

## Workshop: Spiritual Connection vs Security for the Mentally Ill

The linkage between mental health and spirituality is strained by the current atmosphere of danger in North America. The impact of the security environment in mental health is not new inasmuch as war zones have been studied for many years. However, the recent violent events targeting churches and synagogues have made the task of identifying spiritual places with safety much more difficult. This workshop explores how the need for enhanced security at religious institutions impacts the interaction between mental health and spirituality. Based on the experience of the author, recommendations are suggested which require specific research to determine their efficacy.

### Introduction

Houses of worship have always been desirable places for those with some degree of mental illness due to the explicit values of compassion and care. Congregations have implemented various techniques to ease the effort of inclusion of those on the fringe into the mainstream.

As the Executive Director of Congregation Beth Shalom in Pittsburgh, the author had to address the impacts of the violent shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue a few blocks away. Beth Shalom welcomed the congregations impacted, and we had to address the needs of a community shocked by the events. Addressing those needs meant listening to the fears, and providing comfort and assurance that such an event would not happen again. This meant addressing the two aspects of security in a large institution: 1) the implementation of physical protection and emergency policies and 2) the communication of safety to engender the perception of safety. Such a task extends to my current role as chaplain in a Jewish nursing home and hospital as well.

Enhanced security measures impact the mentally ill who are trying to be part of a community in a significant way. Physical changes present clear messages that the world is not safe. The "warm and welcoming" attitude that congregations like to promote is tempered by the presence of an armed guard, metal detectors, fewer entrances, bag searches, and frequent questioning.

In addition to the impact of an environment of fear on the mentally ill is the targeting of the mentally ill as perpetrators of the violence! (see August 4, 2019 Statement of APA President in Response to Mass Shootings in Texas, Ohio") See Lowe and Gale, <https://www.cmhnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/The-Mental-Health-Consequences-of-Mass-Shootings.pdf> (2017) This only makes it more difficult to welcome those with mental illness into the community.

Finally, the mentally ill and the mentally challenged are at risk of being the victims of violence if they fail to recognize the danger in a particular situation. The death of Cecil Rosenthal, employed by the author but attending services at Tree of Life, was all the more painful inasmuch as he would seek to protect others even with the sacrifice of his own life.

The question remains, how can security be enhanced while still embracing those people who need spiritual care the most?

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