



Reiki and Mental Health

BY KATHIE LIPINSKI, R N, M S N, C H

MISINFORMATION ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH conditions such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder is a major contributor to misconceptions about those who have these conditions. Because of the lack of knowledge and understanding about the nature of these conditions among the public, fear of being labeled “mentally ill” can prevent those affected from seeking timely diagnosis and/or treatment. The stigma of having a “mental illness” often engenders self-doubt and shame. It used to be thought (and still is by many), that a person who develops these conditions is weak and/or out of control. Thanks to advances in medicine and psychiatry, we now know more about mental health disorders and how to treat them, but we still have a long way to go.

Lack of knowledge and misunderstanding have contributed to the misconception that one cannot give Reiki to a person with a mental health condition. This has prevented some Reiki practitioners from sharing Reiki with a population that can benefit greatly from its use!

The seeds for this article were planted at the 2007 International Reiki Retreat while I was giving a presentation about Reiki myths and misconceptions. An audience member asked about giving Reiki to someone with schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, and I answered honestly that I had no experience and would have to do some research. I decided then that my presentation for the 2008 retreat would be about Reiki and mental health.

As always, before I write or prepare for a presentation, I ask for guidance and assistance. As a nurse, I have some knowledge of mental health conditions but had never really worked with this population. I began to do research, and I also set my intention to meet people who have experience in this field. I was pleasantly surprised during one of my Karuna Reiki® Master classes when a student, Bridget Salmaggi, told me about her daughter Darah’s work at the Clubhouse, a facility here on Long Island which provides support and opportunities for people with severe and persistent mental illnesses. I contacted Darah to find out more and agreed to come to the Clubhouse for one of their “Reiki Days” during which they share Reiki with both members and staff.

This is the story of the Reiki program at the Clubhouse of Suffolk in Ronkonkoma, New York and the gifted and compassionate Reiki practitioners Darah Salmaggi and Toni Negri, who run it.

Bipolar Disorder and Schizophrenia

Before I begin to describe the Clubhouse program and the experiences of the participants, I would like to briefly provide some information about bipolar disorder and schizophrenia.

Toni Negri, the Psychiatric Rehabilitation Oriented Services (PROS) Facilitator, provided this definition of bipolar disorder:

Bipolar disorder can be defined as a mood disorder in which an individual experiences cycles of depression and mania. These cycles can sometimes occur at a fast pace, such as every two weeks, or it can become a more gradual change such as every six months or more. Bipolar disorder is also categorized into two types; Bipolar I and Bipolar II. Bipolar I involves the cycling of mania and depression while Bipolar II involves the cycling of hypomania, which is a milder form of mania, and depression. While there are currently no cures for bipolar disorder, the symptoms experienced can be lessened through the use of medications aimed to stabilize one’s mood as well as through the use of therapy.

Schizophrenia can be defined as a chronic psychological disorder that affects one’s cognitive, emotional, and behavioral functioning. Symptoms of this disorder can be classified as both positive and negative, and can include but are not limited to, auditory and visual hallucinations, delusions, disorganized speech, and flat affect, also characterized as the blunting of emotions and facial expressions; depression and in more severe cases episodes of catatonic behavior. Similar to other psychological disorders, there is no known cure for schizophrenia and there continues to be debates as to what may actually cause the onset of schizophrenia in the first place. The current treatment for schizophrenia includes the use of psychotropic medications as well as psychotherapy to help individuals reduce the effect of the symptoms they experience.

As a nurse, I would describe bipolar disorder as a condition in which individuals cycle between abnormally elevated (mania) and low (depression) energy levels. This cycling can affect mood, energy levels and the thought process. A person with bipolar disorder can have racing thoughts and reckless or manic behavior that alternates with being immobilized by sadness and feelings of helplessness.

Schizophrenia is a thought disturbance causing a person to have disorganized thoughts, speech, paranoia, delusions, and or hallucinations. Their perception of and expression of reality can be disturbed. People with schizophrenia often describe themselves as overly sensitive to their environment; they “feel” or “hear” everything around them. The issue then becomes how they interpret this information.

