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Success Story

A COGNITIVE BEHAVIORAL THERAPY BREAKTHROUGH SOUTHEAST ASIAN COMMUNITY CLINIC

Lim, a Cambodian American in his late 40s, suffered for over 10 years with headaches so severe that he was virtually unable to leave his house, and he became suicidal. He was treated unsuccessfully on 5 different types of medication. They included 2 anti-depressants, an anti-anxiety medication, and another drug to help him sleep. Lim's psychiatrist, Dr. Devon Hinton, Associate Medical Director of the Southeast Asian Clinic of North Suffolk, enrolled him in a culturally adapted, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) program. The program, developed by Dr. Hinton and Dr. Michael Otto, Director of Cognitive Behavior Therapy at the Massachusetts General Hospital, has adapted effective new self-control techniques to treat culturally-specific Vietnamese and Cambodian anxiety and panic attacks.

Lim was having headache focused panic attacks related to his Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. He began by worrying about his children and getting tense. Then he would get a severe headache, have flashbacks to when he was tortured by having his head banged against a wall in a re-education camp in Cambodia. This would lead to heart palpitations. The Cambodians believe that severe headaches mean you think too much, which will stretch your nerves, cause your blood pressure to go dangerously high, resulting in heart palpitations and death.

Dr. Hinton taught Lim a series of mindfulness meditation and muscle relaxation exercises that intervened in the trigger sequence. Lim also learned that heart palpitation were not catastrophic, and would not cause death. Within the course of 11 weekly sessions, Lim was able to understand his condition better and successfully use coping techniques, such as meditation and muscle relaxation. As a result, Lim's headaches completely disappeared, he was able to improve his relationships at home, and became socially involved in his community. Similar to many others who have completed the CBT program, Lim was also able to dramatically reduce the dosages and number of medications he takes from 5 to 2. Instead of weekly visits with Dr Hinton, Lim now only needs to come in monthly. This balance of medication and culturally-adapted Cognitive Behavioral Therapy helps clients obtain appropriate and effective treatment for disorders like headaches, which are sometimes misdiagnosed in Asian clients.

(names and details about this person have been changed to protect confidentiality)