

BEYOND THE PHYSICAL

An Evaluation of Cottage Dreams

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Executive Summary

Cottage Dreams is a unique recovery initiative which offers cancer survivors and their supporters a week stay at a cottage in Ontario that have completed their cancer treatment in the past 9 months. On account of the program expanding since its inception in 2003, the Cottage Dreams staff desired an evaluation that would provide them with information pertaining to how the program facilitated the healing and recovery process of past participants.

Evaluators from Trent University designed an evaluation that would examine the effectiveness of the program, the benefits it offers to participants, and the role of the program within the complementary, integrated care approach to healing and recovery. The evaluation consisted of 32 in-depth, open-ended phone interviews with past program participants.

The main findings from the research, which were positive in nature, pertained to aspects of healing and recovery that the week at the cottage afforded visitors. Those aspects of healing and recovery which were identified by participants were: a will to live which entails a change in outlook or perspective, being in an environment which is away from everyday life and cancer, being in a natural setting of wildlife and environment, and having time to make emotional connection with others. Each of these elements is a fundamental component within a complementary, integrated approach to healing and recovery and adheres to the Cottage Dreams objectives.

Included in the report are findings about the program itself, which were also positive. Past participants were appreciative of the non-discriminatory nature of the program, the organization's professionalism, and many were touched by the generosity of cottage donors and the Cottage Dreams staff.

The evaluators feel that Cottage Dreams plays an important role in the cancer healing and recovery process and has positively affected the lives of many cancer survivors and their supporters. Taking the comments of past participants into consideration, recommendations have been formulated for Cottage Dreams to consider for future program changes and direction.

Recommendations:

- Consider expanding the program's advertising strategy
- Consider expanding the program's eligibility criteria
- Consider expanding the program into other areas within Ontario
- Consider targeting marginalised groups
- Consider making a meeting between the donors and visitors optional for both parties

Purpose of Evaluation

This evaluation was designed in collaboration between the U-Links Center for Community-Based Research and Trent University's International Development Studies fourth year course, 'Assessment of Development Projects'.

The objectives of the Cottage Dreams program were the foundation from which the research questions of the evaluation materialized.

The program objectives are as follows:

1. Provide time away in a relaxing cottage environment for those recovering from cancer treatments.
2. Provide the opportunity for support and encouragement by extending the cottage offer to family and friends (maximum of five additional visitors)
3. Facilitate the healing and recovery process of mind, body, spirit and relationships.

The research questions that developed from the objectives were:

What is the effectiveness of the program to survivors and their families?

The effectiveness of the program was, within the evaluation, based on if the program was meeting its objectives.

What are the benefits of the program to the survivors and their families?

The benefits of the program are those positive elements it provided survivors in regards to healing and recovery.

What is the role played by Cottage Dreams in the aftercare journey of the survivor and their family? *The role of Cottage Dreams in the aftercare journey was determined based on where Cottage Dreams situates itself in the complementary, integrated healing and recovery approach.*

General program feedback was also obtained from the interviews with past program participants. As the evaluators, we felt that the inclusion of this information within the report was beneficial, because it could be of value to the Cottage Dreams staff and the improvement of the program in the future. This general feedback will be included in the results section, serving as secondary research findings.

The information for the evaluation was obtained from past program participants through phone interviews. The responses were then aggregated and analyzed to answer the research questions. The researchers utilized the opinions of the participants, illustrated in the results section, to evaluate the effectiveness, benefits and role of the program.

It is our hope that the report can be utilized by the Cottage Dreams staff in ways which they see fit. We believe that the report could be used to foster financial support for the program or to demonstrate the significance of the program to government officials and the wider medical community.

Cottage Dreams Program Description

Cottage Dreams is a unique cancer recovery program that provides the opportunity for Ontario residences who have completed active cancer treatment within nine months, or who are currently in remission, to spend a free week at a donated cottage. The week at the cottage is open to a survivor and up to five family members or other individuals who supported them in their journey. The program is geared towards those individuals who, on their own, would not be able to afford a week away. A unique aspect of the program is that it is open to individuals who have experienced all types of cancer. However, the majority of those who participate are those who have battled breast cancer, found in a previous study conducted in 2005 and in the current evaluation.

As is illustrated in the increase of cottages available for donation and the number of individuals being placed in cottages, Cottage Dreams has grown significantly since it began its operations in 2003. The number of cottages available for beneficiaries has increased significantly; from 235 cottages available in 2006, to over five-hundred in 2007. The number of cottage placements has also experienced significant growth. In the first year of operation the number of placements stood at six, whereby in the 2005-2006 period, the program placed seventy-five visitors.

