USU’s Sorenson Center Provides Groups and Workshops to Support Local Residents

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Discussions are among the most beneficial aspects of a group meeting.

The Sorenson Legacy Foundation Center for Clinical Excellence, a community-facing clinical services facility located on USU’s Logan campus within the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services, serves both students and the Cache Valley and Northern Utah community with an extensive array of clinical services provided by licensed mental health therapists and graduate students in training that are closely monitored by experienced faculty. The center also provides single-day and multi-week group meetings and workshops that are designed to provide support and education for the community.

This spring, clinicians at the Sorenson Center are hosting three new group meetings and are encouraging members of the Cache Valley and Northern Utah community to participate. Topics address managing chronic pain, managing chronic tinnitus, and supporting caregivers who suffer from burnout.

Although the groups offered through the Sorenson Center vary in duration and subject matter, they are all open to participation from members of the Cache Valley and Northern Utah communities and are intentionally designed to help people interact. “Based on our clinical experience, we know that it is really good to bring people together,” says Maria Kleinstaeuber, assistant professor of psychology and clinical psychologist at the Sorenson Center. “We include breaks so they have time to talk with somebody with similar problems. We want to give them enough time to have good discussions.”

Each group also incorporates interdisciplinary expertise. In fact, the center’s mission statement is explicit in its efforts “to foster interdisciplinary collaboration that results in an improved quality of life for Utah residents.” This means that clinicians with expertise in various services are actively involved in each of the Sorenson Center’s group and workshop offerings.

“The Sorenson Center was designed to support and promote interdisciplinary services, which are essential in providing comprehensive care to individuals,” says Gretchen Peacock, executive director of the Sorenson Center. “Rather than focusing on a single issue in isolation, working in an interdisciplinary manner allows concerns to be addressed in a coordinated manner.”

Group: Chronic Tinnitus Management

Tinnitus is a constant ringing or buzzing in the ears that does not have an external source. People who suffer from chronic tinnitus make up approximately 15 to 20 percent of the general population, and between one and three percent suffer from additional emotional distress, which can include major depression and even suicide ideation.

Maria Kleinstaeuber, clinical psychologist at USU’s Sorenson Center

Kleinstaeuber is one of the psychologists who will supervise the chronic tinnitus group and monitor its progress. The group is primarily intended for individuals who are suffering from severe emotional distress. “We mainly focus on the subgroup that is emotionally distressed and disabled by the sound, causing a lot of impact on their everyday life functioning,” says Kleinstaeuber. “We try to help them better cope with the distress because we know that the distress makes the tinnitus worse.”

In keeping with the Sorenson Center’s interdisciplinary approach, doctoral student psychologists and audiologists will run the tinnitus group under the supervision of Tiffany

Shelton, audiologist, and psychologists Sara Boghosian, Sue Crowley, and Kleinstaeuber.

The group will meet weekly in 90-minute sessions for 12 weeks. The first four weeks will primarily cover education about tinnitus and information about potential audiology treatments. The final eight weeks will focus on psychological strategies to deal with the emotional effects caused by chronic tinnitus, including resources for preventing future relapses.

Researchers have found that improved emotions can have an impact on the intensity of tinnitus. "When patients learn to keep going in their lives, focusing on what is important for them, that can have an indirect positive impact on the tinnitus itself," says Kleinstaeuber. "And when tinnitus loses that strong negative meaning in life, it also usually loses intensity."

Participants should have been experiencing chronic tinnitus symptoms for at least the past three months. They should also be experiencing hearing distress and disability along with emotional distress.

Group: Chronic Pain Management

The chronic pain management group will meet in person for 90-minute sessions for eight weeks. Presenters will give participants information about how pain is processed in the brain. They will also provide acceptance and mindfulness strategies where participants will work on pain-related thoughts and avoidance behavior. "A lot of it is about dealing with the emotions, because, similar to tinnitus, a lot of psychological processes can make the pain much worse," explains Kleinstaeuber.

"A huge problem with pain patients is the behavior they develop with pain," she continues. "A lot of patients will develop the idea that if they do certain things, it could make their pain worse. So that generalizes and gets worse and worse, and some patients develop a very generalized avoidance behavior. We work to reduce that and bring them back into healthy movement."

In addition to Boghosian, Crowley, and Kleinstaeuber, who will supervise the group, Haley Hayes, a yoga instructor in the Department of Kinesiology, will participate in the group during the last four weeks. She will combine mindfulness techniques with yoga instruction. Groups will also have built-in discussion time to enable participants to interact with one another, comfortably share experiences, and find common ground and support as they deal with chronic pain and its emotional impacts.

Participants in this group should have been experiencing chronic pain for at least the past three months. They do not need a mental health diagnosis like depression or anxiety disorder but should have emotional distress coping with the pain.

Workshop: Caregiver Burnout

The Caregiver Burnout workshop is geared toward full-time and long-term caregivers who serve people with limitations due to age, illness, injury, or disability. This includes those who are caring for elderly people as well as parents caring for a disabled child. The focus of the workshop is to provide coping skills and resources, with an additional emphasis on facilitating interaction between caregivers. The workshop is a Zoom webinar that lasts for approximately two hours.

Dallas Spencer, LCSW, and Nichole Steineke, facilitator of the Caregiver Burnout workshop

"There is a lot of expectation on the caregiver to be able to perform medical tests, administer medications, give shots, work a feeding tube, etc." says Nichole Steineke, master's student in Social Work who will be facilitating the virtual workshop. "There's going to be a varying degree of expertise among caregivers, which is one of the reasons we want people to interact in the workshop."

Symptoms of burnout may include physical exhaustion, a change in physical wellness such as headaches or stomachaches, a decreased interest in hobbies, and more. The person may be irritable or impatient with the person they're caring for. They may also have feelings of emptiness and hopelessness. "It really does affect a person's well-being," says Steineke. "There are positive aspects of being a caregiver that are very beneficial, but it can also cause some physical and emotional distress."

The workshop is designed to provide caregivers with resources that will strengthen them. "We help caregivers to recognize what burnout is," says Steineke. "We then work to create a self-care plan with elements that include

physical, social, spiritual, emotional, and intellectual action items that are specific to the individual caregiver.”

“When people have a name for what they’re feeling, it means they can respond to it,” says Dallas Spencer,licensed clinical social worker and clinician at the Sorenson Center who will supervise the workshop. “It makes them feel empowered to set a boundary or do something that adds to their emotional reservoir, because so much is being drawn from it.”

The groups and workshops provided by the Sorenson Center are an extensive outreach effort that has the potential to impact for better the lives of people throughout the Cache Valley and Northern Utah community. “In the long-term, we want to build up a clinic that offers many different types of group therapies for all subgroups of patients—fibromyalgia, irritable bowel syndrome, chronic fatigue, and so on,” says Kleinstaeuber. Recent groups that may be run again have dealt with topics such as women who struggle with ADHD, LGBTQ+ support, parenting support, and even an aphasia book club for seniors.

Members of the community are encouraged to enroll in the workshops and participate in services provided by the Sorenson Center. To learn about current and upcoming offerings, check the Sorenson Center’s website regularly for more detailed information and to join a waitlist.