Letting men know they are not alone

Multiple studies looking at men's experiences seeking out emotional support due to loneliness, sadness and distress, show significant difficulties among men in seeking out support during personal struggles.These difficulties often stem from mistrust and not knowing with whom it is safe to share their feelings, with mistrust often extending to friends and family as well.[1]

Read more about Charles Alvarez here.

Charles Alvarez and Maria Stout, saw that the inmates in the Lewis & Clark County jail needed more support to build their lives after incarceration. With support from Ability Montana's Outreach Coordinator, they were given the go-ahead to pursue the idea to implement the Living Well in the Community (LWC) workshops with the incarcerated community. This led Charles to host an LWC workshop in the Lewis & Clark jail, where he would meet Chuck, a Native American man, who participated in the men's only workshop.

Chuck has been at differing levels of incarceration for 40 years of his life. He was incarcerated for exasperation of his symptoms including addiction, anger, rage, depression and suicidal ideation.

With the knowledge gained from Living Well in the Community, Chuck decreased his rage by increasing his understanding of his rage – by learning about his own triggers, different communication styles, and how to use "I" statements. With consistent support and resources from his LWC cohort, he learned how to better advocate for himself within his peer group more widely, and importantly among authority figures, especially the correctional officers within the jail facility.

The LWC facilitators, Charles Alavarez and Maria Stout, felt that what made a difference in the incarcerated population was active and reflective listening, focusing on the individual's power to realize that they already had answer to direct their own life's journey. They also felt the most impactful sessions were peer advocacy and communication, which helped participants come to the realization that your past reactions and triggers from your past trauma don't have to follow you, as you can heal by learning about emotional regulation and how to apply it to your everyday life.

One of the things that was unusual but made a difference was that LWC facilitator, Charles Alvarez, would shake hands or hug the participants based on their performance, which would increase their sense of worth because they were starved for physical touch and recognition that they were still “human” and worthy of touch that was positive male acceptance.

Chuck was able to stay out of institutions for six months, which was the longest he was outside for himself. He unfortunately attempted suicide and was placed back at Lewis and Clark County jail. He seemed to feel ashamed that he had failed. We encouraged him to see it as a “roadblock” and not an end to his story and journey.

Charles and Maria took a socioecological definition of disability when they brought LWC to the county jail. This framework considers disability within the complex interaction between individual, interpersonal, organization, and societal factors.

Although Chuck didn’t have a specific diagnosis of disability, his addiction, emotional dysregulation, depression, in addition to the challenges that exist with living most of his life in jail creates limitations of functioning and a need for supports to live a healthy and autonomous life. Charles and Maria saw a high need for the people in the county jail to access and navigate the lessons of the LWC workshop—to set goals and identify needed supports through peer connection and self-awareness in a safe space.

If your clients or consumers have a similar need, consider inviting your local CIL to host a LWC workshop at your organization.

Find your local CIL here.

Charles Alvarez came to be a LWC facilitator at Ability MT because of his own story of disability. At a dark time in his life, Ability MT helped him find peer support through a local Men’s Group and the Living Well in the Community workshop. Watch this video about Charles to learn more about his journey.

1. McKenzie SK, Collings S, Jenkin G, River J. Masculinity, Social Connectedness, and Mental Health: Men's Diverse Patterns of Practice. Am J Mens Health. 2018 Sep;12(5):1247-1261. doi: 10.1177/1557988318772732. Epub 2018 Apr 28. PMID: 29708008; PMCID: PMC6142169.
2. 1.Ravesloot, C. (2016). Living Well with a Disability, a self-management program. MMWR supplements, 65.