Vancouver CoastalHealth

FALL EDITION 2026

FAMILY CONNECTIONS

Edited by Katie Cribb



FAMILY SUPPORT GROUPS

FOR WHEN SUPPORTERS NEED SUPPORT

For this edition of the newsletter, we explore the magic of family support groups. They can be the antidote to the loneliness many caregivers, family members, and support people experience. Throughout the articles, we will hear about these groups from the perspective of attendees, family member facilitators, and staff member facilitators. We hope that if you are curious about support groups, this edition will inspire you to try one.

IN THIS ISSUE

6 **Interview with family member support group co-facilitators**

8 **A first person account of joining a support group**

9 **The case for problem based learning**

Sometimes supporting your loved one requires you to acknowledge that you are not always able and/or capable of providing them with what they need. Please remember that if your loved one is at risk to themselves or others, the best resources are to call “911” or go to your local Emergency Department. In Vancouver, for non-emergency mental health support, please contact the Access and Assessment Center (AAC). If you or someone you know needs substance use support, call Access Central. Information for both is provided below:

AAC Contact Information

Hours: 7:30 am - 10:00 pm 7 days/week

Phone: (604)675-3700

Address: Joseph & Rosalie Segal Family Health Centre,
803 West 12th Avenue, Level 1

Access Central information

Hours: 9:00 am - 7:45 pm 7 days/week

Phone (toll free): 1(866)658-1221

(Voicemails left after hours are answered the following morning)

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TERRITORIAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Vancouver Coastal Health facilities lie on the unceded and occupied territories and waterways of the fourteen First Nation communities of Heiltsuk, Kitasoo-Xai'xais, Lil'wat, Musqueam, N'Quatqua, Nuxalk, Samahquam, Sechelt, Skatin, Squamish, Tla'amin, Tsleil-Waututh, Wuikinuxv, and Xa'xtsa. To find out more about the Indigenous territories where you reside, one option is the website native-land.ca

ABOUT US

This newsletter is brought to you by Vancouver Coastal Health's Family Support and Involvement Team. We assist families with resources, education, information, support, and with facilitating the inclusion of family in the care of their loved ones. We also work with patient and family partners to ensure that clients and families are involved in planning and decision making across Vancouver Coastal Health's Mental Health and Substance Use Services. You can find our contact information on the front page.

The Family Connections Newsletter is available electronically, direct to your email inbox. If you don't already receive Family Connections via email and would like to stay up-to-date about programs and services for families who are supporting a loved one with mental illness and/or substance use, sign up at www.spotlightonmentalhealth.com

By going to this website and clicking on the Family tab you can find our Community Resource Guide for Families, Vancouver Coastal Health's Family Involvement Policy and much more.

THANKS FOR READING!

VANCOUVER FAMILY ADVISORY COMMITTEE (FAC)

A Partnership with Vancouver Mental Health & Substance Use Services

Who Are We? We are Vancouver parents, siblings, adult children and friends of those living with serious mental illness and substance use. We are individuals with lived and living experience. We are community agency representatives, Mental Health & Substance Use professionals, and the VCH Family Support & Involvement (FSI) team. Together, we are the Family Advisory Committee.

The FAC provides a strong family perspective to improve services for our loved ones and to expand communication and supports for caregivers and families.

If you feel inspired to join our efforts, or simply want to learn more about the FAC, please check out our webpage.

Website: vch.ca/en/vancouver-mental-health-and-substance-use-family-advisory-committee
To connect, email us at: VancouverFAC@vch.ca

WE'RE ALWAYS LOOKING FOR NEW MEMBERS!

Why focus on Family Support Groups?



As family support coordinators, when we meet with family members a common suggestion is to give support groups a try. Support groups provide an opportunity to meet other family members who understand the grief, difficulties, and successes that come with supporting someone who struggles with their mental health and substance use.

Some groups focus on providing mental health and substance use education and others focus on providing emotional support. We run a group, called Family Connections Support Group, that does a mix of both (see more on the next page). However, there are lots of other groups run by amazing organizations throughout the region that we will also highlight.

