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Inmates learn how to manage mental illness

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BEACON - Scott Collins reluctantly joined a class called Wellness Self-Management at Fishkill Correctional Facility five months ago, but he missed the first few sessions because he was depressed.

"He said, 'I have no goals. I don't really care. My parents died. I just wanted to be a son to them,' " Mike Golub, the course instructor, recalled.

But Collins, who's from Plattsburgh, stuck with the program. He said earlier this week that he now sees its benefits.

"It's helped me get out of my shell a lot. I usually isolate," Collins said as he sat in a circle with seven other inmates and three staff members in a basement classroom at the medium-security prison in Dutchess County. "Being here has helped me a lot."

The Center for Urban Community Services, an agency that works to end homelessness and help the poor, obtained a \$355,000 grant for a three-year pilot program on Wellness Self-Management and a study on its effectiveness. Collins and 15 other inmates completed the course Thursday. They spent two hours a week in class since April learning ways to manage their mental illness so they can thrive after prison.

This is the first time the program is being offered to inmates in the general population and the first time research is being conducted on its outcomes. Wellness Self-Management is being expanded to Bedford Hills and Sing Sing prisons next month.

In the second-to-last class earlier this week, the eight prisoners in the afternoon session showed they are conversant in the language of mental health recovery. They talked about shedding negative labels, breaking free and building support networks when they re-enter society. Sixteen of the 20 men who started the course are finishing it.

"I'm thinking of my sister," Collins said when the men are asked about support systems. "I've finally decided to build a relationship with her, so it would be a good support."

Collins, 29, suffers from depression and post-traumatic stress disorder and has a personality disorder. His downfall began when he started using hard drugs and alcohol, he said. He began serving a sentence for burglary and grand larceny last year and could be released in March.

Collins' parents died last December when his father shot his mother, called 911 and then turned the gun on himself. "Being locked up in a place, losing somebody important to you as well as your freedom, you

know, it hurts. But being here, I was able to talk about it," he said.

During the class, Golub, the instructor, hammered home the importance of setting goals and figuring out positive ways to handle stress, and then the men shared their insights.

"To me, stress, instead of keeping you focused on what you're doing, you're out of focus. You're doing the opposite," said Julio Rodriguez, 42, of Manhattan, who is in prison for selling drugs.

Prison culture generally doesn't lend itself to these kinds of conversations, Golub later explained. Mentally ill prisoners can be "outed" because they have to stand in line for their pills. Then everyone knows they're taking "Skittles," prison slang for psychotropic medications, he said.

The mental-health recovery movement - whose hallmarks include self-empowerment and control over one's treatment - has gained a strong foothold in the treatment community, but the program is a novel approach in the prison system, officials said.

"Traditionally mental-health treatment was ... that 'I'm the doctor, you take this medication, you'll get better,'" said Howard Holanchock, assistant mental-health commissioner for the state Department of Correctional Services.

"But Wellness Self-Management puts it on the patient, to help the patient develop their kind of individual, kind of personalized goals and relapse-prevention plans," he said.

About 15 percent of the approximately 59,000 state prisoners, some 8,000 people, are being treated for mental illness. The state already provides a range of services, including residential programs for inmates with more serious psychiatric disabilities and people who aren't stable. Prisoners in 10 residential sites have been using Wellness Self-Management groups for about a year.

The grant from the Jacob and Valeria Langeloth Foundation allows the Center for Urban Community Services to offer 16 courses to as many as 160 inmates total in the three prisons.

The study will track about 140 inmates and a control group of approximately the same size at the three Hudson Valley prisons on how they fare in terms of disciplinary actions in prison and relapse, recidivism and hospitalization after they are released.

Mentally ill prisoners tend to have more discipline problems than other inmates, which often leads to homelessness and re-arrest after they are released, said Tony Hannigan, executive director of the center, which is collaborating with the state departments of Correctional Services and Parole and the Office of Mental Health.

Like many of his fellow inmates, 55-year-old James Washington of Rochester abused drugs and alcohol. He has more than three years left in his sentence for second-degree burglary, and he has been in prison before.

"From an early age, I started avoiding life experiences by using drugs," he said.

Washington said he has been diagnosed with schizophrenia, but he doesn't believe he has a mental illness. Still, he is an active participant in the class and said he picked up a lot of good advice and information.

"I've heard it said that the will to do springs from the knowledge that we can do," he said.
