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The Evolution of a Labyrinth Walking Program in Corrections

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ABSTRACT

The development and expansion of labyrinth walking in corrections has signaled a milestone in the treatment of offenders, particularly those incarcerated for substance abuse-related offenses. In this article we describe the evolution of the labyrinth walking program from its inception highlighting: curriculum development and refinement, evidence-based and program evaluation findings. Methods used in working with key stakeholders are illustrated to both implement and evaluate labyrinth walking, and to identify future directions.

KEY WORDS:

Corrections; curriculum development; labyrinth walking; substance abuse

Overall, 3-year recidivism rates for men incarcerated in Massachusetts dropped from approximately 44% in 1995 and 1996 to approximately 39% for the subsequent years through 2002 (Kohl, Matthews Hoover, McDonald, & Solomon, 2008). Statewide recidivism rates range from 31% to 38% (Massachusetts Sentencing Commission, 2002). Of note in the 2006 fiscal year, the Hampshire Sheriff's Office, which employs a reentry model that includes life skills and treatment programs, reported a recidivism rate of 15% for men actively involved in all reentry services and an overall recidivism rate of 27%.

In this paper, the efforts of one county jail to add value to existing treatment programs by incorporating labyrinth walking is reported. This walking meditation has been described as a spiritual journey resulting in transformation. Data from this experience has shown (a) increased inmate satisfaction with learning new skills such as meditation and mindfulness and (2) decreases in blood pressure (Zucker & Sharma, 2012). Site-specific staff and curricular plans have been developed. Efforts are now turned

to dissemination of project findings with the goal of replication and refinement of the curriculum and incorporating labyrinth walking into regional and national correctional treatment programs.

Describing Labyrinth Walking

The labyrinth is often referred to as a metaphor for life's journey. Labyrinth walking is a purposeful walking meditation. Participants engage in this activity by walking a purposefully designed path at their own pace, either on the ground, outdoors, or on a specially designed mat, indoors (24 or 40 feet in diameter; see Figure 1). Like many journeys, it has its twists and turns and curved paths. But every journey, wherever it leads, always begins with one step. In 2006, the Hampshire Sheriff's Office Coordinator of Community Resources invited a certified labyrinth facilitator to introduce labyrinth walking to the inmates. In preparation for these walks, the facilitator prepared a comprehensive 6-week program that included walking experiences coupled with themes: Introduction to the Labyrinth, Relaxation, Self-Esteem, Positive Thinking, Forgiveness, and Inner Peace. Each session consists of a didactic lesson, a labyrinth walk, and reflective writing, drawing, or thinking. Villemaire (2008) has developed a substantial curriculum on labyrinth walking as a cognitive and kinesthetic activity meant to enrich the mind, body, and spirit of community offenders. This curriculum follows from the seminal work by Artress (1995, 2006) with program goals tailored to the correctional setting. Classes are offered in 6-week blocks for 1.5–2 hours weekly.

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FIGURE 1. Floor labyrinth. Courtesy of Veritidas (<http://www.veritidas.org/>). Used with permission.

Labyrinth classes and walks were originally conducted in the jail's visiting room using a 24-foot canvas labyrinth that had to be moved in and out of the facility with each visit. Subsequently, this led to the dream of building an in-ground labyrinth on the property, probably the first in the country (See Figure 2). The first class consisted of 12 men. These "pioneer" participants set the stage for the subsequent programs to follow. They spread the word to other inmates about the experience, and to date, approximately 100 Hampshire County offenders have participated in this curriculum.

Key Stakeholders

There are three key stakeholder groups of significance to the labyrinth walking program. The first group consisted of the inmates. Men already engaged in treatment programs were targeted as they were looking toward their successful rehabilitation and release. The next group consisted of treatment and security staff. Significant capacity building began with the sheriff, so that the program had credibility and significance for rehabilitation. Finally, the University of Massachusetts Amherst and the Sisters of St. Joseph were central to developing and strengthening the goals and objectives of initiating and maintaining the labyrinth walking philosophy and program.

