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Living Well With a Chronic Condition
Madras Classes offer tips, support

By Susan Matheny

Meeting others with similar problems in the Living Well With Chronic Conditions class made a big difference for Jerry Klug of Madras. “I developed a good friendship with another fella in class and we keep in touch. If I’m having a bad day, I can give him a call, or he can call me,” Klug said, noting it’s nice to have someone who understands what you are going through. Klug has both prostate and melanoma cancers, and has had several back surgeries, which put a limit on what he can lift. He heard about the Living Well class and traveled to Redmond to take it last February.

The Living Well program was developed in 1996 following a five-year Stanford University study involving 1,000 people with chronic conditions. Chronic health problems are ones people must learn to live with for many years, such as diabetes, emphysema, arthritis, migraine headaches and heart disease. The research led to a community-based, self-management program to assist people with chronic illnesses. People who went through the program, when compared to those who did not, spent fewer days in the hospital, and showed improvements in communicating with physicians, and in the areas of exercise, fatigue, health distress, and social activities.

Living Well Workshops are now available in Jefferson, Crook and Deschutes counties, through the sponsorship of 11 health organizations, including the Jefferson County Health Department, Mosaic Medical, and Mountain View Hospital. The series costs participants \$10, which includes the book “Living a Healthy Life with Chronic Conditions.”

“The main thing I got out of the class was learning to set realistic goals, and finding ways to work through the limits your condition gives you,” Klug said. Since taking the class, he said he sets goals on things he can accomplish. “It’s like looking at the glass as half-full, instead of half-empty,”



*Jerry Klug with his walking buddies.
Photo by Susan Matheny*

he commented. He said he's also learned to compartmentalize his cancer issues. Originally, he was diagnosed with a slow-growing cancer. But it turned out to be a very aggressive form of cancer. "I learned to keep things in perspective. To enjoy my life and not be preoccupied with the risks of my cancer. That was very important," Klug said.

In class, he said each person had a different type of chronic illness, but they all had similar reactions to the way their illness was affecting their lives. Pain denial, depression and caretaker issues were common problems. Klug is also trying to educate others. "There has been a big taboo about talking about prostate cancer, but the word needs to get out," he said.

Brenda Johnson, a master trainer and regional coordinator of the Living Well classes, noted many of the instructors have a chronic condition themselves. "We do a written evaluation at the end of the program and many people say 'the leaders know what I'm going through,' and the participants appreciate that fact," Johnson said.



Barbara Thacker
Photo by Susan Matheny

Madras resident Barbara Thacker took the first Madras class in April and signed up for the current one, which runs once a week for six weeks, Sept. 28 through Nov. 2. Thacker has osteoporosis and multiple other chronic conditions, of which Addison's Disease (an adrenal gland disorder) is the worst. "There's no way I can say enough about the class. In meeting the people I learned there were so many people living with things, and many were much worse off than myself," she said.

"We all think we are superwomen sometimes," she laughed, adding, "The class teaches that you don't have to be. It's OK to rest, OK to set lower expectations and take it easy." She said in the class, she made new friends, got help with her day-to-day life, and now finds it easier to cope with the conditions she does have. "I learned to slow down and not push myself too much. To not try to do everything. Now, I set weekly goals and don't set unachievable goals," she said.

Now enrolled in the second series of classes, Thacker said it has the same material as the first class, but with a different group of people. "I'm just renewing information, it's almost like a support group," she said of her interactions with classmates. "I'd definitely urge anyone with any chronic illness that they're living with by themselves to go to the Living Well class. It's extremely rewarding," Thacker said.

For more information about the Living Well Central Oregon program and upcoming workshops visit www.livingwellco.org.

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