

insider

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Embracing life – Dan MacLeod credits the Chedoke Chronic Pain Management program with saving his life. He now volunteers in the horticulture therapy program, where clients nurture African Violets. Dr. Eleni Hapidou is a psychologist in the program.



Learning a new approach to life

Dan MacLeod is retelling the story of a pivotal moment in his volunteer time with Chedoke's Chronic Pain Management Unit. He was in the woodworking shop, standing beside a client of the program, when he noticed the pain on the man's face. Not just the physical pain, but the emotional pain that enveloped him.

The client asked Dan how long he'd been volunteering. Six years. Before that he was going through the program. And before that he was just a man living in constant, dreadful pain. "All I could think about was taking my life," Dan confessed to the man.

The client's eyes well with tears at hearing this. He tells Dan he feels that way now, that Dan is the first person he's been able to tell this to.

"I was blown away by him," Dan says. "He instantly got me and I got him. I told him 'you're going to be fine.' He told me about his life."

It is a connection understood by those suffering from chronic pain. It is also understood by those at Chedoke's Chronic Pain Management Unit.

Dr. Eleni Hapidou is one of them. The psychologist has been with the program for 21 years and is proud of the work being done. She says the program uses evidence-based medicine, and its research is known internationally. Group therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy, relaxation, yoga, fitness training, nutrition education and counseling are among the many techniques used.

The program was created by specialists in late 1973, and was one of the first in the world, according to the writings of one of its founders, Dr. Eldon R. Tunks, who was medical director from 1976-1999. It has evolved through the years based on research and needs.

It is currently being run as a four-week intensive course, a fee for service program funded by insurance companies, Workers Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB), Veteran Affairs, and other funding agencies.

Eleni says the philosophy is to teach people to live with pain through a proactive approach of self management, where they lead a balanced life and are cognizant of the needs of body and mind.

Dan took part in the program after about 17 years of living in pain. In 1981, he was riding his motorcycle along the escarpment, rounding the corner around the Kenilworth Access, when he lost control and crashed against a guardrail. He was pinned there, between the bike and the rail, his arm dislocated and the nerves pulled from his spine.

It took months and surgery to recover, and even then, he has gained little use of his right arm. Dan pushed through the constant pain created by the blows to his body. He returned to work, but it was nearly too much for him. By the time he found the Chedoke program, he wasn't sure he wanted to carry on.

What he hoped for from the program was a cure: "I really thought they were going to teach us some secret way to get rid of our pain. I thought I'd gone to the smartest scientists on the planet and they were going to fix everything," Dan says today.

He was told he'd have to embrace his life, and accept the pain. Dan calls that a huge psychological shift.

Today, he preaches that life: "It's about everything that you do. It's a holistic approach. People are into the single bullet approach. ...It's about looking at our lives a different way – proper posture, healthy attitude, balanced diet."

When Dan retired, he began volunteering at the Unit, wanting to give back some of what he'd gained.

He works in the horticulture therapy area, and in the woodworking room, relating to clients going through what he had lived through.

"The program gave me hope and taught me ways to live with my pain and still function," Dan explains. "It saved my life."