



MENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION

Updates and information from the Atlantic County Office

Black History Month, Boost Self-Esteem Month and Random Acts of Kindness Week

Getting Well and Giving Back

Overcoming adversities, Chelsea is admired both inside and outside the statewide online wellness center

BY BETH WADE

Resilience, science, karma. Whatever magical combination collided in 2023, it brought Chelsea Kowal an exceptional year. The highlight reel: a reunion with a nephew after 13 years, an engagement, a job as an algebra tutor (her first paid position in a decade), and a rewarding volunteer post through United By Wellness. She's particularly touched by one additional, unexpected milestone, her story is among a collection that will appear in *Awakenings*, a soon-to-be-released book about survivors of schizophrenia.

For all these reasons and her varied and remarkable life experiences (keep reading to find out!), United By Wellness leadership has felt fortunate to have had her on the team.

Staff celebrate her successes, and, at the same time, with heavy hearts, say goodbye and "thank you" to a motivated, gifted young woman who contributed so much during her year as a facilitator of four different groups, two of which she developed to expand the weekend lineup.

Looking back on her time volunteering with UBW, she said the biggest highlights are related to the gratitude that's been expressed to her and about the groups.

"Everyone is very thankful for their peers, and the camaraderie is so heartwarming," she said. "That's what will stay with me the most. I'll remember the kind words people said to me."

Her dedication to a long list of groups – at first, Depression Support Group, Coping With Chaos – then to two more she created, Reducing Relapses, and Healing Connections is remarkable. She's been active with the online wellness center since August 2022 when she was connected as part of her discharge plan from case management in Sussex County.

Chelsea has many years of lived experience with her mental health struggles, most troubling were delusions and voices. There was a time during her illness, she said, that she believed she worked for the FBI, CIA, and FDA. Since age 16, she's been hospitalized 25 times. She said a new medication has reduced the voices she hears to less than 5 percent of her day.

In addition to her schizoaffective bipolar type diagnosis, she lives with autism and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. To her credit, she studied biomedical engineering and earned a master's degree. Her brilliance in school and in the wellness center groups impresses those who have had the pleasure to know her.

Chelsea's passion and interest in mental health grew in recent years, so she decided to pursue a couple of peer certifications which require 500 hours of experience in the field. United By Wellness and a second agency gave her the opportunities she needed to accomplish that goal. *(continued on the next page)*



Chelsea Kowal has devoted 175 hours to volunteering

Inside this issue

KINTSUGI

The deeper meaning behind a group's art lesson

A LONG AND WIDING ROAD

A caregiver's tory

SELF-LOVE

"A HOW TO" GUIDE

MHANJ Black History Month Programming

WELLNESS BULLETIN BOARD



(Getting Well continued)

As much as she contributed to the wellness of others, she said she also gained a lot through the experience. She remembers in Reducing Relapse that part of the discussion often included self-care. Sometimes, she said, knowing she had to be authentic and speak from a place of honesty, she had to hold herself accountable.

“I could not just talk about self-care; I had to practice what I preached,” she said.

Yvonne Tran, Wellness Center Coordinator at the Atlantic Office, said she’ll remember Chelsea as a volunteer who enthusiastically went to any training offered to her. She brought back ideas that benefited members of the statewide center, and those effects will long be felt, said Yvonne.

“UBW is so grateful to have someone who cares so much about giving back to our members,” she shared. “I’m sad to see her go, but I have no doubt she will exceed in her new job.”

Chelsea shared a thorough list of UBW staff and leadership who have made a difference to her in the past year by offering guidance, including Yvonne, Seth Edwards, Scott Whittle, Ashleigh Zappala, Anne Marie McGinley, Garrett Fitzgerald, and Mike X.

“They opened their arms and supported me,” she said. “I recognize it and I’m paying it forward.”

Looking ahead to the coming year, she said her ideal work situation would be two part-time jobs, one as a peer and one as a lab tech doing research. She’s currently interviewing for a few positions.

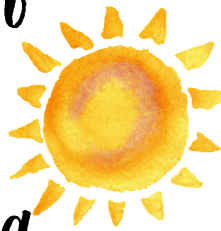
“This year is a big one for me. I think it will be even better than last year.”



Chelsea Kowal and her fiancé, Che Gomez.