Application Process

Cancer survivors interested in participating in the program need to first complete an on-line application prior to seasonal deadlines. Following the receipt of this application, a written application form needs to be submitted. The application is accompanied by a medical disclosure which is completed by the individual's physician or oncologist, supporting the individual's participation in the program. A legal waiver releasing Cottage Dreams and cottage owners from liability also needs to be submitted. This information is required prior to program deadlines.

The next step in the application process is an informal meeting which takes place between the applicant and a Cottage Dreams staff person. These informal meetings provide a forum where the program can be discussed and questions can be answered. The final step in the application process is matching the accepted individual with a donated cottage. The individual's preferences are taken into consideration; however, it is the decision of the Cottage Dreams staff and the cottages available which determine where the individual will be staying.

Participants are required to pay for transportation to and from the cottage. As well, food and miscellaneous costs associated with the cottage stay are the responsibility of the participant and their guests. There may be an opportunity for the cottage guests to meet the cottage owner during their stay. In the process of this evaluation, of the thirty-two respondents, approximately half made such

contact. Upon their arrival, the participants are often greeted with a welcome message and basket that is provided by the program.

While at the cottage, guests are permitted to do as they please. However, there are some rules that are stipulated by Cottage Dreams, such as guests not using motorized water craft due to liability issues. A Cottage Dreams volunteer ambassador may visit a participant during their stay at the cottage to check and see if everything is running smoothly. Guests are expected to leave the cottage in the state which they received it in. Following the guests departure, a cleaning crew service visits each location, this being provided by Cottage Dreams. Regarding the duration of the stay, guests arrive at 2pm on a Sunday, departing the following Friday at 2pm. Not all program participants stay this length of time, but this time period is specified in the regular program procedure.

Methods of Evaluation

The program currently evaluates participants experience via a two page feedback sheet regarding their participation in Cottage Dreams. This is a primary means through which program benefits have been determined in the past. Cottage owners are also asked to complete the same feedback sheet as the participants of open-ended questions.

The feedback sheets are as follows:

- **Was your participation a pleasant experience for you? Please explain.**
- **Would you participate in the program again?**
- **How was the organization of the program from beginning to end?**
- **How was the communication throughout your involvement?**
- **Are you satisfied with the cleaning service of the program?**
- **Would you recommend the program to cottage owners?**
- **Do you have any suggestions with regard to the program?**
- **(Testimonial requested for promotional purposes)**

In 2005, an independent evaluation of Cottage Dreams was conducted. This evaluation was orientated to programmatic aspects of Cottage Dreams. The methods used were written surveys and phone interviews. Both survivors and their supporters were interviewed. Thirty phone interviews were conducted in total. This served as a valuable resource for this evaluation; however, the focus of this evaluation is different.

Complementary Care: Beyond the Physical

As is stated in the program objectives, Cottage Dreams seeks to facilitate healing and recovery process of the mind, spirit, body and relationships in the cancer after-care journey. This type of care is representative of care which is beyond the physical. For this reason, included in the report is a discussion on cancer care which is situated within the complementary, integrated approach; which contains elements that are beyond physical and medical treatments in cancer care. The annotated bibliography contains sources on complementary, integrated care which were utilized in the research process.

An important website which was found in the research process, which served as a valuable information source, was the Center for Integrated Healing website. The organization, a not-for profit society, works to encourage a more holistic healing approach to cancer care and provides a cancer care program for individuals and their families. On the organization's website, information was presented which demonstrated the complementary care approach and the different aspects of healing and recovery which compose it. Cottage Dreams is a program which provides the opportunity for complementary healing and recovery to be realized. On account of this, an overview of complementary care will now be presented, obtained primarily from the Center for Integrated Healing website.

For much of the 20th century, the dominant belief was that illness was separate from the self, therefore conventional medicine approached treatment through external agents such as radiation and chemotherapy. **Figure 1** is demonstrative of the conventional cancer treatment model which is 'tumor oriented'; seeking to cure cancer through the treatment of the tumor.

