Assessing The Efficacy of a Comfort Box in Decreasing Self-Harm Behavior on an Acute Adult Inpatient Psychiatric Unit

Joan Carr LaPorte, MN, RN; John Nishan, BSN, RN-BC, Inga Giske, MSN, RN-BC
Providence St. Vincent Medical Center, Portland, Oregon

Purpose
On an inpatient acute psychiatric unit, self-harming behaviors are occasionally witnessed in certain patients. This is a maladaptive coping strategy that has a number of deleterious effects on both the patient and milieu. This study sought to implement and examine a new intervention in regards to self-harm behavior and the possibility of its reduction in this setting.

Background
Self-harming behavior is problematic on an acute inpatient psychiatric unit for several reasons. Generally speaking it is a destabilizing factor, as it tends to increase the stress and anxiety of both patients and staff. When self-harm behavior does occur, it draws resources away from therapeutic activities and other patients, towards the individual who is self-harming. When a patient self-harms they are perpetuating the existence of an unhealthy coping technique, as well as putting themselves at risk for sustaining potentially serious injuries. Additionally, this behavior may contribute to problems with post-discharge placement in the community resulting in an increased length of stay. When a self-harm event occurs, it is unit protocol to document this in an Unusual Occurrence Report (UOR).

Assessment
The purpose of this study was to determine whether the use of a comfort box with patients who have or are deemed likely to self-harm reduces the frequency of further self-harm while the patient is on an adult acute inpatient unit. Two staff nurses developed a plan to measure the frequency of self-harm during a defined time, one half of which a comfort box was available to staff to utilize once a patient had been identified. The results were measured by the number of self-harm events documented by staff via UORs. There were 11 reports of self harm in June 2015, and 2 in July 2015.

Goals
The goal of this study was to determine if the use of a comfort box reduced incidents of self-harm on the inpatient unit, 5 East, Providence St. Vincent Medical Center in the Summer of 2015, as measured by completed Unusual Occurrence Reports in the months of June and July 2015.

Intervention
Two comfort boxes were made, one for each part of the unit. The boxes contained a small ball that could be used for squeezing, Bubber, a deck of cards, a matching game, a book of affirmations, angel cards and two bags of scented herbs.

Staff were educated to offer 1-2 items from the comfort box to patients who had self-harmed, or patients whom staff assessed as likely to self-harm. This was the only variable that occurred during the two months of the study. No comfort boxes were available during the month of June. The boxes were available for the purpose of this study from July 1st through July 31st 2015.

Evaluation
The use of comfort boxes on 5E resulted in a statistically significant decrease in self-harm events with a p of 0.0063 and a t of 22.496 according to an independent 2 sample t-test. The data collection time frame was short resulting in a small sample size. The comfort boxes will continue to be used on 5E as they proved to be effective. Data on self-harm events will continue to be collected and analyzed to determine ongoing effectiveness.

Next Step
Based on the findings of this study, use of the comfort boxes will continue. Further investigation will be directed towards personalizing the comfort box to a patient’s particular preferences. For example, therapists may hold groups in which patients are able to choose the content of their boxes, decorate their boxes if they desire, put letters to themselves in their boxes or perhaps letters from loved ones as well. These boxes will then either remain with the patient in their room or become available during times of increased stress.

References