

Living Well: learning to manage chronic health conditions

Security Health Plan and Aging and Disability Resource Center team up to offer workshops throughout Wisconsin

"I want to feel good. I want to be able to do things, like walking and biking...and just get out of the easy chair," retired master plumber Gary Raab of Wisconsin Rapids said.

That desire pushed him to attend a Living Well with Chronic Conditions workshop offered by Security Health Plan of Wisconsin, Inc., and the Aging and Disability Resource Center (ADRC) of Central Wisconsin earlier this year.



Security Health Plan members Gary and Sally Raab completed the Living Well with Chronic Conditions workshop with Security Health Plan health educator Angie Pero. The health plan teams up with the Aging and Disability Resource Center to offer workshops throughout Wisconsin to help people manage their chronic conditions and improve their quality of life.

The health plan offers 10 workshops along with ADRCs from around the state throughout the year. The workshops are 2.5 hours once a week for six weeks. Security Health Plan health educator Angie Pero said the typical workshop usually includes 14 or 15 participants and are designed to boost participants' confidence in their ability to manage their health conditions and maintain an active life.

That is just the outcome Raab and his wife Sally had after participating in the workshop. The couple attended the series of workshops led by Pero and ADRC of Central Wisconsin community health educator Ciara Schultz. They raved about the workshops and reached out to Security Health Plan after completion of the series of classes to share their enthusiasm.

In a letter sent to Security Health Plan, Gary wrote, "I was encouraged with the classes we had with the two ladies. They were very helpful and did very good teaching us through the lesson book, charts and role playing."

Gary said he hopes to encourage others to attend similar workshops in the future. "It was very helpful for a lot reasons: to set goals, get out of the house and get encouragement. It took a

few weeks of attendance to really get into it but when you do, it feels so much better to take part."

The Raabs met up with Pero this summer and shared their experience with the workshop. The couple said they both suffer from chronic conditions but have seen improvement in their health after implementing changes they learned in the workshop.

Gary said he has had trouble with his legs for the past 30 years. He said they were "always tingling" and would cramp up.

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It was very helpful for a lot of reasons."*

"It just slowed me down," he said. "When I traveled my feet and legs would tingle and go to sleep, especially on the airplane."

~Gary Raab, Wisconsin Rapids

"And on long car rides," his wife interjected.

The couple said they enrolled in the workshop for a variety of reasons, such as getting out of the house, educating themselves on their health and meeting others who have similar conditions.

"When you reach out and see what is happening to other people around you, it is like holding the hand of someone you didn't know existed. You're no longer alone," Pero said.

"Understanding that aging is a process but you don't have to allow it to take control of your life is important. You have the opportunity and ability to take your control back, and that is what we focus on in these workshops."

The Raabs agreed the experience was encouraging and they enjoyed working with Pero and Schultz. "They worked so well together," Gary said. "One wasn't trying to outshine the other."

Gary said since the workshop he has implemented more exercise in his life and is more mindful about the foods he eats. He has created a plan, set a goal and is sticking with it. He said the workshop covered a large variety of topics and he was able to take what he learned and incorporate it into his day-to-day life.

"I have been trying to control my portions," he said. "I come from a big family of 14. When I was young, if I didn't take my share when the bowl came by, I sure wasn't going to get a second chance at it. I've since been able to accept my conditions and know I need to work to get ahead of them as much as possible."

Sally said she has tried to incorporate more healthy meals into their diets and said they've started visiting the farmers market on a regular basis. They said other tips they picked up in the workshop were incorporating more exercise and activity into their lives, improving communication with others, tips on controlling [bad] habits and take time for fun, travel and hobbies they enjoy.

"Learning about and using health management tools can be a simple way to make a huge difference," Pero said of the topics discussed in the workshop. "We cover techniques for coping with pain, getting good nutrition and exercise, managing stress, developing food label literacy, mindfulness and strong communication skills. We also work with the participants to set goals."

Gary said one part of the workshop that he was particularly pleased with was the open communication about faith and prayer. He said even the facilitators were open about the topic and willing to have that dialogue.

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~Security Health Plan health educator Angie Pero

"It was encouraging to have a platform to talk about prayer and what it meant to us," he said. "Today it seems to be taboo in society."

Pero said spirituality isn't part of the curriculum, but said when topics come up they will keep the dialog rolling if it seems beneficial to the participants. She said this particular session also had a lot discussion around advance care planning.

"It isn't part of the class curriculum but someone brought it up as a goal and it became part of the discussion," Pero said.

As a result, Sally said she and Gary have pre-planned their funeral. "It will save our kids a lot of heartache. We would have never done that if it hadn't been brought up in this class," she said.

Acknowledging the time commitment the workshop takes Pero said, "To get that commitment from anyone to follow through on six weeks is always impressive and it shows me they are getting something out of it. We want participants to leave with a new confidence that they can live their life fully and that they have it within themselves to take the power back from their chronic conditions."

She said the Health Plan offers the workshops each year in different communities throughout Wisconsin. While the workshops do not have any formal follow-up after completion, Pero said all Security Health Plan members have access to health coaching from her team.

"Our health coaching program can help them stay accountable in reaching their goals," she said.

The Raabs recently signed up to partake in the health coaching program with Pero.

To learn more about the Living Well with Chronic Conditions workshops visit www.securityhealth.org/livingwell. To learn more about health coaching services from Security Health Plan visit www.securityhealth.org/healthcoach.