

NAMI NORTH PITTSBURGH PA SUPPORT GROUP

NAMI Keystone PA/NAMI Southwestern PA
105 Braunlich Drive
Suite 200 McKnight Plaza (White Building on Hill)
Pittsburgh, PA 15237
(Turn at light by Dollar Tree)

Support Group Leaders	Candy & Pete Venezia	(412) 361-8916
Co-Support Group Leader	Lisa Gordon	(412) 443-0142 after 5pm
Treasurer	Debbie Julian	(412) 821-1691
Newsletter/Secretary	Sharon Vogel	(412) 821-2805

SEPTEMBER 6, 2023 – Support Group Meeting
SEPTEMBER 21, 2023 – Virtual Support Group Meeting

GENERAL MEETINGS
7:00pm – 9:00pm

17th Annual NAMIWalks NAMIKeystonePA – OCTOBER 1, 2023

MENTAL HEALTH FOR ALL

Monroeville Community Park
Monroeville, PA

NAMI NORTH PITTSBURGH PA is our team's name. Please consider registering and joining our team.

Every year, hundreds of supporters of all ages walk to raise awareness of mental health. The family-friendly event features music, resource tables, food trucks, face painting, selfie stations, and balloon artists. WTAE-TV News Anchor and NAMIWalks Chair Michelle Wright emceeds the event.

Our team has been a top fund raiser the last few years! Candy Venezia was top individual fund raiser last year! Our Team was in the Top 10!! As of this date our Team has raised \$1,170!!

Let's be strong again as an Affiliate of NAMIKeystonePA! For more info, contact slsteinberg@namikeystonepa.org.

FAMILY-TO-FAMILY PROGRAM LEADER TRAINING

NAMI Keystone Pennsylvania is now accepting applications for a NAMI Family-to-Family Program Leader Training that will take place virtually Saturday, Sept. 16 and Sunday, Sept. 17. It will run 9am - 3pm on both days. Registration is required and applicants must have the endorsement of their local NAMI affiliate. **The application deadline is September 8.**

NAMI Family-to-Family is an eight-session educational program for family, significant others, and friends of adults (18 yrs+) who are living with a mental health diagnosis. The course provides critical information and strategies for supporting the person you love, as well as communication and problem-solving skills, family advocacy, caring for yourself and other family members, and more.

If you have questions about the training, please email the NAMI Keystone Pennsylvania Education Department at education@namikeystonepa.org.

TIPS FOR EASING BACK-TO-SCHOOL ANXIETY

By Dr. Stephanie Larsen | August 28, 2023

taken from NAMI.org

As summer ends, a mix of emotions can fill households. While some parents eagerly anticipate sending their kids back to school, and some kids look forward to reuniting with friends and teachers, this time of year can also be met with anxiety and frustration.

Common anxiety may manifest in physical complaints, such as headaches and gastrointestinal problems. You may notice your child or teen become more agitated or noncompliant as the school year rapidly approaches. Other children may revert emotionally and demonstrate an uptick in separation anxiety. Others may be running down a laundry list of the negatives of school. Regardless of how your child approaches this upcoming transition, here are some helpful tips for starting a great school year.

Listen And Validate

The first step in addressing back-to-school anxiety is to genuinely listen to your child's concerns. This might seem like the most obvious step, but it can also be the most difficult. Validate their feelings and fears without trying to immediately fix the situation. By showing empathy and understanding, you create a supportive environment where your child feels comfortable expressing their emotions. This can be as simple as saying, "I know this is hard for you going from such a fun and free summer to the busy school day, it feels a bit frustrating and like you don't have much control right now."

Collaboratively Problem Solve

Identify specific anxiety triggers and work together with your child to find solutions. By involving them in problem-solving, you can help empower them to feel more independent and confident in handling challenges. Building these skills will ultimately contribute to their success in school and beyond.

This may look like acknowledging and validating their concerns and then asking them what they think could help reduce their anxiety. For example: "Hey, I know you're already thinking about being nervous tomorrow morning, but what might make you feel a little less nervous. Any ideas?" You may be surprised with what they come up with! And if they are frozen in anxiety and not able to problem solve, you can offer options and discuss how those choices may influence their feelings or anxiety.

Get Into a Routine Early

Ease your child back into a school routine at least a week before classes begin. Gradually reintroduce early mornings and consistent evening schedules. This may include laying out clothes the night before, getting up at the same hours as school and completing evening routines. For children with high anxiety, practice the school routine in detail, including potentially driving to the school and discussing drop-off scenarios. Remind them of positive and familiar experiences from the past to build reassurance.