FIGURE 1
TUMOUR ORIENTED MODEL

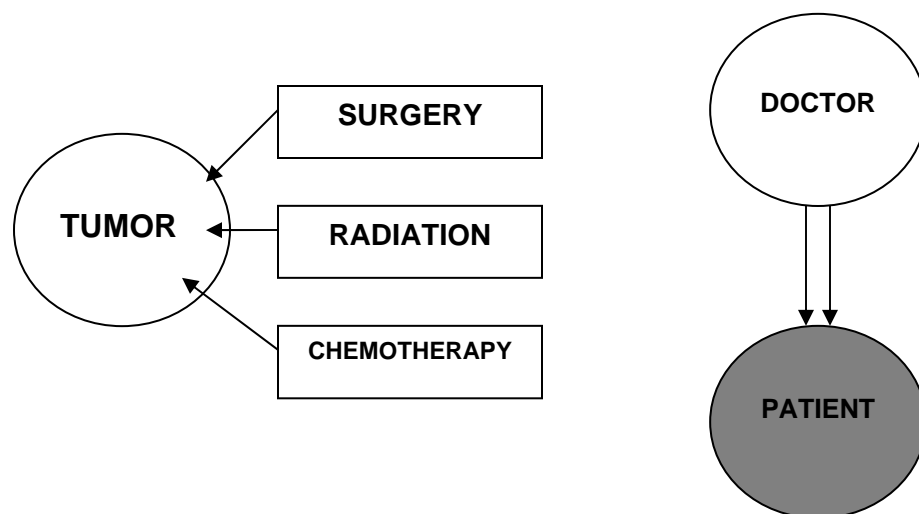


Figure 2 is demonstrative of the 'person oriented' model which looks at the role of the whole person in cancer recovery. Placing the self as the nucleus from which cancer healing and recovery is fostered, this approach is demonstrative of the notion that the mind and body are not separate and that medical treatments are not the only factor which contribute to the healing process. When the self is perceived as playing a fundamental role in healing and recovery, medical treatment becomes one of *many* spokes in the wheel of the cancer after-care journey.

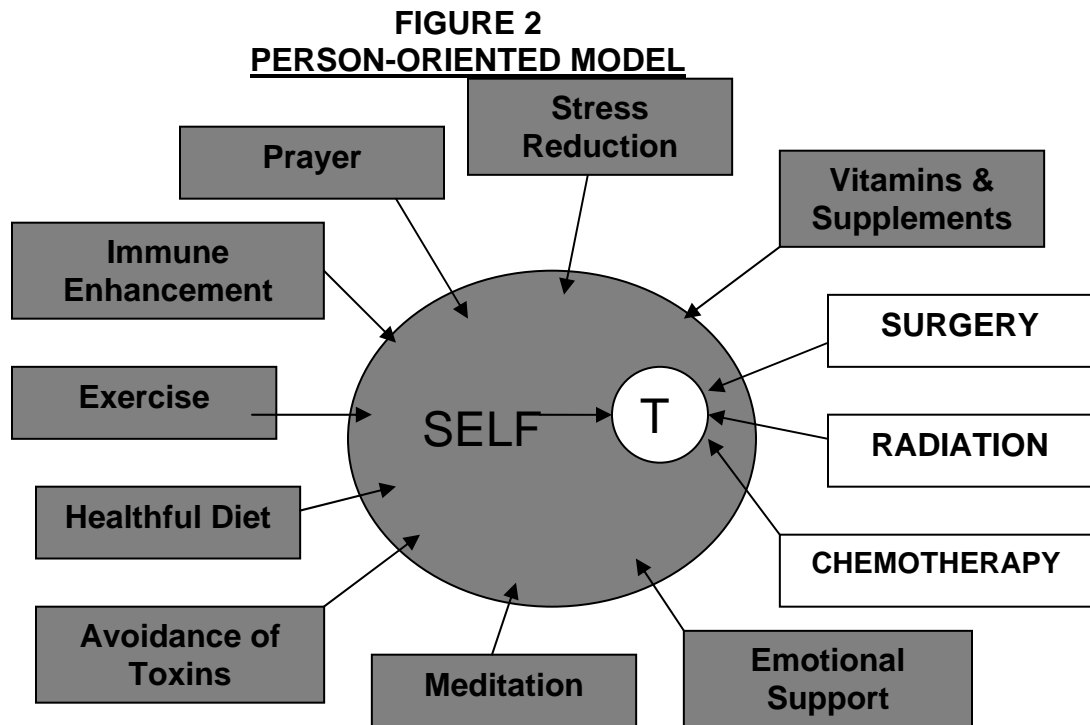


Figure 3 shows recovery as represented by the idea of spokes in a wheel.



An element which can be added to the person-orientated model is nature. Research has found that a relationship to exist between the natural environment and their capacity to foster positive health and healing. Dr. Howard Frumkin asserts that “there are a lot of indications that contact with nature, either walking in the wilderness, gardening, or having a pet, makes people feel better, and can minimize the effects of disease” (Frumkin, 236).

