

UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF MEDICAL PSYCHOTHERAPY GROUPS IN NURSING HOMES

In January of 2008, a Psychiatrist and a Social Worker from the Alexian Brothers Center for Mental Health in Arlington Heights, Illinois began facilitating Group Medical Psychotherapy sessions in three Nursing Homes that provide services to mentally ill residents. These services consist of weekly hour-long sessions held in the homes with the treatment goals of helping residents become familiar with their medical issues and treatment. Additional objectives include gaining a greater understanding of mental health issues, how medications are used to treat mental illness and how to work as an active part of a treatment team. In a self-report survey provided to group members this past summer, the impact of such treatment was evident in the clients responses. Of the group members surveyed, 81% reported knowing which medications they take. With many of the participants taking a number of different medications daily, it is probable that such awareness is made possible due to discussing medicines on a weekly basis in the groups. In addition, 90% of participants reported that they have a basis understanding of why they take their medications. In addition, the survey also revealed that group participants are becoming more involved in other areas of life, including volunteering at the locations and taking on various leadership roles. As the program moved forward some interesting ripple effects have been noticed in the residents, including increased confidence and self-esteem and a more active participation in treatment. The impact of this expansion in treatment goals through Medical Psychotherapy has occurred in cognitive, social and emotional intellectual areas. Now expanded to 7 area homes, here are some additional highlights of the program.

Increased Alertness to their Environment

A major area of development, which was a direct result of raised self-esteem, was the residents' participation in the civic process. Last year was unusual because it invigorated a number of debates and discussions in the political process. As a result 99% of the residents in this group voted in the elections. Some of these residents had not voted in years. Involvement in their environment also increased their sense of self-advocacy. For example, one participant took it upon himself to write a letter on behalf of the fellow residents to his state representative sharing his thoughts on the distribution of money to the residents in the Nursing Homes.

Gaining Trust, Patience and Confidence in General

Residents have been able to understand the value of each other's ideas and personalities and share confidence and confidential information with each other as a result of participating in the groups. They have embraced diversity of opinions and ethnicities. Some residents have lived in foreign countries and all of them offer unique experiences to share with the group. An example of this area is with a client who is severely handicapped but has remarkable curiosity and he constantly shares his many passions such as his love for engines and

sciences with the group. This serves as a tremendous learning experience for all because the residents respect and admire his authority in these areas. Involvement with educational opportunities such as Medical Psychotherapy mobilizes multiple skills and even the act of listening has repeatedly improved the moods of others who participate.

Leadership Positions Established

Several residents have begun to hold leadership positions in some of the homes. One individual in particular leads group exercises at the home each day. Other residents serve as officers in different councils. In fact, we were invited to attend a residents' council meeting where a client served as the President, and he conducted the meeting with great organizational skills. We were impressed with the resolve of the group to advocate for more respect from their medical personnel and take greater ownership in their healthcare. Another resident holds jobs playing music for the home while another clears dishes after meals in the dining room. These are just some of the examples of how increasing education, ownership and empowerment can have positive effects on a community as a whole.

Volunteer Opportunities

Several residents hold volunteer positions in the nursing homes. Two individuals teach art classes while another resident distributes mail at the home. Another resident volunteers at a nearby animal shelter and she shares stories of her work with other residents. Some residents wanted to have copies of their resume written up so they could be as competitive as possible given their circumstances when they applied for jobs. Many of them have volunteered and a discussion of what they learned from the experience helped them organize their thoughts.

Participation in the Arts and Sciences

Several residents are exposed to art classes within the homes. An important step in raising expectations and standards for the residents was introducing them to scientific documentaries about their illnesses, treatment and cutting edge technology being discovered in the healthcare field. This was important because it developed their concentration, focus and visual memory. All of the residents said they enjoyed the documentaries and wanted to learn more whenever possible. The process also introduces learning through multimedia presentations using auditory and visual skills. The discussions to follow have been interesting and the entire group has been stimulated to explore more programs, which often air on PBS channels.

Collaboration with each other and schools

A neighborhood school has offered to send students to volunteer and teach/learn from the residents. A group of students and their teacher, who is also the 2008

US Chess Champion, visited and enjoyed teaching chess to the residents. Details of the visit can be viewed at www.shulmanchess.com

Residents devised a clever Buddy system to take care of each other and help in many miscellaneous ways so that each person is informed about outings and opportunities. For example, as a victim of a stroke one client is helped by many residents who encourage him to practice his impaired speech. A year later this individual is being understood and participates vigorously in the group process.

Development of Motivation, Cooperation and Curiosity

It has been a very rewarding experience to witness the development of motivation and curiosity. Residents have volunteered to exercise, constantly ask questions about their role in their treatment and continue advocating for themselves with their medical teams. The group process also serves as a source of providing valuable educational support to train other service providers about the goals and objectives, which are crucial to achieving success in treatment. Through collaborative efforts with administrators, service providers and most importantly the residents of these facilities the Medical Psychotherapy program offers a unique vehicle for learning, with the effects being noticed well beyond the group setting.

Staff and Residents Enjoying Visitors

