Guidance: Engaging With People Experiencing Mental Health Difficulties

A brief guide to help you engage positively and constructively with people experiencing mental health difficulties

Do...

...be calm, alert, and kind
...be aware of your own limitations – and stay within them.
...be aware of the risks that might arise in a pastoral encounter, especially when alone – choose your space carefully.
...take note of the parable of the Good Samaritan – proactively available and helpful, but he didn't do it all.
...know the statutory or skilled support services available locally, and have contacts to hand*.
...ensure that you have appropriate basic awareness of conditions, listening skills, and services - undertake Mental Health First Aid Awareness training and then refer to the handbook!
...pray -say 'I will keep you in my prayers', or offer a brief prayer if they would welcome that.

*These could include GP surgeries; NHS Mental Health Care Crisis Team and other services; charities such as Samaritans, Mind or Farming Community Network; Diocesan safeguarding team; and specialist support/care services relating to bereavement, bullying, homelessness and housing, LGBT+, racism, relationships, substance misuse & other addictions, young or elderly people, etc, and the Diocesan Healing and Deliverance team accessible via your local clergy.

Don’t...

...do any harm to yourself or others
...talk about your own experiences – they are not relevant or helpful!
...offer facile reassurance - they can suggest you haven’t understood or are minimising gravity.
...attempt to provide a course of therapy, even if you have professional qualifications in the field*.
...undertake deliverance ministry on your own – refer immediately to the Diocesan specialist team and their mental health professionals.
...try to proselytise or ‘convert’ a vulnerable person, or proactively to discuss faith in the context of mental ill health – limit your advice to practical signposting unless specifically asked.
...put yourself at risk of harm from others’ behaviour if they are in a disordered, disinhibited or overstimulated mental state.
...take on what you cannot handle – be clear about the limits of what you can give and the circumstances in which you can give it.
...try to do it alone – make sure you have a mentor or know where to seek help if needed.

* While listening and support is one of the roles of clergy in any pastoral situation you should not be operating as a lone practitioner. You are not covered by any kind of liability insurance if things go wrong.

Remember:
- the importance of non-judgemental, empathetic listening.
- that you do not have access to a person’s medical history and so will not have the full picture.
- that signposting to professional help is as valid for mental health as for any other health difficulty.
- to enquire whether someone is on medication and/or has existing support.
- to signpost back into appropriate existing and engaged services and support.
- the police can remove someone to a place of safety in an emergency.
- there is no substitute for common sense in a pastoral encounter.

- the ELASS model (below)

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