How one Vancouver counsellor found new hope in the Land of the Midnight Sun

BY JENNIFER GIBSON, RCC

Last year, I decided to leave my wonderful but financially challenging job as a counsellor in an addictions treatment centre in Vancouver and try the same position but up in the land of the midnight sun: The Yukon.

Looking at some of the statistics around alcohol consumption from the Yukon, it’s little wonder why the locals are rarely envious of me when I tell them what I do for a living. The Yukon leads in having the highest alcohol-consumption rates and alcohol-related mortalities in the country. Between 1950 and 2000, Yukoners consumed twice the national average of alcohol and saw the most deaths due to liver failure or where alcohol was explicitly named as the cause of death.

The effects of heavy alcohol consumption have been devastating for all Yukoners but particularly for Indigenous communities navigating the ongoing impacts of the residential school system. In one rural Yukon community, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder rates were suggested to be as high as 90 per cent among second-generation residential school survivors. As an acquaintance once told me, “It doesn’t take long to learn that the drinking culture in the Yukon distinctly stands out from the rest Canada.” Enter the therapist tasked with assisting clients’ in their recovery and the light at the end of the tunnel gets about as dark as the winters here.

CREATING MEANINGFUL CHANGE HAPPENS FROM AN INTERNAL TRANSFORMATION, EVEN WHEN EXTERNAL CIRCUMSTANCES CHANGE.

Or at least, that tends to be the perception of the general public.

While I can only agree that the resources here are fewer and the barriers unquestionably significant, I have failed to observe any difference in client outcomes. Seemingly, against all odds, I see many clients create and sustain successful changes in their lives, including stopping drinking. In spite of the pervasive culture of heavy drinking, isolation, intergenerational trauma, and lack of services compared to our southern neighbours, clients here continue to accomplish their goals and experience success. I still come to work with just as much optimism and hope for change as I did in Vancouver based on the many successes I’ve seen.

The only real difference is I have to scrape off my frozen windshield first.

Noticing the similar success rate has led me to wonder if perhaps the true question I came to uncover while working in the north is not about what makes it hard for clients to address their addictions — but what it is that really creates change.

As therapists, we know how to spot an unsustainable change. This might sound like a client coming in and suddenly reporting that the problem they were once so concerned about is no longer bothering them. As if Insoo Kim Berg herself made a miracle happen over night! Oftentimes, the shift is perceived to be caused by something external in their world, which, as therapists who know about the importance of an internal locus of control, makes us leery. For instance, a psychologist once told me about a client who suffered chronic anxiety; however, one day, she reported no symptoms whatsoever after having met someone online she was certain she soon would be happily dating. Anxiety: gone in a poof. As therapists, we know the pitfall of this magical thinking: creating meaningful change happens from an internal transformation, even when external circumstances change.
Yet, as a therapist in Vancouver, I caught myself using the same magical thinking about my clients. As soon as I would start to feel hopeless, I would start to think of all the referrals I could make. If only my client could just make it to the group, the treatment program, the gym, etc., that I referred them to, their suffering would finally end. In particular, I catch myself thinking this way with my most challenging clients who seem the furthest from completing their goals.

Moving from B.C. to the Yukon, I quickly saw how few resources exist for clients. Sometimes, on the surface, my clients’ situations can look truly bleak in comparison. For instance, a client might be returning to a community where they do not have a living, sober family member; or where the only addictions counsellor is also their uncle; or that they have no housing options except where drugs are sold. I once had a client who had to drive eight hours just to access the resources for an online conference with me. Since I am often unable to refer to other services or resources, one would think I might feel a bit hopeless for my clients. And yet, just the opposite is true — I see just the same amount of success and change as I did in Vancouver. However, I am far more aware that my clients are using their internal resources to reach their goals — there are no magical referrals to hide behind.

Thus, what I’ve come to observe is that, as a therapist, I can just as easily fall into the same problematic thinking that something on the outside will create change for clients. Rather than looking for the internal locus of control, I have too often made a shortcut to praying for the miracle. In reality, the motivation, courage, willingness, and mindset that change is possible and you are worthy is needed regardless of resources.

The Yukon has taught me to hold on tight to the unflinching belief that change is possible for anyone in any circumstance, because each client already walks in the door with all the internal resources they need. While I’m certainly hopeful that increased access to resources will come to the Yukon, presently, I am grateful for how my practice has transformed by learning to be weary of hopelessness.

Jennifer Gibson, MC, RCC, is a clinical counsellor currently working in Whitehorse, YT, specializing in addictions, mental health, and trauma with youth and adults. She can be reached at jennifermgibson@gmail.com

RESOURCES
