

Caregiver Chronicles



Mission of the VA Caregiver Support Program: to promote the health and well-being of family Caregivers who care for our nation's Veterans, through education, resources, support, and services.

Issue 02

February 2015



VA HEALTH CARE | Defining EXCELLENCE in the 21st Century

Caregiver Support Line Telephone Education Group

February

Leaning into Love:
Building Strong
Relationship Bonds

March

Creating Space for You:
Caring for Loved ones at
Home

For a referral call your
Caregiver Support
Coordinator.

Caregiver Support Line

Offering support,
resources, tools and a
listening ear.

Toll-free Number:

1 (855) 260-3274

Monday-Friday

7:00am -10:00pm CT

Saturday

9:30am-5:00 pm CT

www.caregiver.va.gov

New Year, New Opportunities

By Connie Holmes, Caregiver Support Coordinator & Licensed Social Worker

Whether you ushered in the New Year by curling up on the couch, celebrating with family and friends or catching up on sleep, there is something refreshing about welcoming a New Year. It provides an opportunity to reflect on the past year and what we learned about ourselves and potential changes for the New Year, or a fresh start!

February is when the some of the shine of the celebrations and big ideas start to fade and it becomes important to have tools and support to remain committed to desired changes.

Perhaps this explains why almost 50% of Americans make New Year's resolutions? However, some data reports reveal only 8% keep their resolutions. The low percentage surprised me. I wondered, what can the Caregiver Team do to help maintain resolutions?

Then it occurred to me, resolution is just another name for goal, and we set goals all the time! Here are some points to think about:

- Examine the past year. What did you do well and what have you accomplished? What do you want to change or improve?
- Set realistic goals. Your goal should be focused on **you**. How do you want to make your life better for you?

- Start with small steps. Many small steps together can lead to bigger change.
- How will you track your success? Using an app on your cell phone, journal or keeping a calendar, are some initial suggestions. The team has goal setting sheets available if you would like guidance.



- Can you share the goal with someone? Success increases when we are "accountable" or have to check-in with another person.
- Plan for set-backs. We are human, and making life style changes is difficult. Be kind to yourself when you slip, and get back on track as soon as possible.

Tools to Help Achieve Your Goals

1. Visit MyHealthVet (www.myhealth.va.gov) and complete the HealthLiving Assessment. It will help you discover your health age and focus on goals go improve your overall health. The website also provides access to the Veteran's Health Library

Building Better Caregivers

Building Better Caregivers is a 6-week online workshop which teaches caregivers how to provide better care and how to manage their own emotions, stress, and physical health.

Typical activities include:

- Reading and interacting with other Caregivers through the online Learning Center.
- Posting Caregiving-related problems and offering help and support to other Caregivers.
- Posting a personalized weekly Action Plan.
- Participating in problem solving and guided exercises.

Access:

Caregivers need to have access to a computer and Internet. Caregivers are asked to log on 2-3 times each week for a total of about 2 hours per week.

Register:

To register for Building Better Caregivers, contact your local Caregiver Support Coordinators.

For more information visit:

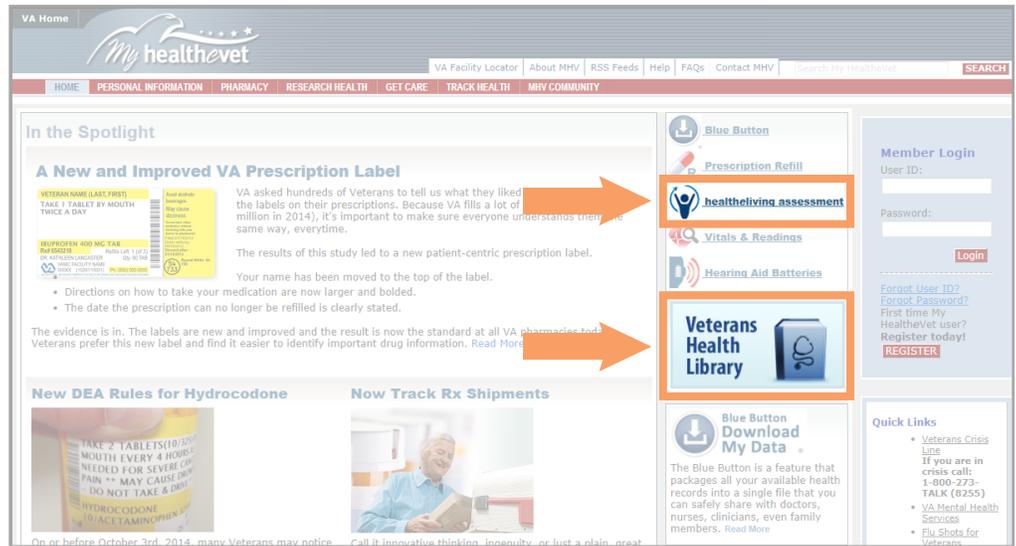
<https://va.buildingbetter>

which contains reliable print and video information on topics such as physical and mental health, wellbeing, disease and nutrition. If you would like assistance with website please contact:

Charity Holstein

Iowa City MyHealthVet
Coordinator
(319) 688-3707

2. Caregiver Journals are available if you would like to track your progress! Call us and we can mail one to you!



What is Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)?

