

# Providing Comfort: The Tradition of Giving Quilts



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# Activity, Time and Materials

## ACTIVITY:

In a small group, share stories about quilts—about making them, receiving them, using them, viewing them—and, specifically, how they have provided physical, emotional, or spiritual comfort. Choose a local organization to donate a quilt to, such as a homeless shelter, a safe house for abused women and children, or a cancer treatment center. Discuss the organization and how giving the quilt can help its members; show photos of quilts, people with quilts, and of people who might receive the quilts that are made. Each quilt made can have a special theme focused on traditions, such as proverbs, folk medicine and home remedies, children’s games, or any other tradition that might be of particular interest. The traditions theme could relate to whatever organization is chosen. This lesson plan can be facilitated by artists, quilters, staff, and volunteers. It requires at least one person with sewing skills and access to a sewing machine. Volunteers with sewing skills can usually be found by contacting a local quilting guild. This plan is appropriate for residents with different levels of cognitive ability, vision, and dexterity.

## TIME:

Three to four hours over at least three sessions.

## MATERIALS:

- Fine-tip, permanent markers (both black and color)
- Pencils
- 9" x 9" pieces of white paper
- Pins
- Darning needles
- Sewing needles
- Mercerized cotton thread
- Cotton batting
- Colored yarn cut into 6" lengths
- Fabric for backing
- Prewashed and ironed white cotton cloth cut into 9" x 9" squares
- Prewashed and ironed solid-color or print cotton cloth cut into 9" x 9" squares
- Photos of quilts, quilt patterns/blocks, and people with quilts
- An actual quilt (or quilts) that can be touched
- The book *Sundogs and Sunflowers: Folklore and Folk Art of the Northern Great Plains*

## **“THREE PLAGUES” (LONELINESS, BOREDOM, HELPLESSNESS):**

All “three plagues” are intended to be addressed. These activities were designed to increase social interaction with staff, family, and other residents; to facilitate a sense of belonging to a social or family group; to jog memories of connectedness to family history and personal identity; to provide an opportunity to engage in an activity that allows for creative expression and the expression of self; and to foster a positive sense of self as someone who has skill, is capable of creating an object of value, and is contributing to society by helping others.

## **ASSOCIATED MEDICAL STUDIES:**

Recent studies have begun to establish a link between quilt-making and health outcomes, such as a sense of well-being. Innumerable personal accounts exist of how quilts have helped people cope with difficult life events. Quilt-making satisfies the basic elements of narrative medicine, which provide for insight into a person’s life, coping ability, response to pain, sense of well-being, joy, and health.

*--Burt, Emily L., and Jacqueline Atkinson. “The Relationship between Quilting and Wellbeing.” Journal of Public Health (2011): 5-6.*

*Cover photo: Veterans flag quilt coordinated and created by head cook and traditional quilter, Nancy Sandstrom, and elder residents at the Lakeside Community Living Center (LCLC), New Town, ND, on the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation. LCLC partners with the Three Affiliated Tribes Museum and the North Dakota Council on the Arts through the Art for Life Program.*

*--Charon, Rita. Narrative Medicine: Honoring the Stories of Illness. Oxford University Press, 2007.*

*--MacDowell, Marsha, and Clare Luz. “Quilts and Health.” Quilter’s Newsletter Magazine (December/January 2012): 44-47.*

*--Shapiro, Johanna. “Narrative Medicine and Narrative Writing.” Family Medicine 44, no. 5 (2012): 309-311.*

*--Pause Wolf, Terri. “Building a Caring Client Relationship and Creating a Quilt: A Parallel and Metaphorical Process.” Journal of Holistic Nursing 21, no. 1 (March 2003): 81-87.*

Nurses tell of patients who would not get out of bed until they were given a quilt or started quilting, and physicians speak of the craft being critical to their ability to cope with their work.

*--Watters, Suzanne, and Lindsay Zier Vogel. “Physicians as Patients: A Narrative Patchwork.” CMAJ 178, no. 8 (April 8, 2008): 1037-1038.*

# Activity Plan

## SESSION 1 (1 HOUR TO 90 MINUTES):

I. Introductory background information for the person directing this activity:

- Most Americans are familiar with what a quilt looks like and millions of Americans have had some direct experience with quilts. Quilts have provided warmth and comfort for decades and are now used in health care for a wide range of purposes, including health and medical education, advocacy, memorialization of victims, raising research funds, meeting physicians' needs for self-care, and helping people cope with difficult life events. There is a growing body of literature that connects quilts and quilting with good health and an overall sense of well-being. Thousands of quilts have been made in

response to every conceivable illness, from Irritable Bowel Syndrome to AIDS. Quilts provide an opportunity for self-expression and thereby offer insights into personal identity, as well as a person's life, pain, joy, coping ability, and health. Makers of quilts have said that the designing and sewing of quilts helps get them through difficult times; it keeps their hands and minds busy and distracts them from whatever challenges they may face. Through the process of giving their work away, quilt-makers feel they are contributing to the health and general well-being of others. The stories behind these quilts are almost always moving and speak strongly to the power of an object to trigger memories, as well as the healing power of quilts and quilt-making.



