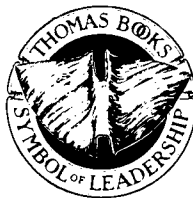# BASIC PSYCHOLOGICAL SKILLS
FOR FRONT-LINE STAFF OF
RESIDENTIAL YOUTH FACILITIES

BASIC PSYCHOLOGICAL SKILLS FOR FRONT-LINE STAFF OF RESIDENTIAL YOUTH FACILITIES

By

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To Micah

PREFACE

In residential settings such as youth treatment centers, schools, child welfare programs, and juvenile corrections facilities, front-line staff members are expected to make a difference in the lives of the young people with whom they work (Colyar, 1991; Norman & Burbidge, 1991). But bringing about positive change can be frustrating and often is difficult.

We all rely on our own life experiences to guide our interventions. While one's own common sense and intuition are invaluable, these resources usually are not enough to create the impact we would like to achieve. In addition to having less influence than is possible, there also is another problem associated with relying solely on our own experience; what appears to make perfect sense to one person may seem unacceptable to another.

I believe there is a core set of skills that can be beneficial to front-line staff, regardless of their backgrounds. When all coworkers are familiar with this body of knowledge, they have a shared frame of reference for interacting with one another. As they confront issues together, this common foundation allows them to discuss and evaluate options in ways that all staff members understand.

With the most recent yearly statistics indicating 9,569 cases of child abuse by facility staff and child care workers (National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, 1992), another reason for promoting a knowledge base is to reduce the likelihood of such maltreatment by staff members. Increasing workers' familiarity with psychological techniques has been shown to decrease the incidence of child abuse in out-of-home care (Rosenthal, Motz, Edmonson, & Groze, 1991). Probably having seen such improvements themselves, most executive directors of residential programs view training as a key way to prevent institutional mistreatment of children (Reyome, 1990). Conversely, experts believe there is an increased risk of child abuse when staff members lack training (Powers, Mooney, & Nunno, 1990). But the existence of skill deficits also means there is room

to grow. For instance, in his article on overcoming institutional child abuse, Tom McGrath's (1985–86) first recommendation is that workers read material related to their jobs and bring up ideas from the readings when they are discussing young people in their care.

Since you are reading this book, it is likely that you see the value of promoting a common set of basic skills. Unfortunately, not everyone perceives the importance of such a foundation.

Some administrators do not devote sufficient resources to the education and training of front-line staff. For example, one study focused on a large social service agency and compared a group of child care workers who recently had terminated their employment to a group of staff members who still were with the organization. Here are three greatest dissatisfactions reported by the no-longer-employed individuals: lack of support for career development, insufficient information on agency operations, and inadequate training (Fleischer, 1985). Training also was a topic addressed at a 1989 conference of residential youth facility child care workers in Washington state. The first four recommendations of the conference related to the need for more and better training. In making their recommendations, the participants noted that when training resources *are* made available, managers and senior clinicians sometimes receive more opportunities than front-line staff (Colyar, 1991).

But when there are problems in building a foundation of understanding, the difficulties are not always with administrators. For instance, it may be the potential learners who demonstrate inadequate interest. Such lack of motivation to develop has been a topic of research. When investigators have compared accepted to rejected applicants for residential child care worker positions, they have found that receptivity to training is the factor that best discriminates between the two groups (Maloney, Warfel, Blase, Timbers, Fixsen, & Phillips, 1983). In other words, if the person is not receptive to learning new information, employment as a residential child care worker is inappropriate.

Insufficient staff participation in learning opportunities can be caused by administrators giving low priorities to such endeavors or by lack of staff interest. The first problem can result in dissatisfaction and turnover among personnel, and the second difficulty probably indicates the presence of individuals who are in the wrong line of work. On the other hand, when administrators invest in the development of their front-line staff, there is likely to be higher organizational morale and lower turnover. And when employees are interested in learning, they are more likely to

provide the kind of service desired by the agency. As has been noted elsewhere, staff training is a clear priority when it comes to enhancing the quality of services offered by residential youth facilities (LeCroy, 1984).

