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### Exploring Client Experiences of Using Complementary Therapies in Counseling

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Graduate Student Research Conference  
Abstract for Poster Presentation  
Kinneret Livny and Lindsey Nichols, PhD.  
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Exploring Client Experiences of Using Complementary Therapies in Counseling

There has been a dramatic growth in the use of complementary and alternative medicine or therapies (CAM) in the United States in recent years (Barnes, Bloom, & Nahin, 2008; NCCAM, 2013). Research in the health care fields has reflected the increased interest for using CAM to achieve optimal wellness (Sewitch, Cepoiu, Rigillo, & Sproule, 2008). In the U.S., CAM signify the use of indigenous or Eastern-based therapies that collaborate and integrate with Western practices to promote healing (Berman & Straus, 2004). CAM are based in a holistic philosophy of health practices that address the mind, body and spirit of an individual (Caspi, Koithan, & Criddle, 2004). Similarly, the counseling profession focuses on a wellness orientation to meeting mental health needs (Myers & Sweeney, 2008; Mellin, Hunt, & Nichols, 2011). As individuals increasingly turn to alternative methods to address mental health concerns, it has become critical for counselors to examine how clients experience an integrative mental health (IMH) counseling approach.

This pilot research study explores the largely uninvestigated area of client experiences of IMH. There are three primary objectives of this study. First, this study aims to understand the demographic characteristics of individuals who seek out complementary approaches to mental health. Secondly, this study explores client

motivations for using an IMH approach. Thirdly, this study seeks to understand how clients perceive the effectiveness of IMH.

This project uses mixed methods and a primarily qualitative methodological focus (i.e. narrative) to understand client's lived experiences. Participants were recruited using snowball sampling. Any individual over the age of 18 who had participated in at least four counseling sessions with a licensed professional counselor (i.e. LPC, LCPC), and used or discussed a CAM therapy in session, was eligible. Descriptive data, such as demographic and basic information, was collected from the original participants as well as a brief survey on their experience of IMH (N= 9). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants who were interested in sharing their stories with the researchers. Themes and categories will be discussed.

Data from this study could inform all counselors of the potential effectiveness of an integrative approach with clients. Healthcare reform has created a number of changes in delivering services to clients, which like previous research in this area (Evans, Valadez, Burns, & Rodriguez, 2002), has made it even more important to understand the therapeutic potential an integrative approach can have. This study is designed to inform practitioners who work with a wide range of clients in various settings. With the increase of mindfulness and yoga programs in school settings to integrative private and community, this research has the potential to highlight the effectiveness of a broad scope of approaches with various ages and settings. Although the research stems from private practitioners or agencies, the narratives will provide powerful evidence for all counselors to consider. From Head Start programs to Veteran's Affairs and all points between and beyond, the scope of counselors and clients who use an IMH approach is expansive.

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