

tragedy. God is experienced as near instead of absent; as a friend rather than an enemy; as a daily guide rather than an enigma.

Individuals, who began by being so burdened by their own family problem that they had no time or energy for anything else, 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 such as the National Alliance of Mental Illness (NAMI). NAMI is dedicated to ending the nightmare of serious mental illness by supporting medical research and by providing information, services and support groups.

### **Another Kind of Miracle**

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

### **A Prayer**

Oh God who cares about all Your children, grant us the gift of acceptance that we might find serenity and courage this day to cope with the mental illness in our family. Teach us the patience and understanding our loved ones who are mentally ill need from us. Help us not to be stigmatized by the attitudes of the uninformed and uncaring. Strengthen us with gratitude for the love and understanding we receive from you and those who care. Enable us with wisdom and guidance to do Your will in our family life and to serve those who suffer. AMEN

*Text by John Baggett, M. Div., M.A., whose son has the mental illness of schizophrenia.*

### **Pathways to Promise**

[www.pathways2promise.org](http://www.pathways2promise.org)

### **Recovery**

Recovery does not mean that the illness has gone into complete remission. Over time, and after what for many can be a long and difficult process, individuals can come to terms with their illness by first learning to accept it and then moving beyond it.

This includes learning coping mechanisms, believing in themselves as individuals by learning their strengths as well as their limitations, and coming to realize that they do have the capacity to find purpose and enjoyment in their lives in spite of their illness. **RECOVERY IS POSSIBLE!**

## **SHOW YOU CARE. WEAR A SILVER RIBBON.**



- Help break down the barriers to treatment and support.
- Help reduce stigma —talk about it!



**FIND HELP.  
FIND HOPE.**

Mental illness affects 1 in 5 people. We provide resources and support to all those affected by mental illness.

**NAMI SOUTHERN ARIZONA DEPENDS ON YOU.  
THERE ARE MANY WAYS TO HELP.  
BECOME A MEMBER, VOLUNTEER OR DONATE.**

NAMI Southern Arizona  
6122 E. 22nd St.  
Tucson, AZ 85711  
520-622-5582  
[NAMIsa@NAMIsa.org](mailto:NAMIsa@NAMIsa.org)

**COMMUNITY-WIDE CRISIS LINE:**  
520-622-6000 or 1-866-495-6735

[NAMIsa.org](http://NAMIsa.org)



Educational information and local support provided by:



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## **When Mental Illness Strikes**

When mental illness strikes in a family, it is like being struck by lightning. It is unexpected and it is devastating. The experience is not unlike a death in the family. The family must cope with and adapt to a terrible loss.

Because of society's misunderstanding of mental illness, it often can seem similar to the experience of some terrible humiliating event which brings shame to family members. It is a tragedy. Like all tragedies it raises profound human questions for those who are affected 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. When the illness carries with it a diagnosis such as depression, bipolar disorder 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 and inability to function socially and to cope with everyday 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 for whom they had so many dreams, no longer exists. In that familiar person's place is a stranger whose behavior is 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 Faith for Coping**

Many families with relatives who are mentally ill find that their religious faith is challenged. However, their faith can grow as they struggle with the tragedy of mental illness. The result is that, in their personal courageous journeys, they show remarkable evidence of the power of religious belief to help them cope with serious mental illness. Their traditions vary, but there are discernible common elements to their experiences.

Many religiously committed families have grown from a faith that pleaded with God to entirely remove the tragedy, to one that asked God for the serenity, the courage, and the wisdom to cope with the tragedy. It is natural to hope for a miracle that will restore things as they were before the illness struck. But 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 and to feel more peace in the midst of daily turmoil than was often felt in more tranquil pasts. There is 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**

Religiously committed families grow from a faith that was preoccupied with responsibility to one focused on acceptance. When something terrible happens, it is normal to seek an appropriate 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 victim; and/or 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. This takes the form of an obsessive concern about "doing the right thing" in relation to the care and treatment of the person who is mentally ill. 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**

It is normal to become angry with God. Like all tragedies which human beings experience as senseless and unfair, mental illness can shake one's confidence in God. For some, it can lead to doubts about God's reality. Such times are deeply unhappy moments. All the old securities and certainties of belief are severely shaken. Thankfully, for most religiously committed 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**

The serious mental illnesses are diseases of the brain. They are not anyone's fault. The issue for faith is not who to blame, but 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, through frantic searches for magical cures, or through blame, they condemn themselves, and usually the mentally ill loved one, to additional needless misery.

Acceptance is not easy. For the religiously committed family, acceptance is experienced as a gift from God. Acceptance means facing the reality of the illness and learning about it. It means living with compassion toward the person who is mentally ill and showing 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 might become 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, acceptance means accepting God's will. It means trusting that one's own imperfect efforts are acceptable, that the suffering itself is meaningful.

When acceptance happens, it is experienced as a restoration of fellowship with God that seemed broken by the