

Higher Ground's New Clinical Manager



Part of the clinical role is to provide an environment where clients feel a level of gratitude, says Higher Ground's new clinical manager.

Higher Ground's new clinical manager Linda Thompson-Shaw is not new to Higher Ground: she was a counsellor at Higher Ground in Parnell over 20 years ago and loved it.

Linda was approached in England by a recruiter on behalf of Higher Ground who suggested her skill-set and experience were a match for the advertised position of Higher Ground clinical manager. "I thought initially 'no' then because it was Higher Ground I thought 'yes'."

Married to an Englishman

and happily living in southern England. Linda had no plans to return to New Zealand until retirement. But she had very positive memories of "incredible" therapeutic work done in her two years on Higher Ground's clinical staff. She applied, was interviewed remotely by video link and got the job.

In private practice after nearly 20 years in different roles in alcohol and other drugs services and the wider community, she missed working in a professional team and she missed the client group.

"I respect their vulnerability

and their potential for growth. If you have an understanding of the client group then you can see the person behind the behaviour. I'm in recovery myself so I understand the behaviour because I've done it myself."

It took four months before Linda was back in Auckland. Her New Zealand family had booked to visit, and she had a practice to wind up. She started work again at Higher Ground last November, no longer in the grand old house in Parnell but now in much bigger new premises on Te Atatu Peninsula.

Linda brought goals and plans into the role of clinical manager, but they were more about strengthening what Higher Ground already did well than changing it. "I'm actually re-implementing rather than adding to the programme."

Phase progression interviews have been brought back. Clients get immediate feedback from peers as well as from staff. She says the process promotes self-efficacy – that is, confidence in the ability to exert control over motivation, behavior, and social environment, which may be damaged or lost in active addiction.

"Clients feel they have a say in their own process, they

Breaking the family cycle of addiction

As a child, she felt no one was listening. That finally changed when she came to Higher Ground. After a lifetime of addiction, this graduate is no longer running from herself. Now over two years free of alcohol and other drugs, this is her anonymous story.

"Que Sera Sera, whatever will be, will be. I never knew how much impact those lyrics would have on me. Over the years I put up with a lot, even though I hated it.

Que Sera Sera, whatever will be, will be. They were words Mum would sing to me when she was going to say something she knew I wouldn't like. I didn't notice the sadness in her voice as she sang. She was emotionally distant and kept herself busy with work.

You see Mum had been trying to escape from her own story long before we kids came along. She left the small East Coast town she grew up in and the ghosts that it held as soon as she could. Landing in the South Island, she and Dad married young. Dad was a hard worker, but he had a problem with the drink and was a compulsive gambler. I would see Dad in the morning for breakfast and not see him again till the next day. Mum would work and my brother would take me to school and look after me till Mum got home.

My childhood wasn't an unhappy one, at least in the beginning. My mum came from a big family and she had moved to Christchurch with her three younger sisters. I remember weekend camping trips, holidays, traditions and family celebrations. There were lots of parties.

Mum tried to bring Maori values into our family but she had her

own issues. She tried to send me home for a few weeks a year to my Nana up North who spoke only Maori. So at home although I didn't live in a Maori culture I knew what it was.

After the loss of my brother to terminal illness Mum got busier and Dad got reckless. More drinking and gambling and it fell to my older brother to take care of me. Eventually the cracks got bigger and Mum left when I was eight. My Dad drank more and when my brother could take no more of the violence from Dad he left home. So it was just Dad and me.

I got used to spending weekends away from home with whoever would take me in the extended family. I knew what was right and wrong and when things I didn't like would happen I would try to tell someone. But no one would listen. I felt scared, alone and helpless. No one heard me. I didn't know what I was trying to tell my parents.

One uncle was inappropriate which led to abuse. When he took over looking after me I knew something was wrong. But it was the 80s and no one wanted to hear.

I experienced some trauma then that would change the way I saw the world and my place in it. *Que Sera Sera, whatever will be will be...*

It was like everyone was saying I lied. I was unsafe so I started running away from the age of nine. I found people on the

streets who I felt could protect me. At least no one wanted to touch me like that. That's when I was introduced to my first drugs (glue and methylated spirits) and I felt an instant sense of nothingness. It took away the hurt and I forgot. I became an everyday user from the beginning, and although the drugs changed over the years the behaviour didn't.

