

HEALTHY LIVING IN COMMUNITY

Workplace workshops connect coworkers to a circle of support

“Live knowing that setbacks are also chances to get it right,” says Greg Franceschi, offering a powerful attitude of resilience to take to the workplace, and an even more impressive outlook on life.

Just a year ago, however, Greg says he was in a state of deep depression after learning he was diabetic. But when an opportunity arose for Greg to learn ways to reshape how his diagnosis would affect his life, he signed up.

At the end of last year, Greg and several other folks gathered together at LifePath, where Greg’s wife Lisa Middents worked, to support each other as they sought to find new ways to manage the challenges in their lives through Healthy Living.

The Healthy Living Program at LifePath has been offering community workshops to help people with chronic health conditions improve their quality of life for about seven years, and under the leadership of Program Manager Andi Waisman, offerings have recently expanded to the workplace.

In the fall of 2017, Greg, Lisa, and others from the LifePath community gathered together for the first testrun of a six-week Workplace Chronic Disease Self-Management (CDSM) workshop series. It was a diverse group of ages, health conditions, job titles, and genders, all joining together in the hope of learning how to better balance work life with personal health care. They all made the choice to reveal personal details about their lives to the confidence of their colleagues, a potentially risky endeavor.

Fortunately, it worked.

Eight months after the first workshop session, attendees report feeling a greater sense of control over their lives and ability to reach their goals.

“I was just telling a bunch how the program in the fall is still affecting me positively now,” says Janis Merrell, who reports that the workshops helped her take more control over her health and helped her to remember to pay attention to her nutrition and exercise habits. “The support of my coworkers in the program, in the form of taking walks together and checking in, has also helped me remain on a healthier path.”

Like Janis, Lisa felt supported by her coworkers. “The experience for me of having the CDSM workshop at my place of work with my colleagues was profound,” says Lisa. “I felt supported in a way that I don’t think would have been as possible with people I’d just met.”

As the weeks went on, two volunteer workshop leaders shared information about the “Self-Management Toolbox,” a set of 11 tools that help you manage living with chronic health conditions. Greg says the workshop offered “simple, thoughtful lessons” on topics such as:

- Better breathing for stress management and relaxation
- Managing medications and communicating with medical providers
- Action planning, or identifying and taking small steps to reach big goals
- Problem solving and decision making

Greg also valued the “continuity of support within the group, and the experience of working with leaders who understood that meaningful changes, be they in diet, exercise, or one’s perception of oneself, only last when they happen in small, manageable increments within a context where the recovering individuals are getting the



LifePath staff members Jessica Riel, Janis Merrell, Andi Waisman, and Marianne Wilkinson take a lunchtime walk together. The four women all participated in the first Workplace Chronic Disease Self-Management workshop at LifePath last fall and continue to try to support one another in developing habits for better health.

support they need.”

Participants talked about the ups and downs of the unique they faced, such as eating the right foods in the right amounts or getting a good night’s sleep, which were often universal across diagnoses, and brainstormed together ways to tackle problems. “It was moving how much trust people had about being vulnerable with each other,” says Lisa, “It gave me such a boost of hope that I could make changes in my life and get healthier and that I wasn’t alone.”

Greg shares the “basics” he took away from the workshop:

- “SLOW down to a pace you can coexist with.”
- “Do not pretend you are or can be in control of more than you realistically can expect to be able to be in control of.”
- “Don’t be so hard on yourself or others.”
- “Slow down some more.”
- “Notice all the amazingly beautiful people and things that abound independent of your frown (or mine).”
- “If things don’t always go your way, don’t be surprised.”

“And, last but definitely not least,” says Greg, “keep talking to your circle and tell them what you are trying to do, maybe even ask for some help.” Greg says that this important step creates a “feedback loop,” giving “a little support” along with “regular reminders that everyone else is struggling, too.”

