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"Keep Your Stick on the Ice": A Descriptive Account of A Hockey Group for Persons Coping with Serious Mental Illness

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Abstract

The following is a description of a unique and exciting Hockey Group for persons coping with serious mental illness. It is perhaps the only one of its kind in Ontario. This article describes the history of the Group, membership, how it operates, values incorporated into the group, benefits to participants and includes comments from the players throughout the article.

Keywords: Coping; Mental illness; Recreational program.

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Introduction

Red Green, a much-beloved Canadian comedian, often closes his show with the line, "Keep your stick on the ice!" What does he mean? Is he talking about hockey? Or life? Or what? This line comes to mind when I think about the Hockey Group that we offer to persons with serious mental illness. I like to think that Red means, "Stay involved with the game, with life, don't give up, keep active and interested!" A good motto for our Hockey Group! The following is a description of a unique and exciting Hockey Group for persons coping with serious mental illness. It is perhaps the only one of its kind in Ontario.

A key reason I chose to write this article is the positive comments I have heard consistently from players over the 12 years this group has been operating. Players had spoken so glowingly and strongly in support of the group, we felt that this group should be publicized so that similar opportunities might become available elsewhere for persons coping with mental illness. We were surprised to learn that our group is so unique. Members would like to see Hockey Groups start up in other areas.

"I think it is a shame that it is not common place in Ontario and all across the country through mental health agencies that provide services to people with mental illness because if we can do it, there is no reason why other agencies can't do it..."

This article describes the history of the group, membership, how it operates, values incorporated into the group, benefits to participants and includes comments from the players throughout the article. I interviewed thirteen members as part of the process in putting together this article.

"I know a lot of people look forward to going every week. It gives them something to

do on that day and gives you a chance to improve your skills in hockey as well as just having a really good time. It is a big thing."

Description

The Hockey Group is a recreational program for persons coping with a major mental illness, such as schizophrenia, bi-polar disorder, or depression. The majority of our players are persons diagnosed with schizophrenia. We currently have one woman attending the group, and while women have joined in the past, it has primarily been attended by men. Ages range from 18 to over 50, with the majority of players in their 20s and 30s. The group has provided recreation to about 110 players since its inception.

The most frequent response I received when I asked the members what they liked about the group was that it was fun! Player after player made these comments.

"It's been a lot of fun"

"A lot of fun! Yeah, I like it! I really enjoy that day when it comes around and we can get out and play..."

"I have enjoyed it myself. It gets me out of this place. 'Cause it breaks a monotonous week. I look forward to Tuesday, yeah, I have got something to do! Other than that, I have nothing."

The Hockey Group plays for one hour once a week starting in early October and continuing until the end of April. We play ice hockey at a local arena in Owen Sound. The games are held on Tuesday afternoons. Players are required to wear ice skates and a hockey helmet with face protection. Other equipment is optional, but recommended. Players can pay by the game, half-season or full season. The first time out is free for you to see if you wish to continue.

We have a warm-up prior to starting the game. Players then throw their sticks in a pile at centre ice. One of the players volunteers to divide the sticks into two piles, which form the two teams. Then each team puts on dark or light hockey

sweaters and gets ready to start.

We do not use referees but rather police ourselves. Players will call infractions as they occur. The most common infraction is for being off-side. We occasionally have goals disallowed or on rare occasions award a penalty shot. This system has worked out very well and disputes have been resolved amicably.

Some players have their own transportation and will assist other players in getting to and from the arena. Staff members involved in the group also provide transportation.

The idea for the Hockey Group originated with staff at Community Connections, a local mental health housing program that also offers social, educational and recreational services to persons with mental illness. Community Connections provided considerable money and staffing to get the Hockey Group underway and is responsible for it continuing to flourish and grow to the present day. The first hockey season was in 1989 and it has run continuously every year for the last twelve years.

The Hockey Group has become more self-sustaining over time. Player's fees cover the cost of our ice time. Community Connections has covered the cost of hockey equipment and the other two agencies (Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) and Grey Bruce Health Services) have made some contributions towards the year-end banquet. CMHA will also subsidize a portion of a player's fees if they are a member of Union Place (a drop in centre for persons with mental illness, operated by the local Canadian Mental Health Association).

Community Connections provide staff to the Hockey Group. As well, a staff member from Aftercare, a case management service for the mentally ill offered by Grey Bruce Health Services, and staff members from the local Canadian Mental Health Association also assist in organizing and operating the Hockey Group.

Community Connections has purchased a considerable amount of hockey equipment over the years to outfit players who could not afford to purchase their own equipment. Players can borrow equipment for a game or for the

season. Community Connections has bought full goalie equipment for use by those who wish to try their luck in net. We average about 14 to 18 players each game. Players are encouraged to play a variety of positions.

