

20201028-MIL Podcast Episode 070 Freda's Story

Podcast Episode 70

Freda's Story: Freda needed accountability to help decrease her pain and reduce her A1C. Being part of a team was the key.

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Meet Freda from St. Louis. Over many sedentary years Freda experienced chronic conditions such as back pain, diabetes and high blood pressure and she found it difficult to follow her doctor's directions to exercise and lose weight. "I desperately needed to garner better health habits, or I would have deterioration in my conditions and need heavier medications," she says, "so I had to modify my carbs, my favorite things". Joining an 18-week health program helped her turn things around. She discovered the power of supportive accountability that comes with a group program, meeting together every week was the key. Educational sessions that introduced new food planning and mindfulness techniques worked in tandem with group accountability. Freda's experience shows us that increasing mobility can lead to physical and mental relaxation and reduces chronic pain. "I learned to reduce my stress, and that meant I had less pain and so I ate less comfort food, an overall great benefit". With Dr. Rose Gonzalez.

Dr. Gonzalez: Hello, and welcome to this edition of the Health Disparities Podcasts. I'm Dr. Rose Gonzalez, a nurse member of the Executive Steering Committee of the Movement Is Life Caucus, who will serve as your host. Today, I'm being joined by Freda, of the St. Louis Operation Change program, but for those who may not be familiar with this program, Operation Change is a community based behavioral change program targeted at women who are African American, Hispanic/Latina or live in rural communities. The Operation Change program includes structured physical activity and is focused on awareness and education to motivate sustained behavior change. So, good day to you, Freda and thanks for joining us.

Freda: Hi, Rose. Thank you for having me.

Dr. Gonzalez: I'm so glad you're here. So, tell me a little bit about yourself, Freda.

Freda: Well, I am a retiree from the government about 12 years, now. I worked for the government 34 years. Traveled a lot, was sedentary for the most part. So, not a lot of healthy behavioral lifestyles over the years. I have health issues, diabetes, as well as hypertension and with my job primarily being somewhat stressful, being on the road a lot, but little exercise and very unhealthy eating habits because I love all of the high carb stuff.

Dr. Gonzalez: How did you hear about Operation Change?

Freda: Through one of my old coworkers who was one of the leaders with the programs here. A longtime friend. So, the program information came through her.

Dr. Gonzalez: So, what about the program encouraged you or moved you to join it?

Freda: Well, I was moved to join because I desperately needed to be on the path of garnering healthier eating habits where I wouldn't have continued deterioration with my blood pressure and having to go to a heavier medication requirement with the diabetes. So, the incentive was quite high to garner better health habits in order to have an active lifestyle and not have a medicine cabinet full of pills and things that will hinder a joyful life.

Dr. Gonzalez: So, you wanted to halt the progression of the disease process. Have you ever participated in a program like Operation Change before?

