
Get Talking

“Our mission is to discover God, to help each other grow in the Christian Faith, and through our lives reflect God’s love to all.”

The URC Youth Mission Statement

“General Assembly commits the United Reformed Church to raising awareness of mental ill health issues and challenging the stigma of mental ill health, and asks the Education and Learning Committee to ensure the adequate provision of training for those responsible for pastoral care, including ministers, in appropriate responses to mental health issues.”

Resolution 9, General Assembly 2014

Introduction

Mental health is a topic to which the United Reformed Church devotes serious time commitment. It is our on-going aim to raise awareness of relevant, related issues and to challenge the stigma surrounding mental ill health, both within the Church and beyond. In recognition of the fact that this is by no means an easy task, the URC Youth Executive agreed to produce this resource for the benefit of all who wish to use it; those within and outside the Church, inclusive of all age groups. Our goal is to help groups of people to reflect and discuss the concept of mental wellbeing, to learn to care for our own mental well-being and to consider how we can help others who may suffer from mental ill-health, as well as those close to them.

There is a wealth of material currently available to help groups engage with the concept of mental health. Many of them have been listed here on the [URC Youth website](#). It is fantastic to have resources such as these readily available, although it can be difficult to know exactly how to use them in a session with your group. This resource – which is, by no means an exhaustive account – is intended to offer guidance and examples of how to engage with such materials and start to tackle the issues that are so felt within our communities and congregations around the UK.

Facilitating

First and foremost, it is important to recognise that mental health can be a very difficult topic to discuss, regardless of a participant's age or personal history with mental illness. It is therefore very important that the person facilitating the discussion or activity feels comfortable and well-informed on the topic.

Due to the challenging nature of the subject, establishing "ground rules" at the very beginning of the session will be beneficial for all, including the facilitator. Make it clear to your group that sharing and talking is optional, not obligatory, that they are free to leave the room at any point, and that your discussion is a private one, not to be spoken about with others outside the room.

General Facilitating Tips:

- ❖ Try researching key ideas and definitions before the session. (E.g. – stigma, mental well-being and the mental health 'five-a-day'). It's always useful to fall back on a solid knowledge of the subject area if conversation begins to falter.
- ❖ Create a safe space for your discussion. Think about your group and how they could best be made comfortable. Are you standing or sitting? On bean-bags or chairs? The discussion space sets the tone for the discussion itself and should not, therefore, be over-looked.
- ❖ Silence doesn't mean failure. Allow people time to think, especially when discussing complex ideas.
- ❖ Encourage everyone to participate, but try to avoid dependence on more confident speakers. If possible, everyone should contribute in some way.

Activity Ideas

When planning a session using differing materials concerned with mental health, you should consider many different kinds of activities and try what you think would work best for your group. Are they a hands-on group, or a more reflective bunch? Would they appreciate a half-time wriggle break to avoid getting too bogged down in the subject? Plan your session around your group, not the materials.

Below are some plans and suggestions for activities to help start to engage people with ideas surrounding mental health. Remember that these are not definitive 'how-to' guides, but models to be adapted and moulded to fit your own use.

Discussion Group Session

This 20-30 minute session uses 'The Stand Up Kid' video by Time To Change as the focus of a discussion about mental health. You will need a device capable of accessing the internet, as well as playing video and sound. Consider additional materials such as a flipchart to write down key ideas or phrases.

Notes for the facilitator are in italics.

Welcome the group, introduce subject and establish ground rules. Consider opening with prayer.

1. How can we stay healthy?
Expected answers: exercise, eating balanced diet, sleep etc. Perhaps ask individuals their personal preferences for healthy foods or sports.
2. Do these things keep our bodies healthy? Or our minds? Or Both?
In fact, the same things discussed in Q1 are excellent for both mental and physical health. Though the group may not grasp it at first, try to help them realise this.
3. What is mental health? Can our minds, like our bodies, become unwell?
Expect some hesitancy, as this can be a difficult thing to clearly define. If specific illnesses are mentioned, always give clear explanations of exactly what they are. Some people may know names of illnesses but not understand fully and pretend to understand if others in the group seem to know more. Be particularly be aware of this when working with younger groups.
4. Is mental health an easy thing to talk about? Why?
Introduce the idea of stigma – consider writing it down - and explain its meaning.
5. Look at Picture A. <http://i.huffpost.com/gen/2271298/thumbs/o-ROBOT-HUGS-570.jpg?6>.
What do you think of it? Is it fair?
This is intended to highlight the difference between general responses to physical and mental ill-health and how they differ.
6. Show video, The Stand Up Kid. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SE5Ip60_HJk.
What are the group's thoughts on the video? Do they think it was easy for Michael to stand up on the table like that? Is it an easy thing to watch? What do they think about the girl at the end? Consider sharing some statistics about mental health with the group, e.g. – "One in four people will experience some kind of mental health problem in the course of a year" (Source <http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/>), to help them understand how mental health really is a problem that affects a lot of us.
7. How can we look after our own mental wellbeing?
Recall the ideas discussed in Q1 and try to draw them back into the conversation. Perhaps introduce the idea of a mental health 'five-a-day'? Or get the group to create their own? Or perhaps share similar models and ideas?