We use a sponge puck, which is fun and much less painful if you get hit where you are not wearing equipment! We accept and encourage players of all skill levels. Players are encouraged to support and assist players with less developed skills and to give them an opportunity to be part of the action. And it happens!

"Another great aspect of the group is the fact that all skill levels are welcome, from people that can barely skate to people that have an amazing skill level; and I think that everyone is given an opportunity no matter the respect to their skill levels, so they get passes even if one knows they probably won't do as well as they could themselves. It's a very supportive group because nobody insults one another for making a mistake. Everyone cheers everyone on when an achievement is made on the ice."

"Quite often they are getting the puck and we encourage them, you know, we kind of just shout out encouragement and give them some pointers of things and we did have a clinic this year on some of the basics and just by encouragement and support. When I started playing hockey with the Sports Group I hadn't played for 10 years and I could barely skate. I was like an ankle-burner and you know I finally found my legs and now my skills are really improved. I really boost my self-esteem and everything and I enjoy seeing other new people coming out, and being able to play and enjoy it and improve their skills too."

No slap shots or body checking is allowed. No verbal or physical abuse is tolerated. I was once asked if this is a dangerous or violent group. I had not reflected on this issue until I was asked the question; and my answer is that of all the various groups and teams I have played with over the years (and that is quite a few groups and quite a few years now!), this group has been the least aggressive or violent, and has in fact been the most welcoming, tolerant and encouraging group I have ever played with!

"It is a wonderful pleasure for me to be able to play with all the people. It is wonderful because where can you get a nice venue like this, have some fun, enjoyment, fellowship and it is also nurturing because you see everybody is really pitching in,

complimenting each other and really being on the same side."

We run a hockey skills clinic once or twice a year. A certified coach, who also owns a local sporting store, donates his time to offer tips. He also offers hockey equipment discounts to our members. We began our season this past year with a sign up session at the office of Community Connections and watched videos of the Hockey Group from years gone by. We end the season with a banquet at a local restaurant after our final game. The banquet is free to the players and is funded by the 3 agencies involved and from profits from our pop fund. One of our players generously offers to bring cold pop to each game, which is sold for \$1.00, with the profits going towards the year-end banquet.

Many of the players have become regulars and have purchased their own equipment. We have new players coming out at any time during the season. Sometimes players will invite a friend or family member to play. We have had equipment donated by individuals who have become aware of the group and we may look to do some more active seeking of donations in future. The Owen Sound Puffer Hockey League (for players age 35 & up) recently donated hockey sweaters and stockings.

Players are required to sign a waiver before playing, which releases Community Connections from legal responsibilities if they were to be injured. We have been fortunate in that we have not had any serious injuries occur.

I recall that when I became involved in the early stages of the Hockey Group, my employer, Grey Bruce Health Services was very concerned. Part of the concern was legal responsibility and part was lack of understanding of the rehabilitative and therapeutic benefit of such a recreational program. I was told I could not participate in the Hockey Group as part of my job, that I would be doing so on my own time and at my own expense, which I did. Fortunately, times have changed and the management of the Hospital recognizes the benefits of this group and is now very supportive of my role with the Hockey Group.

Members of the Hockey Group take on responsibilities and leadership roles in the group. As mentioned earlier, one member has taken on responsibility for

bringing pop to the game, collecting the money for this, keeping account of it and looking after the fund over the season. Another member keeps attendance and collects fees from players paying by the game. Two members are responsible for keeping a bank account and writing cheques to the City for ice time as needed. Other members assist in getting the hockey equipment out of the storage area before each game and putting it back again afterwards. Members are involved in reviewing the group and planning for the future at our initial meeting in the fall, informally in the dressing room after games and as we chat together at our year end banquet. Members take an active role during warm-up and in the game in encouraging each other and assisting others to develop skills, and allowing lesser skilled players opportunities to carry the puck and challenge the goalies. We have had players come out to Hockey Group who have never played hockey or have not played in many years. These players are given encouragement and opportunities to develop their skills. Recently, one player came out who had not skated or played hockey in about 35 years. In his second game, he scored 4 goals! Last year we had two players who had not skated before. Other members welcomed and encouraged them. They play regularly and their skills have improved significantly over the past two seasons. They speak with pride, satisfaction and joy about their participation in the Hockey Group.

"I have found myself excelling beyond anything I have ever imagined."

"...you can learn from the players who have more skills and you can get an idea of just the joy of the game, that everybody is enjoying it out there and really get back to the roots of what hockey is all about - enjoying the game, learning the skills, having a good time and camaraderie with everybody."

"I think for some folks they missed out on a lot of opportunities like playing hockey because they were ill in the past and now that they are feeling better this is a good way to revisit some of those missed opportunities."

