



Thursday Memo – September 25, 2014

The Power of the Group: Integrative Medicine Group Visits

Week one:

Fourteen women and two brave men. Fifteen people of color and one white woman. Carrying diagnoses of PTSD, anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, fibromyalgia, chronic pain of all types, hypertension, and obesity. They have visited specialists, been injected, exercised in physical therapy, and ingested numerous medications to minimal avail. They are survivors of domestic violence, child abuse, sexual abuse, violent crimes, and vicarious trauma. They are pioneering a new program, Integrative Medicine Group Visits.

Our team: another physician, myself, a massage therapist leading meditations, a medical assistant, and a diligent and open-hearted coordinator.

Nine visits in eleven weeks. Sitting in a circle. Learning to trust. Fighting their instincts to get up, run out of the room, do not pass go, where is the get-out-of-jail-free card? Exposed before a group; so naked.

Stretching beyond their comfort zone, learning how to live with awareness and mindfulness.

Learning about depression, chronic stress, inflammation.

Acquiring new skills:

reading labels, eating out healthily,

balancing meals, preparing healthy foods, "eating the rainbow"

recognizing and responding to passive and aggressive communication.

Doing assigned "home practice" daily and diligently:

chair and mat yoga, acupressure, self-massage, journaling, meditation, mindful eating, assertive communication, recognizing pleasant and unpleasant events and their reaction.

Intermediate weeks:

They rely on each other. Hugging, laughing, crying, resisting, pushing, pulling, noticing.

While learning yoga, during a pose, the man spontaneously shouted with glee, "I'm doing yoga!!"

Sharing vegetarian meals - initial skepticism to eventual anticipation and excitement.

Support. Empathy. Help.

Week nine, closure, ending, change, loss:

A woman's fear about slipping back into "old ways" when her husband thought she was "dying" of depression. Her neighbor in the circle looks her directly in the eye, confident, serious: "You will not slip back. I believe in you." The worried woman, sobbing in her neighbor's arms with gratitude, "That means so much." Her neighbor holds her tightly.

The man in the group shares a poem that he wrote - having felt so off-kilter for the past few years, now not exactly correct path, but the path now is his, and it feels so right and good.

Clapping, laughter, hugs, smiles, tears. The leadership team in the meeting room next door hears our mini-ruckus through their business talk.

Trust, the final circle sharing, how far we have come:

- I learned that I was not alone with my pain - a woman who cried with relief on the first day of group as she realized for the first time that she was not suffering alone.
- I never ate any vegetables. My friends are all shocked as I eat vegetables now.
- I can get up off the floor for the first time in 4 years.
- When I went out to brunch I used to only get steak and eggs. This time I ordered a broccoli omelette.
- I used to take eight Tylenol a day for my pain. I haven't taken any Tylenol in over a month.
- I used to feel like I had to take care of everyone else. Now I learned I can only take care of me.

- When I start to get upset I do my breathing and then I feel better.
- I can cope with my pain much better now.
- Whenever I didn't feel like coming, I decided to show up because I knew someone might be depending on me to be there.
- I never finished a group. I never liked groups. This is the first group I ever completed. And I feel so good about feeling like I belong somewhere.
- I always used to fight with my daughter when we talked. Now I learned how to communicate so we don't have to fight.
- My family sees the difference in me, and my relationships are changing.
- I am teaching this to my children.
- I never felt my feelings before.
- Agreed by all: "I came for the hugs."

Moment of graduation:

Participants presenting a certificate to a fellow participant in front of the group, sharing wishes for the graduate or reflections on how the graduate has grown (or both).

Common refrain: "I saw you at the first session carrying your pain and sadness. You participated in the group and now you smile to the world. You are beautiful - keep using your tools and practicing, and I know you will keep growing."

All of us crying together, emotions raw, intense. Tissues.

They own their group. They shared parts of them in our circle that they have never shared with others. They call each other daily. They meet at the farmer's market. They are forming a walking group. They plan to get together for a cook out. They plan to buddy up and call each other during the hard times.

They feel seen and heard, some for the first time in their lives.

Facilitator:

They call me Pam.

Return hugs and smiles.

Caretaking, they wake me up gently when I fall asleep during meditation, they clean up my yoga mat I share in the go-around, they listen respectfully, clap for me, gratitude that I share Pam the mother/wife/friend/human.

In return, they see me, too.

Pleasure and honor to participate in such a wondrous group. Awe. There is a better way. This way.