

AWARENESS RAISING is the foundation of the NAMIWalks program

NAMIWalks are a great opportunity for persons with mental illness, their family members and advocates to tell their stories and educate others about mental illness and NAMI's work. Recruiting people to walk and give money to support their participation are important components of the WALKS. The tremendous impact of hearing from a friend or acquaintance about how a mental illness has personally affected them and their family is what makes NAMIWalks the breakthrough public education program that it is.

This is how we give people in every walk of life a meaningful introduction to the truth about serious mental illness, the treatment options that are available, the obstacles many face as they try to access treatment, and the valuable education, advocacy and support services provided by NAMI.

We are a grassroots organization. As such, educating the public through the NAMIWalk model is a grassroots education campaign.

Several important research projects have recently been published that show the powerful impact that direct contact like this can have on the public's perception of mental illness. These studies note that stereotypes are challenged when people find that a co-worker, a friend from church or a neighbor is struggling with mental illness. These same studies show that this kind of contact with those coping with mental illnesses has the greatest, longest-lasting effect on others learning about how mental illness, possibly for the first time.

Many people are uncomfortable describing their experiences with mental illness because they feel alone and isolated, afraid of being stigmatized or judged. However, the feeling of acceptance and support that comes from walking with hundreds of other advocates begins to change their perception of being alone. So do the examples being offered by the volunteer leaders of the WALK as they tell their stories at WALK events, and through letters and e-mails to people they know. Practice makes perfect: the more we tell the NAMI story, the more support we get, and the more likely NAMI's story will be told when and where it needs to be told.

This expanding network of public education provides another valuable benefit for NAMI--improved visibility for NAMI and the services we provide. The more visible NAMI is, the easier it will be for people with mental illness and their families to find us when they need us. We have all heard countless stories told by NAMI members that often end with, "I wish I had found NAMI years ago." While we at NAMI are becoming better known and more accessible to those that rely upon us, we all look forward to the day when each story ends with, "I am glad NAMI was there for me when I needed support."