Causes of both conditions are complex. Persons diagnosed with bipolar and/or schizophrenia can have a chemical imbalance that impairs the function of the neurotransmitters serotonin



Sharing the gift of Reiki outside the Suffolk Clubhouse.

hand-in-hand with the staff. Their hope was to demonstrate that people with mental illness could work productively and have satisfying lives. Members volunteered their time to help operate the organization in exchange for a chance to learn skills, access opportunities (such as housing, education, health care and employment) and make friends. The concept was so successful that it has grown to 325 programs in more than 28 countries around the world.¹

My introduction to the Clubhouse of Suffolk and its community began when I met Darah Salmaggi, who was at the time a Psychiatric Rehabilitation Oriented Services (PROS) Counselor. The Clubhouse of Suffolk is a Psychiatric Rehabilitation Center based on the ICCD Clubhouse model. Darah explained that individuals who are

and/or dopamine (chemicals which carry signals across the brain). Both chemicals play an important role in mood regulation and emotional states.

Some researchers have suggested a genetic component or predisposition that is triggered by overwhelming stress or trauma; others suggest a dysfunction in the functioning of the neurotransmitter(s) serotonin and or dopamine. Some suggest a disruption in brain development during pregnancy and/or early childhood. No one knows for sure. The causes seem to be a combination of genetic and environmental factors, such as trauma.

Both of these conditions can interfere with functioning on a daily basis. If not managed properly, they can interfere with activities of daily living, self-care, work and relationships.

The Clubhouse Program

The Clubhouse is a model of psychosocial rehabilitation. Participants are called “members” rather than “clients” or “patients,” and programs focus on their strengths and abilities, not their “illness.” Its goal is to offer hope as well as opportunities for people with mental illness to reach their full potential.

The Clubhouse (first known as “Fountain House”) opened in 1948 in New York City. It was established as a community where men and women with mental illness could come together and work

members of the Clubhouse attend several groups each day. The goal of these groups, or “classes,” is to help members gain the tools needed to manage the symptoms of their illness. Many members were recently discharged from the hospital or sheltered by their families because of their illness. Many had severe or persistent mental conditions such as bipolar, schizophrenia, depression, alcohol and drug problems or mental disabilities. Darah explained that no matter what the diagnosis, all experienced anxiety. Her goal was to get them back into school or work and to find housing for them.



Reiki Level I Clubhouse members with Toni Negri (Left side - orange top).

Darah at the time was a Reiki II practitioner. Thanks to the support and encouragement of Michael Stoltz, the Executive Director of the Clubhouse of Suffolk, Darah was able to share this innovative form of therapy and healing with the members.

Darah developed a Wellness Self-Management Program that introduced members to alternative forms of healing. She gave them basic information about Reiki and had a few Reiki practitioners come in to give the members chair treatments. The response was so overwhelmingly positive she decided to start a small group of a select few who were open to and interested in receiving and learning more about the practice.

Asked to describe the group and their experiences, Darah wrote:

...the group initially consisted of six members with diagnosis ranging from mild depression to severe schizophrenia. The group would meet weekly for one hour. We would contemplate one of the Reiki Ideals and then use it as a mantra while they sat quietly listening to relaxing music. I would then give each member a short chair treatment [being] careful not to invade anyone's space, mostly beaming and hovering over chakras. We would then share our experiences with the treatments.

For me the energy was so incredibly powerful. Their heads were always pulsing with immense energy and I would try to stay there until I felt the energy surges calm. I found that more often than not the third eye and throat chakras were wide open and powerful. Very often heart chakras felt closed. I would then quietly activate the Power symbol to assist in healing. I also found that when working with this population there was a strong sense of angels working with me in the process.

Responses after treatments were so exciting. Often they would report an overall feeling of calm and peace. Often members would recall past experiences of people that hurt them, unresolved issues, memories of the past and people that had passed on before them, good and bad. An increased level of relaxation through the day, as well as better sleep and ease in falling asleep, were also reported. One member had shared that with her doctors' consent, she was able to reduce her depression medications. She attributed this to Reiki and increased daily meditation.

The members with schizophrenia were my favorite as some would share their vivid imagery of rainbow colored notes flowing from guitar strings, motherly and fatherly figures embracing them, and brilliant colors that melted into one another as the Reiki passed through them. One member described images of a single flame that would burn green and purple, making her feel safe. One member reported that her constant knee pain would dissipate and sometimes disappear completely while receiving Reiki. Another member reported that coming to class was the only time all week that she was able to have

quiet in her loud voice-filled brain. A member with severe bipolar and Asperger's who did not seem to connect with many would greatly enjoy his treatments. He would laugh during his whole treatment creating a wonderful lighthearted energy for all in the room. Even those members who were extremely shy and quiet came every week and would say they had looked forward to receiving Reiki.

