

HEALING HANDS



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Coping with Stress, Creating & Maintaining Hope

Stressful circumstances — whether borne of adversity, a surfeit of responsibility, unrealistic expectations or a sense of impotence in the face of another's pain — test the human metal. “When the going gets tough, the tough get going” — while others break from the strain. Homeless service providers combine a survivor's toughness with the desire and capacity to nurture others not as fortunate as they. In this issue of Healing Hands, we examine the spiritual and psychological roots of their ability to cope with stress while creating and maintaining hope for clients, colleagues and themselves. In the midst of year-end pressures, we conducted interviews with ten HCH clinicians, practicing in different regions of the United States, and representing a variety of professional disciplines. We asked them to examine the internal and external sources of hope and inspiration that give meaning to their work with homeless individuals. We also asked them how they sustain and renew hope in themselves and others. Finally, we asked them to recommend resources for other homeless service providers.

Sources of Hope

Hope derives from both internal and external sources. Health care for the homeless clinicians reportedly rely on their own inner resources, fortified by life experience and their particular belief system, in combination with the inspiration and perspective provided by clients, colleagues, family and friends. Most persons interviewed mentioned multiple sources of inspiration and hope. Selected remarks often represent the experience of several respondents.

SELF-KNOWLEDGE “I see myself as basically a positive person. My maturity is an asset in remaining positive. You need to know yourself and be strong internally to sustain others.” — *Judy Rippentrop, BSN, outreach nurse, Homeless Health Services, Fargo, North Dakota*

BELIEF SYSTEM “My lifestyle and my religious belief give me hope. The work that I do, in compassion and love for God's people, is a ministry for me. My work is who I am — an instrument in God's hands.” — *Sister Eileen Lantzy, MSW, OSM, medical outreach coordinator, Hope Medical Outreach Coalition, Omaha, Nebraska*

“My philosophy is based not on religion, but on a belief in the basic good in people. There are scam artists we encounter. There are ignorant bureaucrats we have to deal with. But there are also intelligent,

caring providers who are more prevalent, and surprisingly informed and savvy clients who make all the walls [erected by ignorance] seem less consequential.” — *John P. Hartman, PA-C, clinical director, Community Action of Laramie County, Cheyenne, Wyoming*

“A solution-focused belief system is key for me, informed by a harm reduction philosophy based on a nonjudgmental attitude toward clients, and focused on their incremental progress.” — *Elizabeth Anderson, MSW, LSW, case manager/outreach worker, Kalihi-Palama Health Care for the Homeless, Honolulu, Hawaii*

CLIENTS “Clients are a big source of hope — their incredible ability to survive, their colorful stories about living on the streets, and their creative responses to the challenges they have to meet. Those who are broken-hearted and defeated raise my level of compassion; those who manage to survive with egos intact inspire me with their toughness.” — *Michele Fontaine, MA, CASAC, CRC, director supported employment program, Job Links, Project Renewal, Inc., New York City*

“My homeless clients inspire me more than anyone or anything. They give me more love than I could ever imagine, and appreciate anything and everything we do for them.” — *Terri Sutton, BSN, RN, homeless team nurse at ECHO Health Center, Evansville, Indiana*

"I am inspired by clients who have wrestled with their problems, listened to our advice and then taken their own course to regain some control over difficult circumstances." — *John P. Hartman*

CO-WORKERS "The people who work with me are heroes. Neither discouraged nor negative, they are mutually supportive people." —*Noemi Carcar, MD, medical director, St. Joseph Mercy Care Services, Mercy Mobile Health Care, Atlanta, Georgia*

"The commitment of my colleagues is particularly inspiring. One cold, dark February evening, the HCH project director and I walked out of the office together after a very hard day. A client was standing by the door. I felt too overwhelmed to face him, but Jeff automatically offered coffee and started engaging him. If there are enough people doing this work, everyone won't experience exhaustion at the same time. I can't give 100% every day, but there is someone else who can supplement my efforts." — *Betty Kavanagh, LCSWC, director of psychosocial services, Health Care for the Homeless, Inc., Baltimore, Maryland*