Give Your Child Choices and Make It Fun

Empower your child by allowing them to make choices related to the upcoming school year. Let them pick their outfit for the first day or a favorite accessory if they have a uniform. Plan a special breakfast and dinner menu. Consider positive reinforcements for getting through the initial jitters, such as a treat at a coffee shop the first day or a fun weekend activity. Having something that excites them will help them manage their anxiety. Our brains have trouble identifying the difference between anxiety and excitement. If they have something to be excited about, there's a high chance they will relabel anxiety as anticipation for the upcoming event.

Provide Confidence Boosts

Help your child focus on their positive personality traits. Encourage them to verbalize their strengths, like being a good friend, a flexible problem solver or a strong and fearless individual. Reinforcing these qualities helps them feel stable in an unpredictable world.

Watch Your Own Anxiety

Children often model their behavior after their parents. Be mindful of how you manage your own anxiety, especially when it comes to your child's back-to-school worries. Demonstrate confidence and offer support, but if you have concerns, seek help privately to maintain a positive outlook for your child. Show them healthy coping skills and positive self-talk through your actions and anxiety management.

This may look like you:

1. Identifying anxiety about an upcoming work meeting and explaining how you experience those feelings.
2. Describing what the discomfort is telling you and how it is helping you prep by spending time gathering material or practicing your speech.
3. Demonstrating some positive self-talk the morning of the meeting. You may say something out loud like, "I can do this. I've been nervous before, but my boss always appreciates what suggestions I bring to the table, and they wouldn't have asked me to present if they didn't have confidence in me. I know this!"

Seek Help

If your child's anxiety becomes overwhelming, or begins to interfere with their daily life, consider seeking professional counseling. Many professionals are available to provide support and help your child build the necessary skills to manage

anxiety effectively. Additionally, work with your child's school to identify potential support systems, such as a desired teacher hand-off or a gradual transition plan. School officials can also assist in creating an [accommodation plan](#) if necessary.

As the upcoming school year approaches, it's essential to address and manage back-to-school anxiety effectively. By listening to your child, collaborating on solutions, establishing routines and providing confidence boosts, you can make the transition smoother and more successful. Remember, seeking help from professionals or the school when needed is a proactive step toward supporting your child's well-being and academic success.

Together, let's create a positive and anxiety-free school year for your child!

Dr. Stephanie Larsen is the owner of Healthy Minds Psychology Group in Mt. Pleasant, SC, and has specialized in helping the children, adolescents and adults heal and cope with symptoms of depression and anxiety for over the last 10 years. She has been a strong ally to NAMI and believes in breaking the mental health stigma and offering community resources to help families navigate difficult times. For more valuable tips and tricks on promoting healthy minds and managing anxiety, she invites you to explore [her website](#). Join Healthy Minds Psychology Group's Facebook page for a supportive community or follow Dr. Stephanie Larsen on Instagram (@Dr_Stephanie_Larsen) for expert insights and engaging content.

Neuroplasticity III: Trust Myself After Psychosis & Jail

taken from NAMI.org

By Victoria Harris, MD, MPH | August 30, 2023

In NAMI's Fall 2020 issue of the Advocate, I told my story of experiencing delirium and psychosis for over a year and then finding myself incarcerated in a small county jail. While recovering from psychosis, I relied on the principles of neuroplasticity — my brain's ability to adapt and change its neural wiring — to survive.

The following spring, I wrote a NAMI blog post detailing the realities I faced after I was released from jail and embarking on the early steps of psychosocial recovery. While the process of using neuroplasticity to fully recover from these events is not over, I am reaching one of the final stages: learning to trust myself.

My Situation

It was months after my release from jail on bail before I finally learned of the charges against me. I was horrified to discover that there were three pending misdemeanors and 14 pending felony charges. This meant I was looking at four to five years in the state prison for women — or at least the same time in the state forensic hospital.

Ironically, I had more than two decades of experience as a forensic psychiatrist, and I had worked in both places, doing research, giving lectures and providing consultations with the University of Washington's Department of Psychiatry. I knew I shouldn't be going back to either place as either an inmate or patient. But until some of my cognitive abilities returned, I couldn't articulate my reasoning: our criminal justice system is based on the premise of individuals being *able* to form guilty intent when the alleged crime occurs.

I was so ill, as both my behavior and reasoning behind my behavior demonstrated, I could not have possibly formed intent to commit a crime. To plead guilty to even a misdemeanor, as I was being pressured to do, would undercut the foundations of the rights of everyone — regardless of their mental health status. But could I trust myself to make this argument? Could I trust the decisions I was making? This was a critical decision, and I had no room for error. Undoubtedly, my life going forward was going to be profoundly affected by what had happened. How could I trust that I was now able to make crucial decisions that were in my best interest?

