

**So Call Me, Maybe:
Easing Social Isolation and Depression
Through Telephone Psychoeducation, Screening,
Referral and Follow Up**

Jerry*, a man in his mid-eighties, lived alone in an apartment in New York City, where he suffered from a variety of chronic health problems which restricted his ability to leave his home. Jerry received case management services to coordinate his home-delivered meals and provide other needed assistance. Beyond seeing his home attendant a few hours a day and the driver who delivered his weekly supply of meals, Jerry rarely saw other people and often spent many hours alone. He frequently went days without speaking to anyone.

Through a special program funded by New York City's Department for the Aging and Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, we at the Mental Health Association of New York City (MHA-NYC) are partnering with local case management agencies to provide homebound older adults with an opportunity to increase their social contact. Homebound older adults are invited to take part in a telephone-based psychoeducation session about emotional well-being that helps them to identify depression and seek out assistance if they are at risk. Jerry's case management agency invited Jerry to connect with us for one of our workshops. At first, Jerry was reluctant, but after some discussion and a little bit of encouragement, he ultimately agreed to participate.

Jerry joined a workshop that included several other homebound older adults from across New York City, and with the help of David Truzman, the project's lead social worker and workshop facilitator, he contributed to a lively discussion about emotional well-being and its relationship to health; how to recognize depression's signs and symptoms; how to engage in self-care for emotional wellness; and how to reach out for help if depression causes a problem. After

the workshop, Jerry spoke individually with David, who asked him what he thought of the experience. Jerry reported that he enjoyed the class a great deal, and said that he was glad to be able to speak with other people and to hear that he was not alone in dealing with his difficulties in life.

During a depression screening subsequent to this conversation, Jerry revealed to David that he struggled with depressed mood and feelings of hopelessness. He also said that he thought about ending his own life nearly every day and that the only thing that stopped him was his lack of means to carry out a suicide plan. Jerry became tearful as he told David about his suicidal feelings, which he said he had never told anyone about before. He also said he just didn't know what to do.

With Jerry's consent, David arranged for him to be evaluated by a mental health mobile crisis team within 48 hours of their conversation. Throughout this period David remained in contact with Jerry on a daily basis. The mobile crisis team determined that Jerry was clinically depressed, confirmed his suicidal ideation and deemed it necessary to transport Jerry to the emergency room of the nearest hospital for further evaluation. Jerry agreed to be taken to the hospital, where he was kept overnight for evaluation and then discharged with a prescription for an antidepressant.

Upon his discharge from the hospital, David called Jerry to find out how he was doing. Jerry was furious that he was hospitalized, which he found frightening and confusing, and he blamed David for having to go through this incident in the first place. He additionally reported that he did not want to take the antidepressant medication and that he felt that the entire experience was a total waste of time.

David listened patiently to Jerry and empathized with his anger and fear. He told Jerry that he wanted to help him to feel better and have a more satisfying life that was free from depression and suicidal thinking. David offered to help Jerry locate services that would not be in a hospital and that would, ideally, be delivered in his home. After a lengthy discussion about the pros and cons of continuing to get help, Jerry permitted David to refer him to the Weill Cornell Department of Geriatric Psychiatry to see if he might be eligible to participate in a home-based clinical trial for geriatric depression.

Fortunately, Jerry met the study criteria, and once the trial started he began receiving free depression treatment from a licensed mental health professional in his home. After his entry into the clinical trial David called Jerry to check in on him and see how he was doing. Jerry told David, "I'm not angry at you for the hospital anymore and I know that you were just trying to help me." Jerry also added that he enjoyed his visits with the Weill Cornell social worker and that he was glad to be receiving help after struggling for so long.

In addition to connecting Jerry to mental health treatment, David also provided him with information about a low-cost telephone socialization program run by Dorot USA, a non-profit organization that serves frail older adults, so that Jerry would have additional opportunities to socialize with others over the phone and further reduce his loneliness.

David Truzman, along with the other social workers and community partners engaged in this project, is a hero of geriatric care, working every single day to reduce the social isolation suffered by homebound older adults and to identify those who are suffering from depression. This work, which enhances and saves lives with equipment no more sophisticated than a telephone, helped Jerry connect to the mental health care he needed to reduce the pain of his depression and increase the quality of his life.

Jerry, of course, is a hero as well - he demonstrated enormous courage when he acknowledged his emotional struggles and displayed true bravery in his willingness to get help for his depression, despite his fear and frustration. It is people like Jerry, and many others like him, who inspire us at MHA-NYC to do the work we do every day. We are grateful for the opportunity to do so.

*The client's real name, and all other identifying information, has been disguised for the purposes of this story.