*Queen-sized satin star quilt hand-stitched by Mary Ann Krauser of Porcupine, ND, Standing Rock Indian Reservation. This quilt was created for a “give-away” ceremony held at a local powwow in honor of a tribal member suffering from cancer. Medicine wheels are hand-quilted with wishes and hope for recovery.*

2. The person directing this activity should ask a series of questions to start the interaction and to stimulate memories and personal stories related to quilts. This can be done either as a group or one-on-one.

- What comes to your mind when you hear the word quilt or see a quilt?
- Have you ever made a quilt? Has anyone in your family made quilts? If so, tell us what you remember about this person, about the quilt, about the quilt-making. Did you or your family member quilt alone or in a group? (For examples, look at the pictures of and read about the quilts and quilting circles illustrated on pages 113 and 137 of the book *Sundogs and Sunflowers*. You could also show an actual quilt [or quilts] that can be felt and touched.)
- Have you ever owned a quilt? Do you own one now? If so, tell us about it. Who made it? Who gave it to you and when? Tell us the story about it.
- What is the pattern on the quilt and the colors? What is your favorite quilting pattern? What are your favorite quilting colors? (Show photos of quilts, quilt patterns, and people with quilts.)
- What are your earliest memories of quilts or quilt-making? What does the memory make you think of? Who does it make you think of?
- Have you used quilts in daily life—on a bed, for example? When do you use quilts and why?
- How does a quilt make you feel?
- What is it you like most about quilts/quilt-making?

- Have you ever made and/or given a quilt to someone? Tell us why you wanted to give someone a quilt. How did that make you feel? What pattern and colors did you choose and why? How did it make them feel to receive it?

3. Explain that the participants will make a quilt during the next session. Each person will be making one quilt block that will then be sewn together by a volunteer. Explain that everyone can participate no matter what their skill level might be. Some people may be able to think of a design or color to use; others can draw or sew. People should be encouraged to help each other.

4. Provide several examples of organizations or individuals in need for which the participants could plan to make a quilt. It might even be for the facility in which they live. Talk about how the quilt might be used as a bed cover or wall hanging.

5. Once an organization or individual has been identified, ask participants to think about ideas for what kind of quilt might be appropriate or most appreciated. What colors would the participants like to use? Would they like the quilt to have a theme? (If making a quilt with a specific theme, read from the relevant pages of *Sundogs and Sunflowers*. For example, if making a “Proverbs Quilt,” read some of the proverbs found on pages 112-115 and the short stories on page 253. Ask the participants if they can remember any proverbs that they or someone else used to say. What does the proverb mean? When was it said? Write the proverbs down for use in the next session. If making a quilt for children, read the children’s games on

pages 258-261 and 264-265. Ask participants about the games they played as children. What were the games called? Who played them? What were the rules? Were there any chants they called out as they played them? Write these examples down for use during the next session.)

6. Explain that the person directing this activity plan will provide the materials that fit the colors, ideas, stories, and themes that the participants have shared and selected.

### SESSION 2 (1 HOUR TO 90 MINUTES):

1. Remind participants of the discussion about quilts in Session 1, and that they will now be making a quilt for the person/group that they selected. Each participant will make one quilt block, and the quilt blocks will all be sewn together. Reassure participants that there is a role for everyone. Some people may be “assistants,” who provide suggestions for color or designs.

2. Provide each participant with a piece of white 9" x 9" paper and a pencil to sketch out a design for practice. Explain that it can be very simple, such as a single word or symbol. (Examples from *Sundogs and Sunflowers* that may help to spur ideas and conversation include: fishing on pages 239-245, hunting on pages 226-239, flowers on pages 156, 278-280, and 286-287, cowboys, holidays, etc.). If the group decided upon a theme, provide examples that were thought of during the last session, such as proverbs or children’s games. The participants might write out the entire proverb or a key word on the square. For children’s games, ask the participants to think of one or

two objects that the game brings to mind, such as a baseball and mitt, jump rope, basketball and hoop, or ice skates.

3. Provide each participant with a plain white cotton quilt block and markers, afterwards explaining that they can now redraw their practice design onto the actual quilt block. They can embellish their blocks with different colors if they would like to. They can also sign their blocks if so desired.

4. As people finish, several participants and volunteers can start arranging the completed blocks with the other quilt blocks that are a solid color or have a print on them. Ask people to help decide which blocks should go where. Participants that are able can help pin the blocks together.

5. Explain that a volunteer will sew all the blocks together and that there will be one more session, during which the participants will tie the quilt to finish it.

Note: At this point, a volunteer quilt-maker will be needed to sew the blocks together and then pin the batting, top, and backing together.

