

Life skills

NAMI Fox Valley's new Be Well initiative aims to give people with mental illnesses a fighting chance at improving their physical health

By Cheryl Anderson
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People living with serious mental illnesses live, on average, 25 years less than those in the general population.

That's a staggering statistic with many contributing factors including isolation, medication side effects and disabilities. Tobacco use also is a huge coping crutch, according to Beth Clay, executive director of NAMI Fox Valley.

Diseases are linked to lifestyle. But lifestyle choices sometimes are challenging for those living with mental illnesses who also tend to be at a low socioeconomic and social status.

To address these issues, NAMI Fox Valley began a new program early last fall called Be Well, which begins again Jan. 18 at Fox Valley Technical College in Grand Chute.

"What we wanted to do is in the same way we are providing support and education related to their mental illness, how can we create a program that also moves their physical wellbeing into their recovery plan," Clay said.

NAMI Fox Valley is an affiliate of NAMI, the National Alliance on Mental Illness, which provides education, support, advocacy and outreach through a variety of specialized programs in Outagamie, northern Winnebago, Calumet and Waupaca counties.

"Our education programs are for people with mental illness; we call them consumers," Clay said. "And we also have support groups for family members."

Be Well follows a model of peer support for physical wellbeing similar to that offered through organizations like Weight Watchers, but instead bringing adults with mental illness together to support one another and providing them with educational

opportunities regarding things like tobacco use, nutrition, sleep and medication side effects. That's paired with an optional walking club.

"It's a wonderful pairing; it's very motivating," Clay said, pointing to last year's successful class. "Lots of people learned things they never knew about how to eat well, how medications worked and understanding why they were so unmotivated to work out or get out. The walking club also provides an opportunity for people who for a lot of reasons might not go out and walk by themselves ... to engage in something anybody might do to help themselves."

Personal trainer Jen Parsons, a NAMI Fox Valley volunteer for nearly eight years and club director at a Fox Valley Anytime Fitness location, jumped at the chance last fall to become involved in the health and wellness aspect of the Be Well program.

"I think the individuals who attended the group each week had a great time getting to know each other and really got a chance to ask some very important questions that they many otherwise have been afraid to ask about their current health and wellness concerns," Parsons said. "Overall, the program was a huge success and is benefitting so many individuals on so many levels."

And there was no problem filling the 20 spots at the first session, which was held at NAMI Fox Valley's Appleton location. "To come to a place that they already consider safe to learn about something they've not had a chance to do yet was pretty exciting," Clay said.

Volunteer Rebecca Arrowood, a 23-year-old University of Wisconsin-Green Bay student from Neenah, is responsible for lining up speakers for the 12-week program.

"We decided to break it down into sections," Arrowood said. "So we have a nutrition section, fitness and then stress and sleep."

Class participants also will take a field trip to the Fire art studio in Appleton to give them a chance to do something meaningful and fun in a safe group setting.

The 2011 Fox Cities Life (Leading Indicators for Excellence) Study, which creates a snapshot of the benefits of living here and top opportunities for improvement, found people with mental illnesses experience significant barriers when it comes to engaging in community life in the areas of recreation, healthy behavior and safety.

"For people who may not understand what's happening with mental illness, they may view their inactivity and isolation as laziness," Clay said of misconceptions that continue to exist. "And that builds the stigma for people who have those problems to feel like they can't get out and engage in things because they are being judged. Having mental

illness is really a barrier for many people to engage in a lot of parts in life because of the stigma."

The Be Well programming, very loosely based on the national NAMI Hearts & Minds wellness program, is an empowering opportunity to address the disparities of mental illness.

"I am really ecstatic that we are stepping up and doing something about the disparity," Clay said. "That's what we're here to do."

The Be Well program joins NAMI's extensive list of education, outreach and advocacy programs and services that can be found at www.namifoxvalley.org.

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If you go

What: NAMI Fox Valley's Be Well program

When: 5-6 p.m. Wednesdays, Jan. 18-April 4

Where: Fox Valley Technical College, Grand Chute

Details: Designed by a team of local professionals, the program will discuss goal setting, healthy eating, food preparation, fitness, medication side effects, coping skills, meditation, sleep and stress, the arts and more. There's also an optional walking club.

Cost: Free

Contact: Space is limited to 30; call NAMI Fox Valley at 920-954-1550 or email angel@namifoxvalley.org; if class is full, names will be placed on a waiting list for another session to be offered Aug. 1-Oct. 17

Volunteer opportunity: A volunteer is needed to help facilitate the Be Well program. If interested, call 920-954-1550 or email angel@namifoxvalley.org.

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