

# Toronto Star Article - You Needn't Go It Alone

You needn't go it alone By Helen Henderson  
Sep. 21, 2006. 03:02 PM The Toronto Star

When Janet MacNeil was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, she wasn't interested in joining any support group.

MacNeil had a job, four kids, a busy family life.

She knew she was facing a condition that was damaging her central nervous system and interfering with communications between her brain and the rest of her body. She knew MS could rob her of the ability to do a bunch of things, including walking. She knew it was unpredictable and she had a lot to cope with. But a support group?

Not for her.

The thought of trading stories with people farther along on the MS journey didn't appeal at all.

"I didn't want to see my future," she says. "I was terrified to meet anyone with MS."

For three years she balked at any suggestion of joining anything. Then one day, her husband forced the issue.

"He said: 'There's a support group meeting tonight. Are you going?'" she recalls.

"I said: 'No, I'm not.'

"He said: 'Yes, you are.'"

With that, he picked her up — literally, because she couldn't walk at the time — and took her.

That was six years ago and she has never looked back.

Today, MacNeil is a member of three support groups. She has founded a number herself, including "The Chat Room," a group for women only. She also will be one of the panellists at a session on success stories during Self-Help Awareness Week, which starts this Sunday and runs to Sept. 30.

Sponsored by the Ontario Self-Help Network and its 19 affiliates across the province, the event aims to raise the profile of groups and help promote the growth and development of networks and resources.

"I truly believe in the benefits of self-help as a way to learn coping strategies and to share pertinent, practical information," says Lynn Laccohee, manager of client services for the Toronto chapter of the Multiple Sclerosis Society.

"Unfortunately, very few community professionals or individuals know what is available."

So how do you find out?

"There are about 420 groups in the Greater Toronto Area alone," says Spencer Brennan, co-ordinator of the Self Help Resource Centre, one of the partners in Self-Help Awareness Week.

As noted on the centre's website — <http://www.selfhelp.on.ca> — the idea behind the movement is: "You alone can do it but you can't do it alone."

"There is a unique strength in group membership that can help a person to mobilize their energies," the website emphasizes.

Of the camaraderie and resources that come with the territory, MacNeil says: "These are good things to have in your arsenal."

Research bears her out.

Studies cited by the resource centre include one that showed widows and widowers over age 50 who participated in bereavement self-help groups experienced less depression and grief than non-participants.

Another showed the benefits for men aged 57 to 82 who had diabetes. Those who participated in support groups learned self-care techniques, had lower levels of stress and depression, gained more knowledge and rated the quality of their lives higher than those who didn't.

So what's on the agenda over Self-Help Awareness Week?

Among other things, Peel Region will be holding a workshop Tuesday afternoon and there will be a francophone community event Thursday in Toronto.

Tuesday evening in Toronto is earmarked for success stories; Thursday afternoon for a session on how to build partnerships with other organizations; and Saturday for a day-long workshop on how to facilitate a group, including tips on conflict resolution. Most events are free; some involve a nominal fee to cover refreshments and materials. Registration is required.

On Thursday evening, guest speaker Jim Milligan will talk about building connections at the Toronto Self-Help Resource Centre's annual general meeting at 40 Orchard View

Blvd, near Yonge St. and Eglinton Ave. Milligan, a psychologist and educator, is currently completing his PhD at the University of Toronto in the field of problem gambling.

One caveat: As befits the self-help approach, the resource centre has not necessarily checked out all the groups it lists. It's up to you to make sure you feel comfortable before attending any meeting.

For more information, check <http://www.selfhelp.on.ca>, email [shrc@selfhelp.on.ca](mailto:shrc@selfhelp.on.ca), phone (416) 487-4355 (in the Toronto area) or 1-888-283-8806 or write 40 Orchard View Blvd, Suite 219, Toronto, Ont. M4R 1B9.