

AAA classes offer guidance, fellowship for caregivers

Becoming a family member's caregiver is often a role stepped into with minimal experience or preparation; however, the Department of Human Services (DHS) Area Agency on Aging (AAA) offers a free education series designed to ease the transition.

Powerful Tools for Caregivers is a six-week educational series for nonprofessional caregivers with a focus on self-care. Led by Brenda Slagle, caregiver support program coordinator in AAA, the course explores topics such as communicating in challenging situations, identifying and reducing personal stress, and learning from emotion.

"Caregivers frequently spend their time focused on their family members and forget to take care of themselves," said Brenda. "Throughout the course, we are able to help them find a balance between meeting their loved one's needs as well as their own. We can't effectively care for others if we are not healthy ourselves."

Operating similarly to a support group, the course allows participants to share experiences with others, offer suggestions and hold each other accountable. Each week, participants are asked to select a self-care activity that they will accomplish before the next session, which can be anything from spending 30 minutes gardening to having lunch with a friend. At the next meeting, they are asked to report on their success in completing the activity and to explore their feelings around spending time focused on their needs.

"Initially, there is always some hesitation around the self-care activity; participants are afraid that something will happen if they step away from their loved one," Brenda continued. "Over time, however, we start to see visible changes in the participants. Something clicks, and they begin to realize that they can be even more effective caregivers when they are also caring for their personal well-being."

While the spring course finished on April 6, a session will be held weekly on Wednesdays from October 3 through November 7. Classes run from 10 a.m. to noon, and pre-registration is required. For more information, please contact Brenda at Brenda.Slagle@allegHENYcounty.us or 412.350.4996.