"It's a lot of fun. I really enjoy the day when it comes around. I like the exercise and being with other people and the challenge you know."

A few years ago we noticed that attendance was rather stagnant. We were

getting 8 to 12 players most of the time. We discussed the situation as a group and decided to do some advertising. We printed some flyers and posted them on the In-Patient Psychiatry Unit of the local Hospital; and put a notice in the "Pivot", (an information bulletin for mental health providers), and at Union Place. We also did mail-outs to former players reminding them of the Hockey Group and enclosed a coupon for one free game. The results were positive and our numbers increased significantly. We did it again this year and have had the best attendance yet! We have had over 27 individuals playing this year and average attendance is consistently 14 to 18 players, sometimes more.

What are the benefits to participants in the Hockey Group? As any trivia buff knows, hockey is Canada's true national sport and has historically been a great source of pride to Canadians in all parts of the country. To be able to participate in Canada's sport is to feel a sense of belonging, to be part of Canada's rich culture, to be a true Canadian! Aside from this lofty sentiment there are numerous very real and practical benefits.

Playing hockey can be a vigorous form of exercise. Of course, some might question how much exercise my favourite NHL Team, the Montreal Canadians, have actually been getting the past few years, but that is a different issue. The physical demands of playing hockey are significant and our members note the conditioning improvement they make as the season progresses. We hand out copies of warm-up and cool-down exercises that players can do if they wish. As fitness experts note, regular exercise is important and hockey is one of the ways our members can exercise and have fun too, which is very important in a fitness plan.

"Well, it's great exercise for one and that's a big thing for me. It also helps with my mental health. I was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia at the age of 19 and I've been dealing with that for the past 20 years and I find that exercise gives me a good feeling and a good feeling of well being."

"Well, I think just generally it helps your fitness. To play hockey you have to be fit. So if you play hockey and you want to play better, you have to be more fit. So if you play hockey you want to do something during the rest of the week to make sure you are more fit for hockey; and so there are some guys who are doing other things, like

walking and bicycling and going to the YMCA. And that is really good and I think that helps with the illness, I think that helps with mental illnesses."

"I am in much better shape now. I am not just sitting around."

"I have some nagging injuries and the exercise really helps with them. It's the blood pumping through the body and it's just a great feeling and the best thing is to come home and have that hot shower and wash off all the sweat and it really feels good. You get a good nights sleep too afterwards because we played hard...."

"The medication seems to work better. I have noticed it the next day, feeling much better"

Members learn to develop their hockey skills, which can give one a sense of accomplishment and pride.

"I like it when I get the puck and get a score. It kind of adrenalizes you."

"I see that my clients are enjoying it and I see that they are having a wonderful time and that it's bringing them pleasure. So, in essence, in turn it brings me a lot of joy to see them when I have seen so many of them are sick, so frail because their illnesses are debilitating at times. So it is nice to see a group of guys come out and it proves to them that they still can accomplish things in life."

Some members have also now connected with other hockey opportunities in the community and we have some members who plan to join other, more competitive recreational hockey groups in future.

"... within the last nine years of the Sports Group I have improved my skills to the point where I have tried out this year for a rec hockey league and I did quite well It has inspired me to go onto the next level ..."

Playing hockey provides a way of connecting with your body and experiencing the positive and joyful feelings that can come from exercising. The release of endorphins in the body from exercise is identified in the literature of fitness as a positive result.

"It's been a lot of fun. After the game I feel really good. I think it's almost a high."

"It's a lot of fun. It's great to see the energy in people's actions afterwards and you know, a sense of excitement they get from playing the game."

Development of social skills through the interaction involved in the game and in the dressing room before and after hockey is another benefit. Players have the opportunity to connect with others around a common interest. The aspect of interacting with others while performing a task can be a less stressful and more relaxed way of interacting with others. Working with your teammates towards a common goal also offers the possibility of developing a feeling of camaraderie, of inclusiveness, of closeness to others. Large doses of encouragement and praise are a key element in the Hockey Group. Players compliment each other on their efforts, achievements are noted, and encouragement given to continue to improve. Members have identified feeling more pride in themselves and enhanced self-esteem as a result of their participation.

"I think it's maybe a break from feeling ill and sort of being stuck in that system in place of always being a patient or under someone's care. You know, you go out and forget all that and all you do is play hockey for an hour. It's a nice reprieve maybe from the day-to-day struggles they have. I think it's just good to build self-esteem."

"Connecting, being part of a team and in a group and it doesn't matter what side you are on, playing, the whole thing is positive."

"... it is the comradeship, everybody cheers for everybody and they are all just there to have a good time but everybody is trying to play their best; there is still that competition aspect in a really friendly manner ..."

