



Students in Action

Gateway to Holistic Healing Emory University, Nell Hodgson Woodruff School of Nursing

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Abstract

Homeless individuals in the U.S. suffer from physical ailments like heart disease as well as mental health problems like depression. Under the holistic model set by the Gateway Center, a program which shelters homeless individuals, Emory University nursing students and faculty worked to develop health education and art therapy sessions aimed to further the program's goal of providing a therapeutic environment to end homelessness. This article describes efforts to facilitate an environment of holistic healing for Gateway Center clients by improving physical, mental, and spiritual wellbeing--an important aspect of ending the cycle of homelessness. A variety of educational activities were conducted to help Gateway clients explore ways to improve stress management, blood pressure, and nutrition. In addition to these activities, wellness collages, stress balls, social support photo albums, and spiritual wellness origami boxes were created as nursing students engaged clients in open conversations about personal journeys, struggles, and future hopes represented by tangible art products. Based on a survey, Gateway clients found health education and art therapy sessions helpful and enjoyable. Nursing students and faculty found experiences with Gateway clients mutually rewarding and therapeutic.

Full Article

An estimated 2.3-3.5 million people in the U.S. are homeless in a given year (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 2004) and an additional 1.5 million people are expected to be homeless by 2011 due to the recent economic recession (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2009). Homeless individuals suffer a variety of health issues including heart disease, cancer, liver disease, kidney disease, skin infections, HIV/AIDS, pneumonia, and tuberculosis (O'Connell, 2005). Additionally, an estimated half of all homeless people suffer from a mental health issue, such as depression or schizophrenia. These physical and mental health problems both require care – which is made impossible as these people do not have consistent, affordable access to quality medical care and support (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2009).

The Gateway Center is one facility that shelters homeless individuals in the metro area of Atlanta, Georgia. This program partners with organizations like St. Joseph's Mercy Care Services to offer holistic care to the homeless population by creating a therapeutic environment to end homelessness. It serves mostly single, adult males who have been homeless for at least 12 months. With the ultimate goal of obtaining transitional or permanent housing, clients gain access to job seeking assistance, basic healthcare services, rehabilitation, drug stabilization, and two meals per day.

To supplement these services provided at Gateway and thereby facilitate an environment of holistic healing, nursing students from Emory University conducted key informant interviews with Gateway staff and identified topics for weekly health education and art therapy sessions. Gateway clients in the Recuperative Care and Mental Health Rehabilitation Units were invited to participate and were provided lunch. The number of participants during each health education and art therapy session ranged from 8 to

20 during the four weeks of sessions. Most (86%) were Black or African-American and the median age was 47 years. The goal of these sessions was to promote holistic healing so that clients would be able to re-enter the community successfully.

Health Education

Through a combination of lecture, discussion, question and answer, and activity-based learning, we provided education about a variety of health problems common among the homeless population (Table 1). We also worked with Gateway participants to identify personal barriers to improving physical health in an effort to facilitate positive health behavior changes, an essential component of holistic healing.

Tables, Images, and Figures

Table 1. Health education and art therapy session topics, Gateway Center

| | Health Education | Art Therapy |
|--------|-------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Week 1 | Stress Management | Wellness Collage |
| Week 2 | Blood Pressure | Stress Balls |
| Week 3 | Nutrition | Social Support Photo Album |
| Week 4 | Review and Future Self | Spiritual Wellness Origami Box |

The first health session was focused on stress management. We discussed the physical effects of chronic stress, which is a major issue for many homeless people. Through conversation, we helped people name what their biggest sources of stress are and what coping skills they can and do use. We ended the session by teaching some deep breathing and stretching exercises.

During the second week, we started our session by measuring blood pressures. We also discussed the meaning and importance of blood pressure and the relation between high blood pressure and poor eating habits, physical inactivity, and other health problems. Many in the group were taking 3-4 medications to control their hypertension and, until then, did not realize what their medications were for. Becoming knowledgeable of their health condition was empowering for them and helped to increase health literacy.

During week three, we discussed nutritional recommendations as depicted in the US Department of Agriculture food pyramid. Examples of nutritious snacks like raw vegetables were provided and participants created their own trail mix (See Image 1). Our discussion encompassed exploring foods that they enjoyed but were also considered healthy. Participants listed foods typically eaten in a day and planned how they could make healthy yet feasible improvements to their diet, a rather difficult task for individuals who have limited access to healthy foods and are primarily concerned about getting enough calories. One participant had listed two bags of pork skins as part of his daily diet and courageously decided to improve his diet by cutting back to one bag!



Image 1. Emory University nursing student assisting a Gateway participant prepare a healthy snack during an educational session about nutrition.

For our final week, we started our session by doing an activity called "roses and thorns". Each person described good things, "roses", and not-so-good things, "thorns", that were occurring in their lives. One participant shared that he had 16 children and another subsequently joked that having 16 children was more like having a "rose bush" than just a "rose". Following the ice breaker, we played a game which tested Gateway participants' knowledge of health topics discussed. Each nursing student took turns describing a word related to a previous health topic while others guessed. Knowledgeable participants were awarded dental products as prizes. Several Gateway participants even insisted on identifying their own health words and definitions as a challenge to others in the group. Lastly, each participant drew and described to others what they envisioned their future self to be. This activity reflected each individual's hope and determination to become the man they hoped to be.

