Preparation & Screening

Please review the NAMI National Education Programs Operating Policies and Procedures for more details about copyrights, the Code of Conduct and other NAMI standards of practice.

Time Frame

Because this is an 8-week course, you’ll need to consider regional weather conditions, holidays and any local constraints when scheduling the best period for holding the course in your area.

How We Define Family

In this program we use a broad concept of family to embrace all expressions of family life, such as adoptive, bisexual, extended, gay, intentional, lesbian, step and transgender families.

Who Can Take the Course

The course is suitable for spouses, partners, siblings, parents, significant others, teenage and adult children and friends who are family caregivers of people who have been diagnosed with or are experiencing symptoms of a mental health condition, such as major depressive disorder, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, borderline personality disorder, anxiety disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and co-occurring brain and addictive disorders.

Youth, ages 14 or older are permitted provided they are attending as a participant and are accompanied by a parent or guardian.

It’s helpful if the person has been given a diagnosis by a qualified mental health professional. However, many families are not clear about their loved one’s diagnosis. In that case, you must discuss the nature of the symptoms with the family and determine together if the course is suitable for them. If the loved one is exhibiting behaviors such as anxiety, depression, delusions, paranoia, hallucinations, multiple hospitalizations, panic attacks, obsessive-compulsive behaviors, impaired functioning, etc., then this class may be very helpful for the family.

If the primary problem is alcoholism, substance abuse, physical/sexual abuse or criminal behavior not related in any way to a mental health condition, the course is not suitable. Refer these families to the appropriate mental health/community services in your area.
Participants who have a mental health condition themselves but are also family caregivers of a loved one experiencing mental health symptoms are welcome to attend the course. However, they will need to focus on their relative experiencing mental illness. The highest priority is placed on protected disclosure of family emotions; these classes are offered as respite sessions for family caregivers and this must be protected.

**Screening Participants**

To ensure that potential participants who are calling to request to participate in one of the NAMI education programs are referred to the most appropriate program available, an initial screening should take place.

- **First contact and screening** generally take place on the telephone, occasionally via email. Answer their questions and tell them the basics about the course and the time frames, etc. Ask them their family member's diagnosis. Explain that the course applies to mental health conditions such as major depressive disorder, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, borderline personality disorder, anxiety disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and co-occurring brain and addictive disorders since these are the primary brain disorders covered in the course. If the family doesn’t know the diagnosis but mentions challenging behaviors or symptoms, you may need to explore this further to make sure they understand what is taught in the course.

- **Gain information from families** by explaining that the personal questions asked are not meant to pry but are to ensure that the course is a good fit. It’s important to convey a warm, concerned, non-judgmental style and to communicate your respect for how the family has been coping. Be prepared for the emotions that tumble out as families relate the pain and stress of their lives; comfort them and be supportive. Be sure to take care of yourself after any family discussion where the situation is particularly traumatic. The impact of these stories can be very unsettling for you, so make a point of “de-briefing” with your co-leader when this happens.

- **Contact by one of the NAMI Family-to-Family leaders after the screening is important** because the bond you form with participants can begin prior to the first class. Because you’re familiar with their situation, you can bring participants into the discussions more readily; you will know how to “coach” them into commenting and joining the group. Participants are more likely to attend Class 1 if they feel they have a relationship with at least one of the leaders.

- **What about walk-ins?** Some unregistered people may show up at the door for the first class, wanting to take the course. If you have room and they seem appropriate for the class, let them join. You can then call them and/or ask them to meet you early before Class 2, so you can find out more about their family story. If you don’t have room, let them stay for Class 1 if possible, but tell them they’ll have to go on the waiting list for the next course cycle.
• **One last thought:** Don’t use the word “interview” with families. It makes families feel they’re being judged. Just say you want an opportunity to get to know them and answer any questions they may have.

### Class Size

The course works best with a minimum of 10 participants. When the group is smaller, family members tend to relate to the leaders as “therapists” or “fixers,” and leaders can easily be pulled into this role. When more people are in the class, participants learn to rely on each other, and more significantly, to trust their own instincts. 10 may not always be possible, and we discourage leaders from cancelling a class if fewer than this number has signed up to attend. You may opt to postpone the course for a week or two to continue recruiting, and then decide whether to proceed with the smaller group.

If the class is larger than 20 participants, it will difficult for everyone to participate in discussions. Larger groups also make it challenging to manage timing when sharing stories.

### Choosing a Site

Libraries, schools, hospitals, colleges, houses of worship and community centers all have space available for weekly meetings of this kind. Mental health facilities may also have space, but this may be uncomfortable for families whose loved ones receive services there. Some spaces are free; others require a small fee for use. The location should have free parking and be located near public transportation. A comfortable room where participants may sit around a large table is ideal. Informality, warmth and comfort are key elements to look for in choosing a site.

### Attendance

If a participant is absent from a class without notification, call them later in the week to see if everything is okay. If two consecutive absences occur, call them and ask how the course is going for them and encourage them to continue. All this is to be done without pressure or expectation; warmth and empathy are the order of the day. The drop-out rate for the course is generally low. Often if a class member is wavering or under stress, a friendly call of concern and encouragement will keep them engaged.

No new participants should be admitted to the course after Class 2. They have missed too much to catch up and it’s not fair to others in the class.