

# Accompanying Hearts and Minds

**Developing Mental  
Health Awareness  
Across the Lifespan  
for Catholic Ministry**



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# Online Handout



# Welcome

## Disclaimer:

The information provided in this workshop is for educational and informational purposes only and does not establish a professional therapeutic relationship with the presenters. It is not intended to replace professional mental health or medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment.

If you are experiencing a psychiatric or medical emergency, please call 911, visit your nearest emergency room, or contact your local or national crisis hotline.



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# The Minister's Scope

Parish ministers are often:

- First responders
- The first witnesses
- The first consult before the clinician

The aim of this workshop is to:

- Generate awareness
- Encourage early recognition
- Foster a compassionate and pastoral response
- Educate on the limits of the pastoral role, and make appropriate referrals



# Theological and Pastoral Implications



“Christ calls us to attend to those who suffer from mental illness and provide hope and healing” – Hope and Healing (California Catholic Conference).

“Whoever suffers mental illness always bears God’s image and likeness, and has an inalienable right to be considered a person and treated as such.” –St. Pope John Paul II



# **A Minister's Walk with God's People Martha's Journey Across the Lifespan**

Meet Martha:

A parish minister who has served across ministries for many years. Martha has walked with various parishioners and worked in various ministries from baptism to bereavement. Martha has encountered individuals from all walks of life and at different life stages. Martha is not a clinician but has been a “first witness” to mental health concerns in those she has served.



# Childhood (0 - 12)



Martha begins her ministerial journey as a catechist, providing preparation for children receiving their First Holy Communion. One of her students, Lucas, age eight, “is a bit of a handful.” Lucas has difficulty following instructions, remaining in his seat, and sitting still. He is easily distracted and frequently interrupts the class and his peers.

When Martha shares her observations with his mother, Sarah, she explains that “Lucas is a bit all over the place,” noting that this behavior is consistent both at home and at school. Sarah also shares that her daughter, Sofia, is experiencing a different set of challenges. Sofia “is not as social and outgoing as Lucas.”

Martha reflects on this internally, recalling her own observations of Sofia. Although quiet, Sofia often avoids eye contact, becomes overwhelmed by noise in the church, and experiences what her mother describes as “meltdowns” when routines change. Feeling overwhelmed and unsure of what to do, Sarah asks, “Should I take my children to see Father?”

# Adolescence (13-17)

Some years later, because Fr. Matthew is so pleased with Martha's dedication to religious education, she is "voluntold" to take over the high school-aged youth group. After building a strong rapport with the teenagers, Martha finds herself particularly attentive to Anna, a sixteen-year-old core team member. Anna often stays after group meetings to ask questions about her faith. Martha notices that Anna frequently seeks reassurance about questions that have already been answered.

One evening, with tears in her eyes, Anna confides: "I keep having horrible thoughts in my head. Sometimes they're really scary thoughts about hurting myself or people I love, but I don't want to do those things. Other times, bad thoughts about God pop into my mind during prayer. I confess them to Father Matthew every time, but they keep coming back."

Anna goes on to share with Martha that she is going to confession several times a week, yet remains constantly terrified that she is "doing it wrong." As a result, she will abstain from receiving Communion for weeks, if not months, at a time.



# Young adult (18-29)

Because the parish office was understaffed, and in light of Martha's "incredible" performance in ministry, Fr. Matthew asked her to volunteer at the front desk two days a week. While working in the front office, Martha meets Daniel, a twenty-two-year-old college student who is returning to church after some time away. Martha remembers Daniel from a Confirmation class she once taught.

Martha notices that Daniel's behavior seems "different" from before. Once a well put-together and polite young man, he now appears somewhat disheveled. His eyes dart about, and he is heard mumbling to himself, occasionally pausing as if he is listening and responding to someone she cannot see or hear.

Daniel asks to schedule a meeting with Father Matthew for "spiritual help." He is convinced that God has been sharing secret and special messages with him and wants Father Matthew's help with special prayers to protect these thoughts from being heard by the "mind readers" sitting in the pew next to him at Mass.



# Adult (30-64)

During her years coordinating parish ministries, Martha notices changes in James, a forty-eight-year-old long-time volunteer who has suddenly begun missing meetings.

Once very social, he now sits in the back at Mass and appears tense and restless, frequently wringing his hands and leaving quickly after the liturgy. James has also stepped down from ministries he once loved.

In a conversation with Martha, James admits that his mind feels like it “never shuts off.” He shares that he feels like a burden to his family, is constantly exhausted, and lies awake at night worrying about his finances. He confides that over the past several months he has been drinking more to help himself sleep, but it no longer seems to work.

He concludes quietly, “Everyone would be better off without me. I’m tired of pretending I’m okay.”



# Older Adult (65 +)



Eleanor, seventy-eight, has been deeply involved in parish life for decades as a lector, former bereavement ministry coordinator, and daily Mass attendee. Since the death of her husband, she has gradually withdrawn from ministry roles and social interactions. Martha, who regularly serves as a visitor to the sick, notices that Eleanor seems anxious and forgetful, sometimes repeating herself or losing her train of thought, and worries that she is becoming a burden to her children.

When Martha checks in, Eleanor shares that she feels herself “slipping away,” grieving not only the loss of her husband but also the woman she once was; confident, capable, and active in ministry. Though she continues to pray and attend Mass, Eleanor struggles with memory lapses and anxious thoughts, quietly asking whether God is preparing her for death and whether her fading abilities mean she is somehow “failing Him.”

# The Role of the Minister

- Notice Changes
- Listen without Judgement
- Normalize Seeking Help
- Refer When Concerns Are Significant
- Remain Present Spiritually and Relationally (if appropriate)
- Take Mentions of Suicide Serious Every Time



# Martha, Martha...

Over the years, Martha has become the person parishioners turn to in crisis and is on Father Matthew's speed dial. She understands the struggles of parents with children with special needs, listens to young people's pain, witnesses the impact of severe mental illness, sits with suicidal parishioners, and provides a safe space for those who are grieving. Martha struggles to say "no" and often answers late-night calls that no one else will. She neglects her own needs, skipping meals, rest, and personal time, believing she must always be available for others. At first, she tells herself, "This is my calling; this is my cross; I am doing the Lord's work." But over time, the weight takes a toll. She has trouble sleeping, her heart races at every phone buzz, and she replays the traumatic stories of those she serves. During Mass, she feels on edge, scanning the pews instead of participating. At home, she feels numb and irritable, avoids media that reminds her of crises, and her prayer feels dry. Martha is burned out.



The apostles gathered together with Jesus and reported all they had done and taught. He said to them, “Come away by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while.” People were coming and going in great numbers, and they had no opportunity even to eat. So they went off in the boat by themselves to a deserted place.

**Mark 6: 30-32**

# Questions

# Resources

**Catholic Therapists** : <https://catholictherapists.com>

**NAMI Sacramento** : <https://namisacramento.org>

**Mental Health First Aid** : <https://mentalhealthfirstaid.org/mental-health-resources/>

**SAMHSA** : <https://www.samhsa.gov>

Call or text **988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline** available 24/7 : <https://www.988california.org>

**Diocese of Sacramento Mental Health** : <https://www.scd.org/catholic-charities-and-social-concerns/mental-health-and-suicide>

**Sacramento County** : <https://dhs.saccounty.gov/BHS/Pages/Mental-Health-Services.asp>

**Psychology Today** : <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapists/ca/sacramento>

## Catholic Therapists

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