RMH LIFE Recovery Program

Placement Description

Substance abuse assessment and treatment.

Intern or Field Placement Responsibilities/Opportunities

- Observe intensive outpatient treatment groups
- Learn to use breathalyzers to check sobriety
- Learn to check-in and orient clients
- Teach psycho-educational components
- Do background research for therapists
- Attend grand rounds
- Observe treatment group at the partial hospitalization program
- Attend team meetings
- Observe Consults
- Observe group at inpatient unit

Contact Information

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Read about students’ experiences at this site below:
The RMH LIFE Recovery Program is an 8-week (16 session) program that focuses on individuals with substance abuse issues. The idea of the program is that addiction is not a choice, but a disease that can be managed through an array of techniques and coping mechanisms. During the program, patients are expected to remain sober and to contribute to group as much as possible.

During my time working in the RMH LIFE Recovery Program, I was tasked with taking individual notes for each patient for each session. I was to report what they discussed during the time that they “checked in,” which is the period at the beginning of each session when patients give their names, if they have had any triggers, and if they are using any coping skills to handle triggers now that they are in recovery. I was also to report what they talked about during the group discussion on whatever therapeutic strategy was to be presented in group on that particular day. Along with taking individual notes, I also updated patients’ files, kept track of the number of sessions that everyone had completed, and prepared for group each morning by making copies of handouts my supervisor wanted to use during the session.

Besides paperwork, I had the opportunity to interact with all the patients during group, break, and at the beginning of their treatment to go over the paperwork that all new members receive upon starting the program. I sat in on group every Tuesday and Thursday and listened to everyone share parts of their stories of addiction and events of their day-to-day lives. I was able to learn more about multiple topics such as radical acceptance, mindfulness, and relapse prevention techniques.

The experiences I got out of doing my field placement at the RMH LIFE Recovery Program are incredible. The advantages of doing my field placement were numerous, as I learned so much about therapy techniques and group therapy in general, and how patients respond to different techniques. Even though there were some patients that blatantly lied about their recovery, I take that as a learning experience as well. My favorite part of the session was when people would check in and we would hear about how their recovery and life was going.

Another advantage was how great all the staff are at the Outpatient Behavioral Health Center, the building where the RMH LIFE Recovery Program is held. Every single person – front desk, other interns, all the therapists, and especially my supervisor – were friendly and helpful throughout my entire time at my field placement. I never felt like “just an intern” and felt respected the whole way through.

My supervisor, Robin Breeden, was a big reason that my field placement felt like such a good fit. She was encouraging, honest, and an extremely positive influence on my time at RMH LIFE Recovery. She was very supportive in my ideas and encouraging when I felt uncomfortable in the group setting. Robin exceeded my expectations in what a supervisor could be and I’ll always be grateful to her for her guidance, patience, and positive outlook.

The only disadvantages I can think of from doing my field placement at RMH LIFE Recovery was the group setting and my inability to speak up often during the sessions. I knew from the onset that I was uncomfortable with speaking in groups, specifically in groups that were comprised of mostly adults who are older than me. I thought maybe I could adapt throughout the semester, but I don’t feel like I was able to, and that’s just due to my lack of experience. I was
able to present my contribution project (effects of mindfulness on the brain) to the group without any issues, so I know one day I will be able to lead groups in my career, I just need a lot of practice.

Through the positive experiences I had at my site, and even through the one negative aspect of it, I learned a lot about what I want for my future and what I do not. I used to want to be a substance abuse counselor when I was younger and I still believe that this might be a possibility. I do find substance abuse counseling to be difficult, due to the mixture of substances and mental health, but I think that is a worthwhile field to work in and I’d be interested in that possibility. I feel fortunate that I got to observe an array of different types of people (some that wanted to be sober and some that did not) which I feel has better prepared me for my future if I ever work with substance abuse patients again.

Based on this experience with groups, I initially was fully convinced that whatever I end up doing as my career it needs to not involve leading a group at all. Once I actually presented my topic to the group, I felt okay about it. I’ve been thinking about the possibility of having to lead a group if I ever become a counselor and I’m finally confident that one day I will be able to do it without being excessively stressed out. Through knowledge from my supervisor and some of my own self-reflection, I believe that with practice, I can manage to gain the confidence and ability to successfully lead a group.

Before I attempt to go to graduate school and become a counselor, I’m going to take a few years to see if there’s a job that I enjoy with just my Bachelor’s and also to get more experience in the real world. As of right now, I don’t know exactly what that will be, but due to being introduced to the field of substance abuse patients, I am interested in seeing the other side of the process and possibly working for Alcohol Action Safety Program (ASAP). I would never have thought about working a job such as that if it weren’t for my field placement experience. Being an intern at RMH LIFE Recovery has made me more confident to branch out when I enter the job market and I’m thankful I chose this site as my field place experience.

