

Class helps patients cope with illnesses

By Anne Aurand / *The Bulletin*

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The rheumatoid arthritis in Mo Workman's feet makes it painful to walk. Her osteoarthritis has led to multiple surgeries on degenerative joints and bone spurs in her neck and shoulders.

She doesn't want more surgery, and she doesn't want to live on pain medications. So she suffers, and probably will forever.

Workman, 54, is one of many Central Oregonians who has taken a six-week workshop called Living Well with Chronic Conditions. The course, coordinated by the Deschutes County Health Department, teaches practical coping skills for people of all ages who live with chronic health problems, from diabetes to anxiety, heart disease to fibromyalgia. It's also offered for their caregivers.

The workshop coaches participants on how to deal with their conditions and the pain, fatigue and depression that come with them. It educates people about how to improve their nutrition and exercise, and how to communicate with doctors and friends.

For Workman, who works in her own insurance office in Prineville, the class motivated her to set goals and follow through better.

"I know I need to exercise even though it hurts and I don't want to," she said. "Even a little bit is better than none."

Helping patients

The workshops, held in locations around Deschutes, Crook and Jefferson counties, cost \$10. The actual cost to provide the program is \$375 per participant, but it's subsidized by the state, local organizations, grants and donations.

The workshop is not disease-specific and is therefore "not only efficient to administer, but uniquely suited to people with multiple conditions," according to a report issued last year by



Photos by Rob Kerr / The Bulletin

Instructor Lucinda Thiene discusses healthy eating during a recent Living Well class.



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Oregon State University's College of Health and Human Sciences. The report said the workshop had reached approximately 3,900 of 1.56 million Oregonians living with chronic disease between 2005 and 2009. And participants who attend at least four of the six classes in the workshop reduced their emergency department visits and hospitalizations because of it.

The program curriculum was developed at Stanford University, where it's known as the "Chronic Disease Self-Management Program." It was designed to complement and enhance medical treatment and disease management.

"Getting (what the program offers) within the confines of a physician's office is not practical and certainly doesn't happen," said participant Margie Lussier. "They're tools to augment what treatment plans you get from your physician."

Lussier, 66, was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease about a year ago. She is fatigued and has tremors.

"It's progressive and chronic so my anticipation is that my symptoms will worsen and I will live with them the rest of my life. I won't get better," she said. "What I have been told is that I can, with especially exercise or physical activities, delay the onset of increasing symptoms."

She's been a caregiver before, but it is new and strange for her to be the patient, and that's one of the reasons she is taking the class — to accept and identify the problem.

Mona Derby is here for companionship and understanding.

"The biggest thing is that ... I'm not alone," she said.

At 33, she feels like she's too young to have such a long list of issues, which have included clinical depression, an eating disorder, a neurological condition and migraines.

"Outside of the class I almost feel like I'm making things up, a hypochondriac," she said. "Because of my age people expect that I'm healthy."

Long-term friends understand, but when she meets new people or starts dating someone new, it's tough.

"How do you explain, 'I have to take these drugs and these drugs and when I put this drug together with that drug I gained 60 pounds in six months. Then two years later they switched my drugs again,'" she said.

Most people wouldn't understand. The people in this workshop do.

She was working on her depression when she saw an ad for the Living Well program. She knew getting out to meet people would be good for her self esteem. "With my disease, it's really easy to go inside yourself and stay there. It makes me happy to see there's an opportunity to go outside yourself and share that, to know that you're not alone."



This diagram illustrates the cycle of symptoms that many chronic conditions include. The class discusses ways to break the cycle.

Details

For more information on Living Well workshops and schedules: www.livingwellco.org

How it works

Each class starts with a discussion of participants' action plans. Participants set goals for themselves weekly and discuss their progress.

For Workman, one action plan was to contact her doctor and ask about pain medication. Group leaders praised her for asking for some help.

Lussier said: "I didn't do so well with aerobic exercise." But a part of her action plan was to reevaluate her expectations of herself and adjust them based on her energy level any given day.

The group discusses exercise and how many of them just don't enjoy it. An instructor suggests they try to do more gardening, cleaning, snow shoveling — because any physical activity is good for them.

Instructors Lucinda Thiene and Kim Curley initiated a discussion about advance directives, a legal document that specifies what a person wants for their life in the event that they can't make medical or other important decisions due to illness or incapacity. It was an intimate and emotional conversation. One participant said her doctor told her to fill out the form but she just couldn't because the decisions and conversations were too painful and difficult to deal with. The group brainstormed ways to make her task easier. Ultimately, the group decided she should gather her family and have everyone fill out their forms together. No one is too young.

Thiene, an instructor, launched another topic: healthy eating. She explained basic principles of how to eat well and why it's important for everyone. The group discussed obstacles to healthy eating: Family members who aren't on board. The idea of dieting being too restrictive. Emotional eating. That it's too time consuming to shop, cook and eat well. Too expensive. Bad food tastes good. Conversations splintered off as the members shared personal stories.

Carol Holub took the workshop because she wants to become a Living Well leader someday.

"The kind of education that they're providing is all stuff you hear and already know about but it's not usually put together in a nice neat little package like this is. ... You know you're supposed to eat vegetables, but how do you go about it. How do you cook the stuff? A lot of how-to things," she said. "It's a total wellness package."

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