Northpark Private Hospital’s dynamic group activity program responds to patients’ needs and suggestions.

The in-patients range in age from 18 to 90 years and the average length of stay is three weeks. The principal diagnoses of patients are from the mood disorder range.

Within this in-patient unit is a dynamic group program that aims to respond to the in-patients’ needs and suggestions, to support people throughout their admission and to encourage active engagement in their recovery. The group program is facilitated by a multidisciplinary team of social workers, psychologists, occupational therapists and experienced registered nurses. A psychiatrist is active in providing a medical perspective of depression and anxiety through psycho-educational groups on a weekly basis.

The group program consists of skills-based psychological therapies, wellbeing activities and active discharge planning, with a focus on recovery and on individual’s needs and their lived experience. Therapies are introduced in the in-patient environment and are then built on through accessing the day program. In the in-patient setting the smokers courtyard is closed at group times and overnight from 10pm to 6am, which successfully brings a greater number of people into the therapeutic group activities. Current activities that are engaging a broad range of the in-patient community population include:

- **Therapeutic horticulture:** One of the courtyards is being established as a working garden and also as a space of relaxation with a sensory and scented environment.
• Choir: Every Friday, people gather together to bring their voice to familiar songs. After discharge a day program to further their vocal enjoyment is available.

• Animal assisted therapy: The creative inclusion of an animal in the therapy of a person can make a major difference in their comfort, progress and recovery. The animal can assist to facilitate the patient’s progress towards specific emotional, cognitive and social goals, such as, lifting the person’s mood, mental stimulation through the enjoyment of interacting with the animal, stress relief and socialisation. Northpark Private Hospital looks forward to regular visits from a handler and their dog in the near future.

• Mindfulness: Mindfulness is a key component of the in-patient and day program. The mindfulness group program provides a regular space for participants to build the skill of non-judgementally bringing the mind to a point of focus. In the day programs, mindfulness is further developed in closed groups of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, acquired mindfulness and emotional regulation. Specific mindfulness day programs run over three days.

• Health and movement: Throughout the warmer months, a bus has taken in-patients and a clinician to a local gym where energy is expended on a range of gym equipment resulting in a boisterous bus ride back to the facility. At other times, gentle stretching is keenly taken up and tai chi is soon to be introduced to the in-patient and day programs. Alternatively, a gentle stroll down to the creek is taken with some exertion during the climb back up the small hill. A cooking group is undertaken in the in-patient and day program with participants interacting and working as a team, seeking out healthy menus and ingredients. Produce from the garden is found in cooking pots.

• Creativity: Art therapy is popular in the in-patient and day program settings and many of the works are hung on the wall throughout the East Unit. Craft activity is also a welcome focus three times throughout the week including on a Saturday morning.

• Substance misuse: Addictive behaviours in a person who is concurrently managing a mental illness can have far reaching consequences. With the use of a specific screening tool, Cage Aid, on admission, all patients are screened for drug and alcohol use in the in-patient and day program setting. Regular groups are run in both in-patient and day programs to identify the motivations behind substance use and the relationship this has with mental illness. The aim of this program is to introduce mental health and substance use interventions, for the prevention and/or management of relapse behaviours and making lifestyle changes.

• Family, friends and support person sessions: In conjunction with the ARAFEMI educator, Northpark Private Hospital holds sessions every three weeks for patients and their family, friends and support people to discuss their experiences and work towards an improved understanding of each other. A workshop is held each term to work on a specific topic, including carer coping skills, recovery and hope and challenging behaviours.

• Consumer advocate: The Healthscope Consumer Advocate runs a group each Monday to speak from the lived experience of mental illness and to provide support and advocacy to participants.

• Discussing spirituality: Each week a discussion in spirituality is held in the in-patient unit, facilitated by a lay minister.

• Psychological strategies: many groups are held in the in-patient setting based on acceptance and commitment therapy and cognitive behaviour therapy. These approaches flow through into the day program where patients can attend specific closed groups held over a number of weeks. 

By Rosemary Sturmey

“The group program has a focus on individual’s needs and their lived experience.”

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