Fall 2016 – Nick Shaffer

I completed my Field Placement working for the LIFE Recovery Program in Sentara RMH’s Behavioral Health office. The mission of Sentara is to improve health every day, and that was the feeling of the LIFE Recovery Program. LIFE Recovery is a group therapy program lasting eight weeks, with two sessions per week, for recovering substance abusers. LIFE Recovery’s philosophy centers around the disease model, or the idea that addiction is a disease of the brain’s pleasure centers that is progressive and chronic, but also treatable. LIFE Recovery uses mostly treatment options from under the cognitive-behavioral umbrella, but also pulls in elements of art therapy and positive psychology. The main skills taught in LIFE Recovery are Mindfulness and Radical Acceptance. Mindfulness is the practice of being in the moment and gaining control over unhelpful thoughts. Radical Acceptance is acknowledging that one can suffer through emotionally painful events and still live a life worth living. These two skills formed the basis for everything else taught in LIFE Recovery.
During my time with LIFE Recovery, I worked under Robin Breeden, LCSW. Robin is a master in the field of substance abuse treatment, with years of experience in many different types of social work jobs. Under Robin’s mentorship, I was able to gain a good perspective on the day-to-day work of a mental health professional. She also painted a comprehensive picture of my career options coming out of school with an undergraduate degree. Thanks to Robin, my plans for the future are much more concrete than they were when I entered the program.

As for the actual program, patients enrolled in LIFE Recovery had problems with a variety of substances: alcohol, opiates, marijuana, amphetamines, etc. Some were forced to attend by the justice system or child protective services. Others attended out of an intrinsic motivation to get clean and pull their lives together. Patients came from all different backgrounds and tax brackets, confirming a saying from group therapy that, “Addiction does not discriminate.”

My job mainly consisted of preparing for group, sitting in on and contributing to group, and writing up patient notes after group. Preparing for group was your typical intern-work: making copies, brewing coffee, and the like. Sitting in on group was the meat of the experience. I observed first hand the treatment options and exercises mental health professionals use with recovering addicts. I also observed a multitude of real, human moments, some soul crushingly depressing and others warm and uplifting. After group I would type up patient tickets, noting progress and notable quotes from group. For my Contribution Project, I led a group therapy session on Unhelpful Ways of Thinking, or Cognitive Distortions, as Robin had mentioned to me that her knowledge of distortions could be stronger. Occasionally, I would administer Breathalyzer tests to patients struggling with alcohol abuse in the program before or after class. Otherwise, a lot of my time was spent talking with Robin, learning about her career path and experiences. Also, on some days I would come in and sit in on the Partial Hospitalization Program, a group therapy program for people struggling with depression, anxiety, stress, and grief. I would also document patient progress for this group.

The advantages of interning for Robin were numerous. I got to work on the ground level of the mental health field and see real people struggling, and working to overcome, real problems. I improved my writing and documentation skills by typing up patient notes and tickets. I also improved my listening and communication skills in a clinical context by interacting with people at their lowest points. The disadvantages were few, if there were any at all. I didn’t particularly like getting up as the sun rose (group started at 9 am and I was typically at the office by 8), but that’s only a minor complaint. I couldn’t even tell you a thing I disliked most, as I really didn’t dislike anything about the job. Even the paperwork was interesting and engaging.
I want to stress how touching some of these sessions can be to experience first-hand. I remember a woman sharing a dramatic account of her stopping a relapse in progress. This woman was in group for alcohol abuse as a result of her husband’s battle with Stage 4 Melanoma. She shared how she bought a bottle of cheap vodka during a moment of weakness and then, while driving down Route 33 in hysterics, she tossed the bottle out the window of her car before it had been opened. At the end of the night she told her husband about her near relapse and got the love and support she needed from him. Another specific instance I can recall off the top of my head is of a woman having something close to a breakdown in class. She sobbed while sharing her situation, how she had little money, no transportation, two children in social services, no friends, chronic pain, and a lifetime’s worth of stress. And though it’s a cliché, it really did put into perspective how small my own problems were in comparison.

This site, above all, confirmed for me my decision to enter the field of Social Work, and eventually, Counseling. I was unsure whether I would like the work at first, and I remember even being worried that I would hate it, but once I had sat in on a few group meetings I knew I was going to enjoy my time. Ultimately, it’s the people that make this a great Field Placement. You develop relationships with the patients; you’re sad to see them go and happy to hear about their success in recovery. This experience was by far the best class of my semester, and I’ll miss getting up early to go help with group.

