



There is something magical and curative about the powers of nature as seen in the growth of a plant. Flowers perpetuate themselves with their seeds, constantly repeating the cycle. Nature is forgiving; if a plant dies, another can be grown in its place. If a mistake is made, nature teaches how to avoid repeating it, because the life cycle of plants provides us with hope of life renewed and a chance to begin again

- Mitchell L. Hewson, author

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HORTICULTURAL THERAPY AND POST TRAUMATIC STRESS RECOVERY

Recovering clients are learning to use horticulture as a tool in their healing journey.

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Homewood Health Centre, Guelph, Ontario, Canada

Feeling alone, desperate, and unable to function from a father's psychological and sexual abuse, a young woman learns how to move from being a victim to becoming a survivor. Through trusting relationships, and letting go of the past trauma, clients learn to heal, and develop positive coping patterns that enable them to reconnect, and successfully go on with their life. One client states;

I want you to know the role that horticulture played in my recovery at Homewood. I was admitted to the Homewood HADS Program, for alcohol addiction and then the PTSD program. One of the things that fuelled my addiction was the pain I felt as a survivor of severe sadistic childhood physical and sexual abuse, at the hands of my father and other

relatives. Working with you and your staff in the greenhouse, or on the grounds, was just what I needed at the end of a long hard day of spiritual, mental, and emotional work. Sometimes, not often, I would come to you feeling completely overwhelmed, disoriented and panicky and your quiet supportive manner and the work with God's earth soothed me tremendously. I was particularly struck by the memorial garden, though my father died in January 1995, yet I knew that despite the memorial service and physical burial, I had not laid him to rest. I had kept a rose from his coffin all that time, thinking that when I was ready, I would scatter the petals, and finally be able to say goodbye to him, and move on with my life as a free woman. I was able to scatter those rose petals in the memorial garden on the last day of my stay at Homewood. Since then I still have had painful memories of my father's abuse, but I now feel surrounded by my higher power, and I feel safe and comforted.

The Homewood Health Centre's six (6) week intensive program for post traumatic stress recovery provides hope and a chance to begin again. This program strives to help participants create safety physically, emotionally, and in their relationships, as well as to examine negative coping patterns that allow past trauma to be replayed in present life. In addition to formal therapies, the program creates a sense of community, where trauma survivors help other co-patients through the healing process. Gillian Templeton, Program Co-ordinator of the Homewood Health Centre Post Traumatic Stress Recovery Program, emphasises the importance of community. Clients find great support by connecting with the community. This collegiality allows participants to be part of a group and know that they are not alone. This program helps people recover from the after-effects of trauma, many of whom suffer from the clinical disorder known as Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

PTSD is characterized by:

- intrusive symptoms such as memories, nightmares or physical sensations;
- avoidance of people, places or situations that remind the individual of the trauma incident;
- diminished responsiveness to the outside world, such as detachment or estrangement, loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities, or an inability to experience emotions of intimacy;
- symptoms of increased arousal such as difficulty sleeping or concentration, intense fear or irritability, and mood fluctuation;
- Some clients also experience physical symptoms such as stomach aches or headaches.

The Horticultural Therapy Program is an important component of the rehabilitating process for those persons diagnosed with PTSD.

Homewood Health Centre is located in the city of Guelph, in the province of Ontario. These 47.5 acres of property is bordered by the Speed River, a home to a variety of birds, including the blue heron and waterfowl. It is a jewel of a property that boasts of beautifully landscaped gardens as well as natural bush and native trees. This special environment has housed many clients for more than one hundred and sixteen years since its inception in 1883. Clients can wander over the natural or manmade landscapes, and feel the sense of peace and sanctuary. From the early spring to the cold winter months, the property always has something to offer. Stately Swiss stone pines, wildflowers and towering butternut trees, set the tone for the dynamics of client intervention. Clients are housed in beautiful buildings that depict 19-century architectures. The therapeutic interior of the hospital promotes a homelike setting with superior hotel services. Hallways are decorated with tropical plants

and wrought iron furniture. Pictures on walls depict the vivid floral landscapes of local artists. Window areas overlook courtyards that provide vignettes of a miniature landscaped oasis. Dining areas for clients are embellished with floral centrepieces, wreaths and tropical trees. These unique areas have been designed to help clients feel a sense of importance, dignity and purpose. This environment compliments the hospital milieu and provides the stepping stone into the Horticultural Therapy program.

