

Support provided to families of the mentally ill

Peer-based, 12-course series provides education and coping techniques

SUBMITTED Schizophrenia, major depression and borderline personality, anxiety and bipolar disorders create monumental hurdles for those living with the illnesses as well as for their families. Starting next week, family members of those living with serious mental illness in the Sea to Sky can begin

a free, 12-week, peer-based support program to learn about symptoms, medications, problem-solving, how to communicate, what it's like to be mentally ill, looking after yourself as caregiver, and many other subjects.

"The local offering of services is a tremendous opportunity for local residents to strengthen knowledge, skills and support networks in their own communities," said North Shore Schizophrenia Society (NSSS) Sea to Sky outreach coordinator Christine Buttkus. The free NSSS Family-to-Family ses-

sions run each Tuesday from March 9 to May 25, and are led by two specially-trained individuals who themselves have firsthand experience with the challenges of having someone in their family with a serious mental illness.

"We continue to hear how much services offered by NSSS are needed in Sea to Sky. We have extended the start date by one week to ensure we reach as many families as possible," said Buttkus. Family-to-Family reduces stress levels and helps family members cope,

she said. The tools and skills learned in the course help family members re-balance their personal goals with their care-giving roles.

NSSS has offered the program at its Family Support Centre in West Vancouver for 11 years, and the organization has collected much feedback expressing gratitude for the lessons learned over those years. "I am a better parent to my son," said one participant. "I wish I could have known six months ago what I know now," said another. The key is to know you're not alone, said Buttkus. "We really want families to know that there are supports available close to home: you

don't have to struggle in isolation." To register, contact Sue at 604-898-9372, by e-mail at sue@northshoreschizophrenia.org, or Marguerite at 1-604-926-0856.

NSSS also provides education to the community. One-on-one peer support and crisis counselling are available by telephone, and the organization hopes to expand the partnership, outreach and education program to schools in the Sea to Sky later this year. For more information about programs, services and upcoming education events, contact Christine at christine@northshoreschizophrenia.org, 604-932-7543 or 604-849-2252 or visit the NSSS website at www.northshoreschizophrenia.org.

Squawish Chief Mark V 2010