Spring 2016 – Akyla Joseph

For my field placement site, I worked with RMH’s Partial Hospitalization and LIFE Recovery program. Both organizations are ran under Sentara, a not-for-profit organization that purchased Rockingham Memorial Hospital in 2011. The mission of Sentara is to improve health every day, and their vision is to be the healthcare choice of the community they serve. Services at the partial program include group therapy and educational workshops, psychiatric evaluations, and also medication management. PHP consists of a five-day program that covers six different groups each day, beginning at 9AM and continuing until 3PM. The topics from these groups can include subjects such as communication, stress management, art therapy, yoga, and pet therapy. All ages are welcomed, so there can often be a group ranging from one patient who is 18 to another who is 70 years old.

For LIFE Recovery, their services include AM and PM groups on recovering from substance abuse, which consists of 16 sessions. The group topics consist of different recovery skills such as mindfulness, stress management, physiological symptoms, and much more. There is also an AM and PM maintenance group two times a month that are for people who complete LIFE Recovery but still want to check in with a community that they can relate to. Lastly, there can be individual sessions for patients who are both in the program and those who do not want to be in groups. Teenagers who struggle with substance use usually choose to have individual therapy, so the groups mainly contain adults around 21 and older.
For the partial program, every morning I would begin the day by preparing the partial group room, restocking items in the kitchen, and then making coffee. After that, I would check in with my supervisor Jennifer to see if there were any new patients expected today. If there were new patients I would give them an orientation that briefly shows them around the building, record their personal and medical information, and also explains their responsibilities while in the program. After completing all of my morning duties I would sit in on the first group led by Jennifer and take notes on what the patients say. Then I would give them a questionnaire called the overall rating score, which portrays how they feel in different aspects of their life at the current moment. Once the group was over I would enter their ORS scores into an excel file and complete progress notes on all the patients in group. During the rest of my time with the partial program I would either sit in on rounds with the psychiatrist, take notes in group for other therapists, or work on any extra tasks Jennifer had for me to complete.

I enjoyed working with the partial program because there was a lot of flexibility in what I would like to observe for the day. The interns are allowed to sit in on any group offered, and Jennifer also gave us opportunities to lead the morning discussions and/or fill in for another therapist. I also had to opportunity to see how the different types of therapists interact with each other when diagnosing a patient, and I also was able to shadow the psychiatrist during her medication management. One of the things I enjoyed the most was when there would be a particular event or behavior that happened in group, our supervisor would come to our room after and explain what happened/any implications made in regards to their diagnosis or treatment. One disadvantage with this site was how quickly the patients completed the program. Since it is a five-day program, the people are constantly changing, so you do not really have time to get to know the patients. This site has helped me learn and understand how there are so many more people in the world who have things they struggle with than we expect, so it is important for communities to provide an abundant amount of resources for those who are struggling. I have also realized that even though I loved how this program allowed people to receive help while still continuing on with their lives, I would enjoy conducting more individual programs since I am able to get to know the patient better and create a more individual treatment plan.

On Thursdays I worked with Robin in the LIFE Recovery program. After preparing the partial room and making coffee, I would get ready for the LIFE Recovery group by printing out the check-in sheet and making copies of handouts for the day. Then I would bring in the Patient from the waiting room and help Robin by taking notes on the patients as well as writing down major points on the board for the patients to copy. Once group was complete I would log the check-in sheet in a binder and then call people who did not make it into group that day, making sure they are doing well and did not relapse. Then I would fill out progress notes on the patients, fax information to other organizations, and complete insurance forms. Lastly I would put the worksheets used in a binder to help Robin organize her lesson plans and prepare for the next week.

I really enjoyed working with this site as well because it exposed me to how much of an impact substance use can have in a person’s life. Since this program requires 16 sessions, I got to
know the patients better, thus making the conversations more productive. Robin also allowed me multiple opportunities to lead groups, so knowing the patients already helped me be able to engage with the patients better than if they were strangers. One disadvantage of this site was that at times the topics can get repetitive since people do not all join the group the same day, so it is hard to make sure that the patients hear every topic. Similar to partial, this group has shown me how many people are affected by substance use, and also how this abuse can be related to traumatic moments or major life events that occur in people’s lives. Related to my career goals, I hope to work as a counselor for military members and their families. This group has helped me consider working with substance use prevention programs since it is common for military members to use substances as a coping mechanism for PTSD or other mental health issues.

Fall 2015 – Sarah Brown

My time at Rockingham Memorial Hospital’s Behavioral Health facility in the LIFE Recovery program has been a rewarding and impactful opportunity. In the LIFE Recovery program, I had the privilege to work under the supervision of Robin Breeden, LCSW. I was also able to interact on a daily basis with other faculty and staff who shared their experiences and knowledge with me, which helped guide me to have a successful internship.

