

The Pillowcase Project: Pillowcases of Hope

By Gayle Bluebird

The Pillowcase Project (originally called Pillows of Unrest) had its origins at a Consumer Arts Center, the National Artists for Mental Health (NAMH) in Catskill, New York, in the early 1990s. The idea was that of Frank Marquit and Ralph Ivery who directed the program for over ten years. The exercise originally began as a travelling exhibit to be moved around the country and displayed at public buildings and gatherings. The purpose of the project was to provide information and to help remove discrimination against those with a history of mental illness.

NAMH ceased to exist in 2003, when they closed, due to lack of funding and support. Frank and Ralph, both accomplished artists, relocated to New York City where they continued to work with consumers/survivors in various arts programs. Since the closing of NAMH, the “Pillows of Unrest” project was discontinued.

In 2008, Altered States of the Arts Co-coordinators Ed Pazicky and Gayle Bluebird felt that the project should be revived. The name of the project was changed to Pillowcases of Recovery or of Hope, and had been implemented at Consumer Wellness Centers, Hospitals and Drop-In Centers around the country.

In October 2009, a pillowcase workshop was held at the 2009 Alternatives Conference in Omaha, Nebraska. Many Peer Specialists and Consumer Providers were in attendance and took the idea back to their home locations after the Conference, soon to become popular as a recovery tool. Since then, it has been done at numerous drop-in, wellness centers and hospitals around the world.



Unknown designer

Materials to gather for the project:

☐ Pillowcases—white is best, but any color may be used. They must be without prints or decoration. You can ask people to bring a pillowcase if you are presenting the project to a group of community peers. We have also found that hotels and hospitals were happy to provide used pillowcases when the project was done at conferences or in inpatient hospital settings. You will need to make a request in

advance so that the agency has time to gather them. Laundries may be another source of pillowcases, that plus your own stock of used pillowcases, often gathering dust in a closet.

☐ Permanent or indelible markers such as Sharpie Markers of varying sizes and colors—Markers must be washable, so they do not run if pillowcases are washed. Office supply stores and arts & crafts stores such as Michael's are good sources for multiple color packets. Check at thrift stores as often you will find art supplies including markers.

☐ Cardboard to fit inside the pillowcases to provide stability. (empty boxes can be obtained from your grocery store and cut up). One of the best sources of cardboard is from old file folders. The size is perfect, and you can use both sides of the folder for two pillowcases. Many professional offices of all kinds have folders they are happy to be rid of and once again, you may find them in thrift stores.

☐ Plastic covering, newspaper or other large paper sheets to cover tables to protect them. If the tables are old and not needing protection you may not need to cover them.

☐ You can use your imagination regarding other items you may want to have available for the pillowcase arts, but this is also dependent on where you are doing the project. If it is an inpatient setting there may be restrictions. If you are presenting the project in the community you may want to have a basket or bagful of all kinds of items that can be used to decorate a pillowcase: feathers, fabrics, tissue paper, buttons, lace, etc. Sequins are frowned upon because of the mess they can make when they drop on the floor, making cleanup more difficult.

☐ White glue and/or glue sticks

☐ Scissors, and other tools for cutting

☐ Tongue depressors or popsicle sticks to spread glue

☐ Cleanup items, paper towels or pre-moistened wipes for cleaning hands

☐ Clothesline and clothespins for displaying the pillowcases



Before you begin:

Introducing the project is important. People will not know what to do unless you inform them about the purpose of the pillowcase project and how to design the pillowcases. It is important to give them suggestions and ideas. You will explain that the exercise uses pillowcases as a canvas that encourages them to express their personal experiences or issues with emotional distress and/or mental health issues. They may want to express the turmoil that can exist within their own recovery or they may want to express positive and/or hopefulness with words and images or combinations of both. Some people may choose to write poems or phrases. Others design their pillowcases with images that tell a story, decorated with borders or with a variety of bright or dark colors. Ask them to think of the ways they are working on their recovery and to reflect on tools they may have used or are using. Ask them to think about barriers or discrimination they might have encountered along the road to recovery and what their hopes might be as they recover. They may decide to use decorative items to enhance their pillowcase, such as bits of colored cloth or a variety of easy-to-glue items such as ribbons, feathers, etc.

The best way to describe the project is to have photographs or actual pillowcases that can serve as examples. If this is your first time doing the project you can design your own pillowcase and/or ask friends who you know have mental health issues to design them. Make sure you don't showcase only one type of message on pillowcases; ideally you will have a few of each type to show.

Let them know they will have an opportunity to get up and showcase their pillowcase with the group when they are finished. What does their pillowcase convey? What are the messages they have drawn or written?

