

SEEING THROUGH THE MIST: AN INTERVENTION FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WITH MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE USE ISSUES

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ABSTRACT

Over the past few years there has been increased discussion about the need for effective treatment programs for young people with dual disorders (mental illness and substance use). This paper will provide a brief overview of Triple Care Farm, a non-government organisation in rural NSW operated by Mission Australia, and the model for service delivery to a population of young people, for whom there are few treatment options. The residential treatment program combines psychotherapeutic treatments and rehabilitation, including accredited vocational training. Mental health treatment is provided in partnership with local medical practitioners. This innovative program has successfully provided interventions to young people throughout NSW and from other states for many years. Our client group include young people with major depression, a psychotic disorder or post-traumatic stress disorder, with significant associated substance use, and often with criminal offending issues as well.

We will discuss the approach to engaging young people in the program, ways of working with the client's family, and the transition from the farm back to the client's community.

INTRODUCTION

Triple Care Farm, in the Southern Highlands of NSW, is an accredited program for young people, aged between 16 and 21, with 'complex needs'. The farm is operated by Mission Australia, which is a large non-government organisation. The program has been running for 14 years. In a rural setting, the farm provides a context in which young people with mental health, substance use and behavioural issues, have the opportunity to reflect on their situation and to explore new directions.

This paper reviews a model for working with young people with dual disorders and gives a very brief overview of some of the components of the program. Our goal is to contribute to the discussion about approaches to treatment for this challenging group of young people.

Triple Care Farm is a voluntary program. Young people choose to come to the farm and choose to participate in change. They stay for a period of around 3 months, depending on individual need. Referrals to the farm come from all over NSW, and from interstate. Referring agencies include the NSW Dept of Juvenile Justice, the Youth Drug Program, the NSW Dept of Community Services and Mental Health Services, as well as non-government agencies and families. Young people who come to the farm usually have experienced, or are at serious risk of, family breakdown and homelessness. We recommend that they should only be referred to Triple Care Farm if there are no appropriate services for them within their own community.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The program works within the theoretical framework of Personal Construct Psychology, developed by George Kelly in 1955. Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) sees each person as a unique individual, shaped by their experiences, and specifically, the meanings that they place on those experiences. During a process of change, the young person tells their story in new ways.

Interpersonal relationships are fundamental to PCP and are the mediator of therapeutic progress. The most significant relationships are those where one person is able to comprehend and incorporate some of the meanings of another – Kelly calls this 'Role Relationship' (Kelly, 1955; Leitner, 1993).

PCP is an empowering psychological approach. Kelly uses the analogy of the person as a scientist to describe the active approach that the person takes to create their reality, by forming experiments, testing these out and evaluating them through a process of validation or invalidation. Young people at Triple Care Farm are encouraged to direct their own process of change in collaboration with workers, by testing out new ways of being-in-relationship to the world, and evaluating their usefulness as their experiment is validated or invalidated by those around them.

PROBLEMATIC SUBSTANCE USE – A SYMPTOM OF UNDERLYING ISSUES?

The main reason that young people come to the farm is because of problematic use of alcohol or other drugs. This means that their drug or alcohol use is affecting their ability to get a job, participate in training or maintain relationships or may be leading them into criminal activities. Over the years we have observed that problematic substance use is invariably a strategy that young people use to survive overwhelming levels of distress or challenging personal experiences. This distinguishes them from young people who might experiment with alcohol or other drugs or use those drugs socially, but do so within the context of lifestyle which is functional, fulfilling and meaningful.

The types of underlying issues contributing to young peoples' substance use could broadly be described as 'mental health problems', although in 2002, 53% of young people referred to the farm had a diagnosed mental disorder (see Table 1). This diagnosis was most commonly a depressive disorder, although about 10% had a psychotic disorder. About 40% of the young people had had a previous suicide attempt. Over the years, many have had a history of childhood abuse or trauma. Others are grieving the loss of family or loved ones. For young people who have a depressive or psychotic disorder, we have good links to local medical practitioners. Young people are supported and encouraged to seek medical treatment for their mental disorder as well as getting their physical health in order.

The primary focus of the program is to intervene in the problems underlying the substance use. We consider that unless the underlying issues are addressed, young people will have difficulty maintaining any reduction in substance use. This will mean receiving medical treatment for their mental disorder, if required, and psychosocial rehabilitation. For some, it may involve counselling for past abuse or trauma, or learning how to handle anxiety. For others, it will be about coming to terms with grief situations, building self-esteem or learning how to handle interpersonal relationships more effectively. Young people also attend groups to directly address their substance use.

