



THE LIFE-SAVING POWER OF THE

National Alliance on Mental Illness

BY CRAIG DELARGE

As is our habit when faced with a crisis, my wife and I do research and reach out to community. Faced with the unknowns of caring for a mentally ill loved one, we discovered the National Alliance of Mental Illness (NAMI) in Montgomery County, PA, where we lived at the time. When we contacted them, they were very helpful in giving us information about education programs, local resources, support groups, and strategies for how to deal with the mental health system.

THE FAMILY-TO-FAMILY LIFELINE

Immediately, my wife and I enrolled in NAMI's Family-to-Family Program (F2F), a 12-week course, which we attended with several other families. These families became our support community and we still meet with them periodically now, seven years after taking the course. This course was a lifesaver for us. It very thoroughly covered critical topics like:

- 1) What are different mental illnesses and how do they manifest?
- 2) How can mental illness be treated?
- 3) How can one best care for him- or herself as caregiver?
- 4) How can one best influence their loved one?

We explored all these topics with the collaborative assistance of those who have recovered from mental illness, experienced caregivers, social workers, and doctors. More information about F2F can be found at: bit.ly/YEpC92.

The information and social support we gained through NAMI F2F helped us in a few ways. First, it normalized our situation, confirming that we were not unique or alone, and allowing us to feel less isolated. F2F also gave us specific strategies and techniques for coping with the reality of having a mentally ill loved one. The program emphasized the importance of self-care as we could not care for our loved one if we did not first care for ourselves. Finally, F2F gave us a community with which to commiserate, learn, celebrate, and grieve.

GETTING ON BOARD

I came to work with the National Alliance on Mental Illness about six years ago as the result of acclimating to my new life-role as caregiver for my mentally ill loved one. Shortly after we completed the F2F program, I was recruited to the Board of the NAMI PA, Main Line Chapter.

This work has allowed me to bring the best of my professional competencies to the local, if not global, mental illness advocacy community. I apply my digital and social marketing expertise to the development and management of their online and social media efforts, including the

production of educational videos and slideshows. I apply my teaching, coaching, and facilitation expertise to the development and delivery of workshops that educate to reduce stigma and equip caregivers with coping skills, and the facilitation of educational sessions and book discussions.



Craig DeLarge

I work with a team of brilliant caregivers, doctors, advocates, and educators who all have common cause in the work of making the world a more tolerable and productive place for the mentally ill and their families. I derive a great deal of meaning from this work as it has given me a venue for helping others in ways I cannot help my loved one, and it has been a community of refuge by which I have learned, taught, and been healed.

HOW YOU CAN GET INVOLVED

I recommend a few things:

- 1) Participate in local NAMI Walks – Go to <http://www.namiwalks.org/>.
- 2) Most areas across the country have local NAMI chapters. Volunteer according to the NAMI needs in your area. Find out more by going to <http://www.nami.org/> and clicking on "Find Your Local NAMI."
- 3) If you are a caregiver of a mentally ill loved one, I cannot recommend enough that you attend the Family-to-Family educational program. Contact your local chapter for more details.
- 4) Participate in NAMI advocacy letter-writing drives, which you can find out about by subscribing to the newsletter of your area or state chapters, or the national newsletter.

Recently, coinciding with a decision to take my career in a direction that would impact broader healthcare outcomes beyond pharma, I have decided to take a sabbatical period to do research mapping the digital mental health space. My aspiration is to develop a collection of useful publications, attract a collection of relevant clients who can benefit from this research, and discover a leadership role in an organization whose mission is related to this research. Any leads or inquiries to aid these ends are appreciated.

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