

# What is NAMI and Peer Support Really About?

By S. Kaiser, MA, CRPS-A



The National Alliance on Mental Illness, or NAMI, is about peer to peer and family-to-family support, whether at the individual, community, state or national levels.

Sandi Kaiser, a Certified Peer Recovery Specialist for ValueOptions®, and a NAMI Certified Mentor in the Peer to Peer and Provider Education Courses, relates her story of how the organization affected one individual at the NAMI National Conference in Washington, DC this year:

“I was walking around Capitol Hill with other NAMI folks who were advocating with legislators from their states. It was inspiring to see so many people with the blue sashes (provided at the conference) walking around the various buildings on the Hill. One woman, I will call her ‘Tina’, approached our group and asked what the sashes were about. After recognizing we were advocating for mental health, she said, ‘Mental health, that’s good. That’s what I need.’ She then related how she had experienced difficulty getting help through the mental health system.”

“Rather quickly Tina began unraveling her story. She blurted out at one point that she wanted to give up, and was considering suicide. I tried to ascertain if she was a danger to herself. She stated that she didn’t have a plan to do this but was admittedly depressed, lonely and frustrated with the people in her life. She expressed considerable suspicion and anger about those people. My heart went out to her, although her loud and emphatic speech and gestures were drawing stares from passersby. I figured the best thing I could do was to listen to her. This did not seem to allay her fears and sadness right away, but I told her about NAMI and what peer support and advocacy was doing for me personally. I also told her how it has changed, even saved the lives of many. She began to smile and laugh a little and seemed to trust me to some degree.”

“I invited her to the convention. Tina decided to take the rest of the day off to see what NAMI was all about. She had been working for the Federal Government for some thirty years, and had taken the morning off to attend the funeral of a Senator who had died that weekend. Tina ended up showing me and several other compatriots with blue sashes (they had joined up with us along the way and were lost), how to navigate the Metro system to return to the conference. There she was able to receive some good vibes and meet others who were in Recovery at the Consumer Welcome Center (a wonderful oasis at the conference sponsored by ValueOptions® and staffed with VO consumer advocates). Most importantly, I was able to connect with people from NAMI in Alexandria, who helped provide resources and ongoing support for her.”

“I saw Tina the next day at the conference. She was coming out of a session on the uses of spiritual practices to enhance Recovery, so I asked her how she liked it. She didn’t answer the question directly, and it seemed to trigger some of the intense feelings that she had been venting previously. But the point was that she was there- that she came back to learn more about us. Even though some of the NAMI folks came back empty-handed from their visits to legislators, Tina got to experience peer-to-peer support firsthand.