Still, in advocating a common foundation of understanding, I sometimes have encountered one more kind of negative reaction. And it is an attitude that also has been observed by others (Forster, Linton, & Durkin, 1987; Thomas, 1989).

There are individuals who object to the sharing of psychological knowledge by saying that intervention responsibilities should be left to mental health professionals. But such a stance ignores the realities of what happens at most residential youth facilities.

Certainly, the skills discussed in this book should be part of the therapeutic repertoire used by credentialed counselors, social workers, and psychologists. But licensed/certified mental health experts usually account for a relatively small proportion of staff hours with residents. Instead, it is persons who provide education and primary care, such as house parents, aids, supervisors, paraprofessional counselors, and teachers, who typically contribute the bulk of direct contact staff time. It is my firm belief that these individuals also should be familiar with the following material, if not to use it themselves (although I think they should), then at least to be able to understand and support those who do use it.

When staff members communicate inconsistent, contradictory, and arbitrary expectations, residents suffer. On the other hand, the single most important factor that helps residents to thrive is the offering of trustworthy relationships within the framework of predictable and fair expectations (Thomas, 1989).

In light of the preceding considerations, I believe this book has several roles to fill in fostering a foundation of understanding and consistency. It is (1) a fundamental resource for new and veteran staff of residential youth facilities, (2) a practical text for college courses that prepare students for work in these organizations, and (3) a primer for those who serve internships or do volunteer work in such programs.

What are the basic psychological skills that all front-line staff should master? One survey of child care workers identified the three most important topics as behavior management, teamwork and communication, and treatment techniques (Krueger & Nardine, 1984). But there probably are as many answers to this question as there are staff. I will give my answer and simply say that I view it as consistent with the opinions of

these survey participants and with observations made by child welfare experts, clinicians, researchers, and residential child care workers (Colyar, 1991; Izzo & Ross, 1990; Raider, 1989; Thomas, 1989).

Residential child care personnel need to see how their actions can facilitate meaningful change in the lives of young people. Front-line staff ought to have good communication skills. They should be able to engage residents in problem solving. They ought to have a basic understanding of how the consequences of behavior affect future actions. They must be prepared to prevent suicide. And they should have ways of coping with stress.

The following six chapters focus on these basic skills. Chapter 1 begins by addressing a condition that I frequently have encountered, learned helplessness, then moves to a discussion of goal setting. Chapter 2 reviews the topic of communication, with the emphasis on listening skills and on the development of positive relationships. Chapter 3 describes problem solving from three perspectives: helping one resident to confront an issue, facilitating small-group problem solving, and supervising large-group discussion. In Chapter 4 you will find a user-friendly presentation of behavior modification. Chapter 5 discusses methods for assessing suicide lethality and intervening with suicidal residents. And Chapter 6 provides several possible ways of coping with stress.

At the end of each chapter there is a set of study questions. The bulk of these items require application of concepts discussed in the chapters. Such opportunities for applying knowledge have been shown to be good preparation for actual job performance. For instance, the previously cited study by Dennis Maloney and his colleagues (1983) also found that among applicants who were offered residential child care positions, the quality of their responses to various hypothetical child care situations was the factor that best discriminated between high and low applicants. In addition, those individuals with the best responses to the hypothetical situations also had the highest on-the-job performance once they began working in their new positions.

Although any reader may find the study questions to be a helpful review, when instructors, trainers, mentors, and supervisors use the book as required reading, they may wish to ask for written answers to the questions. Reviewing those responses in a group setting can be an excellent way of covering a large amount of material in a brief period of time. And, as the research indicates, the quality of such answers is a good predictor of future on-the-job performance.

Throughout the book you will find concrete examples taken from actual events I have experienced. But all names are fictitious, and I also have changed other identifying information, in order to protect the identity of staff members and students. (As a residential facility psychologist, as a trainer for juvenile justice centers, and as a former house parent, I am in the habit of referring to residents as students, so I will continue to use that designation from time to time.)

