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Xavier Amador: Making a Difference, Making a LEAP of the Heart

Xavier Amador, Ph.D., NAMI's former research director and former member of the NAMI national board of directors, has had a dramatic life—one that has made, and continues to make, a difference in helping thousands of families.



He escaped from Cuba with his mother, sister and brothers, but his father was murdered when Fidel Castro came to power. At age 14, he read a book about psychology that inspired his career. As a stranger in a strange land, he was curious about people and "how we all fit together," he said in a recent interview.

He is a clinical psychologist and adjunct professor at Columbia University, who has been a consultant to the National Institutes of Health and U.S. Department of Justice. For 15 years, he served on the faculty of Columbia's medical school and also was director of psychology at the New York State Psychiatric Institute.

He has been a consultant to or been interviewed by ABC News, CBS's *60 Minutes*, NBC's *The Today Show*, *The New York Times*, and *Wall Street Journal*, to name only a few.

He is a forensic expert who has worked for the defense on more than 30 death penalty trials. His first was that of Ted Kaczynski, the "Unabomber." More recently, he was involved in the case of Zacarias Moussaoui, the only person thus far charged and convicted in the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Both are today serving life sentences.

He is the author of eight books—including *"I'm Right, You're Wrong, Now What? Break the Impasse and Get What You Need,"* which is scheduled for release in bookstores on May 13, but can be pre-ordered through Amazon.com.

Among NAMI families, Amador is best known for *I Am Not*

"The trick is not to avoid a fight, but to fight right."

7 Healthy Habits for Fighting

1. **Don't insist you're right**—being adamant only makes the other person more stubborn.
2. **Don't engage in insults or name-calling**—it only makes the other person angrier and more rigid
3. **Pick the right time**—pay attention to whether you or the other person are too angry, defensive, stressed or tired to be

Sick, I Don't Need Help: How to Help Someone with Mental Illness Accept Treatment which defined the LEAP method—*listen, empathize, agree, partner*—for overcoming conflict, based on individual dignity, respect, and trust. *I'm Right, You're Wrong Now What?* offers the approach to a broader popular audience.

Neither book is about a "complicated therapeutic intervention." Instead they are guides to practical communication.

"My older brother Henry developed schizophrenia and our relationship suffered terribly because we got into "I'm right, you're wrong" arguments about whether he had a mental illness," Amador explained.

"Fifty percent of all patients with schizophrenia and bipolar disorder do not believe they are sick," a clinical condition known as *agnosognosia*. Lack of insight is caused by the illness itself.

"Meanwhile, millions of doctors and family members are dead certain they are sick and need help."

The LEAP method helped Henry, as well as many other persons who were in denial about their mental illness, to nonetheless take their medication—helping to restore insight and move into more effective treatment.

LEAP is different from other conflict resolution or negotiation methods because it shows people how *not* to argue. Instead, people step aside in order to get what they need—while agreeing to disagree.

"There are situations that are inherently unresolvable," Amador acknowledged. "But how you don't resolve it is far more important than the fact that you didn't resolve it."

"The trick is not to avoid a fight, but to fight right."

Listening, understanding another person's perspective, and reflecting it back to them without rebuttals, comment or reaction strengthens empathy and helps convey respect and trust. When that happens, impasses can be broken.

Beyond mental illness, the LEAP method has been by used to overcome conflict between a corporate CEO and his board of directors over eliminating a division of a company and a middle manager seeking to convince his boss to change his mind about laying him off—as well as a couple who disagreed about having another child and a couple in which a husband could not convince his wife that he had not had an affair.

Many personal crises pale next to the onset of schizophrenia—but they are no less real and can often tear families apart.

For Amador, his greatest satisfaction is in simply helping people—and seeing them want to change. He gets many letters and e-mails from people who have used LEAP to repair estranged relationships with children, spouses, parents and friends. "These letters usually make my eyes tear up," he said.

"It is a great privilege to be trusted enough to hear the intimate details of another person's life. Because what's behind this leap of faith is an effort to face one's own demons and try and change."

receptive

4. **Don't use absolutes**—people become more rigid or defensive in the face of absolute claims such as "you always" or "you never."
5. **Don't throw in the kitchen sink**—bringing up past conflicts or transgressions only makes another person angrier and more rigid and derails attention to the issue at hand.
6. **Listen without defending**—let the other person feel that they are being heard or understood, which reduces defensiveness.
7. **Reflect back what you hear**—one of the most effective ways to "lower the temperature" of an argument and open up the other person to your own point of view.

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