

MS Tech: Get on the phone!

by Patricia Wadsley

When you can't get out to meet people, and computers seem too impersonal, there may be a free, scheduled weekly or monthly conference call group—where you can talk to other people with MS, share your interests and concerns, and get some new ideas for managing daily life. Some of the groups are moderated by professional social workers and therapists, others by peers—there are advantages to both types. In many cases, you don't even have to remember to dial; the leader calls you.

"We have 34 specialized telephone groups on different topics for people with MS," said Andrea Arzt, LCSW, director of Counseling Services for the New York City Chapter. "People with MS are not alike. In specialized groups, you connect based on your common interests, as well as on your MS. There are groups for the newly diagnosed, for people struggling in their relationships, for black Americans with MS, for children whose parents have MS, for creative artists with MS, for professional women. There is additionally Café Con Leche, a Medtronic Foundation-funded group facilitated by the NYC chapter and offered to Spanish speakers with MS nationwide."

Each group benefits members in individual ways.

"For instance, if a person has just been diagnosed, he or she wants help in finding resources, learning about the disease, and getting support," Arzt said. "But for someone in an ethnic group or religious community where there is a stigma against any illness, the anonymity of phone groups is a way out of isolation. Cutting out traveling time also makes phone groups work."

New York isn't the only place where specialized phone groups flourish. In the North Central States Chapter there's "Guy Talk," a once-a-month, hour-long conference call where the talk gets pretty rough and tumble.

"We talk about everything from bladder control to deer hunting," said Pat Lynch, the volunteer peer moderator who leads the all-male conference call. Members live in North Dakota, South Dakota and Iowa. "Some guys are still hunting, some have had to give it up. Many of us live in rural areas, far away from each other. Getting together by phone to talk about what's happening works. The members can go out and be with their buddies who don't have MS, and then get on the phone and have a safe place to talk."

Even in these days of high-speed Internet and text messaging, the best way for some to reach out and touch someone is still by telephone.

The All America Chapter is made up of Society offices in over 15

states, including Hawaii, Idaho, Mississippi, parts of Texas and parts of New England. Getting members together from all those locations would be impossible—except by phone. All America's "Stay At Home" group invites people age 40 and older, diagnosed for five years or more, to register for free monthly hour-long conference calls.

The Central New England Chapter's two "In Touch" phone groups—one group is a collaboration with the Rhode Island Chapter—meet by phone once a month, also for an hour each time. The groups were started for those who could not make it to in-person meetings, and instead of being based on special interests, the members are diverse: young and old, newly diagnosed and not, people with a range of concerns.

"This has been successful for us," said Martha Maynard, LPN, assistant director of Community Programs. "But if someone suggests a special interest group, we're open to it."

If you're interested in finding a phone group that suits your needs, or starting one yourself, call 1-800-344-4867.

Patricia Wadsley is an associate editor of this magazine.

