As we move through our lives, it’s easy to take things for granted. Aging can be a process that changes the way we perceive things, both mentally and physically. The challenges it brings, such as the loss of friends, health and independence, can overwhelm a person and catalyze depression, anxiety, feelings of low self-esteem, and spark changes in sleeping and eating patterns.

In response to the unique needs of the large population of 55+ adults in northwest Montana, North Valley Hospital initiated the Embrace Health program in July.

“We’re an aging population and particularly, the north end of the (Flathead) valley is attracting a population that’s retiring or looking to retire so we’re seeing an influx of people of that age group in this area,” explained Mary Jane Fox, Licensed Clinical Social Worker and program director for North Valley Embrace Health.

“And we’re also seeing a rise in undiagnosed and untreated depression and mental health issues.”

Northwest Montana may be known for its pristine mountains, lakes and big sky, but it’s also known for an alarmingly high rate of suicide. Montana consistently ranks in the top three states for highest suicide rates.

Flathead County ranks above the national average for suicides, and continuously ranks among the highest counties in the state, according to the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services (MDPHHS). Additionally, the Flathead valley ranks in the top 10 cloudiest areas in the country, adding to a large faction of people experiencing symptoms associated with seasonal depression known as Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD).

These statistics, compounded with the large retirement community of northwest Montana, create a growing need for a mental health service that caters to older adults. North Valley Hospital opened the Embrace Health program to deal with the specialized mental and emotional needs of this population, and it is the only clinic of its kind in Flathead and Lincoln counties. This outpatient therapy program allows visitors access to a psychiatrist who can aid in medication management. Each patient is treated uniquely where individual and group counseling sessions and medication management is tailored to the individual’s needs.

“Our psychiatrist will review all medications that are being taken so they can screen in the event that adverse reactions or symptoms are arising from medications that are being taken,” explained Fox.

Additionally, Embrace Health provides group therapy sessions several times per day. “We do a lot of group therapy and it breaks the social isolation related to aging,” Fox said.

The program started under the vision of North Valley Hospital’s CEO, Jason Spring.

“There was a similar program at the previous hospital where he worked and he saw how beneficial it was to the community,” Fox explained.

Fox previously worked as the community program officer covering the northwest region of Montana for MDPHHS with the Mental Health Services Bureau. Her six years experience in that position gave her ample experience with the mental health needs of this area of the state.

“This is a program that hopes to help aging individuals restore optimum mental health. When we’re in a deep depression, it’s hard to even enjoy anything at all,” said Fox. “Treatment can help people get their life back.”

One of the biggest challenges that people dealing with mental health issues may face is their own perception about these issues.

“Unfortunately, there can be a stigma around mental health issues. Many people don’t understand that depression and mental health issues are biological, and in the brain,” Fox said. “Like diabetes, it’s physical, but most people don’t recognize them that way. Many times they feel that it’s about them and they are failing in some area.”

For Fox, Embrace Health is a treatment modality and a preventative measure.

“I love helping people get the service and care that can improve their life,” she said. “When I see people feeling better, I know treatment works. We never really know whether we prevented a suicide but at least we know we’re helping by providing this type of prevention treatment for people.”

Fox welcomes people to attend a free presentation she’ll be giving on Mental Wellness at 7 p.m., Tuesday, November 15 at the Whitefish Community Center (formerly called the Golden Agers), located at 121 East 2nd St. The program is free, open to the community and is appropriate for all adults. Refreshments are served. Call 863-3632 for more information.

The North Valley Embrace Health program provides free initial consultations and individuals can refer themselves. Embrace Health is located at the Professional Office Building at 711 E. 13th Street in Whitefish. For more information please call 862-4763 or visit www.rvhosp.org and click on the clinics tab where you’ll find a link to Embrace Health.