The majority of groups are drop-in style which means that you can join a group whenever you want. This could look like attending every group available or only joining once in a blue moon. If you join a group that turns out to not be a good fit don't be afraid to give another group a try. Each group has its own unique flavor and as group facilitators we want you to find one that matches what you need.

BENEFITS OF JOINING A SUPPORT GROUP

- ↑ Hope
- ↑ Safe Emotional Release
- ↑ Self Awareness
- ↑ Shared Wisdom
- ↑ Resource Sharing
- ↓ Isolation
- ↓ Distress
- ↓ Stigma



FAMILY CONNECTIONS SUPPORT GROUP

The *VCH Family Support and Involvement Team* has a support group for family and friends of individuals with mental illness and/or substance use concerns.

We aim to create a welcoming and supportive space in which family members can share their experiences with each other and feel supported and strengthened in their efforts to help their loved ones. The group has a brief educational component. A summary is sent by email following each session, including themes, resources and the education topic. Family and supporters are free to attend on a regular basis or drop in as needed.

Group members report that through learning from one-another and the provided educational resources, they leave the meetings feeling empowered and a deeper understanding of their situation.

TIDBITS FROM THE FAMILY CONNECTIONS SUPPORT GROUP

These tidbits are a selection of the educational materials and information that we discuss during support groups.

Self-Compassion: Knowing that we aren't alone in our experience and treating ourselves with kindness can help us get through difficult times

Boundary Setting: Learning the process of setting boundaries and gaining clarity about the type of support we are able and willing to provide to our loved-one.

LEAP Method: The LEAP (Listen, Empathize, Agree, Partner) method is a communication style that has supported many family members to have difficult conversations with their loved-one's. Especially for those whose loved-one's have anosognosia (they are unaware of their own mental health diagnosis).



WE MEET ONLINE ON THE FOLLOWING DAYS & TIMES:

DATE: Every first Thursday and third Monday of the month (We do not meet on STAT holidays)

TIME: 6:00 – 8:00 p.m.

PLACE: In the comfort of your own home over video call (Zoom)

If you would like to receive an invitation to our Support Group, please contact us and we will happily add you to our distribution list!

Our email is:
familyconnections@vch.ca

"WHATEVER YOU ARE STRUGGLING WITH, THERE ARE OTHERS OUT THERE WHO UNDERSTAND."

INTERVIEW WITH FAMILY CO-FACILITATORS BRYNN AND MIN

By Katie Cribb

We have recently added two family member co-facilitators to the Family Connections Support Group. Min and Brynn both bring a wealth of expertise from their lived experience. I had the opportunity to interview Min and Brynn for their insights about the group.

What interested you in this role?

Brynn: I was interested in becoming a family co-facilitator for the Family Connections Support Groups because I know first-hand the confusion and isolation that can come from having a loved one experiencing mental health and substance use difficulties. When I saw the opportunity to regularly contribute to a support group and connect with others with similar experiences, I was so excited and immediately knew I wanted to support others with the same warmth and kindness I had personally experienced from other support groups.

Min: I am genuinely interested in this role because I enjoy connecting with families and helping build a welcoming community. I believe it is important for families to have a safe space where they can share their experiences, learn from one another, and feel supported. I would be happy to continue contributing to a positive and inclusive environment where families feel comfortable and supported.

How have you found co-facilitating so far?

Brynn: Co-facilitating has been so incredible. I have greatly appreciated facilitating with both Katie and Melanie, who have amazing expertise and an ability to hold space for every member of the group. I've also loved hearing the unique experiences of every attendee; while we have a shared experience of supporting a loved one through mental health and/or substance use, everyone has a different story they bring to the group that fills the space with such wonderfully diverse and important perspectives.

Min: I've really enjoyed co-facilitating so far. It has been a rewarding, collaborative learning experience, allowing us to share ideas, learn from each other's approaches, and create a safe and welcoming environment for the group. I'm still learning as we go, but I feel that we're working well together.



What benefits have you found from attending a support group as a family member?