MENTORS & ROLE MODELS "I want to function in a way that will reflect well on William Cody, a former professor and mentor in my nurse practitioner training program. I want him to continue to be proud of me. Even if I never saw him again, I would feel that way." — *Norma Icenhour, MSN, FNP, RN, Open Door Clinic, Statesville, North Carolina*

"My role model is my grandmother, who raised me in Argentina after my mother died. All people in trouble were her concern. Six or seven people lived with her, and she always set an extra place at the table 'because someone might need it.' This was not an uncommon occur-

rence during the 1940s, even in the United States. The community shared its resources. We have forgotten the example of our ancestors. Today in Atlanta, out of a total population of three million, there are about 20,000 homeless people. It wouldn't be so hard to help them all, if we set an extra place at our tables." — *Noemi Carcar*

TO BE OF USE

The people I love best
jump into work head first
without dallying in the shallows
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.
They seem to become natives of that element,
the black sleek heads of seals
bouncing like half-submerged balls.

I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,
who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,
who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward
who do what has to be done, again and again.

I want to be with people who submerge
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest
and work in a row and pass the bags along,
who are not parlor generals and field deserters
but move in a common rhythm
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.

The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.

Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.

The pitcher cries for water to carry,
and a person for work that is real.

— *by Marge Peirce, from Circles on the Water, 1990*

FAMILY HISTORY "There is a fair amount of pain in my own family of origin. My work is a way to heal that pain by healing others. To be of service, to help and to heal is an ingrained part of me — my own personal philosophy." — *Michele Fontaine*

"I feel that work with indigent people is what I was meant to do. Raised in poverty with some of the same problems experienced by my clients, I was the first person in my family to graduate from college. My family's pride in my accomplishments has made me want to see other people like myself succeed." — *Norma Icenhour*

"I credit my parents with instilling in me early on the importance of caring for persons less fortunate than myself. I entered medicine with the intent of working with the disadvantaged, and have followed through with that commitment. My most important sources of hope are my husband and two children, who are very supportive of my work and always there for me." — *Susan Spalding, MD, medical director, City of Dallas HCH Program, Dallas, Texas*

AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE & NATURE "Finding beauty in a lot of this pain through literature, art and the out-of-doors helps to refuel me. I am an avid reader. Dostoevsky's novels, which touch on homeless issues and despair, can be inspiring. I am particularly fond of the work of Egon Schiele, an Austrian artist, which looks tortured but speaks to the work we do and the population we serve." — *Michele Fontaine* ■

Sustaining & Renewing Hope

Homeless service providers adopt a variety of strategies to cope with discouragement or job stress and avoid burnout. Sometimes they rely on the same internal resources that kindled their commitment to work with disadvantaged people in the first place; at other times, they seek broader perspective through learning or contact with other providers. They reduce stress through physical exercise, renew insight through prayer or meditation, and struggle to maintain balance in their lives, while focusing on what is possible.

BALANCE WORK WITH PERSONAL LIFE Set limits, advises Sister Eileen Lantzy. Keep expectations realistic about what you can accomplish in a day. "After burning out a couple of times during my career, I have learned that I can only work 40 hours per week and maintain my sanity. I need to have a strong interest outside my work that pulls me away from it. Otherwise, I lose perspective." Susan Spalding agrees. "You can't give all of the time and stay emotionally healthy."

SEEK BROADER PERSPECTIVE Judy Rippentrop was an ICU nurse for 30 years before she decided that she needed a change and went back to complete her nursing education. She has worked as a staff outreach nurse at Homeless Health Services in Fargo, North Dakota, for the past year-and-a-half. "Learning new things has been a very important source of renewal for me. I enjoy variety and seek new projects at work." When traveling in this country and abroad, she sometimes visits other homeless projects. Betty Kavanagh advises meeting with persons who are doing similar work and addressing similar issues. "Connect with local colleagues, but also with a larger group to see the broader context of your work." A recent harm reduction seminar helped Elizabeth Anderson to refocus her efforts.