*From all the staff,
consumers,
and leadership
associated with
United By Wellness,
we say a heartfelt
thank you.*

Keep shining



FUN FACTS



Chelsea would often watch videos of babies laughing before group. It helped her relax.

Though it didn't often appear on Zoom, this cup was always sitting next to the camera. She says she was most often enjoying lemonade.

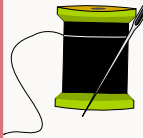
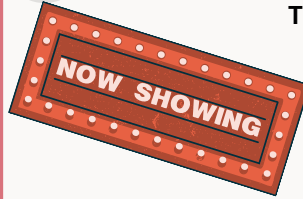
Wellness Bulletin Board

AHC Lecture: Abolition and the Underground Railroad in South Jersey - Not Without a Fight

Saturday, February 24 @ 1pm
Tennis Bldg
250 39th Street
Avalon

Author will be on hand with copies of her book for sale

AT THE LIBRARY



Tech help (by appt.)

Yoga

Chess Club

Movie Events

Writers Meet Up

Mahjong

Crochet, Sewing, and Knitting

Book Club

Winter Craft

Whodunnit? (Ventnor Murder Club)

Family Game Night

Brain Games

Beauty & Personal Care: Tips and Tricks

Senior craft & activities



Each library branch offers special events, classes, and other activities. Check the full online calendar for a complete list through atlanticlibrary.org.

[Click here to view](#)

QiGong/Tai Chi

Free class 11:30 am Saturday, Feb. 17 at
Oceanside Family Success 201 Melrose Ave., AC
Oceanside Family Success Center



Call to register
609-236-8800

ART GALLERIES

Hammonton Arts Center
30 Front Street
"Magical World" Artist Gary Erbe exhibition
609-626-3840

Stockton Art Gallery
"Dwell & Dusk: The Incredible Mundane"
Galloway Campus - L Wing
Use parking lot 5, 6, 7
609-652-4214

Noyes Art Garage of Stockton University
"Ducktown: An Atlantic City Immigration Story"
2200 Fairmount Ave., AC
609-626-3805





Some things are not at all what they're cracked up to be...they're so much more

BY BETH WADE



For about an hour, the front meeting room felt more like part art studio, part garden center during a special activity planned for participants of the weekly group “Living in the Moment.”

In keeping with the group’s theme of mindfulness, facilitator Zana Rexhepi and Wellness Center Coordinator Yvonne Tran, provided an opportunity for group members to focus and use their hands to create art – and on a deeper level discover a new perception about flaws.

Kintsugi, a Japanese art form, is practiced when a person repairs broken pieces of pottery using glue and decorative gold. And, so, on Wednesday, January 10, members of the group wrapped pots and saucers with newspaper and then broke them, intentionally.

With support, guidance, and video instructions, members took their time to piece together the pottery, then adorn the cracks with gold.

“I really enjoyed Kintsugi. It was not only an art project but it encompassed your well-being,” said group member Walter Miller. “You can be broken but you can be put back together. The project was a metaphor for your well-being.”

Yvonne said she did some self-reflection on challenges in her life during the activity.

“I thought how healing with the ‘glue’ of my support system made me come out stronger and slightly different than the person I was before,” she said, “Still beautiful and resilient.”

Once the pots were finished, it was time to fill them!

A community member and friend of the agency had rooted about two dozen spider plants that she donated to MHA Atlantic. Zana and Yvonne then set up the room with supplies – cups, dirt, water, scoops.

“For me, I know that having plants or fresh flowers in my kitchen puts me in a good mood, makes me feel so great,” said Zana. “I enjoy watching something grow.”

