May Is Mental Health Month

Anxiety is a state of mind in which we are worried, nervous, concerned and afraid. While most people experience anxiety from time to time, some develop anxiety disorders. People who live with anxiety disorders regularly become anxious in situations that typically do not trigger anxiety in most other people. Over time, their symptoms can become debilitating and affect their ability to work, enjoy themselves or maintain relationships.

Types of anxiety disorders
There are several different types of anxiety disorders. Here are some of them:

- **Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD):** People with this condition find themselves in a state of anxiety that can last for months. Symptoms include difficulty sleeping, irritability, feeling “on edge,” trouble concentrating and muscle tension.
- **Social anxiety disorder:** Individuals with social anxiety have strong feelings of concern and fear in social situations. When around others, they may experience physical symptoms such as sweating, facial flushing and trembling. They may also have an inordinate fear of being humiliated or embarrassed and eventually will start avoiding social situations. In some cases, people with this condition may have difficulty making friends and establishing a supportive peer group.
- **Panic disorder:** Panic disorder is characterized by unexpected anxiety or panic attacks in which sufferers feel overwhelming fear. During a panic attack, sufferers may develop heart palpitations, shortness of breath, sweating and may even feel like they are choking.

Diagnosis and treatment
If a person believes that they may be suffering from an anxiety disorder, he or she should speak to a doctor. A physician can perform a physical exam and review any medications the patient is taking to rule out other conditions. The doctor may refer sufferers to a mental health professional who can assist with further diagnosis and in developing a treatment plan. In addition, people with anxiety disorders may benefit from self-help practices such as meditation, yoga or regular exercise. In some cases, a physician may prescribe medications that can help minimize anxiety and its symptoms.

**PRAYER:** Dear God, help us to draw closer to you, and to each other, during times of fear and worry. Amen

How faith communities can support people with anxiety

Like other mental illnesses, anxiety disorders are “invisible disabilities.” It’s not always obvious that a person is struggling with anxiety. As a result, sufferers may feel isolated, ashamed and misunderstood, even within faith communities. Yet, there is a lot that congregations can do to support people with anxiety.

Self-education
Faith community members can educate themselves about common mental illnesses. By understanding anxiety and how it manifests, it becomes easier to have empathy for those who have this condition. Education can also help us develop ways and be in relationships with people who struggle with anxiety.

Being supportive
People with anxiety may engage in behaviors that seem inappropriate or unwarranted. This can be frustrating to others, and these behaviors can be misinterpreted as irresponsibility, immaturity, attention seeking or hostility. Family, friends and associates may express frustration and anger to the person with anxiety, exacerbating the situation.

When we understand that people suffering from anxiety disorders are suffering from uncontrollable fear, it’s easier to be supportive. When we take the time to ask about the kind of support they need, we can help assist them in managing and recovering from their condition.

Offer options for getting involved

Many faith communities are structured around group activities. People who have anxiety may want to become involved with a faith community but may also feel overwhelmed by unfamiliar people, loud noises and bustling activity. One option is to offer people with anxiety ways of getting involved with the community that don’t trigger panic. This might include participating in a small prayer group or performing volunteer tasks that can be accomplished at home. Some individuals with anxiety disorders experience symptoms during religious services and activities. In some cases, the anxiety might be eased if the person attends with one or more trusted friends. Offer to accompany and stay with the person during services and events.

**Resources**
Advocate Health Care: advocatehealth.com
Anxiety and Depression Association of America: adaa.org
National Alliance on Mental Illness: www.nami.org

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Advocate Health Care
Inspiring medicine. Changing lives.

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