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THE MONASTERY

WELLNESS THROUGH HOLISTIC THERAPIES AND RESPECT IN A NURTURING AND BEAUTIFUL SETTING.

“The door opens upon her knock. She is greeted by colour and aroma. A feeling of peace caresses like a cat around her legs... With care and tenderness they open the dam gate allowing the hurts to flow like a river and at last they are a little trickle of a stream... The food nourishes the tired empty soul, rejuvenates the broken down body and stimulates the wand mind until she slowly feels herself filling once again.” Poem by a Monastery guest

AT A GLANCE

- What:** The Monastery is a five day wellness retreat for women.
- Why:** To create transformational wellness services and experiences for women – a service beyond the mainstream therapeutic approach.
- How:** Retreats at The Monastery give women who have few opportunities to focus on their personal wellness the gift of time, space and support for reflection, Guests experience a connection with their own innate wisdom and knowledge, discover their own needs and can plan how to make changes in their life. To support this The Monastery also offers a range of complementary healing treatments and workshops.
- Target:** The Monastery caters for women with experience of stress, burnout and depression and the effects of trauma.
- Where:** Situated on the outskirts of Hamilton, The Monastery accepts national referrals.

THE PROFILE

The Monastery is a five-day wellness retreat for women with experience of stress, burnout and depression and the effects of trauma. A team of skilled staff provide a supportive, respectful and nurturing environment where women are given time to pause and reflect as they journey towards enhanced wellbeing. A holistic approach focuses on nourishing the mind, body and spirit with complementary therapies, healing treatments, workshops and counselling provided in a beautiful and tranquil environment. The Monastery team has a dream of creating transformational wellness services and experiences for women by honouring, valuing and accepting all those who walk through The Monastery's doors.

THE BEGINNINGS

In 2005 the WISE Group identified the need for a private, holistic retreat, away from a clinical setting that would provide an alternative for women to focus on their wellbeing. In recognition of that, The Monastery was opened in 2006. Catering for women who have few opportunities to focus on their personal wellness, The Monastery works closely with the mobile support service, Iris.

The Monastery building itself is a place that has always nurtured people. Built in 1906 as a family home, the building has more than a century of colourful history, including as a retreat for soldiers after WWII and, as the name suggests, a monastery. The Monastery's extensive renovation and decoration remain true to its 1900's glory. The building is set in peaceful gardens alongside the Waikato River.

The Monastery's carefully selected team of 18 staff members have extensive backgrounds in a variety of traditional and complementary health. The team includes anthroposophical nurses, midwives, naturopaths, art therapists, reflexologists, counsellors, massage therapists, as well as gardeners and a chef. Currently five wellness professionals are employed full-time, while others work on a part-time or contract basis.

The Monastery relies solely on community support and generosity to operate. The true cost of the five day retreat is \$2500, however to make the service affordable to all women there are a number of payment options available. Approaches are also made to various philanthropic trusts and corporate organisations for funding.

THE PROCESS

During the five day retreat The Monastery's guests experience the gift of time, space and support for reflection, professional healing treatments and workshops, beautiful accommodation and delicious, healthy food, all in a peaceful environment

1. Women aged 18+ throughout New Zealand with experience of stress, burnout and depression can be referred to The Monastery through GPs, the Iris team, counselling services and other health professionals. Individuals are also invited to complete the online [expression of interest form](#) on the Monastery website.
2. Following the receipt of an expression of interest, women are contacted by a wellness professional to arrange a time to further discuss their health and wellness. This is also a chance to assess whether The Monastery is the right place for them. The Monastery is not a crisis service and does not cater for women with significant mental health difficulties or complex medical conditions. Guests must be able to manage their own medication and make their own arrangements (e.g. child care and work commitments) for the period of their stay.
3. On a Monday morning up to five women arrive at The Monastery. They're given time to relax, meet the team and familiarise themselves with the house and its surroundings. Later each woman will meet with a wellness professional to discuss together their individual programme for the week. The programmes are flexible and responsive to individual needs, however the days may include workshops, healing therapies, gentle exercise and sharing meals and time with each other and staff. Guests are welcome at any time to talk with a wellness professional, should they wish to change their programme according to their needs.
4. On the last day each woman meets with a team member to discuss the return home; how to get back into life's challenges while keeping the nurturing aspects of The Monastery alive. The wellness professionals will also offer contacts with appropriate support services in the community, including its sister service Iris. Guests leave at noon on Friday.

