Emanuel starts ‘memory café’ for dementia patients

With toolkit, JF&CS looks to grow program

By Jon Federman
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NEWTON – Isolation... fear... embarrassment. People living with Alzheimer’s or a related disorder and their care partners often experience these emotions, due in part to the increasing difficulty of engaging in everyday activities, as well as social stigma and lack of awareness.

Some people with dementia might feel unwelcome or embarrassed when symptoms occur in public situations, which further compounds these feelings. Isolation can usher in many health risks, including the rapid worsening of dementia.

A memory café is a social gathering for individuals living with dementia and their care partners. It provides a welcoming atmosphere not unlike a coffee house or neighborhood party in a non-clinical setting.

Guests whose dementia is due to any underlying condition are welcome to attend, as well as their care partners, who can include spouses, children, friends and professional caregivers. Guests are not asked about their diagnoses so that the undiagnosed or those not comfortable discussing their diagnoses can feel at ease.

Memory cafés offer social connection, entertaining and enlivening activities, and information to an often-neglected community.

The first memory café was started in 1997 in Holland and the model spread around the world.

By 2011, Massachusetts had its first café in Marlborough. The second memory café opened at Jewish Family & Children’s Service in Waltham in 2014.

After receiving many inquiries and requests for assistance, JF&CS started the Percolator Network, a mutual assistance forum for those wanting to start or sustain a memory café. The network meets quarterly to share questions, best practices and resources. More than 35 new cafés have started with the network’s support, making Massachusetts home to the largest concentration of memory cafés in the nation.

The toolkit

Most recently, JF&CS introduced the “Massachusetts Memory Café Toolkit,” a publication for those committed to improving the lives of people living with dementia and their care partners through starting a memory café.

Developed by Beth Soltzberg at JF&CS with support from the Massachusetts Association of Councils on Aging and the Massachusetts Executive Office of Elder Affairs, this memory café resource includes downloadable templates that can be edited and adapted for use by a new memory café.

Included are sample flyers, planning worksheets, lists of items to be purchased, a guide for guest artists, registration and budget templates, and a tip sheet for volunteers.

The toolkit provides information for an individual or group starting a memory café. Each café is different: some invite guest artists, some offer education about memory changes, and others offer an opportunity to chat and relax.

Still, all cafés share one goal: to help guests feel comfortable and to know they are not alone. The toolkit can provide an effective starting point.

The toolkit was an invaluable resource for Tracy Schneider, who will start a Memory Café at Temple Emanuel of Newton in September. Schneider, coordinator of Temple Emanuel’s L’Chaim senior group, is spear-heading this new initiative in partnership with Dana Gitell of the NewBridge on the Charles Memory Care Assisted Living Community in Dedham.

NewBridge co-sponsors and underwrites this café, which will be the only synagogue-based café in Massachusetts. They will offer it monthly, free to both Temple Emanuel members and community participants.

NewBridge has also held its own memory café since 2014, called Café Connect. With an emphasis on multi-generational interaction, it frequently incorporates high school volunteers who add energy and interest to the program.

“The JF&CS Percolator Network has been extremely helpful as NewBridge has looked to expand our Memory Café offering in the community,” Gitell says.

Emanuel’s café

“As we launch this new collaboration with Temple Emanuel,” Gitell says, “we’ve
drawn on parts of the memory café toolkit, especially the Facilitators Directory. For NewBridge, a part of Hebrew SeniorLife, it’s especially meaningful for us to partner with Temple Emanuel, to create the only memory café in Massachusetts in a synagogue environment. While open to all, it will touch on Jewish traditions, holidays,

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and themes.”

Temple Emanuel’s October memory café will focus on Jewish cooking, for example. “We’ll be making kugels and other traditional Jewish foods. Smells like these can trigger and evoke memories,” Schneider says.

“The toolkit has been extremely helpful in starting our café,” she adds. “We don’t want to forget our seniors or younger individuals who are living with dementia. The memory café is our way of supporting them and letting them know that they are still valid members of the community.

“Years ago, [memory loss] was all hush-hush,” she notes. “Now the cafés welcome these people and celebrate what they can do, what they can remember, and what they can still contribute.

“Cafés are interactive places in order to get the juices flowing and the memories going,” she adds. “People experiencing memory loss and their caregivers can look forward to a couple of hours of fun, activity, and camaraderie. They are in a safe place where they can leave all their cares behind when they enter the room, where guests can forget about limitations and instead focus on strengths.”

Upcoming memory café programs at Temple Emanuel in Newton are planned for Sept. 15, Oct. 20, Nov. 17 and Dec. 15. Please contact Tracy Schneider at 617-959-4928 to register or for more information. Pre-registration is required.

For more information about the “Massachusetts Memory Café Toolkit” and/or the Percolator Network, please contact Beth Soltzberg at JF&CS at 781-693-5628. Please visit www.jfcsboston.org/MemoryCafeDirectory to find a memory café in Massachusetts.

Maggie, a Brandeis University student volunteer, and David, a café guest
Pedro shows off his artwork as Darcy and the group look on.

A couple at the JF&CS Memory Café.

Guest musicians lead a group discussion and sing-along.