

Signs and Symptoms of Depression and Anxiety

A GUIDE FOR CLERGY

Written & Provided by



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All of us are subject to the stresses of daily life and personal relationships. And different people react differently. As clergy, you stand by the members of your congregation—both in times of celebration and in times of emotional and spiritual need—and your help is valuable. But so is your ability to tell when an individual has reached a level of anxiety or depression that calls for clinical counseling or medical help. This booklet is designed to help you learn what to look for and what to say to the person you're concerned about.



Care for Yourself

so you can care for others.

First things first. In your vocation, it's easy to give so much to others that you deplete your own resources. Don't let that happen. Remember that you're human, a child of God, and you deserve the same love and care you give your family and congregation. So take care of your own body, mind, and spirit. See a counselor if you think it may help—we'll help you find one for a Wellness Conversation or for ongoing personal counseling. Meanwhile, follow these suggestions to protect your own mental health:

- **Don't take situations so personally** – it's hard, but try.
- **Stay aware of your emotions** – they can teach and motivate you, so don't dismiss them!
- **Take time to be creative** – write, sing, paint, do puzzles, send your soul a message that it's valuable.
- **Get adequate rest** – you need it.
- **Count your blessings** – keep a gratitude journal.
- **Don't try to please everyone** – it can't be done.
- **Practice saying “no” to requests** – listen to your internal voice.
- **Pray** – practice mindfulness and pursue your spiritual disciplines.

What to know about Anxiety.

Be alert for people whose anxiety level seems out of proportion to the daily stress they encounter.

How to recognize signs of anxiety.

Common symptoms and signs of anxiety disorders include:

- Feelings of panic, fear, and uneasiness.
- Problems falling asleep or staying asleep.
- Heart palpitations and/or shortness of breath.
- Restlessness, inability to be still and calm.
- Nausea.
- Muscle tension.
- Feelings of foreboding or dread.

Some anxiety disorders involve panic attacks.

Symptoms include:

- “Racing” heart and/or chest pains, as if there is a tight band around one’s chest.
- Sense of terror or sense that one might die or have a heart attack.
- Difficulty breathing.
- “Tunnel vision.”
- Feeling dizzy, faint or weak.
- Sweating or having the chills.
- Feeling out of control or a loss of control.

How to talk to people about anxiety.

Anxiety disorders can disrupt your congregant's relationships and ability to work or participate in daily activities. So suggest counseling—and offer encouraging words:

1. **“Talk to an expert.”** Foster relationships with mental health workers, and keep a list of trusted counselors and psychiatrists to recommend to congregants who might need treatment.
2. **“Don't be afraid of treatment.”** If your congregant fears taking medicine, mention that while psychotropic medications greatly help some people, anxiety disorders can also be treated without medication.
3. **“Try calming techniques.”** Learn calming or centering prayers, breath prayers, or other ways of centering during anxiety—and teach these to the person you're helping.
4. **“Learn more about anxiety.”** Display and share information about anxiety and ways to prevent anxiety disorders, especially in the face of stress.
5. **“Let's pray together.”** Show your congregants empathy and concern, and offer to pray with them.

What to know about Depression.

Learn to differentiate between people simply struggling with stress and those who may be experiencing depression.

How to recognize signs of depression.

Common signs and symptoms of depression include:

- Feeling sad or empty most of the day, most days of the week. In children and adolescents, this could also include irritability.
- Lack of interest or pleasure in most activities of the day, including libido.
- Changes in weight and appetite – either increased appetite and weight gain or decreased appetite and weight loss.
- Changes in sleep – insomnia or sleeping more than usual and feeling fatigued.
- Feeling restless, or worthless, or excessively guilty nearly every day.
- Recurrent thoughts of death (e.g., “I think my family would be better off if I were just gone”), thinking about suicide without having a plan, attempting suicide or having a specific plan for committing suicide.
- Loss of energy and/or motivation.
- Interpersonal withdrawal.
- Decreased or a total lack of concentration.

How to talk to people about depression.

Here are some suggestions for what to say and do when working with individuals who are experiencing symptoms of depression:

- 1. “Let me ask you some questions.”** Use the symptoms of depression noted here to assess levels of distress.
- 2. “Do you think a counselor might help?”** Ask the person’s opinion and feelings before you recommend speaking to a counselor.
- 3. “Let me give you some information.”** Even if the individual is initially reluctant to seek treatment, you can still provide facts about depression—plus names and numbers of counselors you know and trust.
- 4. “Let me help.” or “Let me send you to someone.”** Some clergy are trained in pastoral counseling—others are not. Know your competence and limitations when interacting with individuals who may have a serious mental disorder such as depression.
- 5. Encourage mental health.** Use church announcements and/or publications to list mental health resources in your community.
- 6. Don’t downplay the problem.** Do not minimize or spiritualize emotional distress and psychological disorders for your congregants or yourself.
- 7. Trust therapy to work.** Know—and mention—that 80% of individuals who seek therapy for personal problems or psychological disorders report improvement and find psychotherapy to be very helpful.

The Clergy Wellness Conversation

The “Wellness Conversation” is a means of providing emotional/mental wellness support to clergy by helping to increase “the awareness of wellness issues and encouraging positive action to change behaviors that will result in improved physical, mental, spiritual, emotional and relational wellness.” It is not intended to be a therapy session, but a safe place for dialogue and exploration on the interests and concerns of the clergyperson. Participation is self-motivated and is completely confidential; no record or tracking of visits is kept.

It is recognized that professional ministry can be very demanding and clergy often face a unique combination of challenges and stressors which, if not managed properly, can lead to a lack of health and well-being. In addition, we as clergy often overlook our own needs as we put the needs of those we serve first. The Wellness Conversation is designed to encourage self-care by helping clergy remain in touch with personal, professional and spiritual resources which make happier, healthier pastors.

To set up a Wellness Conversation, call The Ecumenical Center or The Center for Healing & Hope of South Texas.

HEADQUARTERS

The Ecumenical Center

8310 Ewing Halsell Drive | San Antonio, TX 78229

TEL: 210.616.0885 | www.ecrh.org

The Center for Healing & Hope of South Texas

13774 US Hwy 87 West | La Vernia, TX 78121

TEL: 830.496.1143