

CHRONIC DISEASE SELF-MANAGEMENT PROGRAM, July 2021

By: Stephen Anable



Gail, 62, a lifelong resident of the Merrimack Valley, wasn't getting the most out of life. Arthritis and back pain had forced her to retire early. She certainly "didn't feel old" but was finding the discomfort intolerable. For example, she had to use a cane when walking and couldn't sit for extended periods of time, even in her most comfortable chair. She had tried all sorts of remedies, including medication, therapy, and exercise, but nothing seemed to work.

Then Gail heard about a workshop designed specifically for people in her situation, "My Life, My Health: Chronic Pain." It transformed her world. The workshop is part of the Chronic Disease Self-Management Program, offered by the Healthy Living Center of Excellence.

Developed more than 20 years ago by doctors at Stanford University's School of Medicine, the program encourages people with conditions like cancer, diabetes, heart disease, and depression to take charge of their health.

The program:

- Empowers people to live with chronic disease
- Is built around group support
- Cultivates three core skills: action-planning, problem-solving, and decision-making
- Explores techniques for dealing with fatigue, sleep, pain, and difficult emotions
- Includes exercises to boost strength, flexibility, and endurance
- Advises attendees about use of medications; healthy eating; and communicating effectively with family, friends, and health professionals

Workshops take place in a variety of community settings, including senior centers, churches, libraries, and hospitals—as well as remotely, via Zoom.

By taking the "My Life, My Health: Chronic Pain," Gail learned she wasn't alone, that others struggled to manage their pain. During the workshop, she was relieved to be free to get up and move to make herself more comfortable. She felt good about attempting the group exercises, doing what she could without feeling judged by either the facilitators or fellow students. Each

week, Gail was pleased she could accomplish a bit more. “It changed everything,” she said. Through strategies like pacing herself, stretching, action-planning, and communicating with her health care team, Gail gradually realized that although her pain remained present, she was much better at managing it on a day-to-day basis—so much so that she decided she did not want to be fully retired. When her former employer offered her old job back on a contract basis, she immediately accepted.

We believe the supportive, participatory nature of the program is a key factor in its great success. Over the years, approximately 1 million people nationwide have completed it. The workshops meet once a week for two hours, for a total of six weeks. Each workshop is facilitated by two trained non-health professionals who may also be living with a chronic disease. All leaders have attended a 24-hour training program that includes reviewing the workshop content, practice teaching, and working through scenarios about problems that could occur. The leaders are often highly committed volunteers and conduct workshops in conjunction with consulting a detailed leaders’ manual. People with a variety of chronic health problems attend workshops together. All participants receive the companion book, *Living a Healthy Life with Chronic Conditions*.

One graduate, Maria, of Lowell, found the workshop on diabetes improved her entire outlook. “I had fallen into a deep depression after learning I was diabetic. But the simple thoughtful lessons, support within the group, and working with compassionate leaders did wonders. The workshop is built on the concept that meaningful changes—in diet, exercise, and perception of oneself—only last when they happen in small, manageable increments, in a setting where recovering individuals receive the support they need.”

Victor, of North Andover, said: “I felt supported in a way that I hadn’t thought possible with people I’d just met. It gave me such hope that I could make changes in my life and get healthier—and that I wasn’t alone.”

For more information about the Chronic Disease Self-Management Program, please visit <https://healthyliving4me.org/programs/>