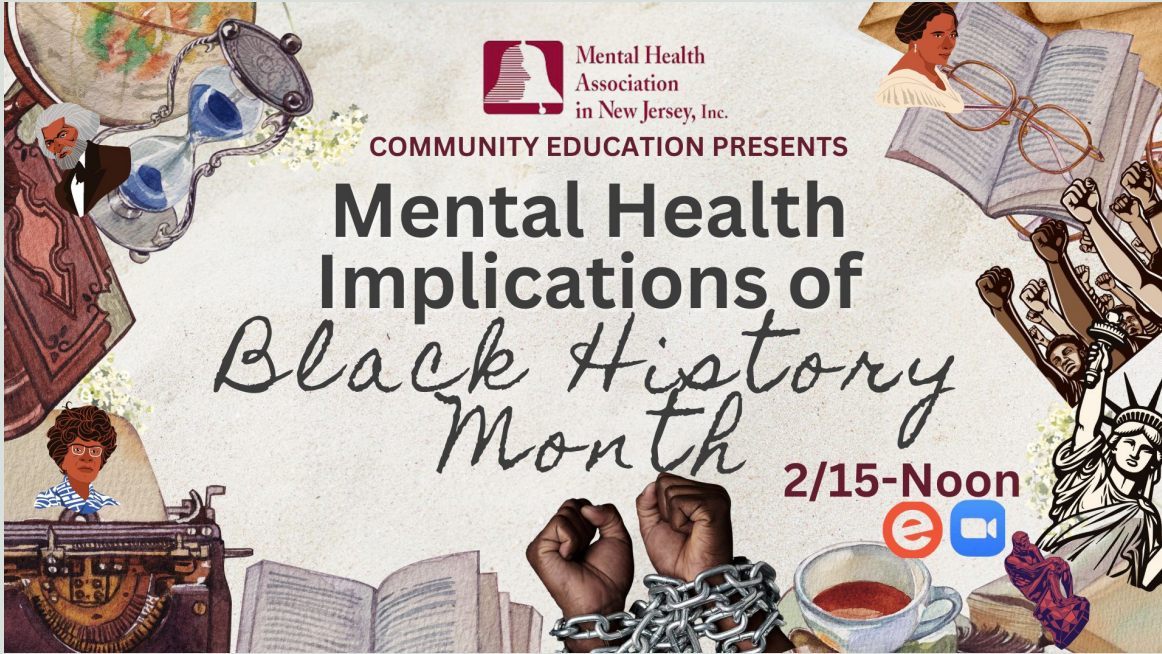
This particular day was about growing plants and trying something new. We know gratitude, mindfulness -- and people -- grew a bit, too.

The timing of the activity couldn’t have been better. Houseplant Appreciation Day happened to be on the same day as group. Special thanks to Yvonne for planning the Kintsugi activity/planting of the spider plants. We are also grateful to Zana for being the faithful, dedicated volunteer facilitator of “Living in the Moment.” Her group is offered at the MHA Atlantic office at 10:30 am on Wednesdays.

“ It was not only an art project but it encompassed your well-being. You can be broken but you can be put back together. The project was a metaphor for your well-being. ”



SPECIAL PROGRAMMING OFFERED BY MHANJ FOR BLACK HISTORY MONTH



Mental Health
Association
in New Jersey, Inc.

COMMUNITY EDUCATION PRESENTS

Mental Health Implications of Black History Month

2/15-Noon



Lynette Sheard, Director
of NJ Mental Health
Players and Community
Education Coordinator

Whether you are an advocate, mental health professional, or simply curious about the subject, this event offers an opportunity to deepen your understanding and contribute to the ongoing dialogue surrounding mental health and Black History Month.

During this hour, we will explore the experiences, challenges, and triumphs faced by the Black community throughout history, and how these have shaped mental health today. A distinguished panel of experts will share their perspectives, shedding light on the importance of acknowledging and addressing the unique mental health implications faced by individuals within this community.

All are invited to this thought-provoking event. Join us for an enriching day of learning and connection!

[Click here to register](#)

2024 CIT-ATLANTIC CLASSES

REGISTER NOW TO GET A SEAT

MHA Atlantic is a proud community partner working to ensure CIT training is offered to all law enforcement and mental health workers with the goal of providing a safer and more effective response to people with mental illnesses who are in crisis.

MARCH 11-15

Stockton-Galloway

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/CITMarch2024>

APRIL 15-19

Caesars-AC

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/CITApril24>

NOV. 18-22

Site TBD

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/CITNov24>

To register, click on the links above. Registration is required.

For more information email: CITAtlantic@MHANJ.org



Long and Winding Road

At age 76, he's traveling daily as a caregiver to two family members, his wife and son

BY BETH WADE
Public Relations Specialist

Routes and roots – these are what chiefly define John's daily travels. At age 76, he's a steadfast patriarch holding it all together for his family, and often sitting behind the wheel of his reliable silver SUV.