This concept of complementary, integrated healing and recovery has provided the foundation for which many organizations, initiatives, and programs have been established. Wellspring Canada is an example of such an organization which provides emotional and psychological support, free of charge, for individuals and families living with cancer. Their programs and services range from expressive programs such as art therapy and creative music, to various groups intended for breast cancer survivors and caregivers of diagnosed individuals.

Cottage Dreams situates itself within the complementary, integrated healing and recovery approach which acknowledges that healing and recovery is fostered by means which are beyond the physical. This is stipulated in the program’s third objective: **to facilitate in the healing and recovery process of mind, body, spirit and relationships**. As a program which offers cancer survivors and their families or supporters a week at a cottage, it incorporates the healing qualities of nature, while also providing a forum through which the various spokes of the healing and recovery wheel, as illustrated above, can be realized.

Methodology

As was stated in the purpose of the evaluation, information for the evaluation was obtained from past program participants in order to determine the program's effectiveness, benefits and role in the cancer healing and recovery process. Therefore, qualitative methods of inquiry were chosen as the best approach in extracting information of this type. Prior to data collection, initial plans included both a focus group and open-ended phone interviews. However, due to low participation numbers, the focus group was cancelled. In total, thirty-two phone interviews were conducted in the data collection process. The majority of those who participated were breast cancer survivors, and a small number of those interviewed spoke on behalf of a family member who had cancer. The interviews averaged between 15 and 25 minutes.

Process

A meeting with the Cottage Dreams staff and the Trent evaluators established the direction the evaluation would take. The first task was for the researchers to research the topic of cancer recovery and healing. The purpose of this was to make the researchers more knowledgeable about the topic, thus improving the evaluator's ability to construct the questions which would be posed to the respondents. The resources which were examined in the research review can be found in Appendix 3 of the report.

The second step in the evaluation process was to prepare and submit the necessary work pertaining to an ethics review. As part of an ethics review process, the evaluators reviewed the SSHRC Guidelines for Research on Human Subjects and submitted an ethics review to the Ethics Committee at Trent University (see Appendix 1). A consent form (see Appendix 2) was developed which outlined the purpose of the evaluation, the rights of the participants, and included a disclaimer which provided the evaluators with the right to use the information obtained from the participants anonymously in their research.

As was stated in the introduction to this section, qualitative methods of inquiry were chosen as the means through which information would be acquired for the evaluation. This method of inquiry was selected by the evaluators for a number of reasons. Firstly, qualitative methods provide the opportunity for issues to be studied in –depth and in detail, producing data which generates a broad understanding of issues and themes identified (Patton, 1990). Secondly, qualitative data allows for the experience of participants in the program to be voiced.

As a method of qualitative data collection, it was decided that a focus group would serve as an effective means through which preliminary information could be obtained and primary evaluation themes could be dictated. The focus group

did not materialize but the agenda for the focus group has been included in the appendices.

A revised methodology developed following the focus group cancellation so the information that would have been extracted through the focus group could be obtained through pilot phone interviews. The first set of questions posed to a small number of respondents, extracted preliminary information and highlighted key themes, thus acting as pilot interview questions. The second set of questions was informed by the information obtained from the initial questions, which were posed to the remainder of the respondents. The two sets of questions utilized in the interviews can be found in Appendix 5 and Appendix 6.

In conducting the phone interviews, the evaluators wrote extensive notes during and immediately following the interviews, in order to capture initial analysis and interpretation. These insights later served as an important component in the process of data analysis.

An important part of the evaluator's methodology pertains to their use of inductive analysis, whereby those conducting the evaluation attempt to enter into the research without pre-existing expectations. The purpose of using such an approach is that the respondents will frame their experience in their own language and themes and patterns will emerge independently of that which is imposed by the researchers (Patton, 1990). The inquiry was flexible in nature; its design was constructed as the data collection progressed, thus providing the evaluators with the capacity to explore themes identified by the respondents in greater depth in subsequent interviews.

Interview Questions: Their Development and Changes

The interviews were structured by a standardized interview guide as the same set of questions was asked of each respondent. This approach was used to maintain consistency between interviewers since there was more than person conducting the interviews and provided the evaluators with a clear guide of how the interview should be conducted.

Pilot Interview Questions

The objective of the focus group was to: highlight those areas where further inquiry was needed and to identify areas which could be omitted; to extract the language which was used by participants in framing the disease; to illuminate those questions where wording had to be changed, and to develop the interview skills of the researchers. Since the focus group was not possible, pilot interviews were formulated so that the objectives of the focus group could be met and themes for further analysis could be identified. Silvermann asserts that the

process of thorough pre-testing validates and reinforces the legitimacy of qualitative inquiry (Silvermann, 1993).