Trusting Myself

I felt trapped in self-doubt; I was spending all my available time and resources questioning whether I could make sound decisions. I needed more information. What made it so easy to accept self-doubt? How could I counter self-doubt when I found myself paralyzed by it?

It helped to realize some factors that caused mistrust of myself:

1. My current social, religious and professional isolation. Historically, connection with people had been a source of validation and confidence in my abilities.
2. The looks of shock, disbelief and fear on the faces of my new psychiatrist and new Rabbi as I told them of my journey.
3. Family members expressing their concern by providing their own diagnosis, assessment and treatment plans that missed the underlying cause of my illness.
4. Bias from the criminal justice system that assumed I was resistant to care, despite never being offered care except in a jail setting. The people in the system could not see that I was profoundly grateful to be well again and actively wanted care so I could recover from all that had happened and remain well.
5. I lacked a model — a person I knew who had experienced psychosis and incarceration — that I could emulate.

I felt so battered by the actions and opinions of others, it became clear that trusting myself had to come from within. This was not something that someone else could give me. I would need to find my voice and, in time, learn to value it. It is true that parts of my story are shocking and sometimes evoke fear. It is also true that portions of my story are now over — people may be hearing about it for the first time and feel shocked, but I have moved on from these events. Someone's reaction to a past event really ought not influence the decisions I make today.

Dealing With the Legal System

The ultimate test in self-trust was deciding what to do while experiencing inherent bias from those in the criminal justice system — from my private attorney to the prosecution to the judge. They believed I would lie if I became ill again. I hid my annoyance and pointed out that their hypothetical was a no-win scenario for me. Either I was sick and “admitted it” or I was sick and lied about it. I was not allowed to be well *and* telling the truth. I told the court that I was more interested in a health-based approach to my recovery rather than the presumption of illness and deceit.

The court's conditions for dismissal of the pending charges were based on a punitive approach should I become ill again. My physician was required to agree to “report” me to the court if I became ill again, regardless of severity or treatment compliance. And the court reserved the right to immediately reincarcerate me if I became ill again — not to help me or allow me to seek care in a psychiatric facility.

I was incentivized to sign the conditions for dismissal: the prosecution would consider ending the agreement after only one year. I decided to trust myself; to trust that I was invested in my care and recovery and could face the challenges of meeting the conditions. I established care as soon as possible. At my 12-month review, despite meeting all conditions for dismissal and having established a Mental Health Advance Directive should I become ill again, the conditions continued for another 12 months. Eventually, though, all the charges were dismissed.

Neuroplasticity helped me find calm in the decisions that I was making. It was profoundly helpful to learn about the pathways of self-trust in both general and specific terms. Replaying past sound, important decisions also helped — but only after I paused to consider how I could build new neural networking around the critical issue of self-trust.

Dr. Victoria Harris is now a retired forensic psychiatrist, with a background in family practice from Canada. She is honored to be the Washington State Representative to NAMI's Peer Leadership Council and serves on the NAMI Washington Board. Dr. Harris was recently elected to the NAMI National Board of Directors and has been appointed Chair of the newly formed Justice Workgroup. Importantly, her young adult children have established their own orbits about the earth, and Victoria loves to walk the trails in eastern Washington with her dog.

PARENTING AFTER RECEIVING A SCHIZOPHRENIA DIAGNOSIS

taken from NAMI.org

By Sarah Merritt Ryan | August 25, 2023

When I was in my darkest hour, amid psychotic episodes, there was light pulling me forward. I just knew I had a future ahead of me where I would get married and become a mother. This desire and calling, at times, led me forward and gave me direction into my future.

I have now been in remission from any symptoms of schizophrenia for 11 years. I've been married for five years and my son is three years old. Our trio family is happy, content and thriving. There is so much meaning behind parenthood for anyone, but for me especially, when such a positive outcome was unlikely.

I've learned some takeaways from my experiences so far about the meaning of giving birth and raising a toddler while in recovery from serious mental illness (SMI).

What Having a Child Means to My Recovery

Having my son has helped me move on with my life after schizophrenia. When you are caring for an infant, you have very little time to dwell on the past or think disproportionately about yourself. To me, parenthood is putting yourself second to the needs of your dependent. Instead of allowing myself to experience feelings of sadness over the lost years of my life, I focus on the new life in front of me — a life in which I am constantly needed. That importance gives me direction, purpose and peace. Instead of continuing to wonder why my life had to be the way it has been, I am completely focused instead on how to make sure my son has the best life possible.

