

# Study finds church congregations blind to mental illness

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Mental illness of a family member destroys the family's connection with the religious community, a new study by Baylor University psychologists has found, leading many affected families to leave the church and their faith behind.

The study shows that while families with a member who has mental illness have less involvement in faith practices, they would like their congregation to provide assistance with those issues. However, the rest of the church community seemed to overlook their need entirely. In fact, the study found that while help from the church with depression and mental illness was the second priority of families with mental illness, it ranked 42nd on the list of requests from families that did not have a family member with mental illness.

"The difference in response is staggering, especially given the picture of distress painted by the data: families with mental illness reported twice as many problems and tended to ask for assistance with more immediate or crisis needs compared to other families," said study co-author Dr. Matthew Stanford, professor of psychology and [neuroscience](#) at Baylor, who is an expert in mental illness and the church. "The data give the impression that mental illness, while prevalent within a congregation, is also nearly invisible."

The study appears on-line in the journal [Mental Health, Religion and Culture](#), and is the first study to look at how mental illness of a family member influences an individual's relationship with the church.

The Baylor researchers surveyed nearly 6,000 participants in 24 churches representing four Protestant denominations about their family's stresses, strengths, faith practices and desires for assistance from the congregation. The results showed mental illness in 27 percent of families, with those families reporting double the number of [stressors](#), such as financial strain and problems balancing work and family. Families with mental illness also scored lower on measures of family strength and faith practices, and analysis of desires for assistance found that help with mental illness was a priority for those families affected by it, but virtually ignored by others in the congregation.

"Families with mental illness stand to benefit from their involvement within a congregation, but our findings suggest that faith communities fail to adequately engage these families because they lack awareness of the issues and understanding of the important ways that they can help," said study co-author Dr. Diana Garland, dean of Baylor's School of Social Work. "[Mental illness](#) is not only prevalent in church communities, but is accompanied by significant distress that often goes unnoticed. Partnerships between mental health providers and congregations may help to raise awareness in the [church](#) community and simultaneously offer assistance to struggling families."

Provided by Baylor University

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