Clients are referred to the Horticultural Therapy program by an interdisciplinary treatment team, and begin their involvement by entering a conservatory that is lush with rich flora and fauna. This area provides a sanctuary for an inviting, **safe** environment. Safety for clients' means feeling protected or sheltered from harm. To experience safety is to know that our well being is safe, so we can feel relaxed and secure enough to take manageable risks toward change and healing. In his book *Coping with Trauma*, Dr. Allen emphasises the significance of establishing safety. Dr. Sandra Bloom, trauma specialist and author of *The Sanctuary Model, A trauma-based approach to inpatient care* states, establishing the survivors' safety takes precedent over all other issues before therapy can begin. Sanctuary is a place set apart as a refuge, shelter, retreat, hideaway, hermitage haven, cloister, and asylum.

The warm moist air, full spectrum of the natural sunlight and the nurturing aspects of plant growth contribute to this protected sensory experience. An abundance of tropical and subtropical plants provide a plethora of aromas and an array of colour. The olfactory sense is stimulated by scented material through the use of essential oils in potpourris and burners. Odours are passed through the

epithelium bulb in the nose, to the largest emotional part of the brain, the limbic system. Certain fragrances such as lavender, sweet woodruff and cinnamon help to calm and lessen a clients anxiety and depression. These fragrances are also dried and put into safety sacks to help patients ground and promote reality. Outdoor garden areas are adapted with raised beds and are specially designed for clients who may have physical limitations. Special garden plots have been designed for psychological burials. Similar to the young woman, who was able to use the roses as a therapeutic tool, PTSD clients can perform a ritual, through a symbolic planting or burial. This ceremony assists clients in remembering a loved one, or provides closure to a traumatic event. Through journals, clients are encouraged to write out their thoughts or traumatic events to assist them in understanding their feelings. This letter can be burned or buried in these therapeutic beds, to help support the client in their ritual right of passage and rejuvenating process. For future healing to occur, clients must deal with the emotional pain and suffering to be able to better develop healthy coping mechanisms and positive behaviour patterns. These therapeutic beds provide a unique therapeutic experience, where individuals learn to integrate and work as a team. The therapist must be aware of clients who are on medications such as: anti -anxiety, antidepressants, anti-psychotics. Side effects can be symptoms such as blurred vision, dry mouth and dizziness, to muscle spasms, weakness and temperature reaction. Gardening programs are generally conducted in the morning period when the temperatures are cooler; thus preventing the body from heating up and reacting to sun and medication (photosensitivity). Sour candies and cold water aids the client in keeping their mouth moist, and preventing dehydration. Proper clothing, such as cotton garments, hats and gloves provide protection from the elements.

Attending the Horticultural Therapy program on a regular basis ensures continuity, collegiality and success. The sights, sounds and sensations of nature help to ground feelings and allow clients to progress through their treatment period. The Horticultural therapists provide a dual role of therapist and horticulturalist, providing correlation in treatment through trust and a positive relationship. Rogerian Therapy helps guide the therapist in the pursuit of the client's wellness. The essence of this client-centred therapy is for individuals to help themselves. Rogers believes in the basic goodness and potential for growth in all human beings. The therapist does not give advice or interpret directly, but rather reflects or restates what the client is saying, accepting and valuing the client as a human being.

