

## Walk On

*Molly V. Strzelecki*

When many 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 on the benefits of walking for people with chronic mental illness who are at risk for metabolic syndrome, and to encourage their participation in an upcoming walk sponsored by the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)—the NAMIWalk. The video, titled *OTs Walk with NAMI*, would not only be the icing on the cake in an ongoing project for LaMourie's community practice course, but 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 request 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 the task force members worked with, which 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, [exercise is] 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, Dianne Tewfik, MA, OTR/L, and Mary Donohue, PhD, OT/L, FAOTA, helped White and LaMourie put together a walking protocol, a mood scale, and an "Am I Ready to Walk?" stages-of-change scale. They 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.

The information packets are 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 centerpiece of the collection 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 close friend, David Doyle, who is a professional videographer," she says. "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 10-minute 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 clients with mental illness.

"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](#) on the You Tube Web site.

The NAMI New York City Metro walk will be held May 10, 2008. For more information, please visit [www.naminycmetro.org](http://www.naminycmetro.org), or for access to full OTs Walk with NAMI program materials, go to [www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com), register a username and password, and under "Groups," search for OTs Walk with NAMI.

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