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PATH course makes for positive impact

DIMONDALE — When Dimondale resident Mary Cooke was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes last April she said she was in shock. Although the 68-year-old woman had been feeling more tired than normal and had burning in her feet, she never expected to have the disease.

Instead of giving in to her illness, Cooke decided it was time to take her health into her own hands. The next month, she joined a diabetes support group at the Eaton Rapids Medical Center and began following her doctor's advice by cutting down on pop, sugar and food portions. Then in September, Cooke made a decision that changed her life.

She signed up for the Personal Action Toward Health or PATH class offered by the TENDON Diabetes Outreach Network under the National Kidney Foundation of Michigan. The free, six-week class helps people with chronic illnesses to better manage their condition by providing ways to reduce pain and stress, cope with fatigue, use medications wisely, and benefit from exercise.

Cooke attended the PATH class with five other individuals who had ongoing health problems.

"It was so nice to know that other people were going through the same thing as me," she said. "It's amazing that everyone was so willing to share their stories and advice."

During the PATH class, Cooke and her peers shared weekly health goals with one another and with class leaders. Cooke's goal was to begin walking down the aisles of her local supermarket and increase her distance each week.

"At first I thought 'how in the world could walking a couple miles a week lower my blood sugar?'" Cooke said. "The class helped me realize that walking really was important to my health and gave me the incentive to go out and do it."

Since the PATH class began, Cooke has lost weight, lowered her blood sugar, and has a lot more energy.

"In addition to teaching the benefits of exercise and goal-setting, the PATH class focuses on relaxation techniques, positive thinking, dealing with difficult emotions, and speaking to your health care provider," said course instructor and program coordinator for the TENDON Diabetes Outreach Network Joanie Koets.

"It's always exciting to see participants like Mary Cooke who are a positive influence to everyone else in the group," Koets said. "Even though it was difficult at first, she made a great effort to exercise more and really increased her intensity and strength over the six-week period."

For Cooke, accomplishing her walking goals each week was all about taking control of her health again.

"I set out to prove something to myself and I did it," she said.

Those interested in signing up for a PATH class or having one in their area should contact Joanie Koets of the National Kidney Foundation of Michigan at (616) 458-9520 or visit www.nkfm.org.

— From Michael L. Steigmeyer, National Kidney Foundation of Michigan