Final Interview Questions

After the first five pilot interviews were conducted, revisions were made. Biographical questions contained in the initial interview set were removed, as their purpose was not clear and the information being extracted was not relevant to the evaluation. The pilot interviews also illuminated trends and themes where more focus needed to be directed such as the aspects of healing and recovery that could be fostered at the cottage stay.

A quantitative question was designed to analyze the relevance of the following themes; nature, the presence of family and/or supporters, and being in a new environment and/or space:

Rate the importance of the following components of the week at the cottage in regards to your healing and recovery process:

1 being of little importance 5 being very importance

a. Nature

b. Presence of Family and/or supporters

c. Being in a new environment and/or space

The initial interviews were also of considerable length and often repetitive, therefore, revisions were made to clarify the scope of the interviews and eliminate redundancies. The researchers were able to develop their interview skills in the first five interviews, as well as assess how the interviews unfolded and what the most effective means of recording information were.

The revised sets of questions were used in the conducting of the final twenty-seven interviews. Incorporated into the questions were background/demographic, feeling, opinion, and experience/behaviour questions (Patton, 1990). Through the themes and issues that emerged in the first set of questions, the second set was tailored towards these themes and for clarity.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the qualitative data which was gathered began with the evaluators revisiting their original research questions.

It was decided that as a method of analysis, the answers of different individuals would be grouped together to highlight key trends. Using inductive analysis, these key themes were determined, and the collected data was then categorized according to these themes (see Patton, 1990). In representing the themes which

emerged, indigenous concepts (those articulated by the people interviewed) and sensitizing concepts (those which the analyst brings to the data through the literature review) were used to define the categories (Patton, 1990). The theme identified using an indigenous concept was getting away to a new different space, while those themes which were identified by the researchers included the will to live, emotional connections with others, and nature.

Results

The results of our evaluation fit into two categories, those that pertain to the research questions and those which address aspects of the Cottage Dreams program. Section one discusses the unique opportunities which Cottage Dreams affords to participants in their process of healing and recovery. The key themes found to facilitate in the healing and recovery process were the will to live, emotional connections with others, the chance to get away and the importance of nature. Section two discusses the Cottage Dreams program more generally. This section describes how participants got involved, their reasons for participating, their expectations and general feedback about the program.

RESULTS: HEALING & RECOVERY

How Cancer Affected Their Lives

In order to evaluate what Cottage Dreams offers its participants, it is important to establish the affects that cancer has on the lives of the cancer survivor and their family. Using this as a starting point, we can then better understand the role that Cottage Dreams has played in the cancer journey. Respondents were asked to describe how cancer has affected their lives and the lives of those around them. It must be noted that some respondents were unable to speak of this issue and declined from answering. General responses were that cancer:

- **Reshapes family relationships**
- **Occupies all of the patient's and family's time (enormity of time spent with appointments and at the hospital)**
- **Imposes a financial burden**
- **Instigates feelings of fear, anger, resentment and bitterness**
- **Results in low energy and fatigue**

A finding which was unexpected and reoccurring was that cancer not only had negative effects, but also positive effects. Several respondents noted that it was a 'blessing in disguise' and that it changed their perspectives, outlooks and attitudes towards life. Many stated that they no longer 'sweat the small stuff', and had made a point of spending more time with family and friends.

Will to Live

The will to live is a fundamental foundation of recovery, for without it, "recovery has little meaning and medical therapies little value" (Center for Integrated Healing, 4). In their responses, participants of the Cottage Dreams program illuminated how the week at the cottage prompted a will to live within them in the following ways:

- **Making decisions to move forward**
- **Changing their perspectives**
- **Celebrating recovery**
- **Doing activities and being around people that make them happy**

The following words, used repeatedly by a majority of the participants, encapsulate the will to live which their week at the cottage fostered: 're-prioritizing', 'not thinking about cancer', 'refocusing', 'fresh start', 'making memories', 'making decisions', 'moving on', 'letting it go', and 'feeling revived and rejuvenated'.

At the same time as it may have fostered this will to live, some respondent stated that leaving the cottage left them feeling down, as they knew that they were returning to all that they had left behind.

The following section includes responses which demonstrate how the program fostered a will to live.

Making decisions to move forward

Having time to reflect on her struggle with cancer and her healing and recovery process, one respondent stated that, *"emotionally, I was put in a different mind space of what needs to be done and what has to be done."*

Another respondent said she could not commit to anything prior to participating, but at the cottage, she found herself *"making plans for moving on"*.

