

OCT 2023

Designing “Barrier Free” Communications: Keeping behavioral design flexible and effective

Occupational therapy can help people recover from domestic violence, but the benefits of these programs aren't always clear to the people they're intended for. We set out to connect residents at one shelter in New York City to these programs. However, we had to adapt our usual methodology, because we and program staff determined that interviewing and observing people at shelters risked making them feel less safe. Instead, we interviewed program staff and audited promotional materials. After this research, we redesigned materials like weekly schedules and flyers to make the benefits of occupational therapy clearer. This work showed how behavioral designers can adapt their work to keep people feeling safe without diminishing the effectiveness of our designs.

Summary

Barrier Free Living, a nonprofit based in New York City, was founded in 1978 with the mission of supporting people with disabilities to live dignified lives free of all forms of abuse and bias. Its domestic violence shelter, Freedom House, offers a variety of private living spaces and life-saving services, including occupational therapy, to help Freedom House residents develop the skills needed for independent living. The NYC Behavioral Design Team partnered with Barrier Free Living to increase the number of residents who attend occupational-therapy programming.

As behavioral designers, we frequently conduct qualitative research through interviews and focus groups to inform our designs. Core to our approach to ethical and equitable research is prioritizing the health and dignity of the people we design with and for, and minimizing harm to those communities. When working with residents of a domestic violence shelter, these considerations require us to reconsider and modify standard procedures and methods.

This project reminds us that behavioral design is an agile tool that can be used even and perhaps especially when designing for vulnerable populations. In this case, instead of conducting interviews

with end users that might have placed undue burdens on them during their recovery, our team leveraged evidence-informed principles from behavioral science to improve Barrier Free Living's outreach materials to maximize the program's impact through occupational therapy while minimizing potential harm to residents.

Highlights

- Occupational therapy can help survivors of domestic violence recover and thrive. Unfortunately, at Freedom House, a shelter in New York City, people have used these services less since the COVID-19 pandemic began.
- To help residents feel safe, we modified our typical design methodology to avoid observing and interviewing residents.
- This project showcases how flexible behavioral design can be, adapting to the particulars of different contexts while still helping people thrive in challenging situations.

Problem

Since its founding, Barrier Free Living has served thousands of people with disabilities through advocacy, housing, shelter, and other services. As the United States' first fully accessible domestic violence shelter, the organization's Freedom House crisis shelter helps survivors (and their children) with disabilities heal and prepare for the future. Today, Barrier Free Living's Freedom House offers occupational-therapy services, which help residents develop valuable life skills and build their independence. However, since the COVID-19 pandemic, a large proportion of Freedom House residents do not participate, despite ongoing interest in these services.

While we believed this problem was important to address, we also knew we needed to work carefully when designing for a population recovering from trauma. As behavioral designers, we seek to learn as much as we can about people and their situations before we design our solutions. This typically includes observing and interviewing people to understand the obstacles they face in completing a particular behavior, in this case deciding to attend, or ultimately attending, an occupational-therapy workshop. From there, we would design an intervention that overcomes those barriers. However, as we were working with residents living in a confidential location, it was essential that our presence at the shelter didn't violate their sense of privacy or safety. We also didn't want our research to inadvertently harm residents by placing additional stress on them or triggering retraumatization. Together with Barrier Free Living, we decided to take an evidence-based behavioral design approach with a lighter-touch qualitative component. Instead of conducting observations and interviews with residents, we would leverage the insights of Barrier Free Living staff and draw upon behavioral science and psychology literature. This approach would enable us to better understand the barriers residents might face without placing additional burdens on them, and we could use those insights to develop our designs to support participation in occupational therapy.

Through interviews with Barrier Free Living staff and a review of Barrier Free Living's outreach materials, our team discovered that the materials used to promote these programs, while simple and straightforward, contained a fair amount of technical language, did not describe what occupational therapy is or the benefits these sessions provided, and were visually inconsistent. Drawing insights from behavioral science about the psychological principles of scarcity and limited attention, we hypothesized that residents might simply not be forming the intention to attend sessions.

In partnership with Barrier Free Living, we selected three of their occupational therapy outreach materials to redesign: weekly events schedules, event fliers, and daily event reminder emails. It was a win-win: applying behavioral design best practices to Barrier Free Living's outreach materials would help remove behavioral barriers to improve participation in occupational therapy without the need to interface with (and potentially harm) residents.