I was 11 when I was taken away from my parents and sent to a girls' home. I got discharged as a state ward when I was 15 because I was pregnant. By the time my children were born I was an addict. I liked to use a cocktail of substances and I didn't care what I used as long as I found total annihilation. I paid the price for this annihilation many times in my life and this only fed into the ongoing cycle. I did unsavoury things with unsavoury people and put myself in harms way frequently to support my drug habit. I lost everything and everyone who had ever mattered to me. But it was my children who paid the ultimate price for my addiction. They were innocent casualties, whose lives had been continuously affected by a mother running from her own story.

On a sunny 'fish and chip' Friday three years ago, I watched as my grandchildren played outside. They were laughing and squealing as they chased each other. I smiled. I noticed one

of them watching through the window, and when I followed her gaze she was watching her Dad and her uncles laughing together and using drugs.

She smiled, and my heart broke. I realised then that my boys had watched me and were now living out my story. I have reflected on this memory many times and though it brings sadness I am grateful for it. Because that was the start of the rest of my life. I knew I had to change my story and show my family another way. And that tsunami of emotion led me to find Higher Ground.

Although I was ready, I was still fighting on the inside. I was scared and I was angry. I always knew why I needed drugs, but never had the courage to face it. At Higher Ground I resisted every way I could but they didn't give up on me. They heard me. They heard me. And for the first time in my life I knew I was safe. It took time for the shell to break, and Multiple Family Group really helped with that. My Mum came to a few family groups, driving up from the East Coast and staying the night. I had blamed my Mum a lot of my life for not hearing me and not being there for me. We had one-on-one counselling and things started to change.

My big brother in Christchurch sent an impact letter that took him three weeks to write and me three weeks to get over, after it was read out in Multiple Family Group by a counsellor who looked like my brother. It was certainly the hardest thing I had to hear. He remembered what I was like as a child and as an adult. He wanted his relationship back with his sister. It was hard for me to take in.

Higher Ground Locks Down

Keeping residents and staff safe and the programme running.

The coronavirus pandemic presented Higher Ground with one of its biggest challenges.

"The staff and residents worked exceptionally well together to keep the place very, very safe during the Covid-19 lockdown," says director Johnny Dow. That meant the house stayed infection-free through level four.

"I'm very pleased with how Higher Ground has handled this – so far. Yes, I was exhausted but pleased. It's been very, very busy," says Johnny.

The outbreak management team reviewed weekly what Higher Ground was doing and any new issues, changes in conditions and concerns that had arisen.

Higher Ground closed to visitors even before the announcement of the national lockdown. Some residents decided they wanted to return home and were supported in that with Higher Ground's community team staying in contact. Many would be coming back to Higher Ground at the place in the programme that they left.

During level four outside contact stopped apart from staff coming in to work.

Staff were rostered at different times so that social distancing could occur. All staff had their temperature taken when they arrived, and shared work spaces were sanitised between shifts.

The therapeutic programme continued. Says clinical manager Linda Thompson-Shaw: "I tried to make sure that residents weren't going to miss out on anything, as much as I could. I had to restructure the programme, trying to provide as good a service as they would have got if we weren't in lockdown."

Big weekly Multiple Family Groups stopped but families still sent in their impact letters which were processed with peers. Clients have the opportunity to follow up any issues with family in After Care.

Higher Ground implemented daily phone and Facetime for the residents so they could stay in contact with their families during a worrying time.

While in Level 4 lockdown outside contractors were put on hold which meant no yoga, zumba, tai chi or singing groups. Residents did not leave the premises except to go for walks.

They stopped going out to evening 12-Step meetings or on outings. Residents set up their own Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous and other fellowship meetings, some inviting staff in recovery as guest speakers. As well as three in-house meetings they joined in on three fellowship video meetings per week.

New admissions have started again, but things have remained pretty restricted as infection control is important, says Johnny.



But real change came by way of a simple teddy bear. As part of my inner child therapy, I had to care for and nurture that teddy bear 'child'. I got off to a rocky start and had her removed from my custody, but I began to embrace the experience. When the teddy bear was returned to me, I looked after and protected her.

And when I wasn't looking we began to grow up. From there I was able to rebuild my relationship with Mum, then with my big brother, my three sons, and finally with myself. I

was surprised when my brother came up for my graduation from Higher Ground and we have an amazing relationship today.

At Higher Ground I learned how to build healthy relationships and how to stay in them. I learned that my whole life I was trying to be heard, I made such a noise making sure I was heard.

I reconnected with my Maori culture and today I wear my Hineora (bone carving) with great pride. A taonga and a reminder of the time I spent learning who I was.