Another respondent stated that it was the, *"Beginning of my return to being someone other than the cancer patient."*

Changing perspectives

"I had a tough time for a couple of days because I felt upset thinking about wanting to see my family in the future". This respondent noted that after speaking with her husband, her outlook had changed. She decided to enjoy the time she could spend with her family, while leaving negative thoughts behind.

"Seeing life as something different."

Celebrating recovery

One participant and her family treated the week at the cottage as a celebration, marking the beginning of a new period following the illness.

Another respondent discussed how she felt guilty for having put her family through cancer and the negative experiences associated with illness. For this respondent, *"giving them something good like a week away at a cottage instead of something bad"* was an important gift she could give to her family.

"Cottage Dreams is a good finale. It makes you feel special and acknowledges what you've gone through." This respondent spoke about how the cottage experience was like a celebration at the end of her cancer treatment, while also acting as an important time for her and family to recognize the accomplishment of survival and the difficult journey of treatment and recovery.

Emotional Connections with Others

Spending time at the cottage with family, friends and supporters was an important aspect for every participant interviewed in their healing and recovery process. Landmark studies have shown that meeting with others to share emotionally and to provide support, not only improves well-being, but also significantly increases the likelihood of recovery from life threatening illnesses (Center for Integrated Healing, 6). All respondents rated the time spent with their friends, family or supporters at the cottage as of utmost importance (rating of 5 on a scale from 1 to 5) to their healing and recovery process in the quantitative interview question. This was exemplified in responses which stressed:

- **Spending quality time together as a family**
- **The importance of seeing their children enjoying themselves at the cottage**
- **Sharing new experiences and making memories**

The following section includes responses which demonstrate the importance of spending time with family and supporters at the cottage.

One respondent remarked that, “*just being there, just the three of us*” was one of the best aspects about her family’s time at the cottage. This respondent also said that the family participated in activities together, this not being the regular mode of things at home.

When asked how the week unfolded in regards to emotional, mental or spiritual healing, one respondent noted how, “*the outside world was away from us, we just focused on each other.*”

“*We were bonding and spending time together. We were never able to do that before.*”

Another respondent said that it felt as though her and her husband were on a marriage retreat.

Another respondent stated that the cottage stay was a reason for everyone to get together and just relax, “*a week of total rest and relaxation.*” Several respondents noted that when they and their supporters returned from the week at the cottage, the whole group spoke fondly about the week, sharing their memories and reviewing photographs.

Getting Away to a Different Space

A response that was consistently noted in an overwhelming majority of respondents was that the week at the cottage provided a chance to get away to a different space. Respondents rated on a scale of one to five, five being most important, the importance of being in a new or different space in their process of healing and recovery. Twenty respondents stated that it was of great importance (5); five stated that it was high level of importance (4); and one respondent rated

it as being important (3). The majority of respondents highlighted that the cottage was:

- **An 'escape' from the disease**
- **Respite from every day life**
- **A vacation to look forward to which they may not have been able to afford otherwise**

The following section includes responses which demonstrate the positive affects of getting away to a different space for participants and their families.

"Seemed like such an opportunity. Cancer affected my job, my family and my finances...it was a retreat for me, a transition in life after cancer; time to go away, be quiet and relax."

One respondent noted that at the cottage, cancer was "*not constantly in my face.*" While at home, the time and energy associated with cancer treatment was described by this same respondent as being very invasive and a constant preoccupation of her time.

"It was a retreat from cancer, could unwind, relax and not think about it. It was a time to reunite and have fun."

Nature

As Dr. Frumkin's research has shown, natural settings and being in natural environments offers important healing qualities for patients with life-threatening illnesses (Frumkin, 236). Cottage Dreams offers participants an opportunity to be in nature while at the cottage; respondents citing within their interviews different aspects of nature which facilitated in their healing and recovery. In the qualitative question regarding the importance of nature, 21 respondents stated that nature was of great importance (5) and 5 stated it is of high importance (4). Elements of the natural environment that respondents cited were:

- **Physical exercise in the outdoors**
- **Hearing and seeing animals**
- **Enjoying characteristics of the surrounding environment**

The following section includes responses which demonstrate participant's interactions with nature and how it contributed to their healing and recovery process.

A respondent remarked how at peace she felt while at the cottage being "*surrounded by beauty that comes from God.*" This reminded her of '*the good things in life.*'

"The sense of peace I felt, on the dock by the water, with the sun going down was so healing."

One respondent described how she got up one day, and by herself, went for a walk. Sitting on a rock, in the middle of the forest, the woman was overcome with emotion. She described it as being a starting point for something new. This respondent stressed the importance of being in this type of environment, as it was conducive for her being able to feel a type of rebirth and renewal.