Goals for the Labyrinth Walking Program

At the onset of curriculum development, a set of goals were established:

1. To refine and add new goals as well as develop specific tools to determine whether the existing curriculum objectives were being met.
2. To create more tangible benchmarks and gather data to measure the effectiveness of the program in addition to academic standards.
3. To introduce new curriculum skills (e.g., meditation and problem solving) that can be implemented immediately to avoid relapse after leaving prison.
4. To form a Labyrinth Society within the facility to train and give inmates greater input and ownership in the development of the program.
5. To meet and work in harmony with drug addiction counselors to integrate and strengthen common goals.
6. To meet regularly with administration to determine effectiveness of the program on individuals as well as the value to the institution.
7. To establish a procedure to follow up on the effectiveness of the program after participants leave incarceration.
8. To increase the number of certified labyrinth facilitators for the program.
9. To meet regularly with the Labyrinth Program Committee to set constructive directions for the program.

Curriculum and Staff Education

The teaching manual served to guide the 6-week curriculum and to assist in insuring a consistent set of lesson plans from group to group. Currently, there are three Veritidas (2010) certified labyrinth facilitators who conduct all or some of the weekly didactic and walking classes. The literature on labyrinth walking programs, although sparse, has informed the development of this type of intervention for inmates. Labyrinth walking is a form of mindfulness meditation and is viewed by some as a tool to help improve quality of life (QOL), with applicability in a wide array of areas. Labyrinth walking has been known to assist in self-regulation, thus decreasing impulse control, problems interpreting social cues, and poor organization, thus enhancing QOL (DeBellis, 2001; Teicher, Andersen, Polcari, Andersen, & Navalta, 2002). Links between mindfulness, spirituality, and biological processes have been described in the literature. Seeman, Dubin, and Seeman (2003) found that the strongest evidence comes from randomized interventional trials reporting the beneficial physiological impact of meditation on lowering blood pressure and less stress hormone reactivity under challenge. Spirituality has the potential to influence the effects of stress on substance abuse treatment outcomes and relapse (Arevalo, Prado, & Amaro, 2008). According to Artress (2006), labyrinth walking is a "body prayer." It helps us to reclaim an awareness of our physical body, which she describes is a sacred act (p. 141).

Labyrinth Connection of Western Massachusetts

Facilitators at the county jail sought to form a larger group of men and women who could come together to share labyrinth walking practices and provide a wider communication network within western Massachusetts. In 2010, The Labyrinth Connection of Western Massachusetts was formed to explore the labyrinth as a tool for individual and collective transformation. Members serve as consultants on labyrinth building and program development and as a regional resource for learning. The Labyrinth Connection of

Western Massachusetts also provides an ongoing pool of certified labyrinth facilitators to assist in the weekly corrections programs. Monthly meetings provide opportunities for sharing ideas, experiences, and resources. Events are planned utilizing a variety of indoor and outdoor labyrinths in the western Massachusetts area, inviting the larger community to enjoy and experience the many benefits of walking the labyrinth. To date, two annual, day-long workshops have been offered to the public. Membership includes consumers and agency affiliates.

Evaluating Effectiveness

Since 2008, satisfaction data have been collected at the end of each 6-week session on all of the participants of the labyrinth walking program. These data are a general self-report of satisfaction with the program content and facilitator. Overall satisfaction with the program was measured on a 5- point rating scale and was collected through 2012. Participants were also asked to determine the most useful class (by theme). Additional assessment questions were “what went well,” “what did not go well,” and “what could be changed for the future.” Recommendations such as changing program times and moving the labyrinth outdoors have been incorporated into ongoing programs. The 5-year combined assessment concluded participants were highly satisfied with the program, would like it to be longer in duration, and appreciated the lesson plan focused on forgiveness.

Research Findings

In 2007, grant funding was sought to sustain the work and validate what we were seeing anecdotally, that labyrinth walking was healthful for mind, body, and spirit. Two labyrinth-related funded projects have been conducted at this facility. The first was funded by the International Nurses Society on Addictions in 2008, and in March of 2012, this work was extended by measuring the effect of labyrinth walking on blood pressure. Both of these projects gained institutional review board approval from the University of Massachusetts Office of Compliance, and from the Administration of the Hampshire Sheriff's Office. Results showed that a strong relationship existed between the teacher and the group of students, that blood pressure trended down after the 6-week program, and that the QOL instrument used was not the best measure for labyrinth walking evaluation (Zucker & Sharma, 2012). A proposed future study will replicate the impact of labyrinth walking on blood pressure using digital wrist monitors.