While going into treatment was an important step in my life and taught me to look at myself, it is the 12-Step programme of Narcotics Anonymous that teaches me how to live with myself on a daily basis. This is the foundation of the new life I am creating and I still need to do the work.

I go to regular 12-Step meetings and do service where I can. I work the Steps and have a great relationship with my sponsor who I talk to regularly. I work with my Higher Ground Aftercare counsellor, and attend a weekly

recovery support group.. Today I have an amazing job where I am able to support others as they discover their own path of recovery, and am studying for a qualification. I thought I had wasted my whole life on drugs, but it turns out I have a wealth of experience that I can draw from.

Today I can say that I'm a good Mum, and that to me is my greatest achievement. I have a program to deal with emotions and whatever life brings me. *Que Sera Sera...*"

can see they are representing themselves, they're part of the process. They get immediate, one-to-one feedback about how we see they're going. Also they can reflect on how they're doing."

Gender groups - that is men's and women's groups - are back weekly. Affirmations are again a daily part of the programme. "It means people get the challenging feedback but they also get affirmed for the progress they are making, because it's very hard to keep going if all you are met with is the negative."

She sees client behaviour as a symptom of what is underlying. "So if someone's acting out I want to know what's going on for them, in a therapeutic way. I always say to people, 'take it to group, take it to your case manager, process it'. If you're reacting to being challenged what's happening for you, what does this remind you of?"

"I try to keep things light hearted, but it's a balance," says Linda.

"It's said that 85-95% of our client group have had trauma, I think it's probably the 95%." Clinical work is about creating a therapeutic environment where clients feel safe enough to bring those experiences and know they will be met with respect.

"I have this analogy I use with clients. If you have a wound on your hand and you pour anaesthetic on it, that is, use drugs, it doesn't just numb the wound it numbs the whole hand. When you anaesthetise from trauma, sadness, pain, grief you also anaesthetise from love, happiness, joy, relationship. So when you start to stop putting the anaesthetic on, you get the pain coming up but you also have the other feelings as well.

"It's about the client being able to hold their sadness and pain and because of that being able to have love and joy as well."

Linda specialises in integrative gestalt therapy with a Jungian aspect, and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. She started

at Higher Ground on placement as a psychotherapy student from AUT University, and finished her Post Graduate degree while a counsellor on staff.

She got into recovery herself in 1991 after starting her studies. "I was trying to heal, trying to grow and they could see that in my application. By the time I started my course I had recognised what was wrong. So I did my early training in early recovery, I don't recommend that, it's really painful.

"But it also helped me in my work ever since. I have an understanding of what it feels like to be in early recovery and trying to do intensive, therapeutic work."

After two years at Higher Ground she moved on to gain more out-patient experience. She became clinical supervisor of the triage team at Community Alcohol and Drug Services central. As a comprehensive assessor there she worked with people with complex needs, such as clients

with severe trauma who required longer-term therapy.

She travelled overseas, drawn back to England and a variety of roles managing counselling services and alcohol and other drugs services. She spent eight years as a Co-ordinator/ Supervisor/ Therapist/ Trainer with the Change Grow Live organisation which ran AOD services for the whole of Hampshire.

She had thought she'd get over the UK within about four years, but 15 years later she was still there and enjoying it, until the approach regarding the job at Higher Ground. "It feels like I've got England out of my system now, making the decision to come back here I don't have that yearning any more."

Referrals

Higher Ground welcomes self-referrals.

Health, social and legal professionals wishing to make a referral to Higher Ground should note that our admission criteria require residents to be over 18 years and over, have a primary diagnosis of alcohol or other drug dependence, an interest in 12 Step recovery and a drug-free status on admission.

Referrals or self referrals can be made by telephoning 09-834 0042 for a pre-admission assessment appointment on weekdays between 8.30am and 4.00pm.

Assessments in detox facilities or hospital can be arranged. Applicants who have outstanding legal charges are considered on a case by case basis. If required, Higher Ground can organise a medical detox through referral to the Auckland Regional Alcohol and Drug Services.

Donations

Higher Ground is a registered Charitable Trust. Donations over \$5.00 are tax deductible and may be sent direct to Higher Ground. Higher Ground is dependent on charitable donations for the continuation of its programme.

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We hope you have enjoyed this issue of the Higher Ground News. If you do not wish to remain on our mailing list, or are incorrectly listed, please write to HGDRT, PO Box 45 192, Te Atatu Peninsula, Waitakere, 0651. For further information about the Higher Ground rehabilitation programme phone Programme Director, Johnny Dow 09-834 0017 or email admin@higherground.org.nz

www.higherground.org.nz