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# prime time

## INSIDE Primetime

### What's cooking

A good diet is especially important for those over 50. Find out how seniors' nutritional needs differ.

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Paul Slosar turns to a support group to help him cope with caring for his wife.

## You are not alone

### Support groups can help elders through rough times

**O**lder people who face a challenging personal situation can find emotional comfort and practical advice at local support groups.

Paul Slosar attends a support group for those caring for a relative with memory loss. The support group meets at Smith Village, a retirement community in the Beverly neighborhood on Chicago's South Side.

Slosar lives at Smith Village along with his wife, Maureen. But they don't live together. Slosar lives in an apartment at the community, while Maureen lives in the building's nursing care section. Maureen needs a lot of help because she has dementia and doesn't speak. She's also confined to a wheel chair, the result of a nasty fall.

"The hardest thing is to accept that this beautiful, independent and intelligent person is in this condition," says Slosar, describing his feelings about Maureen. "But once you have some acceptance of the problem, then you can learn how to be with that person."

Slosar attributes much of his hard-earned acceptance to regular attendance at the support group. Smith Village and its sister community in Orland Park, Smith Crossing, host monthly meetings for caregivers of those with memory loss. The meetings are

## SUPPORT

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open to residents of the retirement community as well as to others who live in the wider community.

The group usually has about 10-12 participants. The hour-long gatherings are led by a trained facilitator. Participants share their stories and also offer each other practical tips on caregiving. Outside lecturers sometimes attend to provide information. "Dementia is a horrific disease," says Slosar. "The group made me realize I was not alone, and I became strong."

### Groups widely available

Support groups specifically meant for older people are widely available throughout the Chicago area. Groups meet at retirement buildings, social service agencies, and community centers. Each group focuses on a particular situation, such as for those who have recently lost a spouse, or for those who have an adult child who is disabled.

Since memory loss is such a widespread condition among the elderly, many support groups are offered by the Chicago-based Alzheimer's Association. The organization's Illinois Chapter has 106 support groups that meet throughout the eastern portion of the state. The groups meet once a month, though some meet more frequently. There is no charge for the meetings. Sessions last about 90 minutes. "We have served families for 30 years," says Nicole Batsch, director of early stage and support services at the Alzheimer's Illinois Chapter.

The members of the support group offer a lot of practical advice, notes Batsch. Participants who have lots of experience often have a solution to difficult, everyday problems, such as bathing, establishing a routine, and how to deal with wandering. The facilitator also directs participants to resources on medications, the latest research, and legal help. "People get a lot of

coping skills," says Batsch.

About five years ago, the Alzheimer's Association started a support group for those with early stage dementia. Family members also attend, but meet in a separate room with other family members. Group discussions cover treatments and research as well as ways to maintain independence. The early stage groups are only available several times a year. (For information on the early stage group, or a general Alzheimer's support group, call 800-272-3900. General support groups are also listed on the group's website at Alz.org. Meeting locations can be searched by entering a ZIP code.)

Social worker David Donaldson runs a support group for those who are dealing with the death of a relative or friend. The group is sponsored by CJE SeniorLife, a social service agency based in Chicago. "Loneliness is the No. 1 issue," says Donaldson. Coming home to an empty house after the loss of a spouse after 40 years of marriage can be "horrendous," says Donaldson.

Donaldson's practical approach relies on group members to answer questions. "We try to help people figure out what they need," says Donaldson. That way, when friends ask how they can help, the bereaved person can say exactly what they want, such as a phone call once a week, or a companion to help with grocery shopping. "If the person can explain what they need, they are more likely to get help," notes Donaldson.

Donaldson's group meets once a week, at CJE's offices on the Northwest Side, usually for about 90 minutes. Participants can attend when they want. Some stay in the group for years. Others drop in and out as needed.

### Not for everyone

The information shared in support groups is confidential. The facilitator sets the ground rules at the outset. Participants are usually asked to introduce them-

selves and say why they are there. No one is made to participate. But those who don't want to share their story or offer advice may not be suitable candidates for support groups, experts say. Individual counseling is often a good alternative.

Also, it's a good idea to try out a group and see how it goes. If one group doesn't seem right, others are often available. The Alzheimer's Association, for instance, has groups meant just for adult children, or for spouses, as well as for general caregivers.

Support groups are available for almost any type of problem. Marlene Hemleben attends a support group offered by the Linkages Program. It provides help to seniors who have adult children with disabilities. The program is sponsored by CJE SeniorLife. The group meets in Chicago two times a month.

"I was so happy to connect with other parents," says Hemleben. Her 37-year-old daughter is mentally disabled and lives in a group home. "We are all in the same boat."

The group covers a wide variety of topics, according to Rosann Corcoran, a social worker and the coordinator of the Linkages Program. Legal issues are often discussed. Facing their own mortality, older people often worry what will happen to their disabled children. "Estate planning is a big issue," says Corcoran.

One of the best features of the support group is that it acts as a resource for parents, Corcoran says. The state of Illinois has a fragmented delivery system of services, so parents must make many calls and fill out lots of applications to get services for their children. "The group can hold someone's hand as they try to coordinate services," notes Corcoran.

The group can also give an elderly caretaker the permission and encouragement to let others help. "It's important for people to realize they don't have to do everything," says Corcoran. ■