

Maladjusted: The Play

The Canadian Mental Health Association Mid Island Branch in partnership with Tillicum Lelum Aboriginal Health Centre & Mental Illness Family Support Services presented Theatre for Living's play *maladjusted* to a sold out audience of 180 at Beban Social Centre in Nanaimo. The event began with James Johnny, former chief of the Snuneymuxw Nation, who opened the event by acknowledging that we are guests on the territory of the Snuneymuxw and offered a prayer to guide the work.

David Diamond, the creator of Theatre for Living, - the joker, the facilitator, the wild card -introduced the play. He started the evening by speaking of the mechanization of health care and its effects on the patients and their families who do not receive the care they want and need as well as on the caregivers, who also struggle to give the kind of care they want and know is needed. With a show of hands, 90% to 95% of the audience had either personal experience or love ones who are affected by a system of mental health care that is "broken". The audience members spoke of a system where:

- there is a lack of respect;
- patients are not asked how they feel and are immediately medicated.
- there is a focus on patients as problems to be fixed;
- drugs are prescribed and then withdrawn- "like ripping of a scab".

Diamond then presented the play created through a workshop with people intimately involved with the mental health care system as patients, as family members and as care providers. The play follows (1) a young teenager struggling with her friend's suicide and her conflict with her mother who is struggling to support her; (2) a young homeless man with mental health challenges trying to leave the streets and (3) the mental health care workers trying their best to help them within the limitations of the system. We are introduced to their stories and then the play stops. At this point, members of the audience are invited to become part of the action. The play begins again at the beginning. Audience members are asked to bring their knowledge and experience, taking the place of an actor and moving the play and the actors in a different direction.

Observation:

At times, the procedures and policies set by the system may be in conflict with the needs of clients. Therefore information about the rules and policies need to be made clear in order to support the clients navigating the system. Successful intake may also require negotiations and adjustments where possible to meet the needs of individual clients.

Recommendations:

1. Clients and caregivers need to be able to work together to create solutions
2. Transparency and flexibility in the policies and procedures are necessary

3. Reviews of intake policies and procedures need to be undertaken to increase flexibility
4. Organizational integration of various aspects of the system can create more effective humanized care e.g. between mental healthcare workers and treatment centre staff.
5. Coordination of policies and procedures across the system would help
6. Important to focus on what serves the client best and not the system

Observation

Affirming and effective communication within families is an important part of healing. The client and the family can benefit from the development of communication skills that would encourage movement of all involved.

Recommend:

1. Supporting clients and families in the development of communication tools as an important aspect of mental health support
2. Helping clients and family members to take the risks that come with letting guard down
3. Recognizing that medication, defensiveness and other barriers may interfere with communication
4. Encouraging effective self reflection

Observation

Sometimes the rules, the policies and procedures are implemented without sufficient explanation and as absolutes, leaving the client feeling pushed against the wall and powerless. Sometimes the client may see that they cannot accept the rules set by the system and then may chose to take a different path – one which might better suit his/her needs.

Recommendation

1. Negotiations take time which is often not available to overextended staff. Therefore more flexible intake processes are needed and more money needs to be put into mental health care
2. Working together with the client to find solutions which meets the client's circumstances
3. Supporting the client with the necessary information so that she/he can be part of the decision-making. Supporting them even when the decision is not to access the service or to accept the care plan.
4. Look for loopholes in the system - that may require skirting close to the edge without crossing it.

Observation

When meeting with clients, overburdened staff can be forced to rely on forms and checklist to make their assessments which may or may not give an accurate picture of the situation. As a result of such assessments, the treatments can rely heavily on drugs as **the** solution.

Recommendation

1. Establishing a relationship with the client as the starting point. Seeing them as a human being not a checklist so as to base treatment on reality not assumptions.
2. Care givers developing communication skills
3. Looking to non medicating options e.g. 12 step program
4. Having more funding for health care so that staff can share the load

Final comments

The humanization of health care requires the navigation of complex relationships - of relationships between mental health service providers, between mental health service providers and clients, and between clients, family members and mental health service providers.

1. It requires recognizing the humanity of everyone involved.
2. It requires human centred care
3. It requires slowing down, listening and communicating which is challenging when the demands of the job create pressures to follow rigid formulas (systems, processes) rather than being careful to recognize the unique aspects of each situation and each person.
4. Attention needs to be given to complementary solutions to drugs such as the 12 step program, counselling, support groups, etc.
5. Human-centred health care is relationship-based and needs to involve the whole community.