

Living Well

Free workshop series helps people with chronic health problems craft solutions and find support

By [Sarah Lemon](#)

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Back pain bothered Susan Rust enough that she sought advice at a local workshop series called "Living Well With Chronic Health Problems."

The first session filled up, so she had to wait. Then the second was canceled. As she bided her time, Rust's health took a drastic turn.

"All of a sudden, I couldn't walk," she says.

The 66-year-old Ashland resident battled a bout of bursitis that painfully swelled both knees. X-rays revealed that Rust also had osteoarthritis. Although the pain curtailed almost all daily activity, Rust attended physical therapy and, finally, space opened up in a Living Well program at Ashland Community Hospital.

"I knew I was not alone and I was in the right place," she says.

Along with 10 other participants, Rust learned to set goals toward improving her health and take small steps each week toward accomplishing them.

She enrolled in an exercise class to strengthen her joints, purchased a pedometer and started walking about three miles a day. Watching her food intake closely, she lost about 12 pounds and alleviated her pain since starting the six-week Living Well seminar in September.

"There's an accountability factor," she says. "I re-ordered my life."

The Living Well program is based on a chronic disease self-management program developed at Stanford University.

In Jackson and Josephine counties, the program is delivered through a partnership between Oregon State University's Extension Service and the Rogue Valley Council of Governments' Senior and Disability Services. Since May 2006, 825 people have participated in 55 free workshops.

"You feel very alone," says Living Well leader Kimber Vaccher. "But the workshop really helps you understand that a lot of people out there have chronic disease."

The built-in support network is invaluable, leaders and participants say. A buddy system keeps everyone engaged and nurtures relationships that continue after instruction is over.

"I felt like I had friends there," says Debbie Gorgani.

After falling down some stairs, herniating a disk in her back and undergoing surgery, Gorgani quit her job and spent most of her time in bed. Previously an avid hiker, backpacker and skier, the 56-year-old Ashland resident isolated herself from family and friends.

Taking "a lot of pain pills" was Gorgani's only source of relief, if not the solution she preferred. She hoped Living Well would teach her different ways to manage pain, but rather than addressing specific medications and dosages, the program gave Gorgani the tools to take control. Since she completed Living Well last fall, she's started working part time and can walk for a mile at a stretch.

"It helped me to realize that my health was in my own hands," she says, adding that she no longer expects her doctor to manage her medications or activity level.

Improving communication with health care providers is a key component of Living Well, Vaccher says. The workshop also is geared toward improving the understanding of chronic disease among the sufferers' family members and caregivers, as well as their relationships.

Eighty-year-old Eulayne Ellis was one of 20 participants who attended Living Well last year in support of someone with a chronic condition. She struggled with depression after her 74-year-old husband, Jack, suffered a massive stroke. Although Jack Ellis still endures "tremendous" pain and blood clots in both legs, the Jacksonville couple's outlook is more positive.

"We've seen such progress, and we've got a handle on things and it's a relief," Eulayne Ellis says.

Participants receive a copy of the companion book "Living a Healthy Life With Chronic Conditions," which contains some disease-specific information, says Arlene Logan, a master trainer and workshop leader. Common ailments among participants are heart disease, auto-immune disorders, diabetes and occasionally mental illnesses like bipolar disorder, Logan says. The workshops see a wide age range, from late-30s to late-80s, she adds.

Many of Living Well's leaders also suffer from chronic health problems, giving them empathy and the ability to facilitate from real-life experience, Logan says. The program trains its leaders, with the next session scheduled in April.

For more information, visit the Web site www.sohealthyoregon.org. To register, call Bernadette Maziarski at 864-9611.

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Keys to

'Living Well With Chronic Health Problems'

- Manage medications
- Deal with depression
- Eat wisely and well
- Control pain
- Set and meet goals
- Fight fatigue and frustration

- Start an exercise program
- Manage stress and relax
- Solve problems
- Communicate better with

health-care providers