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NAMI Family-to-Family Program Focuses on Family Caregiver Needs

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In April 2023, Ontario Shores Centre for Mental Health Sciences (Ontario Shores) began offering the Family-to-Family Program created by the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), the largest grassroots mental health organization in the United States. NAMI Family-to-Family is a free educational program for family, significant others, and friends of people with mental health conditions. Research shows that the program significantly improves the coping and problem-solving abilities of those closest to a person with a mental health condition. The program has been offered in Ontario since 1998 by various Canadian Mental Health Association branches and other agencies but is new to Ontario Shores.

This 8-week evidence-based program has been adapted to the Canadian health care environment and specifically to the mental health system in Ontario by NAMI Family-to-Family Programs, Ontario. For more information, we invite you to visit <https://www.nami.org/Support-Education/Mental-Health-Education/NAMI-Family-to-Family> or to contact the Coordinator NAMI Family-to-Family Programs, Ontario Madeleine Bertrand at f2fprogramsontario@gmail.com

The program is offered by Ontario Shores at least twice annually and is currently delivered in virtual format on the Zoom platform, allowing outreach to family caregivers beyond the hospital location and individuals without readily available transportation.

NAMI Family-to-Family is taught by NAMI-trained family members who know what it's like to support someone with a mental health condition. No one knows better what family caregivers are experiencing than someone who has been there. The program includes presentations, discussions, and interactive exercises which allow participants to digest information, make connections to their own experience, share and acknowledge difficult emotions, and offer mutual support, acceptance, and ideas to those in the group. In addition to information about mental health conditions, treatment options, and the healthcare environment, family caregivers learn that they are not alone, how valuable their support is to recovery, the importance of communicating effectively, and that they **MUST** take care of themselves.

The course provides comprehensive information on:

- Understanding mental health conditions and preparing for crisis.
- Getting a diagnosis.
- An overview of depressive disorders, schizophrenia and schizoaffective disorders, bipolar disorder, anxiety and other mental health conditions.
- Treatment options for mental health conditions.
- The biology of the brain, medications, and side effects.
- Listening and communication techniques.
- Problem solving and limit setting.
- Understanding what it's like to have a mental health condition.
- Recovery and rehabilitation as they relate to mental health conditions.
- Moving forward and self-care.

The participant manual is provided in electronic format to those attending the program and becomes a valuable resource long after the program is completed. While participants may be surprised at the quantity of information, they will use what they need in the moment and return to the course manual for information they require in future.

Participant feedback has been encouraging. When asked how they might incorporate what they learned in the course, participants expressed the following and provided permission to share:

“We will be improving our approach to conversing and communicating with our loved one and using the problem-solving skills to uncomplicate taking actions. Somehow, we will set boundaries to provide us with personal time to renew and strengthen our own relationships with each other and friends.”

“I will explore the resources provided and look into other programs based on areas of interest from the course.”

“I’m hoping my communication skills have improved. I’m trying not to be so hard on myself. I’m trying to make more time to get away.”

“I think for me there are two key changes. The first is to try to not judge the behaviours of the people I am trying to support and better accept it is beyond their control. The second thing is to try to not judge myself or blame myself for what they are going through and to try not to let that thinking bring me down with guilt.”

“I intend to use a different way to deal with my son's episodes that I have learned from the class. I also intend to look into other programs to get my son help.”

We are very pleased at the positive impact this program has had and hope to continue providing it as long as demand continues.

Those interested in learning more about the course or being added to the wait list for the next available program series should contact Elaine Miller, Ontario Shores Patient and Family Engagement Leader, at the Family Resource Centre 905-430-4055 ext. 6970 or familyresourcecentre@ontarioshores.ca

We hope family caregivers will consider taking this course and receiving the benefits it has to offer.