Art Therapy

While health education sessions focused on physical health, art therapy sessions aimed to stimulate open conversations in a relaxed environment (Image 2). With encouragement and support, participants would work to create a tangible object that they had made and were proud of.

During the first week, Gateway participants created a visual representation of their definition of wellness by arranging magazine cutouts into a collage and describing to the group the significance of the images chosen. Many participants included a variety of images like physical activity, family, nature, and balance reflecting their holistic perspective of wellness as encompassing physical, mental, and spiritual wellbeing. One particular participant had chosen an ad for tequila and drew a large red "X" across the picture as he shared his struggle with alcohol abuse.



Image 2. Gateway participants and Emory University nursing students working on an art project while eating lunch.

During the second week, each participant created and designed a stress ball using balloons, cornstarch, and other art materials (Image 3). This activity created an open space for discussing sources of stress in the clients' lives. Several participants volunteered that they rely heavily on one another as a stress coping mechanism—sharing and moving past the inherit lifestyle factors that negatively affect their well-being. One client in particular made his stress ball to resemble an eight ball that would be used in a game of

pool. He explained that this was not a magic eight ball with the answers to life—instead it represented the things you strategically discard but never forget in the game [of life].

Image 3. Stress balls created and designed by Gateway participants and Emory University nursing students during an art therapy session at the Gateway Center.



During week three, photographs taken by participants showing their social support were constructed into a photo album, decorated, and then shared with the group (Image 4). These photographs were taken using disposable cameras distributed during the first week and collected the following week. Many of the photographs showed images of other Gateway clients, case managers, and other staff reflecting an environment of camaraderie and support at the center. Surprisingly, several images of us taking blood pressures or assisting participants with nutrition planning appeared in photo albums. Participants shared their appreciation for the support they received and Gateway and from Emory University nursing students.



Image 4. Gateway participant sharing his album of photographs showing his social support.

In the last art therapy session, we wanted to address the spiritual element of health, as many of the residents were very vocal about the importance that faith and spirituality play in their lives. Together we made origami Wish Boxes, so that the residents would have a concrete place to put their written hopes, goals, and prayers. One student engaged participants in discussion of spiritual and existential wellness and what life meant to them. After spending several weeks together, many of the residents opened up and felt comfortable speaking more in depth about their lives and thoughts (Image 5).

Image 5. Spiritual origami boxes created by a Gateway participant and an Emory University nursing student during an art therapy session.



Health education and art therapy are essential components of the process of holistic healing at Gateway Center. These activities were embraced by Gateway clients who had participated. According to results (Figure 1) from a short survey we administered to evaluate our time with the participants, 93.8% (15/16) respondents reported that they *somewhat* or *strongly* agreed with the statement “I found the information

given to me by the student nurses helpful” and 100% (14/14) *somewhat* or *strongly* agreed with “The sessions provided by the nursing students helped me learn coping strategies to deal with stress” and “I am able to identify sources of stress in my life”. Overall, the majority of participants found the sessions helpful and enjoyable.

Summary and Reflection

Over the course of four weeks, participants were challenged to conceptualize, represent, and verbalize a value in holistic healing that they might not have considered before. These health education and art therapy activities granted them the opportunity to strengthen social support through an increased sense of camaraderie, demonstrate knowledge and autonomy, and receive attention for their industrious efforts. Building health education makes achieving health goals more attainable and art therapy products are a tangible reminder to actively choose to live according to the values represented in their work. Not only was this experience at the Gateway Center holistic in the balance of topics covered or the aspects of healing and wellness addressed, but it was holistic in the sense that we as service-learners also parted with a deep sense of healing. It is also important to note that the process was mutually rewarding as Emory Nursing students and faculty also experienced holistic wellness during the process of offering and engaging in holistic care and interactions with clients. Below are two reflection poems written by Emory University School of Nursing students.

thegateway by susiekelly

hope has dimmed; almost vanished under a bridge of despair
disease. chaos accompanies new stresses cycling uncontrollably.
families fracture. On the edge of vulnerable meltdown they all seek a glimmer of normalcy.
God tests us in many ways.
A tsunami of humanity arrived to share large smiles and open hearts.
magic tricks. with the birth of hope Artwork emerged. wrapped in a shroud of worth, dreams soared like a jet leaving tenuous days somewhere at the soup line.
fractured hearts filled with therapeutic community. evidence of opportunity. Quietness knocking.
But ultimately You make magic! bringing wholeness and healing, the greatest gateway is called by

your
own
name.

Gateway by Kristin Burnley

I feel so lost and alone
With no place to call home
Oh, why did this happen to me

If I could get back on my feet
With a place to live, food to eat
Then maybe the world would see

That I'm talented and smart
I have a kind heart
I wish someone would believe in me

My wish came true one fine day
I went from hopeless to hopeful via the Gateway
They could see in me what no one else could see

I was given a place to stay
A bed for my body to lay
And support to accomplish my feat

It's been a year now and I am so proud
I found my silver lining in that dark gray cloud
I'm now the man I've always wanted to be

References

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