



# Starting a Mental Health Spiritual Support Group


Rev. Alan Johnson  
United Church of Christ  
Mental Health Network



# Quotes from participants


- *For me, this was the first time to say in front of others, that I suffered from depression. Thank you for the spiritual support group.*

---Maria



- *I was involved in a support group for those touched by bipolar illness for over 8 years. I found a strong sense of community and it helped me through some very difficult times. The spiritual support group helps ground me, makes me realize that there is Someone outside of myself who loves me unconditionally. The rituals of the group, the inspirational reading all help me to center myself and provide a depth of experience I did not have before.*

---Anne



- *Listening, no judgment, empathy and sympathy. Also and perhaps more importantly, a structured group that has boundaries for myself and my co-attendees creating a safe, professional and reliable environment.*

---Jen

# Spiritual Support means speaking and listening— healing, helping and hoping



# What is a Spiritual Support Group?

The Spiritual Support Group seeks to be a safe, sacred, supportive, spiritual and welcoming space to speak and listen to experiences of ways that you have been affected by mental health/mental illness/or brain disorder issues and raise the ways in which spirituality and religious traditions have been helpful or a hindrance in your recovery.



# How did we get here?

A strong encouragement from the senior minister

Sent out invitations to form a Task Force on Mental Health

Where we started--education

Attended the NAMI Family to Family program

Formed a Mental Health a Task Group that lead to a Mental Health Ministry Team

Decided to offer Spiritual Support Group in our faith community



## 5 Reasons to offer a Spiritual Support for Mental Health



One out of four, 25% in your congregation are affected by a mental health challenge.

Faith communities are called to be compassionate

Speaking and hearing about mental health concerns breaks the silence on mental illness.

There are positive and negative experiences around faith or religious beliefs

Sharing strategies and disciplines with each other

# Ritual or format of the Spiritual Support Group

## **Guidelines**

Begin by  
reading them and  
agreeing on them



# Spiritual Support Group Guidelines

1. We honor each others' presence and therefore we listen carefully to one another.
2. We allow each person time and opportunity to express himself or herself before anyone speaks twice.
3. It is OK to stay silent. You can say "pass" at any time.
4. Share feelings as well as thoughts including personal insights about your spiritual experiences.
5. Our main purpose is not to resolve difficulties but rather to listen, support and comfort each other. Any wisdom that emerges belongs to the group.
6. We use "I" statements when sharing our experiences, what we have learned, and what has been helpful or not helpful in our own lives. We do not offer advice to others unless they ask.



7. We are open to the expressions of how one's faith or spirituality has been a help and/or a hindrance. This group welcomes all faith traditions or none, and welcomes everyone's understanding/experience of spirituality.



8. We agree that everyone has something of value to share with the group, if they so choose, so that no one person monopolizes the time.

9. Confidentiality is maintained in the group. We cannot share whatever a person says here anywhere else.

10. We seek to provide a safe environment in which a person can share without judgment.

11. We keep our comments in the here and now.

12. If a person needs to leave the meeting at anytime, they are free to do so.

13. We begin and end on time.

# Ritual or format of the Spiritual Support Group

Closing the door

Lighting a candle—  
with or without words

A short reading

Sitting together in quiet—  
a minute



Introduction: snapshot and/or recent challenge and/or use of a discipline and/or way you have used to take care of yourself/any change since you were last here/or what brought you here today.

Expand on common theme(s) or more time for sharing.

Allow for silence

Ending—quiet time

What you will take with you from this evening?

Welcome individual prayers



Blowing out the candle

# Announcements in faith communities, local mental health organizations and local NAMI affiliate

**A Spiritual Support Group for Mental Health** meets for persons who are affected with mental health challenges as well as family and friends. This free group meets Monday, 7:00 p.m.-8:30 p.m. in the Heritage Room of the FAITH Center of the First Congregational Church 1128 Pine, Boulder. This confidential and safe group is to share, learn, and grow in a supportive environment and is facilitated by Anne, a research psychologist and teacher as well as a person in recovery, and Alan Johnson, a member of the Interfaith Network on Mental Illness. For more information....



# Affirmations:

Spirituality refers to one's understanding of one's meaning or purpose in life; connection with a transcendent or ultimate power, a power greater than one's self; experience of the sacred; or set of values that guide one's life.

Conversations about spiritual issues are welcomed.

Exploration of what gives one hope that endures is invited.

In one's recovery, spirituality can be a resource along with medications, talk therapy, and complementary therapies.





# Questions

1. What keeps it from being a therapy/counseling session?
2. What is the role of the facilitators?
3. How often do you offer the Spiritual Support Group?
4. Who is invited?
5. Is there money involved? Use of space?
6. What makes a space conducive for such a group?
7. How do you invite people to attend?

# More Questions

8. How many back-up facilitators do you need?
9. When do you NOT have the group?
10. What do you do if someone is in crisis?
11. Does a facilitator need to report an issue if a person is in crisis?
12. Do you need insurance coverage?
13. What are the boundaries that you establish?
14. Is the SSG time-limited?
15. To whom do you “report?”
16. Do you provide other resources such as print, video, other programs?
17. Do you provide drinks and/or food?
18. Do you always provide tissues?

Hope begins in the dark,  
the stubborn hope  
that if you just show up and  
try to do the right thing,  
the dawn will come.  
You wait and watch  
and work;  
You don't give up.


-Anne Lamont





# Starting a Spiritual Support Group for Mental Health and Wellness in your Faith Community

- **United Church of Christ Mental Health Network**
  - [www.mhn-ucc.org](http://www.mhn-ucc.org)
  - Starting a Spiritual Support Group in your Faith Community
    - Spiritual Support Group Guidelines



Please connect with questions,  
thoughts, ideas, and/or your next  
steps

- [revalan2004@comcast.net](mailto:revalan2004@comcast.net)