TIME OUT FOR EXERCISE, MEDITATION OR PRAYER A number of clinicians cope with stress by attending to their physical and spiritual health. For John Hartman "the most therapeutic things to do are to find time to read a good book and ride my bike on a nice sunny day." Michele Fontaine swims four-to-five miles each week, which helps keep her "on track and energized." She also meditates every day, sometimes during her midday break.

A PRAYER FOR SERENITY

God, grant me serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
courage to change the things I can and wisdom to know the difference.
— Reinhold Niebuhr

"Prayer helps to keep me centered," says Sister Eileen Lantzy. Terri Sutton agrees. "Sometimes when I realize how helpless I am in the whole scheme of things, I pray for my homeless clients and feel peace."

HAVE FAITH IN MAKING A DIFFERENCE Noemi Carcar received her medical degree 35 years ago in Argentina. "As I grow older, I find I am becoming as much a philosopher as a physician," she reflects. "I am sustained by an old Chinese proverb that says, 'a drop of water, very little and very soft, falling in the same place, can make a hole in a stone that is very big and very strong.' If you keep acting and teach through your actions, eventually it will make a difference."

God has not called me to be successful.
He has called me to be faithful.
— Mother Teresa

Listen to health care for the homeless providers describe how they create and renew hope in discouraged clients or exhausted colleagues, and one

begins to fathom the depth and breadth of their wisdom and interpersonal skills. Here is what they advise:

LISTEN WITH RESPECT "First, listen. The experience of being listened to is itself extremely supportive," notes Betty Kavanagh. "Encourage the person to talk about where s/he is. You may hear positive elements within a negative story that the teller may not be noticing. Acknowledge that some things don't have an immediate or even a long-term solution. Nevertheless, just by discussing a problem and placing it within a larger or smaller context, you are making a difference." Judy Rippentrop echoes

"The best thing for being sad," replied Merlin, beginning to puff and blow, "is to learn something. That's the only thing that never fails. You may grow old and trembling in your anatomies, you may lie awake at night listening to the disorder of your veins, you may miss your only love, you may see the world about you devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honour trampled in the sewers of baser minds. There is only one thing for it then — to learn. Learn why the world wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting."

— from the *Once and Future King* by T.H. White

this sentiment. "Listening to homeless people and treating them with the dignity they deserve is very important. I address them by name, wherever I see them, to show that someone notices and cares."

"As I examine my homeless clients, I smile, joke and listen," says Noemi Carcar. "I am also a firm believer in the importance of touch. Pretty soon they open up to me. Communication is a fundamental need for human beings. My patients need more than the medical treatment I can offer; they need contact with another human being and respect as persons. Good medicine involves the art, as well as the science of healing."

"One day recently, I asked a client how he was doing, and he said not good," reports Terri Sutton. "So I asked him how I could help. He said I already had by just touching him; what he needed was to be touched. Some clients come into the clinic just for a hug or a pair of socks or to let me know how they are doing. I try hard to make each one feel special, and always give them my full attention, no matter how crazy it is in the shelter, soup kitchen or under the bridge where I meet them."

EMPHASIZE THE POSITIVE John Hartman reinforces the positives in his homeless clients. "They may still be smoking and not yet permanently housed but seriously searching for a job, or working at controlling their diet and increasing exercise to reduce hypertension. Complete apathy or passivity no longer rules their lives, and they seem truly proud of their successes. To someone who recently had no hope and no future, small gains are important; they should be embellished and applauded!" Elizabeth Anderson affirms the importance of celebrating small steps. "I often review past progress with my clients to help them see how far they have come. I focus on the positive and praise the good things they do."

"I am an incurable optimist," admits Michele Fontaine, who tries to convey that optimism to clients and staff by bringing enthusiasm, energy and passion to her work. "I try to be supportive in a consistent and predictable way. When there are successes, I celebrate and highlight them." A positive attitude toward life and the capacity to avoid stereotyping are musts for HCH clinicians, concludes Hartman. "Every day should have some adventures. You have to enjoy your own life if you are going to inspire others to try again."

