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# Shedding light on bipolar disorder

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Staff Writer

## Latinos benefit from mental health support programs offered in Spanish

Alejandra Aguilar went to a health fair at her son's school last year looking for help for her son, who she thought was hyperactive.

But after reading materials on different

conditions, she realized her son didn't have a problem — he was just highly intelligent and needed more stimulation. However, she recognized signs of depression and anxiety in herself.

"I discovered I was the one who was

sick," said Aguilar, a 33-year-old Passaic resident.

On Saturday, Aguilar attended the first-ever conference of "NAMI en Español," or NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) in Spanish, in West New York.

About 200 people showed up for the day-long event, where they heard from experts in the mental-health field on a range of issues and met other families from across the region struggling with mental-health problems.

Aguilar has attended monthly Spanish language support group meetings NAMI since her visit to the health fair year and said she has met other people

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# Health: Latinos benefit from program

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suffering from similar problems. NAMI referred her to the Mental Health Clinic of Passaic and she was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Her husband, Jose Luis, also started attending NAMI meetings, to better understand his wife and to address his problems with rage and jealousy.

The couple credits NAMI with helping them to repair their relationship and become better parents.

At the conference Saturday, experts in the field addressed common attitudes toward antidepressants in the Latino community, behavior problems among bicultural children, and mental health among seniors, among other topics.

Luis and Aguilar paid special attention to a psychiatrist who stressed the importance of taking medication for bipolar disorder. Luis had been telling his wife that

she should stop taking medication because it was addictive, she said, but he now understood that it was essential for her. Aguilar also liked that the doctor said, "Nobody is looking for depression."

"We'd all like to lead normal lives and not have to go through this," Aguilar said.

Maria and Fabio Jaramillo, a couple from Garfield, attended the conference with their two adult children.

Maria Jaramillo found NAMI when she was searching the Internet for resources on bipolar disorder for her 24-year-old son, Fernando. He was fighting with his wife and lost a job he held for three years at a textile company because he wasn't able to work during a depressive episode, his mother said. Though he was only diagnosed a couple of years ago as bipolar, she said he had attention deficit disorder as a child and had always struggled.

Maria Jaramillo started attending the Family to Family program, a 12-week course for families of individuals diagnosed with serious mental illness. The courses are taught by peers — other adults who have a family member with a mental illness.

"We learned how to understand it better," Maria Jaramillo said. "Before, we couldn't talk to our son about his illness, because we didn't know what it was."

Now, the Jaramillos have a much better sense of how to respond to Fernando's needs. The only challenge is paying for it, because he can no longer be covered under his parents' health insurance, and he doesn't have a stable job, his mother said.

Organizers of the conference Saturday hoped it would help get the word out about the resources NAMI offers, and help remove the stigma of mental illness in the Latino community, they said.

For some, that stigma can make it hard to find the support they need.

"I can't tell my family I have bipolar disorder," Aguilar said. When she told family members in Mexico she was seeing a psychiatrist, they told her she was "crazy" because she wanted to be that way, she said.

Now that she has a local support network, she's not isolated, Aguilar said, and she knows what she's going through is not so rare. Fights with her husband aren't as common, and he now knows how to support her when she's going through a rough time, she said. And when they're healthier, their four children are better off, she said.

"I wish more people knew NAMI existed," Aguilar said.

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