

Breaking down barriers

Complementary therapy can work well as a way of drawing clients into treatment. Mike Blank explains how Surrey Alcohol and Drug Advisory Service is using acupuncture to break down barriers.



How is it for you?

DDN asks members of a weekly auricular acupuncture class if the treatment seems to be working for them.

George:

'I feel calmer, more able to cope.'

I've had acupuncture for roughly nine months, for alcohol and drugs. It seems to be working so far.

It's relaxing. I feel less agitated, calmer, more able to

cope. I feel generally much better.

We do meditation with it, and I do Tai Chi myself. So it's the whole thing together that's making a difference.

It's one of those things I think that either works for you, or it doesn't. If you don't believe in it, then it's never going to

work in a million years. If you've got an open mind, then it can.

Ear acupuncture works well in a group setting. In fact it probably works better in a group. I have body acupuncture as well, because I've had a stroke. That was what started me off on acupuncture, because that worked excellently for me.

Pete:

'You need to relieve yourself from the bombardment of stress.'

I've had acupuncture and meditation for about a year, for alcohol.

I've found it very helpful. I'm treated with ear acupuncture in a small group – I find Qi Gong, meditation and acupuncture are better in a group setting.

We go in, do the Qi Gong, have acupuncture in our ears, then sit down and meditate for three quarters of an hour.

If you can get into meditation – and you can't always – you feel really peaceful and calm at the end of it.

The therapy's an ongoing thing. Every day you're bombarded, getting stressed or whatever, so each week you need to relieve yourself of all

Perception hangovers from the 1980s and 90s tend to classify drug treatment services 'as those traditionally accessed by white male heroin users' – which can often prevent users from setting foot within the very places that can provide them with treatment. Crack cocaine users are among groups that are often seen as 'hard to reach' when it comes to offering treatment or other interventions.

The work that staff at Surrey Alcohol and Drug Advisory Service (SADAS) has been undertaking in the field of auricular acupuncture has helped to break down these barriers.

It is widely reported that acupuncture helps lower stress levels and can reduce the desire to take drugs, and some of SADAS' clients have indeed found it successful as part of their treatment for addiction. Some that have joined our programme have commented on an improved sleep pattern; one client stopped drinking with the aid of acupuncture and another stopped smoking. However, the benefits that acupuncture seems to produce to help clients reduce anxiety levels, and cope with the stress of their addiction combined with everyday life, are not SADAS' main driver for providing this type of intervention.

Individuals in 'hard to reach' groups often reject conventional treatment options but they seem to respond well to trying this complementary therapy. In fact, this approach has been so successful that most clients self-refer or hear about the service through word of mouth. So much so, that there has been a continuous rise in demand.

Once we have enrolled clients for acupuncture then we in a strong position to introduce them to the interventions we offer and if needed, give them the necessary support to help them move on to other

treatments provided by the NHS or residential services. As an industry, we know if we can introduce users into a treatment programme, we are better able to manage addiction, and risk of harm is reduced.

Evidence suggests that if we can enrol clients on a regular course of acupuncture that also includes access to our conventional services or those of partner agencies lasting a minimum of 12 weeks they are much more likely to reduce or stop their use eventually than those who do not receive help from a recognised organisation like SADAS.

The acupuncture service is based, at the time of writing, in a street agency. Many of the acupuncture clinics are held during the evening and weekends to make it as easy as possible for people to come along and gain relief from this complementary therapy. At the same time it gives us the opportunity to introduce them to SADAS' full range of interventions including housing, help with benefits, counselling, harm-reduction and onward referral.

The agency first started offering acupuncture on a Monday morning during September 2003. Within three weeks we were averaging 19 clients per month. In the first full year of providing acupuncture, SADAS' qualified staff treated 26 clients per month. In 2005 this rose to an average of 35 clients per month.

Two and a half years ago, when the acupuncture clinic began with just one National Acupuncture Detoxification Association UK (NADA) worker, an auricular acupuncture procedure manual was put in place, as well as a record sheet that records the number of needles used and an information sheet which outlines the acupuncture treatment. This was signed by the client, giving consent to treatment. As

well as a necessary requirement, the data recorded has proved invaluable to help us analyse the relevant success of the venture of the time of the project.

Since original registration and certification, SADAS now has five staff and one user group member trained to deliver treatment. Training of these staff, undertaken by NADA, took place at the project and the necessary clinical assessments were also completed on site.

Re-assessment of therapists occurs regularly and identifies possible areas of staff shortages and travel costs etc. It also outlined the pressure on re-assessment providers and as a result, SADAS' senior therapist has now become an in-house qualified assessor, able to give re-assessment at the project during the Monday morning clinics.

SADAS intends to double the number of clients treated through acupuncture over the next year and is also looking at gaining access to funding for two full time alternative therapists – trained not only in acupuncture but also in other evidence-based complementary therapies.

Although it is challenging to come up with scientific evidence that proves the benefits of these complementary therapies, our statistics demonstrate that SADAS has been able to treat well over 300 people that were unlikely to access our services at all without the acupuncture programme. In this way we feel complementary therapy has a definite role to play in the future of treatment for drink and drug problems.

Mike Blank is Executive Director of Surrey Alcohol and Drug Advisory Service (SADAS), which offers a range of tier 2 and 3 services to people with alcohol and drug related concerns. SADAS' website is at www.sadas.org.uk

that. I'd like to have it twice a week really, instead of once.

Suzannah:

'I felt so much more relaxed it was ridiculous.'

I find the acupuncture very therapeutic. I've had a lot of conventional medicine and was in psychiatric hospital for a long time.

I had all sorts – electric shock treatment and all sorts of mood stabilisers, everything like that. But it was like taking a sledgehammer to a tiny nail.

I was diagnosed as having a borderline personality disorder,

which means that my emotional coping skills aren't good. You can take anti-psychotics, you can take valium, but they have side effects. I wanted to go for a more holistic approach.

The first time I ever had it done, I felt so much more relaxed it was ridiculous. I could even feel my face felt drained as well.

I have the ear acupuncture in a group session. I think the atmosphere with candles and music helps – people seem to relax to it. It sort of makes everybody on an even plateau and says 'this is the mood I

want you to be in'.

Our therapist does a particularly good job. One day I went in after my birthday when I'd been on a bender. I went in shaking, and she said right, OK, just sit there and let's brew a bit. It's all very non-judgmental.

I think people can be put off if they've just had people patronise them. That doesn't happen.

DDN was talking to members of Cathy Dixon's class in West London. Names have been changed to protect privacy. Cathy's website is at www.energyroots.co.uk

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