CONVERSATION STARTERS

We all have mental health and it is just as important as our physical health. Starting a conversation about mental health is an excellent way to challenge the stigma and to get people thinking and talking about their perceptions of mental health and mental illness.

We have put together some suggested conversation points that can be discussed over a Friday night meal, Shabbat lunch or even a pre-Shabbat Zoom!

1. Is mental health an important issue in your community? How does the community support our mental health or influence the way we think about it?

2. Do you feel that social media helps or hinders our mental health?

3. How does society view mental and physical health differently? Do you think the two should be addressed in the same manner? Why or why not?

4. Some celebrities have come to the forefront and shared about their mental health. Do you think this helps break down the stigma surrounding mental illness?

5. What have been the biggest challenges you have faced during the recent pandemic and in what ways do you feel the community has pulled together in support of one another during this time?

MENTAL WELLBEING AND JUDAISM

The sources below can be used as a starting point to discuss how mental wellbeing fits into religion and culture. How does Judaism recognise the importance of looking after ourselves? What ideas from Judaism can we use to boost our wellbeing?

You may want to think about other textual sources or ideas in Judaism which support wellbeing e.g. trying to use technology less or not at all over Shabbat can boost our mental wellbeing by giving us a break from screen-time. The screen-time break gives us time to maximise face-to-face communication or focus our time on other hobbies and activities we enjoy.

A Valuable Lesson

"It is long past time for us all to break the silence and speak openly about mental illness. It is time for this last stigma to fall and fall quickly in the recognition that we are all created b'tzelem Elokim (in the image of G-d)" – Rabbi Nathaniel Helfgot, 2001

A key part of education is leading from the front. Just by educating about mental health we are raising awareness that we all have mental health and we need to look after our wellbeing to maintain it. We are role modelling the importance of looking after ourselves and teaching a valuable lesson.

Do we have the concept of mental illness in Judaism?

Prayer for the Sick

Refuat Ha'Nefesh, V'refuat Ha'guf / Healing the soul and healing the body

Judaism shows us a connection of healing the soul and healing the body; there is no division between mental and physical illness. There is only illness. Likewise, everyone has both physical and mental health which changes over time and needs looking after.

Does Judaism help?

"The support individuals derive from the members, leaders and clergy of religious congregations is widely considered one of the key mediators between spirituality and mental health. Spiritual or religious support can be a valuable source of self-esteem, information, companionship and practical help that enables people to cope with stress and negative life events" - Mental Health Foundation, The Impact of Spirituality on Mental Health.

Religion and culture can provide us with a sense of community and belonging. Within these communities we know that there are people we can turn to and trust when we need them.

How does Judaism help?

Pirkei Avot 1:6

Aseh Lecha Rav, V'Kneh Lecha Haver

Make for yourself a Rabbi (teacher) and acquire for yourself a friend.

We all need someone to talk to sometimes. Whether we turn to a Rabbi or Rebbetzin for guidance or a friend for support. Most of us will have a community, family and friends who we can turn to.

Parshat Va'etchanan 5:12

Shamor et Yom HaShabbat

Keep (Guard) Shabbat

However we choose to mark Shabbat, Judaism recognises the need to "switch off" from our busy lives and reconnect with those around us. Whether we find comfort in or feel connected to familiar routines and rituals or choose not to use technology for a while, these are great ways to boost our mental wellbeing.