Brynn: I previously attended the BC Schizophrenia Society's Strengthening Families Together support and education group which I found to be a great mix of learning about Schizophrenia spectrum disorders, skill-building for supporting loved ones and ourselves, and hearing the stories from other families. I used to feel that my family and I were navigating through this journey alone, however I now feel like we have so many more people to turn to who are able to provide a listening ear and a soft place to land when things become challenging.

Min: Connecting with other family members who truly understand what we're going through has been incredibly meaningful to me. The kindness and support I've experienced in the sessions has helped me feel less alone, gain new perspectives, and approach supporting my loved one with greater patience, understanding and compassion. I've also gained practical ideas that help me feel more confident in how I respond and support them.



What might someone who is new to support groups consider before joining one?

Brynn: I think it's important to consider what you need from a group prior to joining. Some groups are more structured with the purpose of learning about specific aspects of mental health and/or substance use disorders, and some are more open and unstructured with the intention of processing topical issues for group members. Considering who the groups are designed for is also and important factor before you join; there are groups for parents/caretakers, for specific groups of people with unique experiences (eg. Indigenous groups, groups in other languages), different areas of BC, etc. And when you do join a group, take some time afterwards to tune in with how you feel. Do you feel heard, less-distressed, or more informed? Those are all good signs that the group is working for you!

Min: From my own experience, I'd say that if you're new to the group, it's completely okay to take your time and simply listen at first. You don't have to share until you feel ready. I think a good group is one where you feel comfortable, welcomed, respected, and safe to be yourself. When you can participate at your own pace and feel genuinely understood, that's the good sign that you've found the right fit.



Is there any other information or resources that you'd like to share?

Brynn: BC Schizophrenia Society: www.bcss.org/

Min: I'd encourage family members to reach out for support and remember that they don't have to navigate everything on their own. Connecting with others who have had similar experiences can be incredibly helpful, Sometimes, simply knowing that you're not alone and others understand what you're going through can make a meaningful difference.

Learning Together in the Family Connections Support Group

By Melanie Griffiths

The Family Connections Support Group often includes a brief educational component focused on topics and questions that families commonly have while supporting a loved one. Topics are selected in response to themes that arise in the group and may include communication, boundaries, self-care, navigating the mental health system, or managing conflict.

The education is presented by the Family Involvement Coordinator using a short slide presentation designed to introduce practical concepts and strategies. For example, a recent session focused on staying calm during conflict. The presentation acknowledged that conflict happens in every family, and that when mental illness or substance use are present, families may experience more intense emotions, repeated disagreements, ongoing worry and uncertainty, or conversations that seem to go in circles.



Continued: Learning Together in the Family Connections Support Group

The session focused on staying grounded when emotions run high, understanding what may be happening underneath conflict, and responding in ways that reduce escalation and tension. It explored common experiences for family members, such as fear for a loved one's safety, feeling responsible for fixing things, feeling unheard or unappreciated, exhaustion from caregiving, and uncertainty about the future.

The presentation also looked beneath the visible conflict. Arguments may seem to be about dishes, money, medication, appointments, substance use, or house rules, while underneath there may be fear, exhaustion, guilt, feeling taken for granted, wanting independence, wanting support, feeling powerless, or unmet needs.

Practical strategies included pausing and noticing what is happening, taking a breath, asking "What am I feeling?" and getting curious rather than reactive. Families were also offered ways to reduce intensity, such as using fewer words, slowing their pace, focusing on one issue at a time, giving space, leaving old arguments out of it, and using reassuring statements such as "I want to understand" or "Let's come back to this later."

Some evenings include a planned education topic, while other evenings the support group is more focused on conversation, questions, and support. We aim to be responsive to the needs and energy of the group and adapt each session accordingly.

NEW GROUP ALERT: NORTH SHORE IN-PERSON FAMILY EDUCATION AND SUPPORT GROUP

The VCH Family Support Program at the HOpe Centre holds a regular free support group for loved ones of those with mental health and substance use challenges. We provide families an opportunity to support each other through the sharing of ideas and experiences, as well as an educational forum to learn more about mental illness, self-care, and the supports available in our community. Members consist of both new and experienced individuals who have a loved one with a mental illness.

