

Filling gap for geriatric mental health counseling



Your Turn

Dr. Jaclynn Faffer
Guest columnist

I was saddened to read the news article ranking Florida in the bottom 20 percent of all states when it comes to health, particularly as it relates to access to mental health care providers.

This concern about mental health access was echoed in the recently released Community Assessment by the Collier Community Foundation and Richard M. Schulze Family Foundation.

As the leading advocate for seniors in our community, Baker Senior Center Naples has seen the local senior population increase dramatically. A majority of these older adults deal with health issues. Many of them also struggle with mental health issues and, until recently, lacked access to such care.

When our information and referral professionals brought to our attention the fact that they were receiving numerous calls from older adults in our community requesting referrals to affordable mental health counseling, we decided to take a look at the issue. Here is what we discovered:

- Requests for counseling were primarily for loss and grief issues, relationship problems, and mild anxiety and depression. These were not problems requiring 24 hour/seven day a week availability.

- Few licensed and credentialed mental health providers locally accepted insurance, or charged less than \$150 per session.

As a result of our findings, Baker Senior Center Naples launched a Geriatric Mental Health Counseling program shortly after we relocated to our new permanent home on Autumn Oaks Lane in January of 2023. With a staff of Licensed Clinical Social Workers, we are currently providing short term, solution focused, mental health counseling to more than 50 older adults.

Counseling is provided on an outpatient basis to seniors and their families in a warm and supportive environment. We provide individual therapy, couples therapy and family therapy.

Our experienced and licensed therapists can help seniors with anxiety and stress, depression, grief and loss, difficult relationships, adjusting to life changes, concerns related to aging, low self-esteem, coping with illness, anger, trauma, isolation and loneliness, and caregiver stress.

Importantly, we are Medicare providers and are on the panels of other private insurance as well. For those who do not have Medicare, services are provided on a sliding fee scale. Referrals come from physicians, clergy, other senior center members and the general community.

This new Baker Senior Center Naples Geriatric Mental Health Counseling program was funded with generous donations from the community and is available to all adults over the age of 60.

Celebrating 10 years of service in January, Baker Senior Center Naples takes pride in developing programs that address gaps in service experienced by older adults in Collier and southern Lee counties. As our tag line "Looking Forward" indicates, at Baker Senior Center Naples we are always proud to be part of positive response to issues of concern in the community.

The senior center is well known for its many social and educational programs addressing isolation and loneliness in older adults. It also is regarded for its much-needed dementia respite and caregiver programs. Now, we have added mental health counseling for older adults. We "look forward" to assisting our beautiful state of Florida as it moves up in the annual rankings of health.

For additional information about mental health counseling as well as our other programs for local seniors, please call (239) 325-4444 or visit our website at Bakerseniorcenternaples.org.

Dr. Jaclynn Faffer is president/CEO of Baker Senior Center Naples, a non-profit organization that provides comprehensive, "one-stop-shop" professional services and programs for local seniors and their families.