RESULTS: THE COTTAGE DREAMS PROGRAM

This section highlights the key findings and suggestions that participants discussed throughout the interviews. It includes how participants got involved, their expectations, their reasons for participating, as well as general program feedback.

Involvement

There were various ways in which respondents heard about the program which is reflective of the different forms of advertising that Cottage Dreams utilizes. The main ways in which respondents heard about Cottage Dreams was:

- **Through advertising at a Wellspring Centre and other cancer support groups**
- **Via word of mouth from a former participant, donor or medical staff at various institutions**
- **Via bookmarks, advertisements in Cottage Life and on CBC radio**

It is important to note that the majority of respondents stated that they consulted the website in order to find out more information about the Cottage Dreams program prior to applying. The website proves to be an important resource for both those interested in applying and donating.

Reasons for Participating

Respondents were asked what had encouraged them to participate in the program. Answers to this question are found to correlate to what Cottage Dreams seeks to provide individuals in their healing and recovery process. The main reasons for participating were:

- **Having a vacation which may not have been financially viable otherwise**
- **Getting away in a natural, relaxing, cottage environment**
- **Spending time with family and supporters**
- **Taking a break from everyday life and stress**

The following section describes some of the reasons that participants got involved in the Cottage Dreams program.

One respondent described the program as “*a chance to get out of the city, away from scheduled appointments, being in nature – a total escape and a timeout.*”

A respondent remarked that, “*you don’t realize how much it affects everyone in their own little way and this was a way for us to get back together.*” She described the cottage stay as an important vacation and time of healing which her family could collectively enjoy. She noted that cancer affected her children and her spouse differently, and that she had recognized while at the cottage how everyone had been changed in their own way by her illness.

Another respondent said that “*there is healing in the hospital and then there is healing outside the hospital.*” The Cottage Dreams program for this respondent was a place where the family could be together, ‘be normal’ and greatly aided the healing and recovery of the entire family.

Expectations

Respondents were also asked if the program had met their expectations. The answers were overwhelmingly positive, with every respondent answering yes and the majority stating that the experience had exceeded their expectations. One respondent noted that she had many expectations of what she would find at the cottage and was a little disappointed upon arrival. However, her feelings of disappointment quickly faded when, “*it came to be more about what you were really there for*”; the respondent having been unaware of what the week away could do for her family in the end in terms of bonding, healing and spending quality time together. Another respondent said that despite being afraid of all the warnings and things to remember after reading the paperwork, they had no problems for the duration of their stay.

“It was a great vacation – all I expected and could want for my family.”

“This was a positive from the hell on earth of cancer.”

General Program Feedback

At the end of the formal interview, the evaluators invited respondents to make any additional comments about their experience, the Cottage Dreams program in general, and to share any last reflections. Many respondents took this time to speak in general about the program. The main themes that the respondents felt were:

- **Overwhelmed by the generosity of cottage donors**
- **Grateful and appreciative for the experience**
- **Non-discriminatory nature of the program in terms of the type of cancer**
- **Impressed with the organization of the program and staff people at Cottage Dreams**

The following section includes responses that speak generally about the program and the appreciation of the participants for the experience.

One respondent who has worked in the not-for-profit sector was impressed by ingenuity behind the Cottage Dreams structure. “*I thought what a brilliant idea –*

someone recognizes a need and builds on it, people feel good to be able to help others, it was really well thought out."

"...even though it is a simple thing to offer, when you are feeling sick, feeling death, the impact this gesture has is immense."

One respondent expressed how appreciative she was of the fact that Cottage Dreams was not designed to cater to one type of cancer. She found that while there were many initiatives for specific types of cancer like breast cancer, she was unable to take part in them because she had vaginal cancer. She felt that this non-discriminatory aspect of the program was very important.

Beyond revealing these fundamental, unique aspects of healing and recovery, the evaluators found that Cottage Dreams, through its program design, connects people in an innovative way. The generosity of cottages being donated by individuals to complete strangers was repeatedly stated by participants as holding so much meaning for them. Respondents were overwhelmed by this generosity, and in many cases sought to show their gratefulness to the cottage owners. One respondent stated that, *"it makes me tear up when I think about the generosity"*, and she hoped that Cottage Dreams was letting the donors know how big of an impact their generosity had. Another respondent said, *"It takes a special person to do that."*

In a general discussion with one respondent after an interview was complete, an interesting concept which was collectively described as a **'circle of cancer'** was brought forward. This particular respondent was describing meeting with the donors of the cottage and how she immediately had an intuitive sense that they had been touched by cancer in some way. After speaking at length, she found that the woman's husband had passed away from cancer. She was overtaken with emotion to know that the woman had offered her cottage, despite the fact that her husband had lost his battle. We discussed how Cottage Dreams was a channel through which people affected by cancer could reach out to others affected by the disease.

