Study of the Effectiveness of a Family-to-Family Education Program

Family education making a difference (USA)

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Completing a peer education program gives family members of people with mental illness a greater sense of empowerment with their families, their community and the social service system; they also feel less displeasure and worry about the family member with mental illness, according to University of Maryland researchers. The Family to Family Education Program is a free 12-week structured course, developed in 1991 by the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, or NAMI. NAMI affiliates teach the course in 46 states to family members who meet in community centers, hospitals, health clinics, and Veterans’ hospitals. Family members learn about mental illness and its treatment, and develop the communication skills, coping mechanisms, and crisis-management skills necessary to deal with their loved one's mental illness and its impact on their family. Thousands of program graduates have become NAMI members.

Thirty-seven family members participated in the Maryland study, which found that the program had significant benefits for participants completing the course, including a greater sense of empowerment and less worry. These improvements were sustained six months later. The program did not seem to affect the actual amount of work that the participants did in actually caring for family members, nor was there a change in their self-esteem or sense of mastery. The researchers speculate that the program may not have been long enough to have an impact in those areas or that the measures they used were not sensitive enough to pick up these changes. While the study was limited by a small sample and the lack of a control group, the researchers concluded that the results are encouraging in demonstrating the program’s effectiveness.