I eventually started another small group of members who were really interested and ready to start practicing Reiki themselves. This group was attuned to Reiki I and now has this amazing gift with them every day. It empowers them to know that they have the ability to help and calm themselves. Important points that I would like to share are that I constantly reminded the members, as with all clients, that this healing is of God's (whatever you believe that to be) energy, not my own. Also creating a safe space where people feel comfortable and free to leave is vital, as at times hallucinations and negative thoughts may get the best of them, and I would encourage, but not pressure, them to return.

I then started a larger Reiki circle in the programs where members can now give Reiki to one another. It's a beautiful thing to fill the whole program with Reiki people essentially calming the entire building by their mere presence.

Reiki evolving

The Reiki program at the Clubhouse is now called the "Energy Healing Circle." Darah left the program to pursue her education. She is now working at MetroClub Clubhouse, an ICCD certified Clubhouse in Brooklyn, New York. Toni Negri, the Personalized Recovery Oriented Services (PROS) Facilitator, now runs the Suffolk program.

Toni describes the Reiki group as:

...very similar to a Reiki circle in which there are several Reiki practitioners giving 10-15 minutes of Reiki (while sitting in a chair) to both practitioners and those not yet attuned. This is a continuation of the group that was initially created by Darah, who had the intention to give each member a 15-minute Reiki treatment each week as an alternative way to cope with the symptoms of their disorder. Eventually it was transformed into a group aimed to expose members to the principles of Reiki and ended with these members being attuned as Reiki I practitioners.

The program continues to remain focused on exposing members to the healing benefits of Reiki. Every Monday morning the "Energy Healing Circle" group begins by writing one of the five Reiki principles on the board. At this time members are asked to reflect on this principle and decide how it can be used in their life that day. During this group, members who are attuned to practice Reiki are offered the opportunity to give a Reiki treatment to another member, or are free to simply receive the healing energy of Reiki that day. This group lasts for approximately 45 minutes and every individual in the room is able to receive a treatment. This group is open to any individual who wishes to try an alternative form of healing, and I have found that once a member receives one Reiki treatment, they often come back for another. At the end of class mem-

¹ For more information about the International Center for Clubhouse Development (ICCD) and their locations, visit their website, www.iccd.com.



Out and about on an adventure. Darah Salmaggi (center) with green baseball cap. Toni Negri (upper right corner) with gray top.

bers are given the opportunity to share their experiences during that treatment and are encouraged to journal about each treatment they receive.

Members will often share with me the wonderful experiences they have had with Reiki and the increased sense of connection they have with the universe. Even those members who have not been attuned to practice Reiki have also shared the positive effects it has had on their lives. There have been many occasions where a member will share that a treatment was “very emotional” or has “brought up a lot of emotion.” Being that some of the symptoms of schizophrenia and even schizoaffective Disorder can cause members to have difficulty feeling and expressing their emotions, members have shared that Reiki does them a great service at allowing the energy to heal them in that way. This group also encourages members to spend time each day in silent reflection or nature as a way to connect with the energy they experience during their treatments.

As the instructor of this group, I even encourage members who are not attuned to Reiki to spend time each day with their focus on their chakras. At the end of each class we discuss as a group the different ways one can focus on each chakra and members are given “homework” aimed to help them heal this part of their energy body. Being that Reiki is in all of us, I never discourage an individual from finding Reiki in their own way. Also in this group we discuss some of the different activities each person can participate in as a way to amplify the benefits of Reiki. Many of the members enrolled in the “Energy Healing Circle” also frequent the group “Morning Meditation” which encourages members to take time each day to quiet their mind and focus on their energy body.

Being that many of the symptoms members talk with me about have to do with anxiety, racing thoughts, depression and feelings of isolation, Reiki has given them the opportunity to heal these areas of their life in a unique way that also allows them to feel empowered by the energy. So often members will share with me how powerful a simple touch on the

shoulders by a Reiki practitioner has been for them. Many of our members do not have a life where they feel comfortable touching others or allowing others to touch them, but with the use of Reiki, they have expressed that they can experience this simple act in a safe and healing way.