Recommendations

- 1. Consider expanding advertising strategy.**
Based on respondents' suggestions, more advertising may be beneficial. Some said that they know of many cottage owners who would like to take part in the program; however, these possible donors are not aware of the program. Getting information to cottage owners may be difficult based on the fact that many of the participants obtained their information from Wellsprings, cancer support networks, and hospital personnel. These are not mediums which cottage owners would necessarily access. Different mediums of advertising could be targeted like cottage associations, marinas and commercial stores in high density cottage locations.
- 2. Consider expanding the eligibility criteria to participate.**
A number of respondents suggested that the program's eligibility criteria be changed so as to include those individuals who are undergoing lifelong treatment and those who are not in remission. Respondents felt that the program could be beneficial for survivors even before or during treatment and not just post-treatment. There were suggestions that the program be offered to alumni, if this were possible and potentially to families who had lost a member to cancer as well.
- 3. Consider expanding the program in more areas in Ontario.**
It was suggested by several respondents that cottage donations be sought out in different geographical locations such as Northern Ontario and the London area, to offer a wider range of cottage for people in different areas.
- 4. Consider targeting marginalized groups.**
It was suggested that Cottage Dreams try to target marginalised groups like individuals with first languages other than English and low-income individuals and families. Having the advertisements translated may be a means through which this could be pursued as well as advertising in locations where non-English speaking, marginalised groups may congregate.
- 5. Consider meetings with the cottage donors as optional for both parties.**
The issue of meeting or not meeting the cottage donors was discussed in many of the interviews. For many of the respondents, meeting the cottage donor was considered a wonderful part of their experience and some still keep in touch with the donors of the cottage they stayed at. However, for a small number of participants, they felt that a visit from the cottage owner was a lack of confidentiality. We recommended that Cottage Dreams consider the meeting with the cottage donors as optional for both the participants and the donors themselves.

Conclusion

'Beyond the Physical', the title given to this evaluation, encapsulates the integrated, complementary approach which includes, but is not reduced to, medical treatment in the healing and recovery process. The fundamental importance in healing and recovery of those elements which go beyond the physical, were attested to by Cottage Dreams past participants in their responses:

For example, one respondent stated that the cottage offered what the conventional medical community simply could not offer in the healing and recovery process. Another described how her and her family came back feeling a lot stronger mentally and that this is just as important, if not more important, than physical aspects of healing and recovery. The majority of respondents stated that healing and recovery was like a package deal, it encompasses the medical, social and psychological.

One respondent said, "*Cancer treatment is very exhausting, demoralizing, and hard on your body. The medical community addresses the disease and not the whole person or the aftermath....A week at the cottage to look forward to, made a big difference in my recovery*".

Returning back to the ways in which respondents described how cancer affected their lives, we see a correlation in the design of the Cottage Dreams program which recognizes those needs which are not being fulfilled by the medical community or other cancer support initiatives. The objectives of the program recognize how cancer affects the lives of patients and their families in such ways as changes in family relationships and the time lost to the disease and the financial burden which is often a consequence which respondents identified in the research. The program is also not specified for a certain type of cancer which some respondents identified as critical for a broader reach. These factors contribute to the ongoing success of the program and the desire for the program to be expanded into different areas and to expand the eligibility criteria beyond survivors and their families post-treatment.

As the findings reveal, Cottage Dreams offers participants a unique forum through which fundamental components beyond the physical aspects of healing and recovery can be realized. The will to live, emotional connections with others, getting away from the disease, and nature, were identified by respondents as being fundamental aspects of healing and recovery which Cottage Dreams offered them. It was a transition for some, a celebration for others and a long needed break for everyone who was affected by the disease.

Cottage Dreams connects strangers. One person's generosity is channelled to an individual and their supporters. This non-economic exchange, this generosity, gives an individual and their supporters an opportunity to heal and recover. Cottage Dreams has also created a forum for individuals and families who may

have been affected by cancer to reach out to other cancer survivors through the donation of a cottage, reflective of the notion of a 'circle of cancer'.

Cottage Dreams plays a unique role in healing and recovery which conventional medical treatment can not address. In providing a cottage, away from one's home in a natural environment, it effectively achieves the objective of fostering the healing and recovery process of mind, body, spirit and emotional connections.

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