

Great therapy: Seniors talking with their peers

By Diane Claytor

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."



One-on-one counseling Photo Bigstock

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.

dations 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.

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 recommen-

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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Family caregivers overwhelmed and untrained

By Linda Fodrini-Johnson

An AARP study published in 2015 states that family caregivers are overwhelmed and untrained. Can you relate to this? There are about 40 million family caregivers over the age of 55 who are giving an average of 30 hours a week to this task. It is almost a full-time job and many of these caregivers are still in the workforce, so they are doing two full-time jobs. Is that you?

Of these families, 15 million are trying to provide care to someone with a dementia, such as Alzheimer's or Lewy body dementia, resulting in an even larger time commitment. Often that person needs 24/7 attention because of safety and impaired judgment.

It is an understatement of the real stress that is on families to say that it is challenging to protect the safety of someone who doesn't think that help is needed and is fighting every suggestion. Family members would benefit immensely by seeking training and learning tips on communicating with someone who has a dementia.

Recent caregiver research says that caregivers spend about 25 percent of their time on items like shopping, appointments, cooking, assisting with personal care, helping with daily money management and a variety of other things like home repair or assisting with technology issues. However, what struck me was that caregivers spend an average of 13 hours every month on researching resources or information on their family member's illness.

Thirteen hours of searching is a bunch of time looking for answers or resources. How do you make decisions about what ser-

vice to use, or health care advice to follow? The internet seems to be the first place that families search. What pops up first in your search are all the organizations or services that have paid ads. Then as you move down to the organic results of your exploring, you find organizations that provide the service or advice you are seeking, as they have not just purchased a keyword that sends anyone who puts dementia (for example) into the search bar. It might be exactly what you have been looking for but, nine times out of 10, those listed first are a related service and not the "expert" you were hoping to find.

A few tips in searching for "Senior or Elder" care services on the internet:

- 1) Has the company been in business for more than five years?
- 2) Are they led by professionals related to what you need for your family members?
- 3) Do they take referral fees from places they might find for you, possibly compromising objectivity?
- 4) Do the professionals that work for the company belong to a profession that has a Code of Ethics and a Standard of Practice?
- 5) Do they give back to the community – with education, donations or volunteerism?
- 6) Do they have liability insurance? Bonding is extremely limited in its application – you want to be sure they have a good general liability policy.
- 7) If you were not referred by another professional, can you talk to one of their current clients?
- 8) How do they support the entire family – education, support groups, counseling?

If you want to save a lot of time and headaches in searching

for services, schedule an appointment with a skilled and experienced, aging life care manager with backgrounds in social work, counseling, nursing and related fields. Turn your feelings of being overwhelmed into peace of mind with excellent navigation from an expert that only works for you and will be unbiased in their advice and direction.

Take classes and educate yourself. Eldercare Services offers a series of classes that run all year long for those dealing with the dementias, in addition to a monthly support group and a third Friday of the month lecture series on a variety of senior issues. We can also help you find someone just like us anywhere in the country through our national network and/or our professional care management organization. For information, visit www.eldercareanswers.com.



Linda Fodrini-Johnson, MA, MFT, CMC, is a Licensed Family Therapist and Certified Care Manager. She has been practicing professional care management since 1984. Linda founded Eldercare Services, a full-service care management and home care company in 1989, which now employs over 200 caring people. Eldercare Services has been providing Bay Area families with care management, home care services (caregiving), advocacy, counseling, support groups and education for 29 years.