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- Freda: I have not. That was the very first time. I did have or do have membership with the Y, but was not frequently going, probably once a week. So, with the encouragement to get up and move, get my body moving on a regular basis, I have become almost daily, physically doing something.
- Dr. Gonzalez: So, talk to me a little bit about some of the changes you may have made in your life due to your participation in that Operation Change program.
- Freda: Well, learned quite a bit about food preparation and also those areas of healthier food choices, eating more frequently in order to reduce portion sizes throughout the day and not allow myself to get overly hungry, which then triggers the overeating. Choosing the vegetables and fruits instead of the ice cream and cookies, those things that have a higher carb count. The weight loss has been great because my blood pressure is stable. Still taking the medication but my numbers are very good and with the diabetes the same thing. My A1C continues to remain steady. I'm now down from 7.1 to a 5.2, my last two or three visits to the doctor. So, I am looking forward to being told I can monitor that with exercise and watching food intake and getting off of the meds.
- Rose: Wow, so the program, which took place in 2019, almost a year ago, has helped to impact your health status by, not only, maintaining your blood pressure and keeping it down, but, also, decreasing your A1C because that's pretty significant. That's hard to do.
- Freda: With the program you're practicing the different wholeness or wellness with mindfulness and the physical activity, as well as, developing better eating habits. I think I would not have been as successful, if I had not garnered the discipline and the accountability and participating in the program with the other ladies was helpful, and, also, the fact of being accountable to myself and to them each week was motivating to do the right thing. With that repeated habit it's now become my normal lifestyle, again.
- Dr. Gonzalez: So, I'm interested in that accountability piece, Freda. How did that happen that you felt accountable?
- Freda: Well, accountable because the effort that was put into the program by the leaders of the group, the time given each week and the participation of the outside speakers coming in, as well as, I'm sure the cost of the program. I just felt for someone to care enough about my health to contribute that much time and effort for me, it had to be that I, too, cared enough about me to be accountable to the program's leaders for gifting us with that.
- Dr. Gonzalez: And, prior to the program, when you used to go to your provider or your physician and they talked to you about your pressure, what kinds of things did they tell you to do?
- Freda: Well, of course, again, telling I needed to lose the weight and also modifying my eating habits, especially, for the diabetes because all of my favorite foods and my snacking were the high carbs, sugary type drinks and snacks. I would do without the healthy foods and I'd start out with dessert a lot of times.
- Dr. Gonzalez: Oh yeah.
- Freda: My very favorite things to have, I had to modify all of that and so, with that and only seeing my doctor every three months or every six months, it was different, I think, for the accountability portion because I wasn't facing or having to come up with excuse after excuse every week versus every three to six months.
- Dr. Gonzalez: So, let's talk a little bit about the sessions because the program, as we see it, is three parts. So, let's talk about the first part of the program, which was usually a speaker who

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came and focused on some aspect of health. Was there any one speaker or topic that really impacted you the most?

Freda: Well, I think the ones that impacted the most, I lead a very busy lifestyle with family, with church and oftentimes not developing enough time for Freda, for myself. So, I think the mindfulness speakers to be mindful of taking care of myself, physically, the exercising, my eating habits, but, also, to continue the exercising and taking time to simply rest and do the things that I enjoy doing. I can't very well take care of others, if I'm not taking care of myself. So, just the various speakers that gave insight on how to be mindful in reducing stress level and mindful to take care of the psychological aspect of self, as well as the physical side of it. So, I think it was just a well-rounded program addressing the physical health, my mental health. I think the combination of it all contributes to the success of it.

Dr. Gonzalez: And that's wonderful here because those speakers, they do kind of focus on central topics and we do have mental health portions in there and we have nutrition segments of the program to help, and then, you know, certainly, learning more about how to care for yourself and disease processes. So, those issues and it sounds like the one that resonated, really resonated, was you need to take time for Freda and Freda is important, and in order to care for yourself you need to do some things; rest, you need to move and you need to engage in some mindfulness. So, it's okay to do that. It's okay to do that.

Freda: Yes, yes and with all of that culminating into I was dealing with chronic back pain with the weight loss and the continual, consistent exercising and doing those body strengthening things, I have less pain with my back than I was having before. And so, the speakers would come in and give an insight on encouraging the continual movement but, also, demonstrating the different exercising, the food recipes for healthier meal planning. So, the speakers were great, various professions. Some were nurses. I think we had a doctor and a nutritionist and, also, one that spoke to us about Medicare. So, a well-rounded choice of different topics each week.

Dr. Gonzalez: So, let's talk a little bit, because it looks like now that your lecture section and the information part of the program was over you sort of moved into a second hour, which was, typically, some form of movement. Talk to me a little bit about that movement segment and how did you feel about it?

Freda: I enjoyed it very much. There were a variety. We had those that were doing the physical exercising. We had incorporated the joyful things to do such as the various forms of dancing, which we found entertaining and also enjoyable to do. So, during the slides and learning to do Zumba and different things that I wasn't familiar with.

