



Drug Dependency and Probation Practice – any room for complementary therapies?

This article, published in CAM magazine examines the practical results achieved through an initial pilot with the Probation Service, seeking to help persistent drug using offenders manage the stress they frequently experience with complimentary therapy techniques. The ultimate aim is to reduce the need to resort to drug use as a method of stress management.

Background:

At Lucis College we have been teaching cutting edge complimentary therapies to practitioner level for some years and have been running holistically styled stress management groups in partnership with many different organizations. In March 2003 The Safer Guildford Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership which includes representatives from Surrey Police, Guildford Borough Council, Surrey County Council, Guildford and Waverley Primary Care Trust and Surrey Probation Service secured funding for initially 5 and then 10 two hour sessions. These were targeted at crack cocaine users as there was felt to be a lack of provision for this client group.

This was new ground for us and we welcomed the opportunity to pilot our materials with a client group with entrenched behavioural problems on a physical, emotional, mental and social level due to their persistent drug use and the associated crime. The overarching aim of the group was to increase the confidence and competence of participants to manage stress holistically.

The objectives of the pilot were to introduce a range of approaches and techniques drawn from a variety of complementary therapies, to promote self assessment, self help and personal responsibility for change and finally to reduce the need to resort to drug use as a response to stress.

Probation Practice

One of the most common approaches to working with offenders in probation practice is a cognitive behavioural approach. This is used on a one to one basis and in groups. The emphasis in this approach is working with thoughts and feelings to bring about a change in behaviour as well as identifying and working with underlying belief systems. These beliefs often originate from early family experiences and are being unhelpfully repeated in adulthood.



Research suggests that offenders have particular thinking problems and often struggle to reflect on their behaviour and tend to be impulsive. They tend to have rigid, often negative thinking styles and struggle to see other people's perspectives. Often their values are anti-social and they have difficulty in critical reasoning skills i.e. recognising mistakes and evaluating and learning from them. Problem solving skills tend to be poorly developed or incoherent.

The approach in cognitive behavioural practice involves a collaborative relationship between worker and client where the client's perspective is viewed as a theory to be tested out. The approach is highly practical with lots of practice in between sessions and individuals are encouraged to take responsibility for themselves and their behaviour.

The work we have been doing on holistic stress management with dependent drug users on community sentences has been surprisingly complimentary to the cognitive behavioural approach of mainstream probation practice. Effectively we are working with the same areas but using more varied approaches based on assessing and managing the subtle energy system.

Session Content

By increasing offenders' understanding of their subtle energy system they are able to assess the impact their past and present experiences have had on them in a holistic way. Working with chakras encourages a broad approach incorporating mind, body and emotions. The spiritual dynamic is kept to a simple level in terms of beliefs and values. The sessions are very practical and promote experimentation with a range of tools and techniques during and in between sessions which fits well with the clients' learning styles. Even offenders with learning difficulties fare well due to the practical nature of the sessions. The self assessment approach promotes reflection and disclosure of personal information at the individual's pace.

The nature and content of the sessions is such that we rarely discuss drug use as this tends to be symptomatic of other more fundamental issues that underlie their dependency. This works well in building rapport with clients as individuals rather than just drug users or criminals. A key characteristic of the group has been their poor coping skills in the face of stressful situations. Over time their dependency has developed and has become their primary coping mechanism whatever the cost, including loss of liberty. Varied meditation techniques and working with a variety of "vibrational" tools which have an impact on the subtle energy system have enabled some to experience altered states of consciousness without resorting to chemicals. This has proved a revelation to some participants.

Participants' Experiences



Our experience has shown that participants' perceptions and sensitivities to the subtle energy system including the chakras have been heightened when compared to most people. Auricular acupuncture has been popular in work with drug users to manage their habit. Whilst it is interesting that their reports of their responses to auricular acupuncture have been mixed it leads one to wonder if the success of auricular acupuncture treatments could be enhanced if the recipients were taught ways to balance the entire subtle energy system, thereby allowing for a better flow of energy through the meridians.