Solution

The NYC Behavioral Design Team leveraged the behavioral science evidence behind the psychological principle of **scarcity** and the principles that underpin our **communications design best practices** (such as limited attention, salience, and hassle factors) to inform our final design recommendations. We knew that effective outreach materials would need to overcome common barriers tied to the psychological principles of

limited attention and **salience** by grabbing attention and being easy to understand. Even more importantly, the benefits of participating in these programs needed to be clear, relevant, and inspiring to overcome barriers such as **status quo bias** or **present bias**. Lastly, it was important that residents know who they could turn to for help, especially when faced with small inconveniences or uncertainties in the form of **hassle factors**. To accomplish this, we made changes to:

- ▶ **Grab attention:** We used color, text formatting, graphics, and other techniques to make each piece, and its key takeaways, stand out.
- ▶ **Make materials easy to understand:** We changed language so that terms were simple and precise, and so that action steps were clear. To increase accessibility, we also provided different ways for residents to interact with these materials, for example by creating PDFs to print and JPGs to send by email or save to your phone.
- ▶ **Highlight relevance:** To help residents understand who attends these workshops and why, we added images of residents participating in past workshops and ensured that the benefits of attending each workshop were prominent.
- ▶ **Provide help:** We added the name and contact information of a Freedom House staff member who can address any questions or concerns residents might have.

ORIGINAL DESIGN: WEEKLY SCHEDULE

Freedom House Recreation/Group Schedule for Adults 2022				
Monday 7/11	Tuesday 7/12	Wednesday 7/13	Thursday 7/14	Friday 7/15
<p>Creative Music Group (OT) 11 AM - 12 PM Multipurpose Rm</p>  <p>Community Meeting 1 PM - 2PM Multipurpose Rm</p> 	<p>Gardening Group (Emma) 9:30 AM - 10:30 AM Backyard Patio</p>  <p>Art Group (OT) 11AM-12PM Multipurpose Rm</p> 	<p>Chat It Away (Vanessa) 11 am Multipurpose Rm</p>  <p>Virtual Self-Care Group (OT) 1 PM - 2 PM</p>  <p>https://us02web.zoom.us/j/83608227367 Meeting ID: 836 0822 7367</p> 	<p>Games Group (OT) 11am-12pm Multipurpose Rm</p> 	<p>OT Closed</p> <p>See you on Monday</p> <p>Enjoy the weekend!</p>

BEHAVIORALLY REDESIGNED WEEKLY SCHEDULE

Freedom House Weekly Events

Week of September 12, 2022

Freedom House offers a variety of empowering workshops and events for residents. Through these offerings, residents are encouraged to increase their independence while building a sense of community.

We welcome and encourage all residents to attend sessions regularly.

	Monday Sep-12	Tuesday Sep-13	Wednesday Sep-14	Thursday Sep-15
MORNING		<p style="text-align: center;">Gardening Group 🌻 9:30-10:30am Backyard Patio (Emma will lead session)</p>		
MIDDAY	<p style="text-align: center;">Creative Music Group 🎵 11am-12pm Multipurpose Room (Occupational Therapy, Evelyn)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Art Group 🎨 11am-12pm Multipurpose Room (Occupational Therapy, Jane)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Chat It Away 💬 11am-12pm Multipurpose room (Vanessa will lead session)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Games Group 🎮 11am-12pm Multipurpose Room (Occupational Therapy, Jane)</p>
AFTERNOON	<p style="text-align: center;">Community Meeting 🎫 1-2pm Multipurpose Room RAFFLES <i>All residents encouraged to attend!</i></p>		<p style="text-align: center;">Virtual Self-Care Group 💻 1-2pm Zoom [hyperlink and meeting ID]</p>	

THERE ARE NO SESSIONS HELD ON FRIDAYS
Enjoy the weekend!

QUESTIONS?
Contact Simone at XXX-XXX-XXXX

Take a photo of this QR code to download:

No RSVPs necessary. Just drop on by!

To support Barrier Free Living to continue to put these behavioral design recommendations into practice, the Behavioral Design Team developed a comprehensive Behaviorally Informed Communications Best Practices guide. This guide—which was inspired by our [Communications Audit Checklist](#)—includes explanations about psychological principles and advice on how to apply them to Barrier Free Living’s other communications efforts

Results

Barrier Free Living's occupational-therapy staff have enthusiastically adopted these designs and began modifying them for all future programming. Furthermore, staff from other Barrier Free Living teams have made their own copies of these designs. In all, the organization plans to use these designs across all departments by summer 2023.

While there is no quantitative data to assess impact, the qualitative results of the redesigns are strong. Feedback from staff and residents alike have been overwhelmingly positive. Staff say the designs are attractive and they appreciate how easy the designs are to use and maintain. Staff also shared that residents say they have a better sense of occupational-therapy offerings and the benefits of attending.

Takeaway

Behavioral nudges have always been framed as a cost-efficient policy tool, and this project helps illustrate what that looks like in action. Not only were these three designs quick and inexpensive to produce and implement but conducting a communications audit also helped our team minimize potential harm to residents by forgoing interviews. This project shows that simple, evidence-informed behavioral design solutions are valuable, especially when the goal is to apply design methods that minimize burden on end users.