

Training courses for ministers and priests

Starting point

As part of their duties, priest and ministers are confronted with a vast range of people (community, nursing homes, hospitals, prison, classes, diocese). As part of their pastoral care, they hold many individual as well as family counselling sessions, which are usually of generally advising character regardless of religious beliefs. A special function of ministers and priests are funerals, helping relatives when they lose a family member, being the messenger of bad news as part of their role in a crisis intervention mission and sometimes holding the funeral of a suicide victim and supporting the relatives. In summary, priests have a very demanding and wide range of duties and they often have to deal with people that are confronted with a seriously straining life situation. Even priests and ministers sometimes suffer from depression and recognise the subject out of their own experience.

Known deficits

For priests and ministers it is often difficult to assess whether an individual reaction is still within the range of a normal emotional reaction or whether they are already confronted with a depressive disorder. If a psychological disorder is at hand, it would be very helpful if priests and ministers were able to recognise this and could refer people to further help and support (e.g. psychiatric treatment). Currently not enough knowledge is present to differentiate between depression and distress and where help is available. A critical situation is present if priests and ministers see a person under acute pressure to act. They experience this situation as extremely stressful and avers. They are very scared of addressing the subject ('better not mention it and not trigger a cascade of events'). There is a natural tendency to either avoid such conversations altogether or to offer quick – and inappropriate – advice in order to end the uncomfortable situation quickly.

Aims of the training course

Participants should receive an overview of the symptoms and treatment options for depressive disorders. They should learn to differentiate between emotional upset and a depressive disorder. Priests and ministers should receive a list of contacts where they can refer people to. They should be encouraged to have an open conversation about the current life situation with the person looking for help on the other hand they should be aware of their own limitations and should be able to request further help if required. An additional training course addressing "dealing with suicidality in pastoral care" could be offered. Participants could practice holding a conversation with suicidal people. Thus priests and ministers should be encouraged to address suicidality openly and to refer people concerned to an appropriate place if required.

Practical advice

Training courses for priests could take place during a conference. The time frame is usually limited to 1.5 hours. Thus it is recommended that you focus on the key aspects of depressive behaviour and underline how psychological disorders can be treated successfully. The subject of suicidality should only be addressed briefly. If the course can be held over 3 – 4 hours however, role-play and interactive parts should be included if at all possible. This would be especially important if an extra seminar mainly addressing suicidality is offered.