This is a free and open group. Every Second Thursday from 4:00-5:30 pm @ The HOpe Centre 1337 St Andrews Ave, North Vancouver. Please RSVP to NSfamilysupport@vch.ca or call (604)-984-5000 and ask for the Family Support Program.

Support Groups: A Personal Story

By a Family Connections Support Group Attendee
Reprinted from the April 2025 FC Newsletter

Support groups can be a wonderful and helpful way of connecting with others. Below, one of our family support group members shares their experience:

When someone you love is diagnosed with schizophrenia, it can completely change your world. My brother and I are 10 years apart, and he got sick roughly eight years ago. At first, because I was so young, I was mainly shielded from everything going on. That changed within the last two years when he had a serious accident while receiving care on the unit where he currently still is.

In recent years, I have done a lot of self-learning to understand the diagnosis, learn about the symptoms, and figure out how to support him while also managing my own emotions about the situation. Oftentimes, I am unsure if I'm helping enough or saying the right things.

The support group helped me realize that simply being there, being someone for him to talk to, and, at the end of the day, being a little sister is the best thing I can do.

For a long time, I would talk to my friends and others about what was going on, but I felt as if no one truly understood the gravity of the situation. No one understood what it was like to grieve the death of a sibling who was still alive. No one understood how heartbreaking it is to interact with a sibling whose personality has completely changed. No one understood how hard it is to watch a brilliant mind slip away into psychosis. No one understood how difficult and scary it is to deal with an individual who is not medication compliant.



My mom has been handling my brother's situation the most consistently, and she is a therapy/support group guru at this point. She suggested I attend one of the Family Connections support groups with her virtually from our two different cities. I was hesitant, scared of what emotions might come up, but ultimately decided to go because I figured any emotions that came up in the group couldn't be heavier than what I was dealing with on a day-to-day basis.

Each support group begins with a body scan grounding exercise, which sets the tone for the next two hours. Right off the bat, I felt comfortable sharing personal details that I otherwise wouldn't.

One of the most valuable takeaways is that I realized I wasn't alone and that there are so many families dealing with similar circumstances of a loved one.

There were people who finally truly understood what it was like to care for someone with a mental illness and how challenging that relationship can be to navigate. Listening to others talk about their experiences is heartbreaking but, most importantly, healing.

Attending the group has given me new perspectives on my situation and how valuable my relationship with my brother is, even though it may be different than it once was or how I imagined it to be. Oftentimes, the situation makes me feel overwhelmed, fearful, and guilty. I'm not sure what the future holds, and the support group is a place where I can share these feelings without fear of judgment.

I learned to focus on the small wins, like talking with my brother on the phone every few days, ordering him food, being able to visit him every few months, and despite how heartbreaking it is that he is in the hospital, at least he is not on the street. It helped remind me how important self-care is and how I can only be as good of a support to others as I am to myself. These days, I try to attend the support group as often as I can. It continues to show me that while schizophrenia is a complex and challenging illness, it's possible to navigate it with compassion, understanding, and a community of people who truly care.

- Anonymous



The Case for Problem-based Learning for Adults Supporting a Loved One with Mental Health or Substance Use Concerns

by Colleen Stewart

Part of our role as Family Support and Involvement (FSI) Coordinators is to provide education to staff regarding how to include family in client care planning, as outlined in the FSI policy. The FSI Coordinators fulfill this requirement by providing education through Heart & Soul new staff orientation, presentations at FSI roadshows and rounds, and short presentations at team meetings.

Previously, the Community FSI Coordinator hosted Expert Talks, where mental health and substance use experts presented on a variety of topics. Building on this legacy, the Community FSI Coordinator developed Since You Asked..., an education series where families and carers identified mental health and substance use topics of interest to them, and VCH healthcare professionals, peers, and family members answered questions on a given topic.

Continued: The Case For Problem-Based Learning...

For future education sessions, the Community FSI Coordinator proposes that we directly engage families and carers in the development of education topics that are of interest to them. Engagement could either involve families in the education planning process, ensuring that their interests and questions are understood and considered, or collaborate with them by working in partnership on some, most, or all aspects of education development and delivery (CCMI, 2018). Building on family engagement in education delivery, we could employ Problem-based Learning, a learning approach that stems from the Constructivist theory of learning.

