MCj03048610000[1] **Safe Nights of Calvert County**

**Things to Keep in Mind**

**(when working with persons with mental disorders)**

**Mental disorders are a form of illness, not a sign of poor character.**

All mental disorders are caused by injury to the brain. Sometimes this injury is sudden, as in the case of a serious blow to the head, and sometimes it results from a lifelong deterioration. This deterioration might be from genetic disease, or it might result from environmental factors like exposure to toxins (medications, pollution, workplace chemicals, etc.).

**Persons with mental disorders exhibit characteristic behaviors, resulting either from the original disorder or from medication used to correct that disorder.**

* They are not able to process thoughts as quickly as others. (The exception to this would be someone in a manic state, who processes more quickly than others!)
* They exhibit emotional flatness, lacking the usual emotional responses we expect to see in others. They might isolate themselves, or respond inappropriately in conversation.
* Their thinking is rigid, and they are not able to change their line of thought with the flexibility we might expect to see.
* They feel extreme stress – this is especially prevalent in the homeless population. This may lead to “shadowing” behavior. They might follow someone whose presence is comforting to them. Possessions become “touchstones.”
* They are more prone than the general population to criminal behavior as the result of this disordered thinking.
* Those with more serious disorders may hallucinate (either hearing voices, which is more common, or seeing things that are not there), or they may have thoughts of suicide.

**As with a person suffering any other kind of physical handicap (remember that mental illness actually is a physical handicap), there are ways we can fine-tune the environment to make things easier for them.**

* The physical environment may be made more comfortable by lowering overall volume, softening lights, providing a “get-away” corner.
* Consistency in schedule reassures those whose stress level is high.
* Those seeking to offer service can modulate their non-verbal behavior by speaking slowly and clearly, and in a soothing tone, asking whether the other has understood what they’ve said; and holding themselves and moving in a relaxed manner and positioning themselves at a level with or below that of their listener.

**Be not afraid.**

* One of the best ways to think of interacting with those with mental disorders is to focus on them as children of God. We are all equal in that respect, no matter the degree of our differences.
* Understand that persons with mental disorders have typically been addressing these serious problems for much of their lives. They know that others have difficulty understanding them.
* However, they are used to working with service providers, from whom they are accustomed to hear questions about their condition. Do not hesitate to ask how someone is feeling, or whether they need help.
* Offer choices as often as possible. If a rule must be enforced, do so gently. It may be necessary to explain the reason for the rule or for some request you make. Try repeating instructions in various ways.