

Acupuncture used to treat addiction

Recovery program a successful alternative for woman heroin users

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Angela Tymrak takes a pulse while showing how she performs acupuncture in Falmouth last month. Sabrina Schaeffer/Cape Cod Times

FALMOUTH — Everything went downhill for Nora, a college-educated woman from Scituate, after getting out of the residential treatment program, Emerson House, in September.

“I was a mess,” said the 24-year-old. “I couldn’t hold a job. I couldn’t stay away from (romantic) relationships and I kept OD-ing constantly.”

In the last week of January, she overdosed on heroin three times.

Bill Dougherty, who runs the nonprofit **Recovery Without Walls**, was beside himself.

“Bill thought I was going to die for sure,” said Nora, who did not want to use her last name.

And so Dougherty sent Nora and a group of his hard-to-help clients to attend acupuncture sessions.

Acupuncture, he said, was something he had always heard positive things about during his 30 years in substance abuse treatment. But it took the desperation of nothing-left-to-lose to try it out.

Dougherty, a former case manager at Gosnold on Cape Cod, opened **Recovery Without Walls** in 2006. The organization helps women with education, rent, car payments, mentoring, sober housing alternatives and anything else to support their recovery from the “life interruption of substance abuse,” as Dougherty puts it.

The organization is holding one of its biggest fundraisers of the year Sunday, a sold-out Kingston Trio concert at Mashpee High School.

Recovery Without Walls has helped more than 500 women, he said. Dougherty mans a bare-bones office on Gifford Street, where he oversees the program but doesn't collect a salary; he receives Social Security payments as a retiree, he said. His clients give back by organizing fundraisers for **Recovery Without Walls**. Dougherty writes grants. The organization's annual budget of \$110,000 goes almost entirely to help women in any way they need, he said. The group has helped put women through college, as well as funding the small stuff, like rent payments and car repairs, which, if left unpaid, can lead to cascading problems. It's hard to hold a job, for example, without a working car, Dougherty said.

In January, however, with heroin overdoses skyrocketing, it seemed that nothing was helping, he said.

“It was a really frustrating time, people were dying,” he said.

He decided to take six women, five of whom had overdosed in recent months, and start paying for them to receive acupuncture.

The results immediately amazed him, and continue to do so. Now **Recovery Without Walls** sends about 20 women for acupuncture.

“Everyone seemed to have the same experience,” Dougherty said. “Everyone said, ‘I'm less anxious, I'm calmer.’”

Of the original six, two have had relapses, he said. Those outcomes look good, particularly because nothing had been helping these women.

“This is the first real hope I've seen in my 30 years working in addiction,” Dougherty said. “No medication can change the brain chemistry. But this is like, your brain is no longer interested (in the drug.)”

Acupuncture, a Chinese medicine that's been around for more than 2,500 years, has been studied and found to be effective in treating addictions to everything from nicotine to heroin, said Angela Tymrak, an acupuncturist who treats women from Recovery Without Walls.

In 2000, Yale University conducted a study of heroin-addicted patients on methadone who continued to do cocaine. Compared with patients who did not receive acupuncture, more than half of the acupuncture patients (53.8 percent) tested free of cocaine during the last week of treatment, compared to 23.5 percent of the control group participating in the program, and 9.1 percent of the group that was taught relaxation techniques, according to the National Institutes of Health.

Acupuncture works by directing the flow of life energy, or Qi (Chee), Tymrak said.

“Chinese medicine looks at the whole body system and we’re looking to create balance in the body,” she said.

Extremely thin needles inserted into the surface of the skin balance the flow of Qi, she said, adding that Chinese medicine doesn’t differentiate between the body and the mind.

Acupuncture helps with migraine headaches, as well as post-traumatic stress syndrome, Tymrak said.

For the women from ***Recovery Without Walls***, the acupuncture has reduced anxiety, depression and cravings.

Nora's anxiety, depression, as well as an eating disorder, made traditional forms of addiction therapy difficult.

She had trouble entering a 12-step meeting, much less talking to a group, she said. Even one-on-one therapy proved challenging.

“Now I greet people at the meetings,” she said. “It’s so weird. I was not a believer. But now, I don’t know, it’s like my healthy brain is developing.”

It even allowed her to quit smoking and biting her nails, neither of which she had any intention of stopping.

“But then it just kind of happened,” she said.