Walk On

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AOTA’s The Road to the Centennial Vision


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On Thursday evening, February 6, 2014 the sixth annual Mental Health Taskforce and MNYD of NYSOTA OTs Walk with NAMI pep rally was held at Touro College, Manhattan campus. MNYD Board member, Eileen LaMourie, emceed the events for an audience of one hundred members of New York City OT community, including clinicians, educators and students from SUNY Downstate, Columbia, York, LIU and Touro. She explained how OTs Walk with NAMI joins with NAMI NYC-Metro to advocate for persons with mental illness and their families. Ariel Roth, Events Assistant for National Alliance on Mental Illness of New York City NAMI NYC-Metro chapter, informed the group about the goals of NAMI and its free educational programs. She explained how the NAMIWALK is both a fundraiser for their programming and also a time for the community-at-large to show its support in reducing the stigma of mental illness. This year’s walk will be held Saturday, May 10, at the South Street Seaport Museum Promenade, beginning at 10 am. A 5-K run has been added to this year’s venue.

When most people go running, it’s all they can do to concentrate on little things like putting one foot in front of the other. But when Eileen LaMourie, an occupational therapy graduate student at SUNY Downstate, goes running her concentration isn’t on the little things. It’s on the big picture.
“I pay attention to my inspirations, and I find that exercise and physical movement is very inspiring for me,” LaMourie says, “so it was an example of paying attention to a bright idea and then getting encouragement from people to run with it.”

The bright idea LaMourie had was to put together a video, titled on metabolic syndrome titled “OTs Walk with NAMI” to promote the upcoming NAMIWalk. The video would not only be the icing on the cake in an ongoing project for LaMourie’s community practice course, but it would also become a major component of promoting the NAMIWalk in general, with help from clinical assistant professor at SUNY Downstate, Suzanne White, MA, OTR.

“The community practice course is geared toward health and wellness and prevention,” White explains. “So the walk fits in perfectly with the health and wellness model. That’s how Eileen got started in the project.” White notes that the project is also incorporated into the efforts of the New York Metropolitan Area Mental Health Task Force, which was started 12 years ago at the behest of occupational therapists specializing in mental health in the area. The task force looked to align itself with its clients, and not just the institutions they worked with. This led to a relationship with the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI). Most recently, the task force aligned with the local chapter of NAMI to support and promote the upcoming NAMIWalk. “I’d just been to a lecture on metabolic syndrome,” White says, “and through the courses I’ve taught I’m become more and more aware that exercise is key to combating mental illness and starting on a road to
recovery. Besides that, it’s very valuable for everybody.” White pointed out to the local NAMI chapter that there were universities, clinics, and clinicians within the community—sources of manpower just waiting to be tapped for promoting and participating in the event.

Before making the video, White and LaMourie put together a walking protocol, a mood scale, a stages of change scale, and an “Am I Ready to Walk?” scale, and loaded the entire packet (then later the video) onto Facebook, an online community, so the information would be available for anyone in the community to use.

“They’re downloadable,” White notes, “and the next generation knows how to use computers really well. As occupational therapy practitioners we need to be recognized in community-based practice, and help our clients be able to access this kind of information.”

But the shining star was to be the video. After her inspirational run, LaMourie tapped into her own network of connections to get started on it. “The secret to its success is that I have a very close friend who is a professional videographer,” she admits. “I called him up and asked for advice on how to make a video, and as we were talking about it, he offered to help.” Better yet, he offered to help at no charge. The video has become a key component to the project, showcasing personal stories from clients, along with comments from practitioners and professionals on how walking can benefit mental health. It is an access point for clients with mental illness to better understand how they can take an
active role in their own health and wellness. And the video format was a great tool to appeal to people’s imaginations and tell a story, as opposed to just teaching them about a risk factor or an illness that was threatening their health.

“Part of why we wanted to do this video,” LaMourie explains, “was the idea that we’re really asking people who have the same risk factors as the general population, but maybe even more so because of their mental illnesses, to do something that is really hard to do. People with sedentary lifestyles in the general population have a hard enough time changing negative physical habits. Obesity is a national problem; it’s not just a problem for people who are at risk for metabolic syndrome. I really started to think about how we were going to best facilitate going into outpatient centers and clubhouses, presenting people with this walking program, then expecting them to get up and actually start walking. I wanted to do something dynamic.”

Dynamic is putting it mildly. When White and LaMourie showed the video at a recent Metropolitan Area Mental Health Task Force meeting, which was attended by a NAMI representative, the response was overwhelmingly positive. In fact, a NAMI representative immediately took a copy of the DVD to show at a local NAMIWalk kickoff meeting the next day.

“[NAMI] had the national video that they were supposed to play,” White explains, “but Wendy Brennan, the executive director, decided to open up the program with Eileen’s
video instead.” White notes that they are in negotiations with NAMI to use the video on a national level.

Besides the great reaction from NAMI, the video is also engaging for the clients it’s aimed at.

“Most of the clubhouses in the metropolitan area have computers, and they want clients to use them,” White says. “It’s a very dynamic way to get clients to start building cognitive skill sets, and there is a lot of evidence for using neurological cognitive programs to help people with severe, persistent mental illness to improve their cognitive functioning. I think it’s actually one of the biggest roles that mental health therapists have into the future.”

White and LaMourie hope their efforts will bring out walkers in droves this year, though they recognize that the NAMIWalk is just starting to build momentum, as clients get more and more comfortable with the change in lifestyle.

“What I like about this project is that it’s not just [SUNY Downstate] who is doing it,” White says. “We’ve got four universities, we’ve got clinics in the area, and now we’ve got the potential to have the video go nationally in two different directions, through the occupational therapy community, and through the NAMI community.”
“The nice thing about the video is that it’s up on a public access forum,” LaMourie says.

“The other day I Googled it and found that people were putting it on wellness blogs. That’s the kind of momentum you get only because of the Internet. Whether or not the clients are accessing the Internet as much as we want, the fact that these resources are out there and are possible for them or for group leaders to access, is a piece of the program that is really important to us.”

Click here to view the video. (We’ll put the link to the YouTube video here.)

The NAMI New York City Metro walk will be held May 10, 2008. For more information, please visit www.naminycmetro.org, or visit the Facebook page at [Is it possible to link to the Facebook page?]

The Mental Health Taskforce and MNYD invite you and your students to participate in the 7th annual Pep Rally/Lobby Day evening. As a profession, we joined with the National Alliance New York City NAMI NYC-Metro chapter on Mental Illness to advocate on behalf of persons with mental illness and their families. The original purpose of the Pep Rally was to educate the audience about how to use the OTs Walk with NAMI protocol and participate in NAMIWALK. The NAMIWALK is both an opportunity to raise funds for the NAMI programing and also a time for the OT community-at-large to show its support in reducing the stigma of mental illness. This evening, also, provides our newer students with an initial opportunity to participate in our professional organizations and learn to advocate for our client and our profession.

This year we will return to a student presentation format. Each program/department chooses one student group to present a wellness or advocacy related project that they are doing or have completed. The faculty member usually introduces the students and the project then the students continue to talk about their project for 10 minutes. Many creative ideas have been presented through this format in the past. The students are, also, inspired by the work of other programs as well and gain a broader sense of the OT community.

Jeff Tomlinson, the NYSOTA legislative representative, will present a pre-Lobby Day educational presentation. He will review the major talking points for the day and protocol for interacting with state legislative representatives.