THE UNIQUE APPROACH

The Monastery's view of healthcare combines traditional and complementary approaches to address all aspects of women's wellness: mental, emotional, physical and spiritual.

- Women are given opportunities to experience a range of therapies and workshops from talking therapies and healthy nutrition to artistic outlets.
- The routine or 'rhythms' of each day allow time for quiet reflection for those who have little opportunity to focus on their own personal wellness.
- Respect, intuition, nurturing and empathy are key values underpinning The Monastery's work.
- The Monastery's values are reflected not just with the guests but also within the team and in relationships with others. This demonstrates congruence and is integral in the team's work life.
- The beautiful setting provides a healing foundation where women can, step away from their busy work or home lives, take time to pause and reflect on their own needs and personal wellness.
- The Monastery offers a service for women by women to address the needs of women.

"When I use the word alternative health...I look at a support all around holistically, so that means not just supporting their physical journey, especially if it's a chronic problem or illness, but also supporting them emotionally, spiritually in their whole being."

THE RESULTS

The Monastery's inspirational dream is to create transformational wellness services and experiences for women. The philosophy is based on the holistic focus of nourishing the mind, emotions, body and spirit. This approach reflects the importance of connections with oneself, others and the environment.

Most of the health literature concentrates on the outcomes of traditional medicinal treatment models and there is a gap in evaluating this new approach. The Monastery asks guests to complete an evaluation form after their stay and to return it within two or three weeks. This feedback, observations and other anecdotal evidence from both staff and guests, suggests that The Monastery has a beneficial effect on the wellbeing of its guests:

- Guests can reclaim their self care skills, which may have been overshadowed by life experiences, and then draw upon them for nourishment. Positive changes in the demeanour and mood of guests are commonly observed from day two.
- The majority of guests at The Monastery have had personal experiences that have affected their ability to accept even gentle physical touch. By using physical touch in a variety of therapies, emotional and behavioural discomforts are reduced and touch becomes a part of healthy interaction between human beings.
- The five day stay reminds women who they are and what they are entitled to reclaim in their lives. For example, one guest who experienced many years of low self-esteem returned to the arts after her stay at The Monastery and is now working in women's support services and displays her art in the town's gallery.

“Evidence is hard to see because it's very subtle and often as workers in the organisation we learn to find the small changes but what comes across is the hope that's coming from The Monastery. It's like they've been shown beauty, they've been shown warmth, kindness, love and it's brought them to a different place”

The Monastery is considering how best to follow up with guests to see if the changes last, evaluating the efficacy of the retreat and services offered and evaluating the bulk of information already collected. Ideally, a comparison study with a matched sample would provide more insight.

THE LESSONS LEARNT

- Pre-stay health and wellness interviews are crucial in establishing whether The Monastery is the right place for each guest and then ensuring the appropriate individual programme for them.
- Experiences impact on both guests and staff through the exchange of knowledge and emotions; it facilitates certain changes.
- Strong behind the scenes support, including administrative support, strong financial input and marketing strategies are vital to the successful operation of The Monastery.
- It is vital to create a unique, respectful attitude towards guests and to carefully select and build a congruent team.
- The need for this complementary service to be integrated into the primary healthcare is apparent.
- The Monastery's guests build greater wellbeing through being valued, honoured and accepted – a totally new experience for some.

“There are people working in all sorts of different ways and every way is valuable. There isn't one right way to do this ... and each person has a key part to play... by us being ourselves and being real., That's the best we can do for the people that we work with.”

MORE INFORMATION

Contact

- E-mail info@themonastery.co.nz
- Phone 07 859 1365

Documents/Links:

- The Monastery website
www.themonastery.co.nz

- Iris website
www.iristeam.co.nz
- Athroposophical Society in New Zealand website
www.anthroposophy.org.nz
- *Giving the Women the Special Gift of Time*. Article in Platform November 2006, Page 4
www.in-site.co.nz/platform/links/objects/Platform05.pdf
- The Monastery Wellness Descriptors
available by visiting stories of change at www.tepou.co.nz/knowledgeexchange