Working in the realm of horticulture embraces a return to nature for a mind body experience. Clients are taught and guided in a variety of skills from growing plants for food and nutrition, to using herbs as a complimentary form of health care. Goals of the program are attainable and measurable, and clients learn to build confidence and positive self-esteem through the many horticultural projects. Sensory stimulation provides reality through potpourris, herbal vinegars and an abundance of scented projects. Projects are set up in kits with a variety of colour and choices. Transformation takes place through skill levels and positive self-esteem. Patients learn to treat their self with respect, negative actions are eliminated and new behaviours lead to healthy outcomes through positive experiences. Group projects provide an excellent vehicle for working together in understanding emotions. Conflict resolution through group dynamics assists clients in taking control of their life and learning not to be victims.

During the initial classes, techniques of plant propagation are taught, to enable clients to see the analogy of the plants growth as compared to their personal development and metamorphosis. Daily activities in this program allow clients to balance psychotherapeutic sessions with creative activities to provide imagination and hands on projects. Clients learn to relax, decrease tension, and develop positive social interaction with others. Clients learn to have fun without trauma as the central core of their identity. Variety of plants and activities offer clients an opportunity to experience the world of nature. Clients participate in biosphere walks and ecology studies. Walking trails lead to wonderful wood smells of cedar and pine; fragrances that help calm and provide a feeling of safety for clients who may be experiencing fear and vulnerability. The natural landscape provides a host of stimuli from native wildflowers, trees, birds, and butterflies. Nature provides a sense of spirituality and purpose. The gentle texture and colour of native plants provide insight into the cycle of life, and conform in our time of rapid and constant change. A former client explains;

It is quite remarkable, that no matter what the day brings forward, a walk on the Homewood grounds either soothes my soul, or compliments my joy. What a beautiful sanctuary the grounds are, in all types of weather. On days that seem to have no rhyme or reason, or when difficulties mount, I find that a walk through the gardens always helps put life back into perspective, and gets me back in touch with the simpler and most important gifts of life. I hope that every client will come to appreciate and use the grounds for their soothing and meditative qualities, as well as their sheer beauty. I am grateful to have one of nature's chapels so readily available.

Class lectures on a variety of plant themes help stimulate clients to pursue other horticultural topics. Through class projects and garden activities, clients are able to celebrate their strengths and successes. A former client who lost his legs in a farm accident was able to bridge back his life through this program. During his treatment stage, this client was actively involved with raised bed gardens and it was through encouragement and reliving this trauma, that he was able to leave the wheelchair and touch the soil. This reconnection with the soil enabled him to be a *survivor* and regain his life back. Since then, this client has been fitted with a prosthesis and has been able to go back to his livelihood on the farm. Recent studies have also shown that physical exercise and activities help clients to psychologically take control of their bodies.

Trained volunteers assist clients in the program. These volunteers add to the high quality of client care; through their positive non-judgemental approach and connection to the outside world. Clients are able to interact with volunteers and build their sense of safety as well as practice their communication skills. Through special volunteer training, volunteers are able to connect with clients in their healing journey.

The Horticultural Therapy program continues to lead the way in using horticulture as a therapeutic tool for a variety of psychiatric disorders. The prognosis for clients diagnosed with PTSD is that of eternal hope, optimism and healing.

Sitting quietly in the tranquillity of the gazebo at evening tide, a client closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. The sweet smell of lavender and the hum of the distant traffic lull him into repose.

Upon discharge, Gillian Templeton encourages clients to develop a network of safety through the different kinds of support such as friends, relationships, social activities and professional contacts, clients are able to maintain a healthy coping strategy to enrich and take control of their life.

For more information about Homewood's Program for Traumatic Stress Recovery, please contact Gillian Templeton, Program Co-ordinator, at 519-824-1010 2209 If you are interested in referral to the PTSD program, please have your family physician or other health professional contact our Admitting Department at 519-824-1010 3550

References

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6. Homewood Health Centre – *Clinical Information Package*