Twice daily he heads out faithfully to a long-term care facility to help his wife at mealtimes. She's now in the final stages of Alzheimer's in a specialized unit. For more than a decade, he cared for her at home – the last year with help from hospice workers.

The other regular trips that give structure to his busy week are to his son who calls for rides to the grocery store, Dollar Store, and sometimes physicians, a pain specialist, suboxone treatment, the psychiatrist, dentist, or a wound care specialist. His son wants to drive himself, but his numerous and cumbersome health issues – a seizure disorder, paranoid schizophrenia, and substance use disorder – make that impossible right now.

John's regular travels also include a stop that's just for himself. He keeps an 8 am time slot open to go the gym every day. That's got to happen, he says, for his mental and physical health.

He describes this pattern of coming and going as a way of life that hasn't provided "a normal day in months," but necessary and now, his daily routine.

A support system of family and friends makes these demands feel a bit lighter. Among the most important contacts are those in an Alzheimer's support group. He became connected to the group through IFSS Coordinator, Gail Christian.

"Those weekly meetings on Tuesdays are the best thing I've done. There are a lot of people in the same situation. We're birds of a feather," he says.

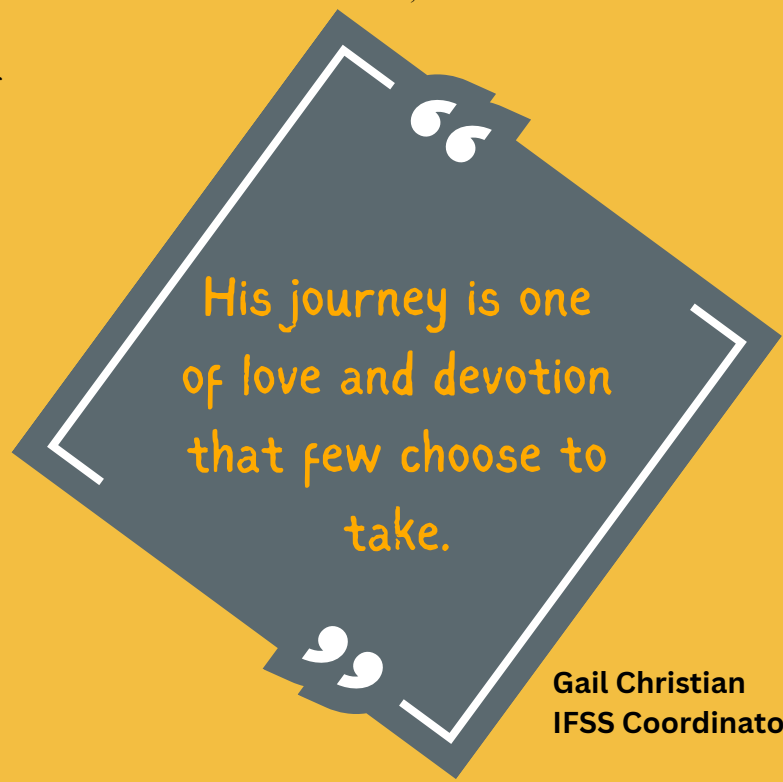
Three daughters who live locally also are helpful not only to their mother but also their brother whose refrigerator and freezer are well stocked throughout the year.

Amidst the busyness and business of his week, his oldest granddaughter is the "light" in his life, he says. He and his wife raised her since she was pre-school age and became her legal custodians. They took her in after their son's illnesses prevented him from being the kind of parent he wanted to be, at least consistently. Her mother lives with big demons of her own, too, that she could not quiet.

His granddaughter is currently in her first year of college working on a bachelor's degree in early childhood education. She still lives with him in a peaceful home on a barrier island – partly because she worries about him, he thinks.

John is a devoted husband and father in a family that has more than its fair share of heartache and worry. Surviving some hard knocks in life, including job changes and economic downturns, made him a more resilient person, he says. His route wasn't evenly paved, you might say.

For many years, Jean, his wife, weathered the worries of their son together with him -- until her memory issues worsened. Looking back, John said their son first showed signs of struggle with focus, concentration, and authority as a pre-teen diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder, ADD.



Gail Christian
IFSS Coordinator

In all, he attended three high schools. He could not realize his post-high school dream of being in the military, though he tried both the Coast Guard and Air Force.