(NAMI • The National Alliance on Mental Illness)

The symptoms of depression are very common. Some people experience these only at times of stress, while others may experience them regularly at certain times of the year. Seasonal affective disorder (SAD) is characterized by recurrent episodes of depression, usually in late fall and winter, alternating with periods of normal or high mood the rest of the year.

Whether SAD is a distinct mental illness or a specific type of major depressive disorder is a topic of debate in the scientific literature. Researchers at the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) first posited the condition as a response to decreased light, and pioneered the use of bright light to address the symptoms. It has been suggested that women are more

likely to have this illness than men and that SAD is less likely in older individuals. SAD can also occur in children and adolescents.

Scientists have identified that the neurotransmitter serotonin may not be working optimally in many patients with SAD. The role of hormones and sleep-wake cycles (called circadian rhythms) during the changing seasons is still being studied in people with SAD. Some studies have also shown that SAD is more common in people who live in northern latitudes.

What are the patterns of SAD?

In SAD, the seasonal variation in mood states is the key factor to understand. Symptoms of SAD usually begin in October or November and subside in March or April. Some patients begin

to “slump” as early as August, while others remain well until January. Regardless of the time of onset, most patients don’t feel fully “back to normal” until early May. Depressions are usually mild to moderate, but they can be severe. Treatment planning needs to match the severity of the condition for the individual.

Although some individuals do not necessarily show these symptoms, the classic characteristics of recurrent winter depression include oversleeping, daytime fatigue, carbohydrate craving and weight gain. Additionally, many people may experience other features of depression including decreased sexual interest, lethargy, hopelessness, suicidal thoughts, lack of interest in normal activities and decreased socialization.

In a minority of cases, symptoms occur in the summer rather than winter. During that period, the depression is more likely to be characterized by insomnia, decreased appetite, weight loss and agitation or anxiety. In still fewer cases, a patient may experience both winter and summer depressions, while feeling fine each fall and spring, around the equinoxes. Many people with SAD also report that their depression worsens or reappears whenever there is “less light around.”

Some people with bipolar disorder can also have seasonal changes in their mood and experience acute episodes in a recurrent fashion at different times of the year.

How is SAD treated?

Many people with SAD will find that their symptoms respond to a very specific treatment called light therapy. For people who are not severely depressed and are unable—or unwilling—to use antidepressant medications, light therapy may be the best initial treatment. Light therapy consists of regular, daily exposure to a “light box,” which artificially simulates high-intensity sunlight. Practically, this means that a person will spend approximately 30 minutes sitting in front of this device shortly after they awaken in the morning. Side effects of light therapy are uncommon and usually reversible when the intensity of light therapy is decreased. The most commonly experienced side effects include irritability, eyestrain, headaches, nausea and fatigue.

Scientific studies have shown light therapy to be effective when compared to placebo and as effective as antidepressants in many cases of non-severe SAD. Light therapy may also work faster than antidepressants for some people, with notable effects beginning with in a



few days of starting treatment. Other people may find that it takes a few weeks. Antidepressant medications have also been found to be useful in treating people with SAD.

Some people may require treatment of their symptoms only for the period of the year in which they experience symptoms. Other people may elect for year-round treatment or prophylactic treatment that begins prior to the onset of the season in which their symptoms are most severe. This is yet another reason to discuss treatment options with one’s physicians. While not explicitly studied for the treatment of SAD, psychotherapy, such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), is likely a useful additional option.

What should I do if I think I have SAD?

Any person experiencing significant symptoms of depression should feel comfortable discussing their concerns with their doctors. Some primary care doctors (e.g., pediatricians and general practitioners) may be experienced in treating SAD and will feel comfortable treating this illness. Other doctors may want to refer people with SAD to a psychiatrist for treatment of this illness. This is more common in people with complex psychiatric illnesses or more severe symptoms. Before starting any treatment for SAD, a person should make sure to meet with their doctor to discuss the benefits and risks of treatment. Friends and family members of people with SAD may be appropriately concerned for the well being of their loved one.

Reviewed by Ken Duckworth, M.D., and Jacob L. Freedman, M.D., December 2012



Care for Caregiver Support Program

The Caregiver Support Program has developed four Self-Care courses for Caregivers of any eligible Veteran who receives care from VA. Each course is 3 hours long. It includes: lecture, small group discussion and time for personal planning taught by licensed health professionals.