According to Maastricht University (n.d.), Problem-based Learning empowers learners to take the initiative in identifying and addressing their own learning needs instead of being told what to do, allowing them to develop a strong foundation for continuous personal and professional growth. Students learn by working in small groups to solve complex, real-world problems, which increases their motivation and leads them beyond mere memorisation, or rote learning, to develop a deeper understanding of the subject matter.

This contrasts with traditional teaching methods, which Yang, et al (2025) define as teacher-centered, lecture-based learning or conventional demonstration-based instruction. In traditional teaching, students passively receive information. Problem-based Learning encourages learners to actively participate in their own learning.

By inviting families and carers to develop their own educational pursuits, it acknowledges that they are experts in their own lives and can define what knowledge and understanding they need about mental health and substance use. The FSI team's role would be to facilitate learning with the support of a healthcare professional and a peer who can answer questions and provide education that families may not normally be privy to on a given topic.

References

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Maastricht University. (n.d.). Problem-based learning. Maastricht University. https://www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/over-de-um/onderwijs-aan-de-um/problem-based-learning

Yang, J., Ge, J., Li, M., Zhang, C., & Peng, S. (2026). Constructivist learning theory–based teaching methods in nursing education in China: Protocol for a systematic review and meta-analysis. JMIR Research Protocols, 15, e93097. https://doi.org/10.2196/93097

FAMILY SUPPORT GROUPS
PLEASE CALL/EMAIL AHEAD TO CONFIRM DATES AND TIMES

VCH Family Connections Support Group - An online family drop-in support group held twice a month over zoom. For more information please email: familyconnections@vch.ca

VCH North Shore Family Education and Support Group - An in-person support group held on the North Shore. Please RSVP to NSfamilysupport@vch.ca or call (604)-984-5000 and ask for the Family Support Program.

BC Schizophrenia Society Family Support Groups – for family members supporting someone with serious mental illness. Local listings of BCSS support groups across B.C. regions can be found here: bcss.org/support/bcss-programs/family-support-groups/. You can also contact the Coastal Manager @ 604-787-1814 or coastmanager@bcss.org for more details on the groups and to register.

Borderline Talks – for individuals living with Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) or Traits, and their loved ones. Zoom group every Sunday at 4pm. Check bpdsupportgroup.wordpress.com/finding-help/

Pathways Serious Mental Illness *(formerly Northshore Schizophrenia Society)* - weekly online support groups, and family to family education sessions. For more information on the next support group: pathwayssmi.org/weekly-support-groups/

Pathways Clubhouse Chinese Family Support Group – Catered to Chinese-speaking (Cantonese and Mandarin) individuals and families, who are caring for a loved one with mental health issues. 2nd Saturday of each month from 1:00pm to 4:00pm via Zoom. Part 1 (1:00pm-2:30pm) is a free talk delivered by a guest speaker and Part 2 (2:45pm-4:00pm) is a Heart to Heart Support Group Sharing. Additionally the 4th Saturday of each month has a face to face support group at the Pathways Clubhouse. Contact Lee Ma at Lee.Ma@pathwaysclubhouse.com or 604-761-3723 for details.

MORE FAMILY SUPPORT GROUPS
PLEASE CALL/EMAIL AHEAD TO CONFIRM DATES AND TIMES

Parents Forever – Support group for families of adults living with addiction. Group meets weekly via Zoom on Friday evenings. Contact: parentsforever@lookoutsociety.ca

Holding Hope with Moms Stop The Harm – Holding Hope Groups are peer-led support groups, offered at no cost, to families with loved ones living with addiction (substance use disorder) across Canada. Contact: info@holdinghopecanada.org

SMART Recovery meetings for families are back! Tuesdays 6:00-7:00pm, smartrecovery.zoom.us/j/91012011101 Meeting ID: 910 1201 1101; Also search for a local meeting here: meetings.smartrecovery.org/meetings/location/

Al Anon Family Groups – Support groups for family and friends of someone with an alcohol use disorder. Local meeting locations can be found here: https://al-anon.org/al-anon-meetings/find-an-al-anon-meeting/

