

Secret to managing chronic illness is support

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Treatment for chronic disease makes up 75 percent of our nation's health care spending, but few of us realize that some of the best treatment can be found at our local community centers, schools and libraries, not in our medicine cabinets.

Education can yield enormous benefits to the individual while saving health care costs.

Chronic disease affects older adults more than any other age group. Nine in 10 Americans ages 65 and older have at least one chronic disease, including diabetes, heart disease, arthritis, hypertension and many others.

While medical care is important, people with these conditions live 99 percent of their lives outside the health care system. How they manage their day-to-day lives makes all the difference.

A class led by peers in a community setting that teaches patients how to take charge of their chronic diseases by making diet and lifestyle changes was developed at Stanford University.

In the Chronic Disease Self-Management Program, participants learn over six weeks how to eat better and become more physically active. This reduces symptoms and even prevents further chronic diseases from developing.

Participating in the class improves quality of life, while reducing hospitalizations and trips to the emergency room.

Like AA or Weight Watchers, the "secret sauce" that makes this program so successful is peer support. For example, many of the Stanford-model classes taught by the Health Trust, a foundation that operates in Silicon Valley, and other Bay Area organizations take place in local senior centers. After class, classmates often will be found sharing recipes for healthy food or forming neighborhood walking groups.

The even better news is that parts of the new health care reform law can potentially support the expansion of these classes into more communities in the years to come.

Over the past several years, Southern California-based Partners in Care has done yeoman's work crisscrossing the state to promote and expand the reach of classes, with very limited resources.

Now Stanford University has developed an online version of the course at sfg.ly/av1NOs, which may be especially helpful for the homebound.

With help from the National Council on Aging, the online course is available nationwide. The Oakland-based California HealthCare Foundation is supporting its promotion.

Fortunately, helping people manage their chronic disease has proven payoffs. With the majority of the population becoming older, with all the health challenges that brings, chronic disease management is a simple idea whose time has come.

Frederick J. Ferrer is CEO of the Health Trust, a Campbell foundation with an initiative to support healthy aging. To learn more, go to sfg.ly/cuj6F3.

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