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8. How can we help others who may be suffering?
Remind the group of Picture A and the negative attitudes often held towards mental ill-health. Get the group to suggest ideas for themselves on how to help, then suggest some of your own and ask them to reflect on why the suggestions coming forward might be good, or not so good, to consider.

As the session draws to a close, remember to thank and congratulate the group for the ideas shared, and remind people of the ‘confidentiality rule’ if you introduced it in the beginning. Consider closing in quiet meditation and/or prayer.

Practical Tasks Session

This 20-30 minute interactive, practical session is intended to help your group to consider the roots of mental health; to explore the ways in which society views mental illness and to reflect on how to look after our own mental wellbeing. The activities described can be carried out individually, in pairs or in larger groups. There is scope for including a feedback element in the session, with sub-groups or individuals presenting their ideas to the rest of the group.

You will need; large sheets of paper (A2 is recommended), marker pens, photos of strange types of tree, or a device capable of displaying such images, and sticky notes (optional).

Introduction:

After welcoming the group, introduce the concept of trees. A good way to start this could be by telling a story, opening with “*I went for a walk yesterday in the park, and I happened to pass a tree...*” Highlight the fact that trees come in all sorts of shapes and sizes and can be found all over the world. Using pre-printed photos or an electronic device, share images of strange-looking trees and ask your group to consider how and why they think these trees grew in the ways that they did (a search for “weird trees” using any online search engine will yield plenty of results).

Ask your group what trees need to grow. Expect answers like water, sunlight and nutrients. Guide your group towards considering the idea of roots, identifying that roots are the means by which trees take what they need to grow from the soil.

Main Activity:

Give everyone (or groups or pairs) two large pieces of paper and a pen. Ask them to draw the basic outline of a tree on each piece of paper (including roots, trunk and branches). Alternatively, everyone could draw a tree on a communal whiteboard to create a shared visual aid for the session.

Part One- Ask the group write down, perhaps in green, their answers to the following question using sticky notes or board pens, amongst the roots of the tree. ‘If human beings were trees, what would our ‘roots’ take from the ‘soil’? What things do you want or need for a healthy life and good growth?’ Give a few examples to get things going, thinking about practical things like food and water, but also personal examples like music or family. Leave the group some time to do this task. Perhaps consider playing some background music.

Part Two- Ask the group to respond by writing down their ideas among the roots in a different colour, perhaps red. This time, the question is "What are some of the things in life that we take in at

our 'roots' which might stunt our growth or make things more difficult for us?" Again, provide some examples then leave the group to work.

Part Three- Ask the group to think about the fruit that a tree bears. Sometimes it comes out good and healthy, but, at others, it doesn't work out so well. Ask the group to write down the 'fruit' (outcomes) which result from taking in the 'nutrients' they've written down in parts one and two.

At this point, ask the group to feed back some of their ideas. This might take the form of presentations by small groups or perhaps through re-capping or reading aloud some of the suggestions which have been offered.

Reflection:

Be sure to thank everyone for their input. Now move into a slightly more difficult topic. Identify the fact that no one person, or 'tree', takes only good or only bad things from life around us, but that it is always a mix of the good and the bad which we encounter and consume. Introduce the idea of our "trees" being a bit like our mental health. To be healthy in both body and mind we need to take in good things from the world around us. BUT, sometimes our minds and well-being can be stunted by our life experiences (reference part two of the tree).

However, if we are affected by these negative things, it doesn't mean that our "trees" are of less value or worth than other trees, nor should they be judged as such. To relate this idea to mental health, explain the idea of stigma to your group. Referencing the strange trees from the introduction, highlight how our different experiences can create some very interesting trees, of all different shapes, sizes, styles, colours and forms. No one tree is better than the other, and we accept every tree as it is.

The whole point of trees growing in such weird and wonderful ways is to allow them to live life to the fullest extent possible in the circumstances around them. Sometimes, things don't quite work out like that for us, though. Our branches grow inwards so the leaves can't catch the light that's there. We feel boxed in and strangled by the world around us and feel unable to reach out into it to take what we need and offer what we have.

When this happens, we need to seek help, not to get our trees into the 'right' shape (because there is, most certainly, no such thing), but into a form which will allow us to truly and authentically live life in fulfilling and sustainable ways.

Everyone has the right to be themselves, troubles and all, but no one deserves to have those troubles drag them down. We may not always be able to fix the problems or ease the hurt, but we can always bear the load together.

Now read the text below aloud to the group. Consider making the text visible via a screen or projector so that people can re-read at their leisure.

"When you go out into the woods and you look at trees, you see all these different trees. And some of them are bent, and some of them are straight, and some of them are evergreens, and some of them are whatever. And you look at the tree and you allow it. You appreciate it. You see why it is the way it is. You sort of understand that it didn't get enough light, and so it turned that way. And

you don't get all emotional about it. You just allow it. You appreciate the tree. The minute you get near humans, you lose all that. And you are constantly saying "You're too this, or I'm too this." That judging mind comes in. And so I practice turning people into trees. Which means appreciating them just the way they are."

.... *Ram Dass* ...

Closing Piece:

Leave the group to consider the quote quietly, perhaps ask them to discuss what they think in pairs. Close with a shared reflection, meditation or prayer.