

New study shows benefits of Mindfulness for parents of adult children with developmental disabilities- CARING FOR THE CAREGIVERS

(Toronto – Tuesday April 4, 2017) – Community Living Toronto knows just how difficult it is for caregivers of someone with autism or developmental disabilities in today’s day and age of lack of resources and services.

Community Living Toronto’s Sue Hutton, BSW, MSW was recruited by CAMH Clinician Scientist [Dr. Yona Lunsky](#) to research Mindfulness as a coping technique for parents of a child with autism and other developmental disabilities. Sue has practiced Mindfulness for over 20 years, and has received professional training with Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction at University of Massachusetts. Her knowledge of Mindfulness combined with her social work experience with families brings a perfect blend to caring for caregivers.

When Dr. Lunsky talks about the unique challenges faced by the parents of adult children with developmental disabilities, she uses the analogy of being on an airplane when the flight attendant is giving instructions for what to do in an emergency. Parents with children on board are told that if the oxygen masks fall from the ceiling, they should put their own mask on first.

“If they don’t put the oxygen mask on, they can’t help their kids,” says Dr. Lunsky.

The research that the team did has just been published in the “*Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*”.

Just in time for National Family Caregiver Day, which is also on April 4th!

Expanding on previous work on the well-being of parents with adult children with developmental disabilities and mental health needs, Sue and Dr. Lunsky’s team took a closer look at the impact of Mindfulness on those caregivers. Parents seeking help or services for their adult children were divided into two groups over a period of six weeks. One group participated in a weekly support and information group and learned about resources and services available for their adult children. The other participated in a group-based Mindfulness intervention.

“The parents in the Mindfulness group reported reductions in terms of depression and stress, whereas the parents in the other group did not,” says Dr. Lunsky. “And the change was sustained over time. The parents in the Mindfulness group improved and they kept those improvements.”

Lee Steel, whose 25-year-old son has autism, found herself struggling to find the right supports to help him after he became an adult and was no longer in school. But when she ended up in the Mindfulness group, she soon realized that she had not been paying attention to her own health and wellness.

Her introduction to Mindfulness changed all that.

“I am taking more active steps about self-care than I had ever given myself permission to do before,” says Steel. “I didn’t know that part of being a good parent was to have a life, have my own interests. Over the years that really took a back seat. I felt like being a good person, being a good parent, was all about what I could do for somebody else.”

Dr. Lunsky believes that for parents like Lee, who often feel helpless about the present and fearful for the future, Mindfulness can help them become better and healthier parents.

“The approach of teaching parents to be more mindful helps them in terms of their interactions with their children, and it also helps them cope with ongoing stress that can’t in itself be immediately resolved,” says Dr. Lunsky.

The study was done in partnership with Developmental Service Ontario Toronto at Surrey Place Centre, Community Living Toronto, York University and the University of Warwick.