I take joy and pride in every opportunity my husband and I can create for our son to have a healthy childhood and successful life. My dream is no longer that I could have had a different life, but that my son can have a different life than mine — a life that is better. By making his life better, focusing on him and being the best parent I can be, I am growing, healing and improving in the process as well.

I Have No Regrets

At this stage in life, there are no more “what ifs.” There are no more nagging regrets like, *if I only had never gone off my antipsychotic, if only I hadn’t had psychotic breaks, maybe that would have made me a different person now with a different kind of life.*

My son is so perfect and precious, sweet and delightful —and this beautiful human could not have existed if everything in my life did not happen exactly how it happened, literally down to the day. If I hadn’t had those psychotic breaks, in which my life was on hold for years, the timing would have never worked out to meet my husband, either.

That something so perfect and precious could come out of my life is confirmation and proof that my life is on the right track — that everything that once seemed random and bizarre and painful could come together in a way that still produced good things. My husband and son are second-to-second reassurances in my life that all my decisions, even the regrettable ones, ultimately led to a desirable outcome.

My Son Has a Clean Slate

Often, it amazes me that we could have created someone so wonderful and special. I’m still in awe that, out of so much pain and supposed missteps in my life, we still created a beautiful life that is untouched and unscathed by everything I went through. It feels redeeming. I love that my son has this clean slate and fresh start that I don’t necessarily have myself. I can use everything I’ve learned in this life of mine to give him the best life possible.

Maybe this outlook is, in fact, a stage of grief — bargaining, perhaps. But I truly feel that my life will be complete and make sense if my son’s reality is less painful than mine. If my son’s life is better, my circumstances feel fair, and my soul can be at peace. Even if he has a slightly higher chance of experiencing symptoms of schizophrenia than the average person, he is in good hands. I am ready and prepared for any signs of SMI, and our family will learn from my mistakes. I also take comfort in the fact that by the time my son gets older, we will see medical breakthroughs, better treatment and encouraging discoveries that will be able to change the lives of those with mental illness.

I’ve heard before that deciding to have a child is the ultimate act of optimism, and that has certainly been true in my life. Before we tried to get pregnant, I had to believe that I knew how to make another person’s life better than mine. I had to believe, in spite of everything I experienced, that my life would be “worth it.” I had to decide that even if my son does get a mental illness like mine, that his life is still worth living, just like mine. Ultimately, I am hopeful for the future.

Sarah Merritt Ryan is a writer covering mental illness topics like stigma, recovery and hope. She is an ongoing NAMI Blog contributor and Connection Support Group Facilitator based in North Carolina. She is a survivor of schizophrenia and is now a wife, mother and small business owner.

GREEN LIGHT GALA – Saturday, DECEMBER 9, 2023

Wintergarden at PPG Place
Downtown Pittsburgh, PA

NAMI Keystone Pennsylvania will host the *Green Light Gala for Mental Health Awareness*. The Gala will take place at one of Pittsburgh’s most iconic buildings and newly renovated event spaces, the Wintergarden at PPG Place.

The *Green Light Gala* is a statewide event that shines a light on the need for better mental health awareness, treatment, and resources. It also celebrates the progress that has been made, the life-changing advancements that are on the horizon, and the brave individuals who are telling their stories to pave the way for so many others.

For the past three years, the Gala has been postponed due to the pandemic. But in 2023, it’s back! And the celebration coincides with NAMI Keystone Pennsylvania’s 40th anniversary of providing community support, education, and advocacy for peers and families affected by mental illness.

Any questions, contact Maria Kakay at mkakay@namikeystonepa.org.

NAMI MEETINGS – 2023

January 4 & 19, 2023 (Both Zoom Meetings)
February 1 & 16, 2023 (Both Zoom Meetings)
March 1 & 16 2023 (Both Zoom Meetings)
April 5 & 20, 2023 (20th is a Zoom Meeting)
May 3 & 18, 2023 (18th is a Zoom Meeting)
June 7 & 22, 2023 (22nd is a Zoom Meeting)

July 5 & 20, 2023 (20th is a Zoom Meeting)
August 2 & 17, 2023 (17th is a Zoom Meeting)
September 6 & 21, 2023 (21st is a Zoom Meeting)
October 4 & 19, 2023 (19th is a Zoom Meeting)
November 1 & 16, 2023 (16th is a Zoom Meeting)
December 6 & 21, 2023 (21st is a Zoom Meeting)