Courses: Problem Solving and Effective Communication, Managing Stress, Taking Care of Yourself & Utilizing Technology

Feedback from Caregivers who have taken the courses has been positive.

Do something just for you and call your Caregiver Support Coordinator to register today!

Connie A. Holmes, LISW
(319) 338-0581 x 6865

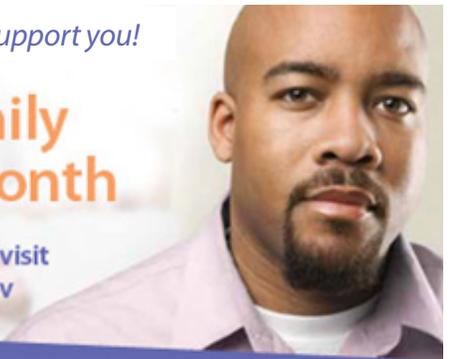
Sondra L. Reglein, MSn, RN
(319) 235-1230 x 2250

You're there to support the Veteran—we're there to support you!



National Family Caregivers Month

for more information visit
www.caregiver.va.gov



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Resources to Help With Depression

Veterans Crisis Line



The VA has a great resource for veterans and caregivers to use should you experience a mental health crisis in the home environment. The VA's crisis hotline is staffed with mental health professionals who can assist in a crisis situation. If you or a veteran you know is having a mental health crisis please call the VA crisis hotline at:

1-800-273-8255 and press 1

National Alliance on Mental Health (NAMI)



If you have someone in your life that is suffering from a mental health disorder, a great community resource is your local NAMI Chapter. Information on NAMI can be found at www.nami.org, or through the NAMI information helpline at:

1-800-950-NAMI

"NAMI is the nation's largest grassroots mental health organization dedicated to building better lives for the millions of Americans affected by mental illness. NAMI advocates for access to services, treatment, supports and research and is steadfast in its commitment to raise awareness and build a community for hope for all of those in need." (www.nami.org, 2014).

VA Caregiver Support

In partnership with VA's Virtual eHealth University (vVeHU) presents LIVE Virtual Training designed specifically for Caregivers of Veterans.

Join us at www.MyVeHUCampus.com and have YOUR questions answered LIVE through our interactive virtual training platform.



VHA Caregiver Program: PTSD and Family Relationships

1/13/2015 12:00 PM – 1:30 PM Central

Presenters: Karen Guthrie LICSW;
Michelle D. Sherman, Ph.D.

Description: This session is designed to equip Caregivers of Veterans with tools to recognize and respond effectively to stress in children and other family members affected by a Veteran with symptoms of PTSD. The program will focus on educating Caregivers about PTSD and provide developmentally appropriate guidance on talking with children and adolescents about the Veteran's symptoms and behavior.

Available Online: All sessions are presented online, streamed directly to your desktop or mobile device.



Enrollment: Visit www.myvehucampus.com and click the ENROLL icon at the bottom of the page.

Included are step-by-step instructions explaining how to enroll. If you need any assistance, please contact us. Email the MyVeHU Campus Helpdesk at:

support@myvehucampus.com
or call 423-979-4368.

For more information, visit
www.vehu.va.gov

Message from Your Caregiver Support Coordinator

The Caregiver Team looks forward to our continued work with each of you throughout 2015. We are available to coach you to reach self-care goals and help you balance your caregiving roles and responsibilities. New Year's resolutions are common in January, February is when the committed goal setters emerge. We challenge you to find one daily self-care goal you can implement and maintain.

We are working hard to make sure our quarterly newsletters are providing you helpful and useful information. Please be sure to let us know if there are any topics you would like to read about in our upcoming newsletters. We hope that you enjoy this newsletter and wish everyone a safe and warm winter season.

We are both here to serve you, our Caregivers, so please don't hesitate to call:

Connie A. Holmes, LISW
(319) 338-0581 ext. 6865 or
(319) 383-2608 Tuesdays and Fridays

Sondra L. Reglein, MSn, RN
(319) 235-1230 ext. 2250 or
(319) 383-2667 Tuesdays and Thursdays

Caregiver Peer Support Mentoring Program

VA's Peer Support Mentoring Program links you to a peer – someone who has experienced similar challenges and situations – to provide you with additional support and guidance along your journey.

In addition to providing support, the Caregiver Peer Support Mentoring Program also helps Caregivers to establish relationships with each other and create a comfort zone for support.

Caregivers of Veterans of all eras are eligible to participate, both as mentors and as mentees. Mentors will be required to participate in training before being partnered with a mentee.

To get connected to the Caregiver Peer Support Mentoring Program, contact your local VA Caregiver Support Coordinators.



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