



National Alliance on Mental Illness Help Line  
1-800-950-6264 <https://www.nami.org/help>  
Suicide Prevention Lifeline 800.273.TALK  
Translifeline 877.565.8860  
Veteran's Crisis Line 800.273.8255 *press 1*  
Pastoral Care—Pastor Jim Alexander 623.792.5295  
<https://thepalms.org/Tools2Thrive>

The American Counseling Association (ACA) has designated April as Counseling Awareness Month. The theme this year is

***The Future is ... Self-care, Advocacy and Inclusion #BurnBrightNotOut.***

While the purpose of this month is to advocate for the heroes in the counseling profession and to celebrate their effort whatever their settings may be, it is also an opportunity for us to think about the growth and support counselors facilitate in individuals. As we continue learning how to be a WISE Congregation for Mental Wellness and stamping out the stigma associated with mental illness, there can also be some stigma associated with *going* to see a counselor. What's more is that once a person decides to see a counselor, they may run into the issue of cost and insurance coverage disparities or gaps as with Medicare. The story sounds a lot like this:

*"It is extremely frustrating, It is demeaning when you are on Medicare and can't find services... it is tiring, exhausting and, if your mental health already has a sense of hopelessness or helplessness, you are faced with jumping through hoops or getting so many 'no's' or no call backs... it begins to feel more hopeless."*

What are the ways in which faith communities can promote self-care, advocate for the mental health care provider and those seeking services?

- **Share your story**

There are few things more powerful than leading by example. Combat the stigma around mental health by sharing your story about your own struggles and personal experience. By doing so, you create a safe space for friends and family in which they can feel more comfortable sharing their own experiences rather than suffering in silence. Sharing your story shows others that they are not alone and gives them hope.

- **Listen and learn**

One of the best tools for fighting stigmas associated with mental health is the capacity to listen. Seek out personal stories from friends and family, on social media and television, and other sources of information that can help you learn more about what mental health challenges look like for different people and how common struggles with mental health are. Similarly, pay attention to when you or others might be perpetuating stigmas or falling for common misconceptions and work to change those things to create a better, more compassionate environment for everyone.

- **Support others**

Mental health challenges can be different from physical challenges in that you're often unable to see them as easily, unless you know what to look for. When you are familiar with common symptoms of people struggling, you can more easily see when someone might need your support. You're responsible to fix anyone, nor should you try to. Be available and open to support and encourage them in healthy and productive ways. And, of course, most important: You can't help others if you're not taking care of yourself.