

## Support Program Can Help Caregivers Cope with Relative's Mental Illness

A free, nationally available program can significantly improve a family's ability to cope with an ill relative's mental disorder, according to an NIMH-funded study published June 2011 in *Psychiatric Services*, a journal of the American Psychiatric Association.

### Background

The Family-to-Family (FTF) education and support program is a free, 12-week course offered by the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI). FTF is offered throughout the United States, in two Canadian provinces and in three regions in Mexico. With more than 3,500 volunteer teachers, it is supported by local donations or municipal funds. Since 1991, 250,000 family members have participated in the program. It is the most widely available education and support program for family members of individuals with mental illnesses.



Two previous studies suggested that FTF reduces caregivers' stress and helps them gain a sense of empowerment over their situation. For this most recent evaluation of the program, Lisa Dixon, M.D., M.P.H., of the University of Maryland, and colleagues aimed to determine its effectiveness using a randomized controlled trial. Half of the 318 participants were assigned to the program immediately after enrolling in the study, while the other half were waitlisted for the program for at least three months (control condition). Those who were waitlisted were free to seek assistance from other sources.

Participants were interviewed at the beginning of the three-month program and again three months later. They were asked about their problem-solving and coping skills, their overall distress level and worries about their ill relative's situation. They were also asked about their sense of empowerment to manage challenges within the family, the mental health system, and the community. They were also tested regarding their factual knowledge about mental illness.

### Results of the Study

Compared to the waitlisted control group, FTF participants showed significantly greater improvements in coping with their ill relative's condition by learning more about the illness and gaining a sense of empowerment in the family, service system and community. FTF participants also showed increased acceptance of their family member's illness as well as improved problem-



solving skills, compared to those who were waitlisted. Results also suggested that FTF participants' overall sense of emotional distress eased.

### **Significance**

The researchers concluded that FTF effectively enhances coping skills among families of people with mental illness. These results echo those found in the previous qualitative studies. The researchers suggest the program can positively influence how family members solve problems and "navigate emotional difficulties" surrounding their loved one's illness.

### **What's Next**

Additional research is needed to conclusively determine if the positive effects of FTF can improve the outcomes of the individuals with mental illness for whom the family members were taking the class.

### **Citation**

Dixon LB, Lucksted A, Medoff DR, Burland J, Stewart B, Lehman AF, Fang LJ, Sturm V, Brown C, Murray-Swank A. Outcomes of a randomized study of a peer-taught family-to-family education program for mental illness. *Psychiatric Services*. 2011 June. 62(6):591-597.