

## Full support

### Almost 6,800 self-help groups now operating in New Jersey

BY JEFF WEBER • STAFF WRITER • JULY 21, 2009

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When stress levels heighten and medical bills mount, who are you going to call? There isn't a health-care version of "Ghostbusters" that can magically make these tensions disappear, but there is help out there. Self-help groups are becoming more and more popular in Central Jersey thanks to the help of the New Jersey Self-Help Group Clearinghouse, a free service of St. Clare's Health System funded by the State Division of Mental Health Services.

Many self-help groups exist to provide support to others. Topics range from broad-sweeping issues such as cancer, mental health, overeating, alcoholism and abuse, to specific problems such as polio, fibromyalgia, restless legs and bi-polar disorder.

Many members of self-help groups prefer to remain anonymous, especially those that deal with addictions and self-inflicted ailments.

Once such member recently told the clearinghouse, after receiving the help they needed, that "attending a self-help support group has helped me to realize that I am not alone. I have received support and been able to give back through my feelings of fulfillment."

And more people than ever are finding that fulfillment. The clearinghouse reports that almost 6,800 self-help groups are now operating around the Garden State — a 50 percent increase in the past eight years.

#### **Do-it-yourself**

According to clearinghouse director Ed Madara, more individuals and families are dealing with rare or hard-to-cope-with disorders and are looking to start their own groups.

"They are not alone," he says, noting that three new groups for trichotillomania — where the subject obsessively pulls out individual strands of hair — have started in New Jersey over the last year.

Another popular topic these days is chronic pain, specifically fibromyalgia. There are not many groups of that kind in New Jersey and none in Somerset County. Dave Kalbach would like to change that.

"I'm still kind of writing a format and receiving some information to really put it together," says the Somerville resident, who suffers from sciatica and neck pain. "But I do have people in mind that I've spoken to (about the group), and I'm sure there are many others."

Kalbach recognizes the importance of what a self-help group does for one's psyche because of his own experiences. He hopes once the group (908-581-0775 for information) is under way, people suffering from fibromyalgia, degenerative disks, bone spurs and other back and neck issues will benefit.

"One of the goals (of a self-help group) is to kind of change the perception of people who don't have it and how they view people who do have it," he says. "It's meant for someone like a spouse to have a greater understanding, to make them understand what that person — who tends to want to keep it to themselves — is going through."

#### **Well-established**

On the flip side are groups that have a strong presence in Central Jersey, such as the National Alliance on Mental Illness, or NAMI, of New Jersey (732-940-0991). NAMI is represented in Middlesex, Somerset, Hunterdon and Union counties, with its chief offices in North Brunswick.

NAMI self-help groups are composed of people who are family members of someone with a mental illness such as depression, bi-polar disorder or schizophrenia. They receive education and are taught how to be advocates for those suffering with an illness.

"Mental illness can disrupt family life, and in the group, many people find understanding and support that they may not get from their own families or friends," says Aruna Rao, associated director for NAMI of New Jersey. "The

stigma of mental illness makes it very hard to come out publicly as an affected family member or consumer of mental health services, so the group provides a safe, confidential place to get support, information and referrals."

### Seeking help

But by and large, many new self-help groups are small and need help getting off the ground. Scores of Central Jersey residents are looking to begin their own but need the help of others who share the same affliction, or know someone who does, to get started.

Here are just a few groups from across the region that are looking to get under way:

In Middlesex County, progressive supranuclear palsy (609-918-0072) and tracheostomies (732-752-6629). Neither of these afflictions have groups in New Jersey.

In Somerset County, blood cancer (908-239-1515), celiac disease (908-874-3338), workaholics (908-397-7781) and oppositional defiant disorder (732-648-8197).

In Hunterdon County, neurofibromatosis (609-773-0372), a rare illness that causes tumors to grow throughout the body. There is a national group, Neurofibromatosis Inc., but none in the Garden State.

And in Union County, body abuse such as self-mutilation and bulimia (908-477-4158) and a group for older adults recovering from mental illness (973-461-9953).

There really is something for everyone, and everyone needs a little help sometimes.

"My years as a medical practitioner, as well as my own first-hand experience, have taught me how important self-help groups are in assisting their members in dealing with problems, stress, hardship and pain," says former U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop, who also served as a member of Compassionate Friends — an international self-help group for bereaved parents — following the sudden death of his son. "The benefits of mutual aid are . . . (an) attempt to deal with their isolation, powerlessness, alienation and the awful feeling that nobody understands."

Compassionate Friends has local chapters in Bridgewater (908-431-9775), High Bridge (908-638-8717) and Spotswood (732-548-1419). More information on how to find other self-help groups in Central Jersey is available by calling 800-367-6274 or by visiting [www.njgroups.org](http://www.njgroups.org).



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The National Alliance on Mental Illness of New Jersey "en Español" support group of Middlesex and Union counties. NAMI self-help groups are composed of people who are family members of someone with a mental illness such as depression, bi-polar disorder or schizophrenia. They receive education and are taught how to be advocates for those suffering with an illness.



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The National Alliance on Mental Illness of New Jersey support group of Somerset County.



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The National Alliance on Mental Illness of New Jersey support group of Middlesex County.



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The National Alliance on Mental Illness of New Jersey group of Hunterdon County.

## **CENTRAL JERSEY SELF-HELP GROUPS**

Middlesex, Somerset, Hunterdon and Union counties all have different self-help groups. Here are a few that are available:

### In Middlesex County:

B.I.L.Y. (Because I Love You) for parents of children of any age who pose behavioral challenges

Central Jersey Restless Leg Syndrome Group

Recovery, Inc. for persons with nervous symptoms, anxiety, depression or fears

### In Somerset County:

Debtors Anonymous support group for those who wish to stop incurring debt

Single Senior Women support group for women 60 and older who are divorced, separated or widowed

Kids Connect for children 7 to 17 to help them cope with a parent's cancer diagnosis

### In Hunterdon County:

Depression & Bipolar Support Alliance support group for those with chronic depression or bipolar disorder

Hunterdon Eye Openers for those experiencing vision loss

Sugar Babies for children with Type 1 diabetes and their families

### In Union County:

GROW support groups for depression, anxiety and other mental health problems

Good Grief for young adults, teens and children bereaving loss of loved one

Adult ADHD Support Group for adults with attention deficit disorder or hyperactivity disorder