Dr. Gonzalez: So, the variety, you liked the variety and exposure to different forms of movement. As you were going through that movement segment, did you start to feel, slowly, that change in your that pain, let's say pain in your back or any sort of joint pain that you may have had, did you start to come away with, "Oh, actually, I'm feeling better after this segment." Did you come away with something like that during those movement segments?

Freda: Yes, I did. Well, one, it helped my body to relax and with the exercising, the strengthening exercises, with strengthening my core section of my body and just learning to do those movements that would be less stressful, but, also, the strengthening exercises contributed to reduction of the pain. Of course, with the added weight loss, I'm carrying the less weight, which was problematic for my back, as well.

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Dr. Gonzalez: The program says that, and it sounds like yours was more back pain than knee pain, but, you know, for every ten pounds it is 30 to 60 pounds of pressure on your knees. So, I'm sure the additional weight put that additional pressure on your back, and then, probably, the lack of movement to kind of loosen that up and kind of keep you a little more flexible. So, the tightening up and the relaxation really kind of helped to break up that pain and help you. Excellent, excellent, excellent.

Freda: I think another added benefit to that, which one might be surprised with, with the movement and the exercising, and finding those ways of reducing the stress, I found that I began eating less of the healthier snacky stuff because that I realized was the comfort food was reducing, so I thought reducing the stress. So, having other ways of stress reduction and not desiring to eat all of the high carb things, enhanced the ability to get the weight off, which, in turn, helped with the chronic back problems and with the exercising strengthening those core muscles in my back and abdominal area, also helped to reduce the chronic back pain. That's an overall great benefit.

Dr. Gonzalez: Sometimes, you have that back pain and you really don't want to move, but it sounds like the combination of the strengthening of your core but, also, like you said you had a stressful job and you would frequently lean to stress eating, it sounds like and stress eating comfort food. And now, it sounds like through the program, you've adopted a different behavior, which is you've learned some new relaxation techniques and you've learned some new ways to move and strengthen your body, so your pain is reduced. You don't have to go for that, my stress eating is usually potato chips with that salt and that crisp, I don't know, and that grease but moving away from that and recognizing that and knowing that, now, you can do some maybe deep breathing or mindfulness and that takes kind of the edge off, you know, and it probably does relax your muscles enough to help you to move a little more comfortably.

Freda: That's correct, it does.

Dr. Gonzalez: Have, as a result of the program, because we finished it, I think we finished your program in mid-November, I think it was last year...

Freda: Yes, I continue, today I continue daily, I still use my Fitbit and keep track of the carbs or the calories that I'm burning, and, also, it is my motivator to try to get those 10,000 steps in every day, as well as get the body moving and moving around, every hour for that nine-hour period. Yes, so that still is a regular routine I have, and I have continued with the weight loss. I began to internalize a lot of what we're going through and noticed that I started the snacking and my comfort food, again.

Dr. Gonzalez: Right.

Freda: So, recognizing that I had to revert back to some of the notes I had taken with the speakers that came in to give alternative ways of stress reduction and recognizing that with what we're going through as a nation with this to be intentional of moving, walking and doing things to reduce that stress level.

Dr. Gonzalez: It sounds like you picked up some really good skills during the program that can be applied, now, because of this COVID situation, the uncertainty of it and the isolation in many ways is stressful, is very, very stressful. So, you know, I'm glad you had the notes and going back to your notes, and then, saying, "Oh, this is why I'm doing this," right, because we all turn to our comfort food. I hear people eating ice cream and really chumping down on baked goods or whatever, but you picked up some good skills and you recognized it and you said, "Okay, wait a minute, wait a minute." You assessed your situation. Right? You identified, "Oh, I'm falling into these bad behaviors. I'm stressed and I need to figure out how I'm going to cope with this."

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Freda: Yes.

Dr. Gonzalez: I think that's great.

Freda: Yes. So, instead of going to the refrigerator or the cupboard, I turn on my music and get centered, again, or get up and go take a walk, take up a good book reading instead of turning on the news every half an hour.

