

Help! What's the difference between Pastoral Care and Mental Health Care?

Pastoral Care addresses the spiritual concerns of an individual or members of a household. It often involves questions of faith, belief, or doubt. Pastoral care provides an opportunity to talk to someone who cares about you and keeps your concerns strictly confidential. Preparation for marriage, baptism, confirmation, reaffirmation, funeral planning, or other life transitions can be part of pastoral care discussions.

Mental Health Care addresses the well-being of an individual in regards to their mental and emotional health. Mental health can suffer because of situations such as illness, job loss, or grief, as well as because of chemical imbalance or trauma. Medical professionals and trained therapists provide different approaches to responding to the mental health of individuals.

Pastoral Counseling combines pastoral care and mental health care by a licensed therapist who also focuses on spiritual needs. These professionals have medical or social work degrees along with seminary training. Pastoral counseling can be a healthy and helpful way to deal with family issues and questions of faith, as well as other concerns. There are many professional pastoral counselors nearby and Bill and Kim are happy to make introductions or referrals.

While mental, emotional, and spiritual health are intertwined, responding to the needs and concerns of an individual can require various kinds of care—it is not a reflection on your spiritual fortitude to ask for help, nor is it a punishment from God to suffer from depression, anxiety or any other mental health concern.

As members of the body of Christ, we are called to care for one another as best we can. If you know someone is suffering, say something. If you are suffering, please let us know. We want you to be well.

Neither Kim nor Bill are professional counselors, nor do they profess adequate training in mental health care to diagnose, treat, or respond to the serious concerns of mental well-being. Because they care for you, the clergy will do their best to make recommendations based upon your individual situation to get you the help that you need. There is no shame in asking for help.

Thanks to Caroline S. Coffill MSW, Counselor at VCU Counseling Center for many of the resources that follow.

If you are experiencing the below symptoms, or any other symptoms of depression, **you are not alone**. Almost everyone experiences depression at some point in life. However, it is important to know when to get help and that **you can do something about depression**.

Signs and Symptoms of Depression

While everyone's experience of depression is unique, the following symptoms are common:

Physical

- Poor appetite or overeating
- Low energy or fatigue
- Sleep disturbances

Psychological

- Feeling hopeless
- Low self-esteem
- Self-critical thoughts
- Feeling that no one values you
- Feeling no purpose to existence
- Recurring thoughts of death

Emotional

- Feeling sad, empty, alone, or hopeless
- Excessive crying
- Feeling more tense or anxious than usual
- Excessive worrying
- Overreacting to situations

Professional/Academic

- Decreased motivation
- Difficulty concentrating

Social

- Decreased interest in activities you enjoy
- Decreased trust in others
- Easily irritated
- Wanting to spend time alone
- Difficulty relating to people

If you identify with some of the symptoms described above and are concerned that you might be depressed, contact a member of the clergy for a referral to a professional therapist. We would be happy to connect you to a medical professional, licensed social worker, or pastoral therapist.

You are not alone. We are glad to support you as best we can.

General support related to coping with anxiety and depression related to COVID:

Care for your Coronavirus Anxiety Toolkit

APA's Guide to Coping with Isolation

The Veterans Affairs **Resources for Managing COVID-19 Stress**

Grief-specific:

Grief and Grieving can be an overwhelming. If you are looking for a community based resource we recommend the Bereavement Collation as a starting point for support beyond the parish. Some resources can be found [here](#).

APA article on coping with grief (including non-death losses) during COVID

Coping with Depression

- **Challenge the negative thoughts in your head.** Depression can make you feel alone or worthless. You might find yourself thinking that nothing good ever happens, that no one cares about you, or that things will never get better. Realize that these thoughts are coming from depression – not you.
- **Be aware of your stress levels.** Now is not the time to be taking on new projects and responsibilities. Consider paring down what you're doing to make your schedule more manageable.
- **Take care of your body.** Try to eat nutritious meals, get exercise, and get enough sleep (7-8 hours a night).
- **Surround yourself with supportive people.** Friends who have a negative outlook will only make you feel more negative.
- **Take life one day at a time.** Don't get consumed with thoughts of the future: make small goals and don't think about the whole semester. Try to add more structure to your life.
- **Avoid alcohol.** It is a depressant, and will only amplify your depressive feelings.
- **Become involved** – don't take on a huge commitment, but try to find something you enjoy. Volunteering to help others might help you to focus more on positive things.
- **Remember depression is treatable.** You may need to talk with a counselor, but you can overcome depression.
- **Express your feelings.** Don't keep your emotions bottled up. Find a way to experience feelings that is comfortable for you – talk to someone (friend, family member, counselor, religious leader, professor, etc.), write in a journal, go to a support group.

Helping a Friend Who is Depressed

1. **Be supportive.** Listen to your friend. Set aside time so that you can talk without being interrupted. Let your friend know that you care and are willing to help.
2. Introduce your friend to **coping techniques** such as those suggested above. If these don't seem to help, suggest that your friend seek professional help. You may wish to call the clergy to find resources for your friend.
3. Understand that your friend is experiencing **depression**. Your friend won't just "snap out of it." Overcoming depression takes work and time.
4. Remember to **take care of yourself**. Being there for your friend should not come at the expense of your own health, physical or mental. If you are overwhelmed, take a step back and consider calling a counselor for advice.