

## **“GRASPING THE STRINGS OF BALLOONS”: KIRKETON ROAD CENTRE’S GROUP COUNSELLING MODEL OF CARE TO IMPROVE WELL-BEING DURING COVID AND BEYOND**

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### **Background:**

People who inject drugs (PWID) may experience isolation and loneliness with few supports and connections with others. Impacts of this on health and well-being were exacerbated by COVID-19 restrictions. Trauma histories of clients often result in a lack of skills to create and maintain healthy relationships. A support group was established as COVID-19 unfolded to develop connections beyond those already existing, identify skills needed to build positive relationships, and enhance their communication skills.

### **Description of model of care/intervention:**

Clinicians assist group members to identify their most pressing issues, help make sense of their issues and problem-solve while eliciting mutual support and feedback from group members. While the group often begins with a pre-planned preparation the focus may change depending on what is brought to the group. Role-plays and brainstorming in pairs are often used to facilitate functional behaviours in their relationships and to create connections. Educational topics included substance use, healthy boundaries, assertiveness and relationship skills.

### **Effectiveness:**

Thirty (COVID-safe) group sessions have been conducted since September 2020 averaging 4 participants (range 1-5 people). Stages of change varied. On first attendance a loneliness questionnaire was completed which highlighted lack of connection and isolation. At the end of each session participants completed the Group Session Rating Scale (GSRS). Scores consistently reflected high levels of satisfaction. Return attendance was common signaling the potential value and benefit of accessing the group. Many report this group was their main source of social support during COVID-19. Flexibility allowed innovative strategies to be employed as the group evolved. The consistency of the weekly group proved beneficial to building trust.

### **Conclusion and next steps:**

The need for this group clearly exists for this marginalized population of drug users. We plan to expand the group to include referrals from other agencies and, accordingly, to extend the number of groups held weekly.

### **Disclosure of Interest Statement:**

*None to disclose.*

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