### SESSION 3 (1 HOUR TO 90 MINUTES):

1. Remind participants of the previous two sessions, during which they discussed their memories of quilts made, received, and used, and their making of a quilt to give to a person or group. Working with the volunteer quilt-maker, show the participants the nearly finished quilt and explain that they will be finishing it by adding ties. There will be a role for everyone. People who do not have the mental capacity or dexterity to tie can help to hold the quilt in place, for instance.
2. Place the quilt on a table and have everyone sit around it, so that they can reach part of the quilt. The person directing this activity should pair people who need help with others who can take a lead role and be encouraging.
3. Demonstrate with one tie, then give everyone yarn pieces and a darning needle. Suggest that the people tying can participate in the quilting tradition of saying a prayer or sending a good wish for each tie they make.
4. While participants are tying the quilt, talk about each block and the memories associated with it, the colors used, and how much it adds to the quilt as a whole.
5. When the tying is finished, hold the quilt up for everyone to see. Take a photo of the quilt with the entire group surrounding it.

Note: At this point, the volunteer quilt-maker will need to take the quilt and sew on the binding. To make it easier to hang the

quilt, it would be helpful if the quilt-maker also could sew a sleeve onto the top back edge of the quilt. A wooden dowel, cut to the width of the quilt and with screw eyes attached at both cut dowel ends, could then be slipped through the sleeve and hooked over nails on the wall.

### SESSION 4 - OPTIONAL SUGGESTIONS (45 MINUTES TO 1 HOUR):

1. Invite the person or group that is receiving the quilt to come to the facility or participants' residence to be presented with the quilt. Arrange for a small celebration, during which one or all of the quilt-makers can present the quilt.
2. If the person/group receiving the quilt is not able to come to the participants' residence, arrange for a group of participants or a representative from the group to deliver and present the quilt.
3. Another option is to have a small celebratory gathering, during which the participants who made the quilt can prepare it to be delivered to the person/group receiving it. The participants can then write a note or sign a notecard to be included with the gift.
4. Take photographs of the quilt and the quilt-makers as it is being made, as well as when it is presented to whomever will be receiving it. Collect comments from the quilt-makers and from the quilt recipients about what making, giving, and receiving this quilt has meant to them. Compile photos and comments into a memory book that can be shared with other residents and visitors.

## ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS:

I. Many communities have quilting guilds. Such organizations often are known for their community-mindedness, and for their charitable work to support various benefits through events like quilt raffles. Consider approaching a local or regional quilting guild to develop an ongoing relationship between them and the residents of the care facility. To help take the residents' minds off their own problems, encourage them to make quilts for others. In this way, they will have a sense of giving and will develop the sense that, regardless of their situation, they still have the capacity to help others in need. Each of the participant's capacities may be limited as individuals, but their capacities are most certainly increased as a group. Perhaps develop a program where the quilting guild works with the residents to create baby quilts for a local shelter or hospital maternity ward.

Note 1: Men tend to participate less in such activities. To increase the odds of male participation, try to include subjects to which men can better relate. Hunting and fishing, as mentioned previously, are relevant examples. Men also could be tasked with making a quilt hanger to display the quilt.

Note 2: Some elder care facilities also have had great participation amongst both women and men through the making of a "veterans quilt." First, an American flag is made. Photographs of friends and family members who served in the military are then photographed onto material that is applied to the quilt. The elders in the care facilities can then share stories of their service, either verbally or in writing. Such projects tend to bring the larger community into the elder care facility because the families wish to have their family service members represented. Veterans Day and the Fourth of July make for excellent holidays on which to unveil this type of quilt.



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Marsha is the Curator at Michigan State University Museum and Professor of Art, Art History, and Design at Michigan State University. Dr. MacDowell is also the coordinator of the Michigan Traditional Arts Program (a statewide arts partnership of the MSU Museum and the Michigan Council for Arts and Cultural Affairs) and the Director of The Quilt Index ([www.quiltindex.org](http://www.quiltindex.org)), a freely accessible online digital repository of over 50,000 quilts with related data and stories. Dr. MacDowell has also written extensively on quilts, curated quilt exhibitions and festival programs on quilts, developed curricula related to quilts, and has served on the boards of the American Quilt Study Group and the Quilt Alliance.

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Clare is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Family Medicine, College of Human Medicine at Michigan State University, with almost 40 years of experience as a gerontologist in the health care field, first as a clinical social worker, educator, and consultant in long-term care settings followed by nearly 20 years in academia as a health services researcher. Her primary research interests address factors that have an impact on optimal aging and quality of life for vulnerable older adults, particularly the direct care workforce and the intersection of health, creativity, medicine and the arts. The focus is on the human experience of illness and community-based, policy and practice-relevant research that involves strong community partnerships. Dr. Luz teaches research methods and medical humanities. She served on the Michigan Governor's Long Term Supports and Services Commission until it ended in 2015, serves on the statewide Michigan Society of Gerontology Board, and is Co-Director of the Geriatric Workforce Research Initiative and Founder of AgeAlive.

*(Images courtesy of Troyd Geist, North Dakota Council on the Arts.)*