Healthy Steps to Freedom

Alcohol and drug addiction are serious, chronic and relapsing health problems for both women and men of all ages and backgrounds. Leading to physical and mental health problems, substance abuse often precipitates violence, sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancy, motor vehicle crashes, homelessness, rising health care costs and obesity.

Healthy Steps to Freedom (HSF) targets women and girls in substance abuse settings especially those who find weight issues to be prevalent in their drug use and/or recovery treatment. HSF teaches nutrition, exercise and body acceptance as an alternative approach for losing weight and increasing energy. Participants learn about exercise; nutrition; strength activities; calcium intake; and educational programs which address body image disturbances, eating disorders and other poor lifestyle practices.

Issue:

More than half of clients in treatment for methamphetamine, cocaine and other stimulants are women. Research indicates that women primarily use meth to lose weight and increase energy. Although women sometimes lose a significant amount of weight during their drug use, much of the weight loss is attributed to loss of muscle, bone mass, other vital body tissues and dehydration. They may also experience hair and teeth loss, numerous health problems and ruined relationships with family and friends. In addition, women often experience rapid, unwanted weight gain when they stop using drugs. The fear of gaining this added weight can lure many back to using stimulant-type drugs, which are known to have quick weight loss effects.

Many women gain a significant amount of weight while in mental health treatment, due to physical inactivity, poor nutrition and/or prescription medication. These women often feel hopeless, being unable to control their weight, which can worsen their mental health status. Some individuals even stop taking prescription medication because of the negative side effects (e.g., weight gain, lethargy).

What Has Been Done:

More than 60 HSF sessions have been conducted since its inception in February 2007. In this time, about 5,100 contacts (to over 500 participants) have been made. The Healthy Steps to Freedom 12-week program continues to be implemented in substance abuse and mental health recovery centers across Las Vegas (including but limited to: Choices Group, Inc., Las Vegas Indian Center, Las Vegas Rescue Mission, Nevada Homes for Youth, Salvation Army, US Vets and WestCare Nevada – Outpatient Services and Women & Children’s Clinic).

The HSF curriculum manual was published in fall of 2009. This 560-page manual contains lesson plans, instructor notes, weekly personal commitment plans and handouts for participants. Currently, an adolescent version of the HSF curriculum is being developed.

In collaboration with the Center for the Application of Substance Abuse Technologies (CASAT), HSF train-the-trainer (TTT) workshops have been conducted in both Las Vegas and Reno since 2009. These two-day workshops (including continuing education credits) offer substance abuse and mental health care providers important knowledge and resources to help present the HSF curriculum at their treatment facilities.

Impact:

HSF Program participant’s average age is 34 years old. BMI averages about 28.4 (which is categorized as overweight). Similarly, average body fat percentage is 30% (which is classified as concern for unsatisfactory health). About three-fourths of HSF clients have children (average of 1.9 kids per client). For those with children under 18, the average age of the youngest child is 5 years old).
Effectiveness of HSF on Health, Body Dissatisfaction, Thin-ideal Internalization, Eating pathology & Weight Concerns:
After program participation, clients reported:
- Increased health & nutrition knowledge
- Increased positive health & nutrition behaviors
- Decreased thin-ideals set by society on women
- Decreased body dissatisfaction
- Decreased disordered eating symptoms
- Increased ideal weight goals
- Decreased concern that gaining weight may trigger drug-use relapse
- Decreased concern about using drugs to lose weight after leaving treatment

With a demonstrated increase in health knowledge and positive health behavior change along with reductions in eating attitudes, negative body shape and less thin-ideal internalization, attrition rates are likely to be higher and hopefully drug relapses will be diminished. After program participation, clients have the skills to improve dietary practices and family meal planning, physical activity, healthy bodies and body image satisfaction. These newly learned lifestyle behaviors, exemplified in the home, have a direct impact on child health and obesity.

Partners:
- CARE Coalition
- Center for the Application of Substance Abuse Technologies (CASAT)
- Substance Abuse & Mental Health Treatment Facilities (Choices Group, Inc., Las Vegas Indian Center, Las Vegas Rescue Mission, Nevada Homes for Youth, Salvation Army & WestCare Nevada)
- University of Nevada, Las Vegas – Department of Psychology
- University of Nevada, Reno – School of Community Health Sciences

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