"Hockey teaches you to be an optimist and to never give up."

Another important benefit that has been reported by members is feeling a sense of acceptance.

"I like the camaraderie from the fellows, yeah, I just, you start to know people and it is

comfortable."

Players note that they feel welcomed in the group and accepted no matter their level of skill. The group offers a safe and friendly atmosphere.

"It is safe. No one is really doing anything against the wishes or the rules or to hurt anybody or make people's self-esteem go down."

A player noted that he felt comfortable with this group when he would not have had the confidence to participate in other hockey opportunities in the community. One player noted that he felt there was nowhere else in the community persons with mental illness would feel they had opportunity to play hockey. He noted that symptoms of illness such as lack of motivation, fears about being accepted, anxiety, etc. prevent persons from participating. This group help builds self-esteem and confidence which can lead to participation elsewhere. He has now developed enough confidence to play hockey in another setting as well.

"Interesting enough one member said to me, and I was quite impressed with his skill level on the ice, that before he started to play with the Hockey Group he never played hockey in his life and I was just utterly impressed. This is quite remarkable that he has progressed so far."

Having the opportunity to play hockey with other persons coping with a mental illness has been a positive experience for members. Feeling accepted and understood has been identified as a key benefit.

"I think that a lot of clients who have mental illnesses are very apprehensive about the idea that someone will potentially laugh at them, ridicule them or mock them because they don't have the skills or because of their meds don't have the coordination, or because of their drowsiness from the meds or the depression will not be able to perform up to snuff or at a level they think is acceptable for the group at large. So once they came out one time, 99% of them I know will come back again because they don't find that fear coming true or it being founded in any way. What they do find is this

nice, supportive, very tight knit group that is there for each other for the good times, not to accentuate the bad times. So when they make a mistake or their performance is lacking, nobody says anything. In fact, people say "nice try"! When they do accomplish something, such as a goal by somebody who has never played in their lives, it is like a feeling of winning the gold medal at the Olympics. It really can't be duplicated elsewhere."

"Everybody seems to get along."

"They can interact with each other and they do get along. It is quite nice to see people get along so well."

Feeling "important" is one of the results a member noted. He believed his efforts helped his teammates and that working as part of a team made him feel connected and important.

"What I find is beautiful for me to be able to play hockey is that something that all of us can share together, men and women that are playing this is that you build yourself up slowly and gradually with confidence, you can see how you interact with each other and doing your best..."

Development of new friendships has resulted from joining the Group. Players get to know each other better over time and enjoy each other's company. Some players make plans to get together for a meal or go out to a movie in the evening after the game, or to get together at other times.

"It's kind of like a big family actually. Over the years guys get to know each other and get to know people from different areas because people come in from all different areas of Grey and Bruce Counties. You know quite often as a result of meeting from the Hockey Group, we would get together on another type of social occasion!"

"I like the camaraderie. That is the best. Getting out with the guys. I meet some friends, which is, I think, that has been helpful for me and helpful for the guys I make friends with. Some of us go to the show, go to the movies after we play hockey and sometimes we have dinner. Which has been a really nice benefit."

Summary

In summary, some of the key attitudes or values we try to instill in the group are:

- have fun
- play fair
- be considerate of less skilled players and give them an opportunity to participate more fully
- respect for others
- give lots of praise and encouragement
- acceptance (all are welcome no matter the level of skill)
- be tolerant
- enjoy each other's company
- be a team player.

There are many potential benefits to players participating in the Hockey Group. These include:

- fun
- increased level of fitness
- friendship
- acceptance
- pride
- sense of accomplishment
- feeling of importance
- good body feeling
- feeling of being more in touch with your body
- greater interest in fitness
- improved self esteem
- increased sense of responsibility
- feeling part of a team
- opportunity to play hockey not available elsewhere
- better hockey skills
- greater self confidence
- improved social skills

- feeling connected to others

Recommendations

The Hockey Group has proven to be a popular and successful recreational opportunity for persons coping with a major mental illness. As I described there are many benefits for participants. For a lot of the players, including myself, it is a highlight of the week. I would highly recommend other agencies serving the mentally ill throughout Ontario and Canada consider the possibility of creating their own Hockey Group. If you do, give us a call and maybe we can arrange to get together to play a game!

In closing, I should mention that Community Connections also offers other popular and beneficial recreational programs. These include the Volleyball Group, the Baseball Group, the Hiking Group and Women's Aqua Fit. Ideas also being considered are for a Cycling Group. Please contact Community Connections (519-371-2390 or housing@gbchc.healthserv.org) or myself (519-371-8850 or mschwan@owensound.healthserv.org) for more information or to share what recreational opportunities you may be offering.

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