Dr. Gonzalez: Yes. So, I'm going to move us to the third segment, was our social support group where you had a team leader, and you kind of meet to discuss, at the end of the first and second hour, you meet to discuss what the speaker talked about, and then, you talk about things that are occurring and you're setting goals. Talk to me a little bit about that.

Freda: The sessions were very good. Whatever the topic was we had the viewing of, I guess, a short film or after the discussion with the leader and then we'd breakoff into our groups, individually, and just share our takeaways from those discussion sessions, which were beneficial and allowed us, well, in many ways, it allowed us to get to know one another better as a team, which, of course, built those trust levels and for some continued friendships and, again, the accountability partners and just acknowledging the value that each person, individually, brought to the team and offering encouraging words for the different things that individuals may have had going on, how it impacted some more than others. That part I found very instrumental for all of us in that stress reduction and engaging and having a safe area to share.

Dr. Gonzalez: Now, when you first were placed in that team what did you think?

Freda: I was very comfortable with it. I knew a couple of the individuals there with the whole group. I was not, I didn't know prior to the program, any of the ones on my team, but I'm a people person. I love people and I enjoy talking and meeting individuals. So, it was a pleasant experience to extend myself to others that I didn't know, and then, the bond forged as we would come together on a weekly basis and look forward to Saturday and gathering with them.

Dr. Gonzalez: So, you were excited to meet new people. You're a people person. Then, you looked forward to meeting with them every week. My understanding is in those groups you talk, each of you set your goals for the program and you talk about those goals. How did it feel if you did meet the goals? How did the group kind of treat you or what would they say if you weren't able to meet your goals?

Freda: Well, always very pleasant. Never a putdown, just encouraging to, well, today is a new day. We'll start afresh and strive to meet the goals this week. So, always uplifting. Never criticism that would cause one not to want to be a part of it. So, because individuals cared enough about you as an individual and cared about you meeting those goals, for me, that was part of the desire to be accountable for it because you have others that are pulling for you to do well and it's encouraging that someone cares enough that they're doing well, but, also, want you to do well, too.

Dr. Gonzalez: So, it sounds like the accountability issue, you know you almost fed off each other. So, there was trust. It was almost, it sounds like it was almost non-judgmental. So, you fell off the horse, get back on the horse. It's okay. It's a new day.

Freda: Right.

Dr. Gonzalez: People fall off horses. People fall down. Why do you fall down? So, you can learn how to get up.

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Freda: Yeah.

Dr. Gonzalez: And so, falling down was something that people could readily admit to, right and say, "Oh, I didn't meet my goal."

Freda: Correct.

Dr. Gonzalez: But it wasn't like, "Shame on you," it was like, "Oh, well, today's a new day. Start again." Right?

Freda: Right, right.

Dr. Gonzalez: When you heard those things, when you saw how people were treated, how did that make you feel?

Freda: Well, it makes you feel good. It makes you feel that you are a part of a team that truly cares. We would be excited not only for our own successes, but to have others equally joyful that you succeeded with what your goals were, and, also, those that would be empathetic when you didn't meet those goals. You didn't feel awkward or feel that you should not be a part of the group. So, just the caring and sharing portion of it made it desirable to keep pressing on.

Dr. Gonzalez: Did you look forward to those weekly meetings, then? I know there were 18 weeks of them.

Freda: Yes, 18 weeks, but very enjoyable weeks and as we got to know each other better, the level of sharing became more intimate. I can put it that way. The sharing became more intimate and the bonding of getting to know each person was very rewarding.

Dr. Gonzalez: At what point in that program do you remember saying, "Oh, my God, I think my life, I am changing. I am making changes. I am changing my life." Do you remember when that happened?

Freda: I'll safely say maybe midway through the program because physically to see the reduction with my weight, the consistently lowering of my blood pressure, and those glucose levels being maintained, so, it made a difference and with the exercising, I incorporated that immediately. So, probably just a couple of weeks into the program because I was excited to be able to continually do it and with the expectation that I would see change if I'd just be disciplined and consistent with everything that I was learning through the program. So, when we had our weigh-ins with the weight loss down that was always exciting. And then, throughout the week, whenever we would have the weeks of new food recipes to come in, we'd incorporate that into my weekly meals and trying different things. For me the result or the evidence of it was almost immediately, within a couple, two or three weeks into the program.

