



NAMI Mercer Support Groups Promote Recovery

By Madeline Monheit and Elisabeth Hagen

A man falls into a hole so deep he can't get out. A doctor lowers a prescription into the hole. A clergyman tosses in a prayer. Finally, a stranger walks by and jumps into the hole. "Why did you do that?" the man asks. "Now we're both in the hole." "Yes," the stranger responds. "But I've been in this hole before, and I know the way out."

Throughout history, individuals with common problems have helped one another. Regarding mental problems, however, the concept of peer support is relatively new. Alcoholics Anonymous, formed in 1935, was one of the first efforts to promote recovery through the sharing of experience, strength and hope. In the 1960s, civil rights and feminist groups inspired a similar call for change in the area of mental health.

"Connecting with other people who are dealing with the same issues can be an important part of recovery," explains Dr. Ken Duckworth, medical director of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI). Peer support is now one of the ten fundamental components of recovery identified by the *National Consensus Statement on Mental Health Recovery* issued in 2004 by the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).

In keeping with its grassroots origins and volunteer-driven operations, NAMI Mercer facilitates several free consumer support groups that offer respect, understanding, encouragement, and hope. Participants share coping strategies, exchange information about issues and services, fight stigma, and interact in a confidential, non-judgmental social setting.

NAMI Connection, a group that meets Monday evenings at 6:00 pm, offers a casual and relaxed approach to sharing the challenges and successes of coping with mental illness. The meeting begins with the program's guiding principles, but the format is otherwise flexible.

"We run popcorn style," says Anastasia, one of the group's peer leaders. "When people are ready, they speak."

Participants relate their personal treatment experiences, but NAMI does not endorse or recommend any specific course of action, medication or therapy. The group's co-leader

Richard (not his real name), who took the three-day NAMI Connection facilitator training last June, explains that his role is to keep the discussion moving and positive. “When people interrupt and give direct advice, I say ‘Please tell us about your own experience.’”

Wellness and Recovery Action Plan (WRAP) is a free, 10-session support program that meets one evening per month to help persons with mental illness stay on the path to wellness. Developed by Dr. Mary Ellen Copeland, WRAP guides individuals through the process of developing their own wellness and recovery plan. Participants learn to avert relapses through the use of positive supports.

After she was released from the hospital, Melanie (not her real name) wanted an independent life. She was introduced to WRAP by her sister Mary, who learned about it through Intensive Family Support Services (IFFS).

“WRAP is a great recovery tool. Participants get help identifying their warning signs, as well as developing a wellness toolbox and a crisis plan,” explains Mary. The support group gives members the opportunity to discuss their experiences and compare their strategies. According to Mary, “Melanie’s lifetime journey of recovery is well on its way. I am making the transition from caregiver to support person.”

The **Weight Management Support Group** meets from 6:00-7:00 pm on the fourth Wednesday of each month. Robert and Sarah (not their real names) started the group almost a year ago. Like so many others taking psychotropic drugs, Robert experienced weight gain, going from 140 pounds to more than 200 pounds.

“I had to find tactics to control my weight,” Robert said. Since forming the group, he has lost about 70 pounds.

“I keep an accurate food journal,” he said. “I use portion control, walk with my friends along the local canal towpaths, and do weight training and cardiovascular exercise at a gym several times a week.”

Mary Hayes, who recently graduated from the Institute for Integrative Nutrition in New York, now co-facilitates the group. She and her husband, Dr. William Hayes, shared their expertise with the group during its initial year.

Mary is impressed with the commitment of Weight Management participants and finds them stimulating and supportive.

“Robert and I encourage people to talk and share articles and books for discussion. No one approach works for everyone.”

NAMI Mercer's support programs for people with mental illness honor both the uniqueness of each individual and the power of support from peers who share similar struggles. Providing peer support is just one way that NAMI Mercer fulfills its motto: "You are not alone."

For more information about NAMI Mercer consumer support groups, call 609-799-8994 or go www.namimercer.org.

Published in the *Times of Trenton*, Nov. 22, 2009, A11