Ten days after he was kicked out of the latter's boot camp, he experienced his first psychotic episode at home and was hospitalized. For a long time, he bounced between treatment facilities, programs, and hospitalizations, and boarding homes to a government subsidized condominium.

He'd like to buy a home, he tells his father, but his thoughts aren't based on reality. At age 44, he's never held a job. He'd like to be an Uber driver but has no license because of the seizure disorder caused by lesions on his brain.

John's son hallucinates and often experiences intrusive, troubling thoughts, sometimes about being in the military. He's called his dad about being a secret agent (continued on page 7)

or saying he can't find his boot locker. On another occasion, his son was picked up by police while face down in a puddle hollering about an attacker who wasn't there.

Another troubling behavior - he was caught stealing from John's home and his sister's house during a holiday celebration. As a result, holiday dinners and birthday celebrations now take place in restaurants. Sometimes you must adapt and change your route.

John said he thinks his son would benefit from a more supervised living arrangement, an extended care facility like what he saw once in Georgia where residents had supports, work opportunities, and a curfew, and staff on site. The building also had a lockdown section for seriously ill individuals who required hospitalization.

"If I ever win the lottery, I'd see if I could set up a group home or extended care facility like what I saw in Georgia," he said. "I'd try to find a way."

One constant worry is that his son is still using drugs - his appearance, low body weight, habit of stealing, and an incident of passing out on a neighbor's lawn lead the family and the care team (AtlantiCare PACT Team) to suspect as much. John sees a concerning infection on his son's arm and doesn't believe the story about a spider bite. His son has been revived at least once, to his knowledge, by Narcan.

"The doctor tells me that some drugs don't show up on screening. I had no idea that was possible," he explains.

John said his son is the second person identified in the family to struggle with mental health and addiction. His wife's brother died at age 34 from alcohol abuse.



An original acrylic painting by John, who creates art as part of his self-care.

Despite - and, in fact, because of -- the worries and constant travels, he says he makes time to enjoy activities that are satisfying to him. He's fond of fishing. He also enjoys exploring a few forms of art, including acrylics and watercolor.

The skills John acquired as a marine welder have been brushed off, revisited, and used to create metal sculptures.

"Gail encouraged me to get back to art," he said. "I started taking classes at ACCC [a community college] a few years ago, but I couldn't leave my wife at home alone, so I had to let it go."

And so, an old route and a new route have collided in a meaningful, helpful way. By slowing down and soldering with those tools of his past, he can become still, focused, and just be in the moment. That's important because John's got roots and routes.

Every day.

Roots and routes.

Note: the names in this story have been changed to protect their privacy.



MHA Atlantic Family Meetings

7 pm on the third Thursday

10 am on the second and fourth Thursdays

Call 609-517-8614



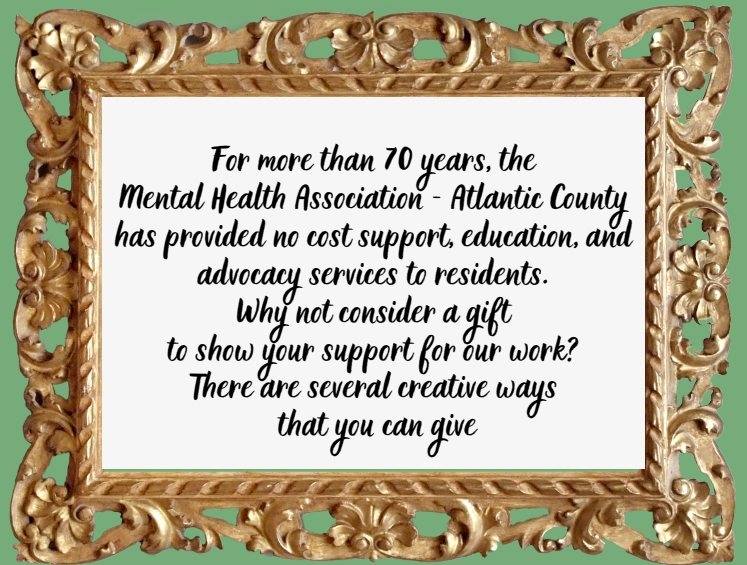
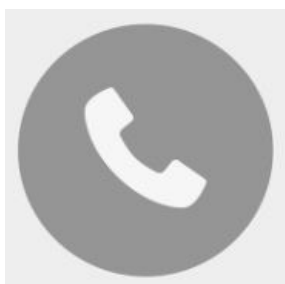
**Acute Care Family
Program serves
families in crisis
7 days per week
Available 8 am to 8 pm
609 517-8614**

Support and assistance for families with a loved one in crisis and in need of linkage to treatment and other services.

