

Center in the Park Beats the Blues

"Beat the Blues" is a research project underway at Center in the Park (CIP), which explores screening and intervention for depression among African-American older adults. This is a group considered to be at greater risk for depression, and whose depression often goes unrecognized and untreated. CIP is collaborating with the Johns Hopkins School of Nursing's Center for Innovative Care in Aging on the project, which provides a model for increasing depression screening and intervention in a community-based setting.

Senior centers like CIP can offer a natural gateway for this kind of screening and intervention, according to Megan McCoy, CIP director of grant research and development. Centers routinely assess older adults for service needs and health status. She says they can also provide 'safe havens' for individuals who may be reluctant to consult with their primary care physicians about feelings of sadness or depression, but who might be more comfortable disclosing their feelings to trusted senior center staff.

CIP reached out to center members and others in its North-west Philadelphia community and beyond, including home-bound individuals, to recruit participants. Through the project, 703 African-American older adults were screened for depression over a two-year period. Of those, 208 screened positive for depression and were eligible for the one-on-one Beat the Blues intervention.

Interventions included information and referral to resources, such as behavioral health programs; up to 10 weekly sessions with a counseling professional; and case management. Through "behavioral activation," a key aspect of the project, participants were helped to identify meaningful activities they could engage in to feel more hopeful and positive. They then received help with breaking down their 'action plan' into manageable steps.

As one participant noted, "You not only helped me to recognize that I had symptoms of depression and that having those feelings was a problem, but [also] how to get myself out of it."

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two groups for research purposes. One group received the "Beat the Blues" intervention immediately; the other group received the intervention after a four-month delay.

CIP initially collaborated with Thomas Jefferson University's Center of Applied Research on Aging and Health on the study. When "Beat the Blues" lead investigator, Laura Gitlin, Ph.D., became director of the Johns Hopkins School of Nursing's Center for Innovative Care in Aging in 2011, Johns Hopkins University became the collaborator.

CIP is incorporating depression screenings as part of its regular enrollment process for new members as a result of its positive experience with the project, says Lynn Fields Harris, CIP executive director. "We feel that it's important to do an initial screening and make referrals to resources in the community," she says. "We also will do screenings for current members upon request."

CIP and Johns Hopkins University are currently developing a "Beat the Blues" training manual for community-based agencies, including senior community centers, to help them address depression among older adults.

For more information:
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Passion for Painting at Older Adult Sunshine Center

When Elizabeth Cheatham was seven years old, she placed second in her class art contest. Her passion for painting began then, but she did not cultivate it until much later in life, at Community College of Philadelphia and as a senior member of Older Adult Sunshine Center.

She left school before graduating, in order to work; then married and raised six daughters with her husband, the late Welford T. Cheatham. Elizabeth Cheatham put her personal goals aside while she raised her children. She used what free time she had to volunteer in several churches and at Mercy Hospital and won awards for her volunteer work.

In 2005, at the age of 85, Elizabeth resumed pursuit of her earlier goals, earning her high school diploma from Regional High School in Center City Philadelphia. Shortly after graduating, she began taking art courses at Community College of Philadelphia. Although she had been drawing on her own for many years, the classes enabled her to learn proper techniques, and she rapidly expanded her portfolio.

Recently, Elizabeth began attending art classes at the Older Adult Sunshine Center, where she works one-on-one with Philadelphia artist and teacher Jennifer Scott. One of the pieces she created there, "Run Down Barn," was displayed in PCA's 2012 "Celebrate Arts and Aging" exhibit at Philadelphia Senior Center. This was the first time that Elizabeth, now 92, was willing to show off her artistic skills. Since that exhibit, her confidence has soared, she says. She now displays her original artwork at the senior residential complex where she lives, in addition to the Sunshine Center.

For more information:
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Fall 2012