Dr. Gonzalez: Wow, so that also encouraged you. Right? It gave you like, "Oh, this is making a difference. Maybe I'll...I want to learn more."

Freda: Yes and I can do this because I have a whole team of other ladies with me to help encourage me along the way that I'm going to see next week and are going to be excited that I have dropped another pound or have made it through without eating up half of a cake, again, this week. So, just the camaraderie and the sisterhood.

Dr. Gonzalez: That's powerful, that's extremely powerful. So, you joined the program. You realized you wanted to be accountable because people were giving of their time. You also had some

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health issues that you wanted to address and almost within a couple of weeks you started to see the change, not only in your physical condition and in your health outcomes or health stats like your blood pressure or your A1C, but you also, now, on this journey have picked up a team, a sisterhood, a group support that encourages you and even made you feel more accountable for achieving your goals. The group was always, we can do it, we may fall and stumble, but we're going to get up and we're going to keep moving towards our ultimate goal. So, you encouraged each other, and that encouragement helped to feed more successes. Is there anything that you want to share with or listeners that we may not have covered during this conversation, something that is unique to your journey through Operation Change?

Freda: Well, the most critical part for me was getting to the point of finally being still and doing something for me. I spent a lot of time with my profession, with community work, ministry responsibilities. So, it's always reaching out, caring for others. I now take time to be mindful of taking care of me. So, I'm not tired all the time. I have successfully maintained and kept the weight off, as well as my glucose levels. So, it's very important to not feel guilty or feel you're being selfish when you take care of oneself.

Dr. Gonzalez: So, the program sounds like it gave you almost permission, it gave you with your group and all of you learned, "Oh, it's okay to take care of myself."

Freda: I would even go as far to say, learning that it's okay, but learning that it's of necessity in life to take care of oneself. As I am caring for myself, my service to others can be a more enlightening experience because I'm available. I feel physically like being there. I'm not tired, so my service to others is much greater when I'm healthier myself. There were some concerns about the length of the program, but I think for many, and for me, I think if it had been a shorter period of time, it wouldn't have been enough for me to garner those disciplines that I personally needed.

Dr. Gonzalez: I will say from all the groups I've attended that when we say 18 weeks, everybody sighs, right. Everybody goes, "Huh, 18 weeks!" And what you just shared was it does almost take those 18 weeks to kind of incorporate those changes and to develop that support team and, at the end of 18 weeks, we usually hear, "Why is the program stopping? Why can't we continue?"

Freda: Um-hmm.

Dr. Gonzalez: It seems like the 18 weeks really allows individuals to incorporate the changes that they want to make in their lives and to continue it. Well, Freda, I want to thank you so much for sharing your journey with us today, and I want to thank our listeners for joining us in this edition of the Health Disparities Podcast. Freda, thank you for your time, today. Thank you for your willingness to talk about the program and thank you for being part of Operation Change St. Louis. We thoroughly enjoyed working with you in Operation Change and we look forward to more programs in St. Louis, once COVID-19 is under wraps and we can make it out there and meet and be with each other to do the program.

Freda: Thank you for the opportunity to participate in the program and, also, an opportunity to share my experiences by way of the podcast. Hopefully, it will be an encouragement that as you travel to different cities and back here in St. Louis that others will certainly take advantage of it.

Dr. Gonzalez: Thank you so much and from all of us here at Movement Is Life and the Health Disparities Podcast, please stay safe, stay well and join us, again, soon. For more episodes, please visit www.MovementIsLifeCaucus.com/podcasts Until the next time, adios. Bye. Thank you, Freda.

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Freda: Bye.

Dr. Gonzalez: Bye.

Freda: Thank you, bye.

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