Lisa appreciated that the shared workplace allowed her to continue to connect with her circle on a regular basis. “Being able to see people on an ongoing, daily basis who’ve been through the workshop also helps reinforce what I experienced and makes the personal breakthroughs I made during the workshop so much more lasting. I came to love and appreciate the other people in my workshop on a deeper level than would have been possible in the ordinary workday. I feel a lot of encouragement every time I see them at work that we can take charge of our health and make choices that make us stronger and happier.”

The Workplace Chronic Disease Self-Management Program not only benefits employees, but is also a boon to employers. Stronger, healthier, and happier employees are less likely to become ill, have accidents, and be absent from work; could have lower health insurance costs; and are more likely to maintain motivation and focus during the workday.

Greg shares his thanks for the support he received from the others in the workshop, who helped him to “strategize at a difficult time.”

“To all of us all,” Greg toasts, “who continue to try to make the best of it anyway.”

If you’re interested in having the Healthy Living Program come to your place of work, contact Andi Waisman, Health Living Program manager, at 413-773-5555 x2297 or 978-544-2259 x2297 or email awaisman@lifepathma.org. Read more about the program online at LifePathMA.org.

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LEGAL NOTES

Massachusetts MOLST Form, Massachusetts Health Care Proxy, & Living Wills – explanations of these important medical documents

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The Massachusetts MOLST Form, the Massachusetts Health Care Proxy, and a Living Will are three very important documents necessary for health care planning. There are similarities between these health care documents, but each document has specific

purposes. The MOLST Form and Living Will are primarily used for end-of-life decisions. A Health Care Proxy is recommended for every legal adult as soon as they turn eighteen years old.

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Do Not Resuscitate or Comfort Care form because of their present serious medical condition. It can only be signed either by an individual who has the mental capacity to make their own decisions based on their present medical condition, or their named health care agent in their Health Care Proxy on their behalf if they are mentally or physically incapacitated and their Health Care Proxy is invoked. In addition to being signed by the individual, or their health care agent, their physician also signs the MOLST form. It is not a legal document, which means it is advisory but not enforceable.

The Massachusetts Health Care Proxy is a legal document. The Massachusetts Health Care Proxy law allows individuals to prepare a document naming a health care agent to make their medical decisions for them should they ever become incapacitated and thus unable to make their own medical decisions. A Health Care Proxy is strongly recommended for every person age eighteen and older. It is signed by the individual in the presence of two witnesses. Preparing for possible mental and/or physical incapacity is a subject matter not only for older adults to give serious consideration. Even young adults can



become seriously ill or severely injured and become mentally and/or physically incapacitated. If an incapacitated person with a serious illness or injury has not signed a valid Health Care Proxy, a court proceeding naming a legal guardian is required so the court

appointed guardian can have the authority to make all the medical decisions for that incapacitated person. This can be costly and takes time.

Living Wills, although not legally recognized in Massachusetts, are strong evidence of a person's intentions as to the withholding or withdrawal of treatment for end-of-life decisions. These intentions can be incorporated within the Health Care Proxy itself or can be spelled out in a separate document attached to the Health Care Proxy. A Living Will gives your health care agent clearer directions to guide your named health care agent to act on your behalf for those medical decisions.

For more information and a toolkit including a Health Care Proxy form, go to www.honoringchoicesmass.com. MOLST info and forms are at molst-ma.org.

The views expressed in this column represent general information. To address your particular and specific needs consult your own attorney. If you need help with referral to an attorney, contact the Franklin County Bar Association at (413) 773-9839 or the Worcester County Bar Association at (978) 752-1311. Elder law resources may be found through the National Academy of Elder Law Attorneys, Massachusetts Chapter, at massnaela.com or 617-566-5640.

Community Legal Aid (CLA) provides legal services free to people age 60 and older for civil legal matters with an emphasis on access to health care coverage (MassHealth and Medicare) and public benefits as well as tenants' rights. A request for legal assistance can be made by phone at 413-774-3747 or toll-free 1-855-252-5342 during their intake hours (Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday from 9:30 a.m. to 12:15 p.m. and Wednesday from 1:30 p.m. to 4:15 p.m.) or any time online by visiting www.communitylegal.org.