Some of the participants have had access to other therapies which affect the subtle energy system such as yoga and tai chi whilst in prison and in community based projects. In these cases we found generally that individuals were able to engage significantly more quickly than the others. We were also able to support the techniques by relating them to something that they had already experienced as positive.

We started this project with an open mind and a willingness to accept negative feedback, so far all feedback has been extremely positive - but it is still early days. Although we follow a holistic approach we have found that the discussions arising from the exercises usually give the participants a chance to express emotions and experiences in a "safe" way by relating them to a corresponding weakness in a chakra for example. Discussion on any mind/body/spirit issue is usually dictated by the group. We are not there to supply them with a spiritual belief system if the subject arises we try to give them an overview and sufficient information for them to go away and explore any concepts in more detail under their own instigation. The key messages we try to encourage them to hear are how to be more objective about their own lives and experiences and to see opportunities for growth in their life experiences.

We structure the sessions so that there are a lot of practical, experiential exercises which keep them engaged although participants are given the option to take part or not. Usually the more reticent join in as they relax. In terms of working with a group such as this our experience is that we have had to keep the sessions fast paced and as a teacher it can be exhausting work. The ratio of teacher to pupil is relatively high – 2 teachers and a class assistant to around a maximum of 15 participants. This is due to a number of factors. Primarily as the sessions are experiential it is important that the participants are given sufficient support and encouragement as they work with the exercises. In addition to this some issues may crop up for individuals which they may not wish to express to the whole group. When this occurs it is possible for one of us to give the person some time apart from the group. As we grow in experience it may be possible for this ratio to be reduced but at the present time this feels to be right.

There is also the aspect of security as this client group can be volatile particularly when some continue to use drugs. Managing anger has been a significant issue for some people who have been helped by attendance at these sessions. However, our own insurers have stated that there will be a need to increase the cost of our



insurances due to the perceived higher risks which they feel are involved in teaching such groups.

Evaluation

It is our experience that the clients leave the sessions with tools and techniques which they can work with at very little cost.

Whilst there is no denying the benefits that can be gained from such therapies as acupuncture, reflexology, massage etc., the harsh reality is that many of these people, once they have been rehabilitated will be on limited incomes and the opportunity to receive these therapies will decrease. Paying £20 - £30 for each session is not going to be viable for them but the techniques they are given in the session can be used whenever they wish at little or no cost to themselves.

We have had reports back from probation staff that participants have used them and found them to be helpful in particularly stressful situations such as prior to attending Court. A number of participants have passed the techniques onto friends and family including one person whose father is suffering from cancer. He found that some of the techniques were beneficial in his father's management of pain. This resulted in a rise in self esteem and confidence for the individual concerned.

One of the surprising aspects of the work is that some participants have wanted to know more, prompting the possibility of encouraging them back into learning which we are currently exploring with the help of a local College. We have developed a range of Open College Network accredited courses which offer the potential for progression and are accessible due to the more practical nature of the topics and the flexible approach to learning that is offered by the Open College Network. This in turn could be supported by the Learning & Skills Council who currently are very concerned with supporting a decrease in the number of people with basic skills needs. Our subjects lend themselves excellently to "blended learning" whereby basic English and maths skills can be incorporated into the teaching.

And Finally

The evaluation of this work is still ongoing. The aims of this innovative project were to increase individuals' confidence and competence in managing stress holistically. So far we have continued to achieve this for a significant proportion of participants and the feedback from them and their probation workers continues to be very positive. This approach is not a miracle cure as the complexity of issues facing dependent drug users requires a multi dimensional approach. However, we have succeeded in engaging this client group and by offering a broader range of techniques and approaches we hope to have contributed to their process of change.

All the evidence therefore supports the conclusion that this pilot project achieved what was intended despite some of the practical problems. Holistic stress



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management clearly adds to the range of interventions on offer to drug users. However, the success so far realized by this pilot study has led us to believe that other groups such as those suffering with long term pain, life threatening illnesses or high stress levels could be helped by this approach and we are hopeful of securing funding to continue this work in other environments such as the NHS.

For further information it is possible to access our website www.lucisgroup.com or contact Shirley O'Donoghue, Principal of Lucis College on 01306 882291.