

# **THE HEALTH CONNECTION**

## **Embracing wholistic health as a way for the future treatment of young people affected by cancer**

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On first approach, attempting to make a decision about which road to travel for healing in today's climate can be rather an overwhelming pre-occupation. There are so many questions, so many options, some attractive, some familiar, some extravagant and others extraordinary. How do we best make a balanced and informed choice to support ourselves and the young people in our lives affected by cancer?

### **HEALING POWER OF ART THERAPY**

Pertaining to my personal journey, I have discovered the power of Art in Healing and have explored this avenue of Life with passion and wonder. For decades the Arts have been used as a means of expression. For example, painting, drawing, sculpture, movement and dance all enable the participant to express their individuality as they enter a realm of inner transformation and self development. Artists have been drawn to this realm of exploration for centuries, diving into their unconscious and unleashing the deeper side of their nature as they contact unexpressed and hidden parts of themselves, bringing about a merging of the conscious with the unconscious. Even when one cannot consciously remember a particular event or dynamic that occurred in their life, the body never forgets. We may have blocked or buried events as they were too painful to deal with or there were not the right supports in place at the time for healing. These unresolved issues still remain hidden in the body, still in need of care. This is where the use of Art Therapy can be implemented to contact the hidden issues and in doing so, bring them to the surface, to be healed appropriately.

My journey toward healing as a vocation developed through a culmination of studies, experiences and observations made throughout my life. I studied secondary school teaching, and a BA in Fine Arts. The history of the world of Art wakened in me the wonder of human emotion, expressed so passionately and openly by the great Artists. At the end of three years at college, with a Degree in Fine Arts and a major in painting, I packed up my brushes and set off in search of a way to promote the gift of 'expression through the arts' to help ease human suffering.

My journey took me to teenagers at risk of suicide. I discovered that not only could Art be utilised as a form of non-verbal communication and a means of expression but as a tool for healing. So, with these troubled teenagers, I painted. Together we painted the darkness. We drew the torment of growing into adult life and we opened doors of wonder and bewilderment, unravelling ways to truly live in this world. It seemed to me that people stuck in one perceived

reality were able to move easily from that to another space once a door was opened. The expression released through Art Therapy freed people up to walk into the full expression of their life.

## **PHILOPHONETICS**

I wanted to know more, to go further. I complemented my existing knowledge with the study of Philophonetics Counselling and Art as a form of therapy, for children with cancer. Putting new theories into practice I used painting and drawing as tools for inner exploration and to gain a deeper understanding of one's own inner experience. Philophonetic Counselling, on which my work is based, has grown out of the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy (the study of man) and Psychosophy - the anthroposophical approach to psychology, which encompasses the human being as comprising a body, soul and spirit. The practise of Philophonetics Counselling addresses the conscious relationship to one's inner life and provides a range of tools for self-care, well-being and personal development. It incorporates the belief that each one of us is potentially equipped to deal with and make use of all the challenges and opportunities presented to us throughout our journey and determines that every aspect of one's life can be traced and mapped in the subtle dynamics of the body. For example, without necessarily being conscious of an issue related to anger, the expression of that anger can be physically punched, hit or beaten into clay. Watercolours may express the relationship of flow to a particular issue and the colour chosen will give insight to the individual's inner landscape. The expression unleashed through this form of Art Therapy provides a wealth of information to use as a guideline to assist the individual to understand, release and re-establish balance toward healing. Well armed with knowledge, experience and enthusiasm, I developed an Art Therapy Program for specific healing and in 1995 began working at the Oncology/Haematology unit at the Melbourne Royal Children's Hospital. The Program was geared to give emotional support to children with cancer and to assist in adapting to the often frightening reality imposed by their illness. The program created a space where the children felt safe to explore their feelings and concerns related to cancer.

At the same time I ran a private practice as a Counsellor, addressing a variety of issues from chronic fatigue, anorexia, rape, depression, substance abuse and lack of direction, to counselling for couples and simply how to live life to its fullest.

Everywhere I ventured and every work place I became involved with, I witnessed wonderful projects being implemented. The attention to detail at the Children's Hospital was impressive; the structures of support offered to those I counselled was encouraging and yet there were areas lacking that continued to concern me. I often felt impotent to make effective change and was determined to remain focused on the areas that were positive and provided others with hope and nurturing. In the back of my mind there remained a seed of discontent that assured me there must be a better way, where all corners are covered, where a wholistic approach would be put into practice in all areas of operation, not just some.

## **THE GAWLER FOUNDATION**

It was with these criteria and accompanied by the last wish from a young boy I had been working with, that I contacted Ian Gawler in the hope that his already established Centre for adults with Cancer could accommodate a new Program for young people in a similar situation. Within a year

of our first meeting, I was invited to join the team of dedicated staff and volunteers at The Gawler Foundation and to develop the young people's program. The Foundation's property is situated at The Yarra Valley Living Centre in Yarra Junction, just over 70 kilometres from the hustle and bustle of Melbourne, an ideal setting for rest, retreat and recuperation.

