As a young girl growing up in Kentucky, Lora Humphrey Beebe learned about schizophrenia after a family member was diagnosed with the disease.

“Why are they different from others in the family?” she would ask. “What makes this person act the way they do?”

These simple questions required complex answers, leading her on an inquisitive journey to help both her family and others coping with this illness. Her curiosity continued into her graduate studies. But it was not until working as a research assistant at the University of Kentucky that she dove headfirst into schizophrenia research.

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In 2005, Beebe joined the University of Tennessee’s College of Nursing. The community values of the Volunteer spirit encapsulated her own beliefs, providing an ideal environment to enrich her research.

She focuses on two areas of research: interventions to improve community living for individuals with schizophrenia, and programs to educate nursing students about recovery-based care for persons with psychiatric disorders. To provide recovery based care, clinicians partner with clients to help them identify and meet their own goals to improve health, live a self directed life, and reach their potential.

As part of her interventions research, Beebe developed a program named Telephone Intervention–Problem Solving, or TIPS, to help people with schizophrenia adhere to a healthier lifestyle and comply with taking medication. “This is a group that’s very sedentary,” Beebe said. “They eat a poor diet. They have a lot of exercise barriers. So improving health for that group is really important.”

Beebe and her team conducted a randomized control trial with 185 participants. Over a nine-month period, some participants received weekly phone calls while others received their usual care. The study examined serum blood levels of each participant’s primary antipsychotic medication, medication attitude, self-reported medication adherence, and pill counts.

Those receiving the telephone intervention showed an increase in medication compliance by 20 percent. With its success confirmed, TIPS has been disseminated and replicated around
In 2014, Beebe was awarded funding from the US Health Resources and Services Administration to educate students about recovery-based care through an innovative program, leading a team of collaborators in the UT Health Science Center’s College of Pharmacy and two units at UT Knoxville—the Department of Nutrition and the Exercise Physiology program. She and her collaborators taught graduate students in nursing, exercise physiology, nutrition, and pharmacy how to holistically assess and treat individuals with psychiatric disorders. The program focused on traditional treatments such as medication and psychotherapy as well as self-care activities such as healthy eating, smoking cessation, and exercise.

“This is a disease that’s really devastating. It’s expensive and it affects people’s quality of life,” Beebe said. “The majority of people with schizophrenia are too disabled to work, so they can’t contribute to their community.”

Beebe hopes that teaching students a holistic approach and including psychiatric disorder treatment as part of their education will give them experience and confidence in providing services to individuals with a mental illness.

“They are heroes to me, and I believe they deserve our help.”

Beebe encourages students to follow her lead by finding something they are passionate about and sticking with it.

“It’s not an easy population to work with because their illness makes it hard to establish a relationship with them and get them to participate,” Beebe said. “The most rewarding part of my research is hearing about patients whose lives are made better because of participating in one of my studies.”

Beebe, who has been in nursing for over 37 years, continues collaborating on projects with community partners. Currently she is a part of a team led by Sandra J. Mixer working on a grant that focuses on recovery-based care education for UT students.

For more information on Beebe’s work on recovery-based care, visit nursing.utk.edu/recovery-based-interprofessional-distance-education-ride.

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