Spontaneous writing, drawing, or reflective thinking is encouraged at the end of each labyrinth walk. Journals were collected weekly and analyzed based on the work of Colaizzi

FIGURE 2. Outdoor labyrinth at the Hampshire Sheriff's Office, Northampton, Massachusetts. Used with permission.

(1978). Analysis began by carefully reading participants' journals as well as researchers' anecdotal notes to better understand the data. Significant statements were extracted from each description that directly pertained to the phenomenon under study, in this case, the weekly journal theme. Next, the formulated meanings were identified and categorized into theme clusters, and participants' journals and researchers' anecdotal notes were referred to once again. The theme clusters were integrated into a description of participants' emotional reactions to labyrinth walking. Overall themes from journal responses fell into five thematic areas. Below is a sample of quotes from participants, written in their journals at the close of a walk.

1. Positive Emotions/Thoughts: “I felt like a weight was lifted off my shoulders.”
2. Self-Improvement: “Thinking about things before reacting is a beautiful thing.”
3. Positive Actions/Intentions: “It helped me focus on what matters to me and what I have to do to keep that in my life.”
4. Reflective Thoughts/Self-Awareness: “I began to watch my thoughts become my actions.”
5. Self-Esteem: “As I walked the labyrinth, I can forgive myself.” (Zucker & Sharma, 2012, p. 51)

Subsequent grants enabled us to purchase a 24-foot portable labyrinth and, most importantly, the design and completion of an outdoor green labyrinth. Please see the outdoor labyrinth in Figure 2. Collaborations have grown between the jail and the local university, specifically the schools of Nursing and Regional Planning and Landscape Architecture. The most recent project, the completion of a 40-foot outdoor green labyrinth, will afford opportunities for inmates to not only walk the outdoor labyrinth but also maintain and care for the plants across the seasons. In addition, this new labyrinth will give us an opportunity

to compare indoor and outdoor walking environments on outcomes such as stress and QOL.

Dissemination

The Labyrinth Program has received national attention from a variety of sources. Over the past 4 years, the combined work on this project has resulted in one data-based journal article; three national poster presentations in Atlanta, GA, Boston, MA, and Greenwich, CT; one podium presentation; and four intramural and extramural sponsored grants. In the past 2 years, this work has drawn the attention of both national and regional Labyrinth Societies and the local newspaper (Hampshire Gazette, 2011). Currently, this work is being documented in a film produced by a local cable television station. The Labyrinth Connection of Western Massachusetts has held two educational workshops in 2011 and 2012 for over 40 participants, where this work has been highlighted. These data have documented our conviction that labyrinth walking programs are an emerging important tool for transformation in this population.

Conclusion and Implications for Clinical Forensic Nursing Practice

Labyrinth walking programs are transformative journeys for the walker and have implications for not only correctional nursing but almost every specialty in nursing. A labyrinth walking program for offenders has been shown to increase offenders' awareness about the importance of the relationship between walking meditation and self-reflection. As overall recidivism rates are tied to successful treatment programs in total, we cannot claim that labyrinth walking is responsible for decreasing rates but only a contributing factor in adding value to treatment program offerings.

To date, these conclusions are based on both self-report and empirical data that the program has improved the lives and health of inmates from a biopsychosocial perspective. The educational aspects of this program have

been evaluated as highly satisfying, are low cost, and are valued by the correctional system. The ongoing goal is to refine the curriculum of labyrinth education to better meet the needs of these clients as well as to demonstrate the effectiveness of this treatment modality. The long-term goal is to share the success of this program with others for adoption. Future projects include the ongoing testing of the effects of labyrinth walking on blood pressure, in addition to the identification of a variety of biomarkers that may assist in targeting care for inmate rehabilitation.

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