Dr Ian Gawler, therapeutic director of the Foundation, was diagnosed with osteogenic sarcoma (bone cancer) and had his right leg amputated in January 1975. Secondaries in his lungs appeared within six months and he was given a prognosis of two weeks to live. As there was no more assistance available through the medical profession, he set about on his own journey of recovery, discovering that our bodies have a natural, inherent capacity to heal. He developed his own self-help program of health and healing and now offers hope and direction for many others, celebrating his twentieth year in remission a couple of years ago.

The Gawler Foundation has assisted many thousands of adults to improve the quality of their life and survive cancer, since the Foundation's inception in 1981. The Foundation helps people manage their illness by applying the principles of relaxation, meditation, a positive state of mind, good diet and nutrition. The current range of services includes residential programs, cancer support groups and meditation groups.

## **THE HEALTH CONNECTION**

In April this year, after many months of planning, the Foundation launched the inaugural 'Health Connection' - a five-day residential program for young people affected by cancer, their caregivers and other family members. Five specialists, guest speakers and a team of volunteer support workers staff the Program. Everyone gets involved, learning the basic principles and applying the techniques of the self-help program in an atmosphere of fun, participation and outdoor activities.

The Program provides an opportunity to learn through direct participation and from the experience of others. The Program is tailor-made for young people with emphasis on Art Therapy, which takes the form of Body Tracing, Painting, Pastel Drawing and Clay Sculpture. Some sessions involve the young people working independently from their caregivers to focus on age appropriate learning. Siblings are encouraged to share their experiences and the demanding role of the caregiver is acknowledged, with discussion on supportive ways of caring for the carer.

There have been three Health Connection Programs this year and the fourth is scheduled for the beginning of December. During the Programs, the entire groups share breakfast, group meditation, massage, sessions on nutrition and diet and a challenging ropes course. Jokes are shared around a bonfire, the young people go on a sherpa-walk and there is even a visit from some clowns! The segment entitled the 'Power of Laughter' is both enjoyable and enlightening and is regarded as a sure highlight of the week!

The first group of three families shared a very special week together. At the time of the first Program, seventeen year old Steve from NSW, joined by his Mum, showed amazing strength and determination after suffering a stroke just six weeks beforehand. Sixteen-year-old Emily with her Mum, blossomed during a challenging week and thirteen year old Mark was accompanied by both his parents and his younger brother Tim. The Program numbers grew for the second and third editions, with each group collectively facing many challenges and experiencing many rewards.

Through the experience of living with cancer, each young person, without exception, had discovered the true value of life. Lasting friendships were made and each group departed from The Gawler Foundation with new insight, practical ways to apply their newfound knowledge and feeling much more able to cope with the illness in their lives.

## **NEW DIRECTION**

I consider that I am now in the privileged position of working on a Program I believe in, with a group of dedicated staff, in a job I am passionate about, which provides a valuable service to the community. The most outstanding difference between my current workplace and the many others I have been a part of, is undoubtedly the wholistic nature of The Gawler Foundation. Every aspect of the Foundation supports itself. The promotion of practical ways to implement a healthy lifestyle, to take control of illness, empower the individual to make informed choices and to recognise the importance of the involvement of the whole family in the process of recovery.

Since ‘The Health Connection’ residential program began, I have facilitated many sessions with young people and have heard many stories that affirm the power of family involvement. I have also heard stories about diet and nutrition in particular that have surprised and disturbed me. A couple of the young people told me they would pretend they were feeling sick when meal times came around, in order to avoid the hospital food. They actually preferred the drastic alternative of having a nasal-gastric tube fitted or being fed intravenously. The emphasis on food in the hospital seemed to be placed in the arena of response rather than nutrition. There appeared to be an acceptance of feeding the children anything that would make them smile or feel better in the short term, irrespective of the nutritional value, which I thought would have been of utmost importance. The Foundation uses organic and biodynamic foods and specifies a diet low in fats and sugar.

The aim of the Program is to help families to develop and sustain optimal conditions for health, healing and peace in family life, in a safe environment. With this as the basic premise, the Program also provides specific support for the differing and unique needs of young people and their caregivers, while supporting and optimising any conventional medical treatment the young people may be undertaking.

## **FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS**

I recognise that with certain legislation and restrictions in place, no institution can currently provide everything a family requires along their road to recovery. Programs like ‘The Health Connection’ offered at The Gawler Foundation are essential for the growth of our medical system. The hope for the future is that we all work together in a complementary way. At The Gawler Foundation we choose to work in support of medical practice and ideals and consider it imperative that the medical profession return the favour. The more understanding and accepting the medical profession becomes, the more we can work together to complement and have a positive and agreeable impact on the health of young people. Parents of young people with a life threatening illness are likely to respond so much more when the advice they are given is complementary rather than contradictory. As a community of health practitioners, surely it is our

obligation to make the road along which these families are travelling, as smooth, informed and uncomplicated as possible. There is no doubt that we all share a common goal for the health and well-being of young people and their families. It's time to work toward a common interest, for the health and well-being of the entire community. I am of the opinion that this is just one of the ways we can assist families supporting a child with cancer. It's really important to open the lines of communication, source the many avenues of assistance currently on offer throughout our health practices and beyond, and then work together toward wholistic health.

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