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Great therapy: Seniors talking with their peers

By Diane Claytor



One-on-one counseling Photo Bigstock

We tend to think of Lamorinda as an area that's perfect for young families. And it is, with the outstanding schools, beautiful parks and proliferation of activities geared to families and children. But go to the grocery store, walk the trail or enjoy dinner out and you may also notice something else - a large number of older people. According to the 2010 U.S. census, close to 20 percent of the residents in our three communities are over the age of 65. And while most of these seniors may be active, vital members of the community, there may be others that are lonely, depressed or feeling overwhelmed and don't know where to turn.

Senior Peer Counseling, a free volunteer therapy program through Contra Costa County Health Services, could prove to be the perfect fit for older adults facing many of life's challenges. As described by Moraga resident Alice Brock, a longtime volunteer counselor, the program helps older adults think through their specific situations, imagine and discuss possible solutions, learn about the many community resources available, and how to access them and effectively work within the system.

Developed more than 30 years ago by Evelyn Freeman, the international peer counseling program offers senior citizens who may be experiencing difficulties that often

accompany aging with the opportunity to talk with another older adult who has been trained to provide assistance, emotional support and encouragement.

It's believed that senior peer counseling provides a more comfortable and supportive environment for older adults with difficult issues; they often don't want to speak with younger counselors who are unable to relate to their particular circumstances. Joyce Martin, psychologist and clinical supervisor for Contra Costa's English Senior Peer Counseling program, notes that "even though our counselors are lay people, many older people would rather talk with a peer than a professional that's 30 or 40 years younger. Our counselors frequently have had similar life experiences and can relate better."

A senior peer counseling study conducted several years ago by Applied Survey Research found that 75 percent of the clients surveyed reported that the counseling helped considerably, particularly with their concerns about health, loneliness and sadness.

In addition to those issues, Martin noted that many seniors are coping with isolation, family issues, anxiety, housing concerns and grief and loss, as well as changes in both cognitive abilities and health.

Volunteer counselors receive intensive training, learning various therapy models and counseling techniques. They learn to effectively communicate with clients that have problems and to recognize their particular needs. They also learn about confidentiality, boundaries and assessing for safety. Volunteers meet weekly with Martin and the other volunteer counselors to discuss their cases and, when warranted, get and give suggestions and support. Additionally, there are in-service meetings featuring speakers from various community organizations and resources, familiarizing the counselors with the many options available to their clients.

Brock, 91, has been a volunteer counselor for nine years and finds it to be a "very humbling experience. People have problems and they are so happy just to have someone to talk with that is not emotionally involved," she said. "We listen, do not give advice, but can toss out suggestions or alternative solutions. We point out to the clients their own inner strengths and resources. It's a wonderful program and I think we really help," she noted proudly.

Maintaining boundaries can sometimes be difficult, Brock admitted. Volunteers make it clear to the clients from the beginning that they are meeting in a para-professional capacity and are there to "help them think about their situation and how it could possibly change so they feel better," Brock said. "We help them set goals, asking what they would like to accomplish and then work towards those goals. We make recommendations but don't make decisions."

"Basically, our volunteers offer knowledge, resources, support, encouragement and help to dispel fears of the unknown," Martin shared.

There are currently 20 volunteer counselors and Martin would like to increase that number. With referrals coming from all major organizations and facilities in the county that serve seniors, there is often a waiting list of clients requesting the program's services. Volunteers, on average, see two or three clients weekly for an eight to 12-week time period. These sessions take place in clients' homes or at senior centers; Brock, for example, meets her clients at the Lafayette Community Center.

The program has recently hired Abran Aviles-Scott to serve as their Latino Senior Peer Counseling coordinator in an effort to better serve Spanish-speaking seniors looking for help. "Language is often a barrier which creates even more difficulties for older adults," Aviles-Scott said.

For more information on either becoming a volunteer or receiving services provided by the Senior Peer Counseling program, please go to cchealth.org/volunteer/senior-counselor.php or call Joyce Martin at (925) 521-5636.

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[back](#)

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