While I hold a weekly group related to Reiki, Clubhouse has also hosted three ‘Reiki Days’ in the past two years in which Reiki practitioners were invited to Clubhouse to give treatments to as many members and staff who would like one.²

Reflections

One of the things that touched me deeply when I first spoke with Darah was her telling me how starved the members were for spirituality. She shared how they devoured everything she said! She was probably the first person who had ever helped them to connect with their own divine self—their soul or essence. Many had not been touched in a loving or compassionate way in a long time (some never!). She described their God connection as empty! Many had never had a chance to explore their spirituality and search for meaning in their life. Their life was spent managing their illness.

Darah explained: “I believe that for so many in this population isolation has become a way of protection. I believe that the small physical contact I was able to have with them was for some the only love they had felt in a very long time. I can understand why people might be weary of working with someone who is suffering with a mental illness as our society has created such a negative stigma associated with them. For me the truth is that like any illness we as individuals are afforded an opportunity to heal ourselves and I believe that Reiki has become the motivating factor in these individuals’ lives to do so. When the medications, counseling, and traditional treatments are not working, what is there to lose?”

Toni commented: “There are so many more ways we can use Reiki to help those around us with or without a psychological disorder and at the Clubhouse I feel we have only skimmed the surface. One major thing that I would like to ask all Reiki practitioners is to keep an open mind. There is a stigma out there

² Author’s Note: I attended these Reiki Days and experienced the gift for staff and members. During one of the Reiki Days, I was moved to tears (as were several others) when I saw Darah, her mom Bridget, and Sheila (Bridget’s mom) all giving Reiki to a member. The gift of three generations sharing their love of Reiki and the love between them was something to behold!

against those with mental illness, and I can assure you that it is a wrong and unfair belief. Just like everyone else, someone diagnosed with a mental illness needs human contact and craves the compassion and love of others. I think if we can keep in mind that there is no difference between those who are diagnosed with a mental illness and those who are not, we can be well on our way to healing the world and all who reside in it.”

Meeting Darah and Toni and being a part of the “Reiki Days” at the Clubhouse has been a profound experience for me personally as well. As someone very sensitive to the energy of others, I had avoided working with this population because it was not comfortable for me. Being part of this group helped to dissipate my own discomfort and reminded me what Reiki is really all about.

No matter what the diagnosis, no matter what the condition, Reiki reaches us all at the human level where we connect heart to heart. It needs no words. Reiki reaches out and touches a person at the soul level: their divine self or true essence. It nourishes a person’s spirit.

I hope this article has helped to dispel misconceptions you may have had about the value of using Reiki for people with mental health issues. It has helped me to remember that we are all connected and that Reiki speaks the language of the heart!

Guidelines

Here are some Guidelines that Darah and Toni suggest when working with people with schizophrenia, bipolar or other mental health conditions:

- Be mindful of personal space. Some people are uncomfortable if you get too close.
- Ask them why they are receiving Reiki and remind them to be open to this alternative way of healing.
- Explain that Reiki can do no harm and that it will not interfere with their medications.
- Remind them that it is not your energy that you are giving them.
- Make sure you have permission to use touch. Some people may not want to be touched or may feel uncomfortable.

- Explain that they can receive Reiki even if they are not touched.
- Ask if there is anything they are uncomfortable with and ask them to tell you immediately if they become uncomfortable for any reason during the session.
- You can help them feel comfortable being touched by simply putting your hands on their shoulders only.
- Tell them where you are going to touch, for example: on top of head, shoulders and probably the legs. This will prepare them for what you are going to do and help ease any discomfort.
- Some are very sensitive to energy. Go slowly.
- Don’t hug them at the end of the session unless you explain beforehand that this is a way you like to give Reiki. Ask if it is ok.
- Encourage them to share their experiences with you.

In essence, the same rules apply for giving a person with mental illness Reiki as you would with someone who does not have mental illness—be respectful, compassionate and kind.

It is also very important to remember that Reiki is not a substitute for medical or psychiatric care but can be used in conjunction with and part of a wellness program.

If you are interested in starting a Reiki program or sharing it with this community, Toni suggests that you contact the Director at one of the Clubhouses located across the country. Clubhouse locations are listed at www.iccd.com.



—Darah or Toni may be contacted at darahsalmaggi@optonline.net; Toni.Negri@Clubhouseofsuffolk.org. Kathie can be contacted at kathiekaruna95@aol.com.

© 2010 Kathie Lipinski