One last important reminder: make sure you are enthusiastic about the project. The success of the project will depend on how you present it. Let your enthusiasm shine!

Getting Started:

1. Give each participant a pillowcase and a piece of cardboard to slip inside the pillowcase to provide stability while doing their work. 2. Lay out the markers on the table allowing them to share sizes, (thin or thick) and colors. 3. For those who will do writing or poetry, the finer point Sharpies are best. 4. Ask them to think about the previous discussion and to plan out their pillowcase before beginning. ☐

2. If you have time limits such as at a conference, you may want to give people the time they have to do their pillowcase, but some people may want extra time which you can accommodate in different ways.

3. As the facilitator you can mosey around the table(s) without being intrusive. You might make comments about what you see or just let people know you are supportive. You also might sit and do your own pillowcase. I have done this workshop when people have said, "Where is your pillowcase?"



by Sharon Wise

Some Additional Tips:

☐ If you plan to use glitter, bear in mind that it can be very messy and difficult to clean up. Check with the facility or venue to make certain they permit it. If you do use it, keep a plastic covering, newspaper or heavy craft paper over the tables to prevent spillage. Glue guns should only be used with very close supervision from someone with expertise in their use. They are a safety hazard and can be injurious. Use a white glue or similar instead.

☐ This is an excellent workshop and/or activity to be included as a centerpiece at all types of mental health conferences, special events and celebrations. Some hotels may have heavy curtains in the area to be used and will provide silver pins to hang them on the curtain. Or you may ask for bulletin boards or for clothesline that can be strung across a room or open space. Discuss with this with the conference representative at the hotel, advising her of the project so that they may prepare the tables in advance or provide older tables for you to use.

☐ Variations on special themes may be considered. Hope, Recovery, Self-determination, among others selected by the participants.

☐ If you have a digital camera, you may want to consider taking pictures of the finished pillowcases for future display on a website or in a newsletter.

☐ Naming and Claiming: Be sure to ask each individual to sign their artwork and for permission to place their name on an accompanying card when showcasing the pillowcase in public places. A sample permission form on page 13 of this manual may be used for that purpose. This is an essential part of empowering the artist and is often overlooked (due to a misunderstood HIPPA Law) particularly in inpatient settings. HIPPA laws do not preclude asking for a person's consent and the majority of the time, persons will feel honored to be identified with their artwork.

"I wanted my pillowcase to say that I thought I was going to spend the rest of my life in chains and shackles

Depending on the facility or venue, you can prepare an exhibit by hanging the completed pillowcases on a clothesline or just hanging on the walls. If you are able to display, encourage each artist to complete the permission form and leave the pillowcase for display for a period of time. Each pillowcase should be identified with the artist's name. Displaying them will create a feeling of pride for each artist. Be sure and have a camera handy to photograph the artworks

Post-Discussion

At the completion of the project, ask each person to stand and show their pillowcase design to others in the group. Ask them to talk about their design and what it means to them. Ask them if the project helped them and if so, how?

Time limits are usually not necessary but if someone begins to talk too long you might say something about the importance of everyone getting a chance to talk and share their work.

Some participants in the group might share ways in which someone's art had meaning for their own lives. That is permissible. Usually the group process takes over. There are ooohs and aaahs expressed or questions about the meaning of someone's work. Keep in mind that not everyone wants to get up and share. Make sure you let people know they can share if they want to but fine if they wish not to.

Talk about the possibility of displaying their work outside the facility as well as inside. Ask for suggestions as to places they might know that would display their pillowcases. Explain to them that public viewing is a method to help remove discrimination and acceptance of the talents of those with mental illness.

Don't forget to have each person fill out the permission form for display.

Displaying the Pillowcases

After the pillowcase project is completed, string a clothesline somewhere in the facility and hang each pillowcase on the line. Some facilities have actually displayed their work at local public facilities such as libraries, town halls, around the hospitals and in local Chambers of Commerce.

If you plan on doing this, make up a card for each pillowcase describing the design and the ideas the artist is trying to convey and include the artist's name. This kind of display is a good tool for de-stigmatization in the community and additionally building the self-esteem of each artist.

There are numerous ways the pillowcases can be used for display. Local Universities can show them in their student union or other facility on campus. You may want to show them at local arts festivals or fairs.

In order to be able to display any artwork publicly, it is advisable to obtain a permission form from each participant allowing their material to be displayed. A copy of a permission form is available on the next page of this manual

Make certain you get good photographs so that you can consider displaying them on a website or FACEBOOK page.