OTHER RESOURCES The stress and hope consultants quoted in these articles recommend the following resources, in addition to those already mentioned, to fellow homeless service providers:

BOOKS

- *Amazing Grace* by Kathleen Norris
- *Called to Care* by Judith Allen Shelly
- *Compassion Fatigue: Coping with Secondary Traumatic Stress Disorder in Those Who Treat the Traumatized* by Charles R. Figley (Ed)
- *Crossing the Border* by Michael Rowe
- *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff at Work: Simple Ways to Minimize Stress and Conflict while Bringing out the Best in Yourself and Others* by Richard Carlson
- *Dorothy Day: Selected Writings* by Robert Ellsberg (Ed), Dorothy Day
- *Freedom from Addiction* by Neil T. Anderson
- *Gesundheit! Bringing Good Health to You, the Medical System, and Society through Physician Service, Complementary Therapies, Humor and Joy* by Patch Adams, Maureen Mylander
- *Grand Central Winter* by Lee Stringer
- *Harm Reduction: Pragmatic Strategies for Managing High-Risk Behaviors* by G. Alan Marlatt (Ed), David C. Lewis, David B. Abrams
- *Not All of Us Are Saints* by David Hilfiker
- *Streetviews: A Collection of Art, Poetry & Recipes* from the Wyoming Coalition for the Homeless
- *The Mole People: Life in the Tunnels beneath New York City* by Jennifer Toth
- *The Ragamuffin Gospel* by Brennan Manning
- *The Spirituality of Imperfection* by Ernest Kurtz
- *The Street Lawyer* by John Grisham

UNTITLED

This is my story about
 Rising from the dirt
 You can plant me anywhere
 Down deeply
 The sun gives me spirit to rise
 I am so tall
 They could cut me
 Make food out of me
 Pick my cotton
 You can water me
 They can dig me up and put me back in
 I am so tall
 I can not be lost
 A machine can cut me up
 I'll be on your kitchen table
 You can plant me all year 'round
 I am a beautiful tree.

- by Joseph Simms, a.k.a. Smiley
 HCH, Baltimore creative writing program

PHOTO ESSAYS OF HOMELESS CHILDREN

- *The Tunnel* by Margaret Morton
- *Shooting Back* by Jim Hubbard
- *A Cry for Help* by Mary Ellen Mark
- *Outside the Dream* by Steven Shames

MUSIC

- *Fried Green Tomatoes: Original Motion Picture Soundtrack* — Thomas Newman
- *Jewel* — Marcella Detroit
- *Touched by an Angel: The Album* — soundtrack from the television series

WEBSITES

- Autumn's Place (see especially *Desiderata*, *Native American Prayer*, *Water Balloon Fight 1999*) — <http://angelfire.com/nj/AutumnRose523/>
- *Voices & Verses* <http://www.mrmd.com/voi/verses.shtml>

CLIENT ARTWORK Poems and drawings by homeless clients are also important resources for coping with stress and renewing hope. "I find the transformation of clients' experience into art very inspiring," remarks Betty Kavanagh. "The constant availability of client artwork in our clinic means a lot to me." She encourages homeless service providers to investigate art and creative writing programs at HCH, Baltimore and Albuquerque HCH (ArtStreet) — and to begin their own programs, if they haven't already done so. ■

HAPPY HOLIDAYS FROM THE HCH CLINICIANS' NETWORK!**Communications Committee**

Maggie Hobbs, MSW (Chair); James Dixon, BSW; Laura Gillis, MS, RN; Karen Holman, MD, MPH; Ken Kraybill, MSW; Scott Orman; Pat Post, MPA (Editor)

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P.O. Box 60427, Nashville, Tennessee 37206-0427 ~ For membership information, call (615) 226-2292 or visit www.nhchc.org.



HCH Clinicians' Network
 P.O. Box 60427
 Nashville, TN 37206-0427