

Sharing Hope: Understanding Mental Health

New NAMI Toolkit Reaches Out to African American Congregations

by Sally Osmer, L.C.S.W., Executive Director, NAMI Mercer, New Jersey

“Just as we may have never thought we would have an African American president, we have thought we could not talk about mental illness in our community. But now it’s a new day, and we can talk about mental illness and recovery, even here in church.” With these words, Reverend Dr. John H. Harris, Jr., Pastor of Galilee Baptist Church in Trenton, New Jersey, opened the first pilot of Sharing Hope and concisely summarized the mission of this new toolkit-based NAMI outreach initiative for African American congregations.

Across the nation, congregations of all denominations bring African American families together and provide emotional support to their members. Researchers have found evidence that

many African Americans seek help from the clergy more frequently than from other professionals. Mental health issues are no exception. When coping with mental illness, African American families may look for guidance, support, and understanding from their faith community.

Unfortunately, faith leaders and their congregations oftentimes do not understand mental illness or do not know how to help families dealing with these illnesses, such as by linking them to more formal provider services. To address this issue, NAMI’s Multicultural Action Center developed the “Sharing Hope” initiative to assist NAMI affiliates and grassroots leaders in educating African American congregations about mental illness. Through a one-hour scripted presentation, the

initiative aims to increase understanding and de-stigmatize mental illness; to show that treatment is effective and recovery is possible; and to introduce NAMI education and support group programs to the audience.

In Trenton, a Promising Beginning

Twenty-five people attended the first pilot, which took place in late 2008 in Trenton, New Jersey. Participants were members and neighbors of Galilee Baptist Church, a large, predominantly African American congregation in the heart of Trenton. Galilee is a well-respected congregation with many active neighborhood ministries, including a Mental Health Ministry that is led by NAMI Mercer member and NAMI Family-to-Family teacher Kimme Carlos.

NAMI Mercer has offered the NAMI Family-to-Family program at two predominately African American churches in Trenton, including Galilee. Sharing Hope offered Kimme and NAMI Mercer an opportunity to further this relationship. “This new program is a perfect complement to Family-to-Family as it can introduce basic information about mental illness to a congregation,” states Kimme. “Many congregations are interested in introducing the issue of mental illness, but might not know exactly how to proceed.”

Reverend Harris values NAMI as a partner in his ministry and understands the useful information that NAMI programs can provide. “One of the best things that we as Galileans have ever done was to bring Sharing Hope to the church as a part of Black readiness. It is time for us to come out of the dark ages in dealing with mental illness.”

HOUSE calls for NAMI

As part of the 100th episode party, a second promotion to benefit NAMI was launched in January by members of the hit FOX-TV television series, *HOUSE*, to continue drawing attention to NAMI’s work in education, support, and advocacy for individuals and families affected by mental illness.


The new T-shirts are emblazoned with the phrase, “Normal’s Overrated,” another “House-ism” uttered by Dr. Gregory House, played by Hugh Laurie, star of the show.

The initial T-shirt promotion in 2007 raised over \$150,000 for NAMI.



NAMI’s board president and executive director with Hugh Laurie.

“Normal’s Overrated” is a phrase with broad appeal, and can lead to conversations about stigma and mental illness.

To purchase the T-shirt, visit www.nami.org/house. 



NAMI Mercer staff and volunteers with Pastor Harris following the pilot program.

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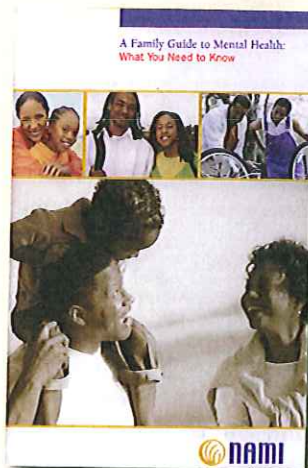
In just 60 minutes, the group became more comfortable talking in their own church building about mental illness and people they know who live with mental illness. They started the all-important next step—to talk about how they, as a congregation, can be more welcoming and helpful to families and individuals. “We were very pleased with the openness of the group that attended the session, and their willingness to ask questions from their own experiences,” reported Kimme. Noting the success of the pilot program, NAMI Mercer plans to offer Sharing Hope in three other congregations in Mercer County in 2009.

Building Understanding Through a Trusted Resource

Sharing Hope is meant to be utilized by NAMI state organizations and local affiliates in reaching out to African American families through the faith community. The toolkit offers detailed steps to take in order to successfully implement the program. It is available online at www.nami.org/sharinghope.

For more information, contact sharinghope@nami.org.

The toolkit may also be accessed online via NAMI FaithNet, where additional resources for outreach to faith communities are available, at www.nami.org/namifaithnet. ☺



A Family Guide to Mental Health: What You Need to Know

A Family Guide to Mental Health: What You Need to Know is available through the NAMI Store at www.nami.org/store.