Our team engages families who are often navigating the mental health system for the first time.

Staff educate families about mental illness and offer resources and referrals that can help their loved one

*Help is a phone
call away*



*For more than 70 years, the
Mental Health Association - Atlantic County
has provided no cost support, education, and
advocacy services to residents.
Why not consider a gift
to show your support for our work?
There are several creative ways
that you can give*

How You Benefit from Planned Giving
Planned gifts are charitable contributions that are part of your financial or estate plans.
Including a gift to the
Mental Health Association -Atlantic County
in your will or trust allows you to create a legacy which provides families like you with the education, support, empathy and options to provide the best care for your family.
It only takes 20 minutes or less.

**You Get to
Leave a Legacy**

Making a bequest in your will is a powerful way to leave a lasting impact.
Another way to leave a large gift is through establishing your legacy by making a bequest, showing your support for years to come.

**You Get a
Tax Break**

Did you know that bequests can reduce federal estate taxes for heirs? And these deductions are not limited to cash — they can include assets like real estate, IRAs, and stock as well!

**Decide How Your
Gift is Used**

When you leave a bequest in your will to Mental Health Association in Atlantic County, you can allocate a program where you would like to make an impact.





Practice self-love and improve your day-to-day wellness with these tips...

Ask yourself what you need and allow yourself to receive it

Make time to do something that makes you happy everyday, no matter how simple

Let go of anger

Recognize strengths

Pursue interests and goals

Accept flaws and imperfections

Forgive your past mistakes

Stand up for yourself the way you would stand up for others

Take time to notice effort and progress

Allow yourself rest when you need it

Treat yourself with kindness - in thought and action

GUESS

Who



Picture

GAME



Which Atlantic staff is this?

Make your guess using the link or scan this QR code



HAPPY Valentine's Day

from the
volunteers, staff, and
leadership
here at
MHA Atlantic



February is designated to promote confidence and boost self-esteem. Here are a few United By Wellness groups that can help...

Join United by Wellness for access to more than 60 groups, both weekdays and weekends



Scan the QR Code to register for United By Wellness

LIGHTBULB
A group for your thoughts

Every Friday
2pm-3pm

Join us to discuss a variety of topics, answer questions, and learn from each other!
Topics focus on wellness and mental health.
Call/email for Zoom meeting information or join the virtual wellness center at no cost using this link:
<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/8VXP2K8>

609-652-3800 Unitedbywellness@mhanj.org mhaac.info/ubw
This is a Group of United By Wellness: MHANJ's Virtual Wellness Center

TUESDAYS @ 3 PM ON ZOOM
BETTER TOGETHER

"CALL/EMAIL FOR ZOOM MEETING INFORMATION OR JOIN THE VIRTUAL WCENTER AT NO COST USING THIS LINK
[HTTPS://WWW.SURVEYMONKEY.COM/R/8VXP2K8](https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/8VXP2K8)"

TOPIC FOCUSED GROUP- A SUPPORT GROUP FOR INDIVIDUALS WHO STRUGGLE WITH A COMBINATION OF PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES. TOGETHER WE WILL DISCUSS A TOPIC SURROUNDING THE STRUGGLE OF BALANCING PHYSICAL AND MENTAL WELL-BEING. LETS SUPPORT EACH OTHER IN OUR JOURNEYS TO WELLNESS!

A GROUP BY UNITED BY WELLNESS, MHA'S VIRTUAL WELLNESS CENTER

609-652-3800

SELF-HELP COPING SKILLS GROUP

MONDAYS 2-3PM

Call/email for Zoom meeting information or join the virtual wellness center at no cost using this link:
<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/8VXP2K8>

Join us to learn about different coping skills! Each week we complete activities such as poetry, drawing, & journaling and talk about how they work for us!

609-652-3800