

Tips, Research and Techniques for Direct Practice

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COMMON FACTORS - INCREASING A THERAPEUTIC APPROACH WITH YOUTH

There is new research recently published from the family therapy field that lends optimism to positive youth development models (strength-based practice and asset-building initiatives). This research speaks to any youth worker, be they pastors, community recreation, juvenile delinquency, school-based, parents, or any interested counselor/therapist. This new research highlights how to establish a positive and helpful alliance. It also is soon to send shock waves across the therapy field as well as all of the helping professions. This has to do with recent studies of therapy outcomes. These large "meta-analysis" studies are actually a "study of many studies." What they have found is that none of the over 400 recognized therapy models have proven to be more reliable than any other. There are no clear-cut "winners" in the effectiveness race. Incredible when you consider that most universities and training workshops tout the recent "soup du jour" model for "what works." The researchers compare the claims of "more effective" to the claims made between aspirin, Tylenol and Advil. They all will ease headache pain and work better than taking no medicine at all.

These many therapy models are often transitioned into juvenile delinquency and school-based strategies for working with youth. Yet, none come out as clear leaders in the effort to help. The authors of this new research, (Hubble et al. 1999) sponsored by the American Psychological Assoc. (APA) call this the "Dodo Bird Effect" in a take-off from Alice in Wonderland where the Queen proclaims, "All have won, so ALL must have prizes!"

What does this research find? From reviewing literally thousands of research studies on therapy outcomes, it finds that the biggest engine to change is the family and youth! Not "us" or our models-those that we work with. When compared to other factors of what brings positive behavior change, it is the "client" that makes the greatest contribution to this change. If all the models are about the same, (regardless of what the popular founder or model developer has to say) then this finding prompted the researchers to look for what does matter...or more specifically, to answer the question: What are the active ingredients in helping to realize positive behavior change?

What they find is there are "common factors" that all of these helping models see, to raise-all in their own unique way. All of these 400 models are helpful because they raise these factors for treatment efficacy. If the contributions to "change" were listed as percentages, then the research determines the breakdown to be:

- **Client factors - 40%** - This involves what the youth and family come in the door with. Not what we teach, or what we do...but what they have and what is part of THEIR environment, as they meet us. This includes, personal strengths, talents, past problem solving abilities, social supports, beliefs, resources, fortuitous events, etc. The largest single contributor to change is the youth and family. Youth are not conduits or processors of information, they are active and generative and the more we encourage and foster their participation, the more we reap the single largest resource to "change."
- **Relationship factors - 30%** - To the extent that youth workers can foster a good alliance with youth, it will contribute up to 30% towards change. This includes: perceived empathy, acceptance and warmth. The critical idea here is that the evaluation must be determined by the youth! The researchers cited that most previous studies determined whether a good alliance was being established by adult report. No...The greatest predictor of success comes from the youth's report. And we had better work fast; the greatest gains (positive final outcomes) are found when youth report a positive alliance by the 4th meeting. We need to strongly consider the first impressions we are conveying to youth and family and work toward accepting youth goals at face value and working in harmony with their interests.
- **Expectancy & Hope - 15%** - This is also called the "placebo effect" that the youth and family's hope and expectancy that your youth program or helping resource will bring change and help for them. It involves whether our programs can convey "possibility" for change. Hope, optimism, encouragement.... extending these will counteract demoralization and improve outcomes with juvenile populations. Hubble et al. (1999) also report that hope cannot be increased by "cheerleading". To truly raise hope, then Juvenile staff must increase an adolescent's "agency" thinking, ("I can do this") followed by "pathways" thinking ("Here's how I do this").
- **Model/technique - 15%** - Finally, and very humbly, what we do as helping adults, our strategies and techniques that psychological models teach us are so important, are one of the least influential contributors to change. This is simply amazing when you consider that most of our universities spend a majority of the time promoting this factor instead of finding more effective ways of eliciting, amplifying and reinforcing the youth and family factors. And this 15% is enhanced if these techniques work to raise the other 3 common factors! But, don't turn on the gas or tie the noose just yet, for this finding brings a very introspective and hopeful change in us. We need to move from the "Sage on the Stage, to the Guide on the Side." Outcomes improve when we instill hope and accommodate youth rather than requiring youth to fit or conform to our favorite model or techniques.

This research is a boon to asset initiatives. The mystique or complexity surrounding "therapy" can be worked through and shed. Instead, what is truly "therapeutic" can become very illuminated and more youth workers can begin to build these important alliances and work to enhance these common factors with youth and family. Professional therapy will always have its place, but what is "effective" can be shared by all. We may not all be in the therapy business but we are all in the "business" of promoting positive behavior change.

(Look for more practice information in the next issue!)