

Benefits of memory cafes

By Cathy Brauner

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When memory begins to fade, the need for human interaction does not. Yet people struggling with Alzheimer's disease and related disorders often find themselves feeling isolated and stigmatized.

That's where memory cafes come in.

"Memory cafes are all about connecting people socially," said Beth Soltzberg, director of the Alzheimer's/Related Disorders Family Support Program in Waltham. Soltzberg was at Wellesley's Tolles Parsons Center recently to give a talk explaining the concept. On the large screen next to her was a quote that captured how many people feel as the condition progresses: "All of our friends disappeared."

The idea of memory cafes is relatively new. Started in Holland in 1997 by a geriatric psychologist, they soon began to spread into other countries, and reached the U.S. in 2008. There are now about 400 in the U.S. The Marlborough café, which opened in 2011, was the first in Massachusetts, which now has more memory cafes than any other state in the nation.

Gayle Thieme, director of senior services for the Wellesley Council on Aging, and Kate Burnham,

health and social services administrator, said the senior center staff is trying to assess interest in bringing a memory café to Wellesley. If it happens, they hope to have it up and running by May. How they would cover the cost -- anywhere from \$7,000 to \$18,000 a year (mostly staffing time) -- is still under discussion, but one possibility is backing by private home-care vendors. Some cafes reach into the business community and receive sponsorship.

In Massachusetts, the words "memory café" are likely to be part of the name, although the café may also have an additional name, possibly with a special local meaning. The one in Marlborough is called Create a Better Day Café and Waltham -- the second café to open in Massachusetts, is JF&CS Memory Café.

All the cafes are designed to be warm, welcoming and relaxing places for those with memory loss and their loved ones. A guiding principle is that no one is ever asked if he or she has dementia and participants do not have to disclose their diagnosis unless they want to. The cafes serve all ages and conditions, from those with traumatic brain injury to people with Alzheimer's Disease or other forms of dementia. One of the Massachusetts cafes serves Spanish speakers. The cafes generally meet

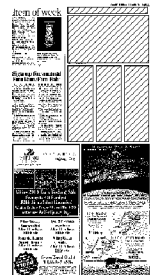
monthly for one-and-a-half to two hours. Many are located in senior centers, but some convene in libraries, places of worship or other settings. Memory Café of Needham, for instance, meets at The Cupcake Treat Bar on Highland Avenue.

Volunteers are a big plus at the cafes. In Waltham, the monthly café is co-hosted by a Brandeis student group.

Each café is different. The Waltham café attracts a lot of retired academics, so they tend to appreciate the kind of lectures they are accustomed to. At some, relaxation and conversation are on the menu, while at others guest artists work with participants who enjoy art. "Memory cafes don't have to involve the creative arts, but it's fairly typical," Soltzberg said.

Activities may include everything from sing-alongs to yoga to outings.

The cafes keep in touch with each other through the Percolator Memory Café Network, which was started by Jewish Family & Children's Service in 2014. Through quarterly meetings, Network members share ideas and information about resources, coordinate meeting dates and times, and promote awareness of the cafes. A list of existing Massachusetts cafes can be found at www.jfcsboston.org/MemoryCafeDirectory.





Beth Soltzberg, director of the Alzheimer's/Related Disorders Family Support Program in Waltham, speaks at the Tolles Parsons Center on Thursday about the concept of memory cafes. Wellesley may have its own memory cafe as early as May. [WICKED LOCAL STAFF PHOTO BY CATHY BRAUNER]