Insert Table 1

MODEL OF THE PROGRAM

The Counselling and Case Management Team provide the focus for the program at Triple Care Farm. Young people formulate their own goals and develop strategies to achieve these goals in consultation with their case coordinator. These goals are reviewed every fortnight. There are opportunities for group and individual counselling, including an 'alcohol and other drugs' group.

The Residential Program, the Vocational Program, the Sport and Recreation Program, the Family Support Program and the Placement and Aftercare Program make up the other components of a comprehensive and holistic service. Young people are able to participate in a variety of activities, including VETAB accredited vocational training.

The farm has a particularly successful partnership with the Indigenous Substance Misuse Service in the local area. This service is able to mentor aboriginal young people attending the program from across NSW and ensures the program is culturally sensitive.

ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE PROGRAM

Engaging these young people in an intervention program is challenging. As the program is complex and there are numbers of staff, young people have a formal orientation to the program, during which they are

introduced to all staff members individually, have time to get to know them, ask questions, and have the various components of the program explained.

Frequently, young people arrive with negative attitudes towards counselling and underdeveloped interpersonal skills. Providing a safe and welcoming environment for young people is critical. An important component of that safety is a clear structure, with firm but flexible boundaries. Being or feeling 'out of control' can be a terrifying experience for young people.

The farm environment facilitates the efforts of the young person to form meaningful relationships. Relationships with members of the counselling and case management team are usually very important, but many young people will also choose to develop relationships with workers in the residential program or the vocational instructors. Taking the time and space to nurture these relationships, and to negotiate different viewpoints, gives the young person a sense of connectedness.

Young people participate in an interesting and challenging program. They are able to choose their own goals and directions, often deciding to build on existing strengths at first, rather than plunge straight away into the issues that may be confronting or emotionally charged.

WORKING WITH FAMILIES

Families can be a critical issue for the young people who come to Triple Care Farm. Most young people have experienced some problematic situations with their family. Supporting young people to work through these experiences, either with or without their family, is an important aspect of their process of change. The goals of family work are directed by the young person, and according to their time frame. For some young people, it may mean confronting childhood abuse, for others it may be taking the opportunity to express their anger or grief or struggles to their parents. Sometimes it might be about helping young people to gain an understanding of their parent's point of view. Not all young people go home to live, and that is not the aim. The farm considers that family work has been successful if the family are able to share quality time together, communicate feelings and negotiate differences.

One of the most valuable strategies for family work is the 'Rotary Cottage'. This is a separate house on the farm property, where families can stay and spend time with their young person. Young people find it empowering to bring their family to 'their environment', rather than always going to their family's environment. This sets the scene for a fresh perspective in the relationship.

THE TRANSITION BACK TO THE COMMUNITY

Building links back to the young person's community is the most challenging part of the work at Triple Care Farm. From the time a young person first enters the program, the direction is back to the community. Young people go on regular home leave and explore goals for the future. A strong network of resources – family, friends and a range of community services and agencies – ensure that young people will have the best chances of success when they leave the farm. Linking young people in to realistic work or training options and providing support to achieve their goals ensures that young people are most likely to experience success.

The farm has a placement and aftercare program, which supports young people to develop their placement choices and provides support to young people, mainly by phone, for 6 months following completion of the program. During 2002, just over half the young people initially admitted to Triple Care Farm completed the program. The farm was successful in following up all of these young people over the six months post discharge (see Tables 2 and 3). Recent outcome data suggests that a critical point occurs for young people at about 3 months post discharge. The farm is currently reviewing aftercare procedures to provide additional support to young people during this critical phase. The new procedures will include a placement review conference at 10 weeks after leaving Triple Care Farm, with major parties identified by the young person invited to attend.

Insert Table 2

Insert Table 3

IN CONCLUSION

The approach taken by the Triple Care Farm program provides an effective intervention for young people with mental health issues and substance use problems. The program builds on the strengths of young people and aims to address the underlying issues impacting on substance use. In particular, young people receive assertive treatment and psychosocial rehabilitation for mental health problems. Follow-up outcome data suggest that young people who complete the program are able to maintain reduced levels of substance use at 6 months post discharge from the program as well as stable and appropriate accommodation.

REFERENCES

Kelly, G.A., 1955. *The Psychology of Personal Constructs*, New York: Norton.

Leitner, L.M., Dunnnett, N.G.M., Anderson T.M. & Meshot, C.M. (1993). Unique aspects of Personal Construct Psychotherapy. In L.M. Leitner & N.G.M. Dunnnett (Ed.), *Critical Issues in Personal Construct Psychotherapy*, (pp. 3-17). Malabar: Krieger Publishing.

