



BACKGROUND

In 2006, Friends for Life (FFL), in partnership with the BC Persons With AIDS Society (BCPWA), received a grant from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research to establish the Living Well Lab (LWL). Its objectives were to

- ① explore, through a participatory, community-based process, the impact of complementary therapies (CTs) on the quality of life and wellbeing of FFL's members *and*
- ② provide LWL participants with an online tool that would enable them to self-monitor and track their wellness journey.

Participants completed a series of questionnaires over an 18 month period which focused on such areas as: changes in physical and emotional states, level of satisfaction with FFL services, social support and personal transformation. Interviews and focus groups were also conducted with members to learn more about their experiences using CTs at FFL.

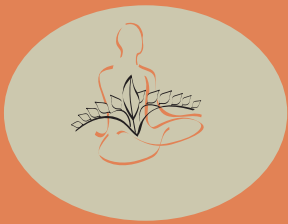
RESULTS

LWL members completed the last survey in August and the final results have recently been analyzed. Members' commitment to the project was incredible with over one-quarter of FFL members (n= 207) enrolled in the LWL.

The LWL has provided FFL with a rich understanding of who its members are, what their needs are and what they are seeking from FFL.

- ✦ 60% of participants are dealing with complex health issues; most commonly HIV, depression & pain.
- ✦ 59% have mental health concerns
- ✦ 44% live alone
- ✦ The most commonly used CTs among members were vitamins, massage therapy, naturopathy, traditional Chinese medicine and healthy lifestyle activities like exercise and diet.
- ✦ Participants indicated they mainly come to FFL to relax, for nutrition support and daily social support.
- ✦ 53.8% found that socializing with other members makes their time at the house a relaxing experience.
- ✦ 30.7% found the physical environment of the house to be relaxing. →





- ✦ While participants reported health improvements in many aspects of their lives, the most significant were detected in the areas of pain, stress, energy, empowerment and personal transformation.
- ✦ 94% of members experienced significant transformative changes in their wellbeing since coming to FFL (examples of such changes include feeling less isolated, having more friends, eating better, having less pain and increased mobility).
- ✦ 92% felt these changes resulted in improved quality of life: such as decreased anxiety, feeling more confident about their health and having an enhanced social network.

Focus groups centered on participants' communication with conventional and complementary practitioners. From these sessions we learned that half of the focus group participants do not talk to their conventional doctors about CT use and those who did talk to their doctors about CT use had reservations about sharing this information with them. Additionally, some participants were frustrated with having to educate their doctors about CT use while others chose not to discuss CT with their doctor mainly because they were never asked.

CONCLUSION

The LWL has provided FFL with a tremendous amount of information on how to most effectively support members in their wellness journeys. FFL is now in a better position to review its services and plan for the future, including introducing a new appointment booking system. Because the LWL online tool has become an integral part of many participants' healing journeys, FFL has opted to renew the 'www.livingwelllab.com' domain. This will provide new and existing members with unlimited access to the wellness tool. As the LWL project draws to a close, LWL members should be proud of the valuable input and insight they have provided into the effectiveness CTs have on one's health and quality of life. Your contributions to this research project may very well benefit the health of others who are also dealing with life threatening illnesses.

If you have any questions or would like to learn more about the project, please contact Andrea Mulkins, Living Well Lab Coordinator at andrea@friendsforlife.ca.