The mission at RMH and for the LIFE Recovery program is to improve health everyday. RMH’s vision is to be the healthcare choice of the community they serve. The faculty and staff at the Behavioral Health facility are driven by the RMH values, which include, People, Quality, Patient Safety, Service and Integrity. Before starting my internship, I am lucky to say that I shared some of those values and that is why I felt that I selected the right field placement.

The Behavioral Health facility is focused on a full range of mental health and chemical dependency services for seniors, adults, adolescents and children. The facility offers either inpatient or outpatient services that involves counseling, inpatient stay, workshops, and group counseling sessions. At the patient’s first initial visit they will meet with a counselor to decide a treatment plan that fits the patient’s needs best. For the LIFE Recovery program, it works in a similar manner. A patient will first meet with my supervisor, Robin Breeden, to discuss their chemical dependency, which could vary from alcohol to any other type of drug addiction. Once she has met with a patient, she will decide which program, individual counseling, Phase II AM group or Phase II PM group will be best for that particular patient. The Phase II groups are either at 9 a.m or 5:30 p.m on Tuesdays and Thursdays that require an attendance of 16 sessions. The Phase II groups focus on the same goal that is to help patients live a substance-free life. During this time, Robin teaches various lessons about recovery, relapse prevention, skills to maintaining sobriety and other lessons that aid in the patients’ journey to recovery.

During my time with the LIFE Recovery program, I have gained numerous types of experiences and opportunities. My most significant experiences were products of my responsibilities and duties as an intern. The primary responsibility I had was to observe and assist in the facilitation of the Phase II group therapy sessions. I was able to research, create and organize specific lesson worksheets and activities. After each group, I had to type and file patient
progress notes which are reports regarding their recent stressors, their affect and mood, their participation in specific lessons, and their progress in the program. I was given the opportunity to observe and assist patient Chemical Use Assessment Intakes that were apart of the patients’ initial visit with Robin. Another opportunity I was involved in was to observe and facilitate lessons from the LIFE Recovery program, such as Mindfulness to the patients in the Partial Hospitalization Program, as well as type their progress notes. Other than my basic intern duties, I had the opportunity to learn and experience the overall internal structure and functions of the RMH Behavioral Health facility.

The foundation of my field placement was based off all the advantages my site offered. I was able to meet and interact on a daily basis with psychology professionals. They gave me an insight into a world that I was only able to view through textbooks and lectures in class. I now know the possibilities that careers in psychology can offer. I have also had the advantage of making great connections within an excellent facility. I have become familiar with faculty members who could be possible networks in my future. The one advantage of this field placement that I found most important was the hands-on experience it provided. I had the ability to put all the information I have learned so far as a psychology major into action, especially my knowledge of different types of therapies and mental disorders. There was no better way than working with the LIFE Recovery program to validate my choices as a psychology undergraduate student. However, I did stumble upon some things that I did not like or disadvantages as an intern. This included things like working with staff that had different perspectives than me. I had to put aside what I thought was the right actions or decisions to make in order to truly benefit the patients. Even if I felt that it was incorrect, I needed to be open minded to what a faculty member wanted me to do. It was difficult as a LIFE Recovery intern to be limited to only seeing certain functions of that program and dealing with those specific patients. Although I wanted to be involved in everything I possibly could, like individual therapy, I knew that it was not realistic, and I could only do so much as an intern.

Starting at RMH, I was eager to jump right into the group sessions and make an impact on patients’ lives. I have learned that in this situation working with recovering addicts is that, not always will I be able to change a patient for the better. As an intern I was limited to the actions I made and the advice I gave. It was important to be careful that I correctly followed my supervisor’s instructions and criticisms. As an intern, I have observed patients who are only attending group because of external factors like court. In this situation, I realized that for someone to change it had to come from within, they had to want to change their lifestyle and some patients did not want to change. However, I did not take this to heart or become discouraged because I observed that in a group setting patients would come and go. I had to remind myself that I would come into contact with patients who are going through many struggles and sometimes it is out of my control to help them. I was not able to relate to them, but I gave them my respect and tried to understand as much as I could. Even though it was overwhelming working with these types of patients, I was able to ask questions and learn how to properly engage with them.

Working at RMH Behavioral Health LIFE Recovery program was a hands-on learning experience. I discovered a lot about myself that I did not know before. This field placement has
strengthened my skills and also exposed my weaknesses in which I will continue to work on. From my time at this site, I have learned that I want to continue with psychology but direct it to my passion of medicine. Although I have always wanted to be a counselor, I feel that it may not be appropriate for me after observing all that it entails, like certain limitations to dealing with patients and proper paperwork. This experience has opened my eyes to more opportunities. Instead of counseling, I would like to use my skills and knowledge I have gained from my field placement to become a mental health nurse, still incorporating my love for psychology.