Table 1: Presenting issues for young people in 2002

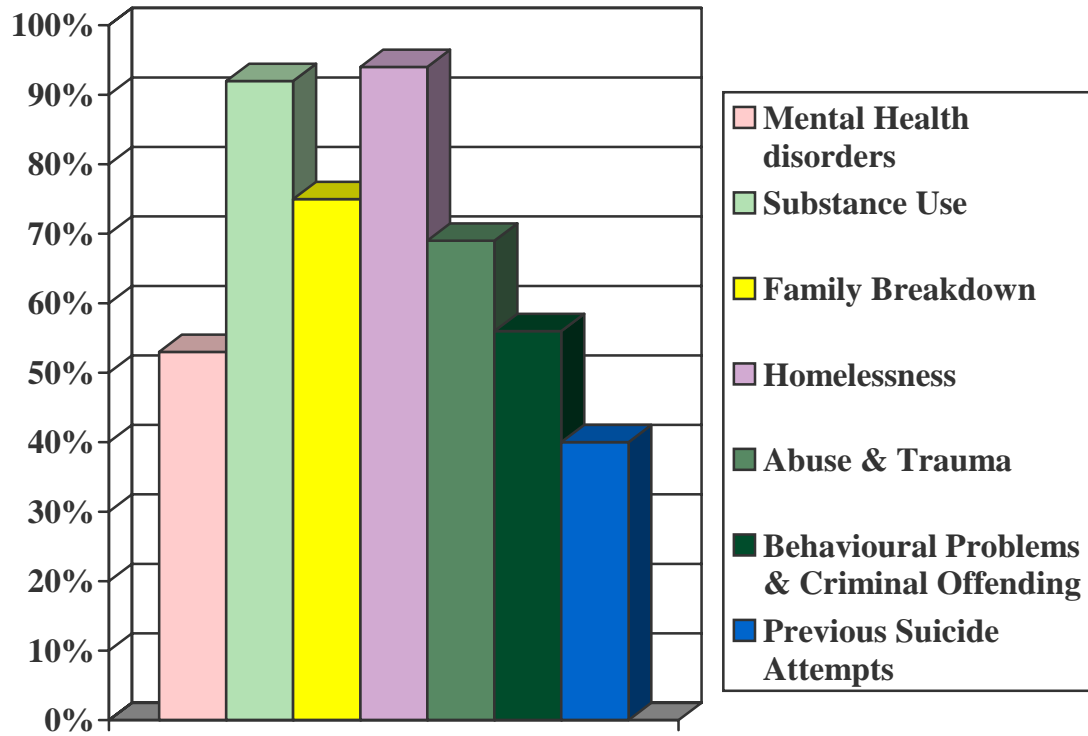


Table 2: Self-reported substance use post discharge for 2002

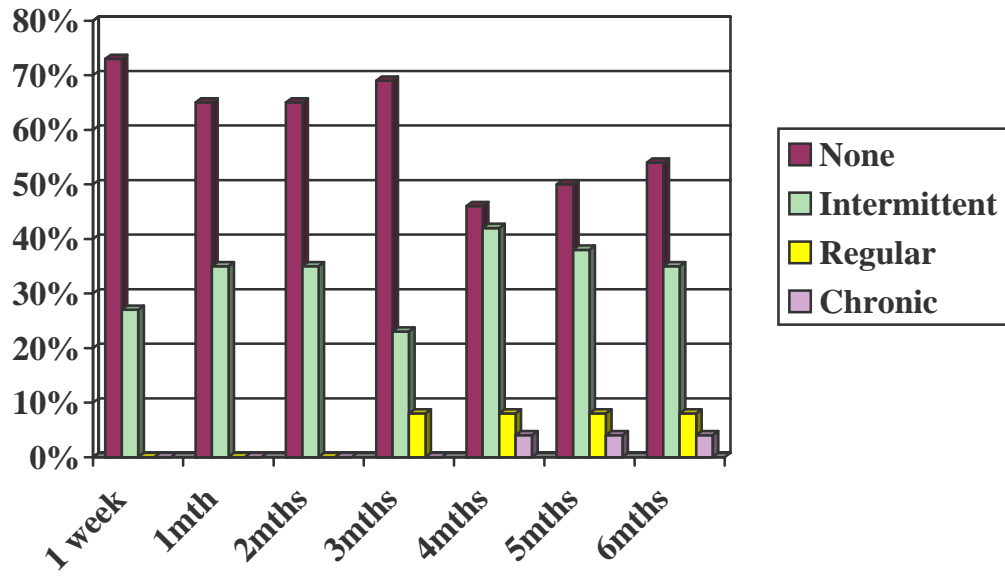


Table 3: Accommodation Outcomes post discharge for 2002

