

Job 7:3

Judges 15:7-8

Hosea 6:4

# Chapter 5 – 10

(individual chapter worksheet)

Chapter: \_\_\_\_\_

- **Please write out the two most surprising facts you learned about the disorder and be ready to share them with the group:**

1. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

- **Read one of the bible stories that are mentioned in “A Biblical Example” this section.**

- How were God’s purposes still fulfilled in the biblical example?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

- How have you seen God use someone that you or others least expected?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## Discussion:

- **While educating ourselves about the symptoms and behaviors associated with mental and neurological disorders can be helpful, using this knowledge to categorize or “fix” others can be counterproductive.**
    - How can we protect ourselves from the tendency to self-diagnose or diagnose others?
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- **Chapter 6 begins with a quote from Patty Duke: “my recovery from manic depression has been an evolution, not a sudden miracle.”**
    - How do you define recovery? What’s the difference between recovery being an evolution vs. a sudden miracle?
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- **Every chapter tells the story of a family who eventually received help after experiencing a mental health crisis.**
    - What can the church and its members do to prevent these crises and help those experiencing them?
      - Ch. 5 - Read Daniel and Nancy’s story on pages 72-73
      - Ch. 6 - Read Mark and Shirley’s story on pages 79-80
      - Ch. 7 - Read Brenda and Kelly’s story on pages 104-106
      - Ch. 8 - Read Martha and Hannah’s story on pages 123-124
      - Ch. 9 - Read Jane and Trey’s story on pages 138-139
      - Ch. 10 - Read Cami and Ray’s story on pages 158-161
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## Week 5: Chapters 11-14

How to prepare:

Week 5 will be a discussion of Chapters 11-14. Divide reading assignments amongst your group. Give each group member the related chapter guide to assist them in discussion. No one is expected to read all chapters, just come prepared to talk about the one you read.

### Key Statements

“Yet in the midst of trauma, tragedy and mental challenges, faith serves as a stabilizing anchor in an ever-changing sea”

“Having faith, even a strong faith, does not guarantee that during times of extreme distress an individual will not consider suicide as a way out”

### Key Scripture:

1 Kings 12:6

Job 12:12

Leviticus 19:32

Psalms 71:9

2 Samuel 19:32-35

Luke 1:64

Acts 20:9-12

1 Kings 19:1-20

Job 6:8-11

Jonah 4:1-11

Acts 16:25-34

Ephesians 2:8

# Chapter 11-14

(individual chapter worksheet)

Chapter: \_\_\_\_\_

- **Please write out the two most surprising facts you learned about the disorder and be ready to share them with the group:**

1. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

- How does having this understanding help us to not judge those who are struggling?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

- **Read the bible story mentioned in “A Biblical Example” in this section.**

- How were God’s purposes still fulfilled in the biblical example?

\_\_\_\_\_

- What should our response always be our community?

\_\_\_\_\_

- List 3 ways you can help someone in your faith community who is caring someone with mental health challenges?

1.

2.

3.

- What steps can you take to follow Paul’s example, and ensure people (not rituals or traditions) remain the central focus of your ministry?

## Discussion:

- **While educating ourselves about the symptoms and behaviors associated with mental and neurological disorders can be helpful, using this knowledge to categorize or “fix” others can be counterproductive.**
  - How can we protect ourselves from the tendency to self-diagnose or diagnose others?
  
- **Chapter 6 begins with a quote from Patty Duke: “my recovery from manic depression has been an evolution, not a sudden miracle.”**
  - How do you define recovery? What’s the difference between recovery being an evolution vs. a sudden miracle?
  
- **Every chapter tells the story of a family who eventually received help after experiencing a mental health crisis.**
  - What can the church and its members do to prevent these crises and help those experiencing them?
    - Ch. 11 - Read Leslie and Joyce’s story on pages 180-182
    - Ch. 12 - Read Meg and Shannon’s story on pages 193-194
    - Ch. 13 - Read Brad and Clare’s story on page 212

# Week 6: Chapters 15-16

## Key Statements

“The goal of recovery goes far beyond symptom reduction but aims at equipping the individual to live beyond their illness”

“The involvement of the church in mental health is the missing piece necessary to transform our broken system, making it accessible and more effective”

## Key Scripture:

Hebrews 11:1

Psalms 13

Lamentations 3:21-23

Romans 5:1-5

1 Peter 4:10-11

James 5:14

Galatians 6:2

John 13:34

James 2:14-17

Romans 12:15

## Discussion:

- **“Recovery is a process, not a quick fix” (page 237). Many people living with mental illness have heard things like “just pray about it”, “snap out of it”, or “you just have to be strong.” These statements imply that mental illness is a sign of spiritual or emotional weakness and can be quickly overcome if you do certain things.**
  - How are these statements unhelpful and even harmful? Discuss compassionate and encouraging things you can say to someone throughout their recovery process.

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- **Beyond offering prayer and Bible study.....**
  - how can your faith community adopt a holistic approach to mental health recovery? How can you uphold this approach with your friends/family who may benefit from this?

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- **Although pages 244-245 discuss the importance of meeting spiritual needs by reminding others that God is faithful, it can be hard for Christians with mental health challenges to receive these truths and emotionally connect to God.**
  - How can we as Christians support our fellow believers, even through seasons of doubt that may be exacerbated by mental illness?

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- **In order to meet the relational needs of those who are living with mental health challenges, we must overcome the stigma. Page 248 states that “stigma is always born out of fear and misinformation and can only be overcome by truth and education.”**

- What stigma about mental illness is your faith community still battling against? What will you do after this study to help overcome it?

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- **“An active and supportive faith community cultivates life, while isolation brings frustration and fatigue” (page 246). Faith communities have tremendous built-in strengths that can provide life and hope to those living with a mental health challenge and to their family members.**

- What strengths does your faith community possess, and how can you use those strengths to bring comfort and support?

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