Things were difficult for Melanie Bowman when she started as a senior program coordinator in the Department of Mathematics' graduate statistics program in August. Bowman had moved with her husband from New York to help take care of her 78-year-old mother, who has dementia. Though Bowman's father is her mother's primary caregiver, the adjustment, she said, hasn't been easy.

"When I first moved here, it was particularly difficult because I was kind of getting hit in the head with the changes that were happening with my mother because I hadn't lived near her for a long time," Bowman said. "So, it was a little stressful."

But Bowman soon found the help she needed, and it was right here on campus. During a presentation by Life & Work Connections [1] during Bowman's new employee benefits orientation, she learned of the resources available to employees who care for elders, including classes and counseling services.

"I have never worked someplace that had so much support for people," Bowman said.

Life & Work Connections, a unit within Human Resources, recently expanded those resources with the launch of "Caregiving Connections" Employee Series, free, biweekly sessions where UA employees who care for older adults can discuss the experience and share resources. The meetings began in March and are open to benefits-eligible employees. The sessions end in May, coinciding with Older Americans Month [2], led by the federal Administration on Aging.

The sessions are meant to complement a recurring class called Being Your Best When Work and Elder Care Intersect, said Caryn Jung, senior coordinator of dependent care and work/life integration, who co-facilitates "Caregiving Connections" with Susan Pickering, an employee assistance counselor.

"It's intended to build community among employees with caregiving responsibilities," Jung said.

Offering a small group setting for up to 12 employees, the sessions are driven by employee-led discussions while Jung and Pickering guide the conversation with eldercare topics and answer questions. Both bring a wealth of knowledge to the meetings: Pickering holds a master's degree in educational psychology and is an expert on mindfulness and resiliency for caregivers; Jung is the UA's first coordinator for employee and student eldercare services and holds a master's degree in gerontology.

"Susan and I provide a safe, professional and welcoming environment where individuals feel
that they can share ideas and feedback in a very compassionate forum," Jung added. "We also share with them strategies and ideas that perhaps they may not have considered. So, truly, there's a very respectful and fluid exchange."

For employees like Bowman, just having others to talk to who understand the eldercare lifestyle is helpful. And the only way one can understand it is to have lived it, she said.

"What has happened for me is that I've really come to the realization that it's OK to say, 'This sucks, and it's probably not going to get better, so let's just do what we can to prepare,'" Bowman said.

Though the "Caregiving Connections" sessions are scheduled to end in May, Jung said Life & Work Connections is exploring options to keep them going.

Attendee feedback, she added, has been positive.

Bowman said she would recommend the sessions to anyone involved in eldercare to any degree, whether they're providing long-distance care or otherwise.

"To be with people who really do understand and who really can say 'I know' ? and you know that they do know ? that's very comforting," she said.

Sessions are held at noon on the second and fourth Wednesdays of each month at Life & Work Connections, 715 N. Park Ave., Room A, on the second floor. Remaining sessions are scheduled for April 25, May 9 and May 23. Employees can register by emailing Pickering at pickerings@email.arizona.edu.

For information about other UA resources related to caregiving, visit the Life & Work Connections website [1] to find sections on childcare and eldercare.

Source URL: https://uaatwork.arizona.edu/lqp/connecting-caregivers-new-sessions-support-employees-caring-aging-parents

Links:
[1] https://lifework.arizona.edu/
[3] mailto:pickerings@email.arizona.edu