Each chapter begins with a quote from a residential facility staff member. As with the dialogs that appear in the book, I edited the quotes to enhance their clarity. But I never changed the essence of what the person was communicating.

In your own program, you may know coworkers who think that to keep from becoming naive pushovers they must harangue residents. Although the approach I am advocating does not preclude confrontation, being in the young person's face is not the goal. Instead, the focus is on getting students to identify issues, consider options, predict likely outcomes, make plans, and learn from the consequences of their behavior. Helping young people struggle through a reasoning process and face the results of their decisions is an intervention strategy that is both caring and firm. Since the combination of emotional support and realistic expectations has been identified as an optimal approach for encouraging adaptive student behavior, staff members who empathically encourage residents to master skills are likely to be more successful than their colleagues who rely on aggressive prodding (Colyar, 1992).

Based on our first nineteen years together, my son, to whom this volume is dedicated, believes that at times I have been hard on him, and he certainly does not think I am a pushover. But he does see me as being fair, as wanting to understand his point of view, and, in most cases, as being willing to have him bear the responsibility and face the consequences of making his own decisions. Although there have been actions he has taken that he later regretted (as is true for all of us), he has developed into a hard-working and conscientious person. Supervisors and teachers find that he speaks his mind, often in a humorous way, but they also quickly learn that he can be counted on to fulfill his responsibilities. Their confidence in him has been reflected by events such as making him a senior member of a radio station remote crew, naming him "Student of the Year" in the broadcast journalism program of an arts magnet school, lamenting the end of his internship at a network news organization in New York, and appointing him co-host of a campus

television program. As you no doubt perceive, I am a proud father. But I also am a father who has tried to live by the communication principles, problem-solving philosophy, and behavioral concepts you are about to encounter, and I believe those efforts have contributed to my son's current approach to life.

The psychological skills presented in this book are sufficiently general to allow for a substantial amount of individual style in their implementation. Imitation is not what I seek. Instead, I hope to encourage cooperation and effective teamwork.

Collaboration is what I want to inspire, but there is one class of providers who often must function on their own. Those individuals are foster parents. Since in my own parenting and residential facility efforts I have used the book's concepts, I view this material as being crucial for foster parents. And I am not alone in seeing the need for them to encounter such topics.

Foster parents frequently cite lack of training as a reason for terminating their service, and advocates of foster care reform stress the importance of providing sound information on child-management techniques. According to clinical experts and veteran foster parents, the key methods on which to focus are positive incentive systems, nonphysical discipline, and problem solving (Chamberlain, Moreland, & Reid, 1992). Those also are areas that constitute central themes in this book.

At the residential youth facility where I currently work, staff members frequently term aspects of the material you are about to read as "Dr. France's approach," but I did not create any of the basic methods that follow. The fundamental skills in this book originated with other researchers, clinicians, and writers, although you will encounter my interpretations and modifications of their ideas. As an eclectic collection with a central theme of mutual understanding and support, it is my hope that the chapters will be useful to staff members within a variety of theoretical perspectives. For example, I believe it is possible for an individual with a developmental/interpersonal focus to value and use the behavior modification material, just as it is possible for a behaviorally oriented colleague to profit from and appreciate the communication information.

After completing the book, readers should be able to discuss student-related issues from a common foundation. Although this knowledge base does not provide magic solutions, it does include the most powerful skills I know for promoting meaningful change.

I am interested in what you think of the book. If you have opinions you are willing to pass along, please write to me at the Department of Psychology, Shippensburg University, Shippensburg, Pennsylvania 17257.

K. F.

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I also would like to acknowledge the residential youth facilities outside of the juvenile justice system that I have worked at during the last twenty-two years. But, for reasons of confidentiality, the names of those programs will remain unmentioned. Nevertheless, the residents and staff members of those organizations have contributed greatly to this volume.

Regarding contributors I am free to identify, I express thanks to several individuals. Much of the writing style and quality is due to consultation and editing by my wife, Mary France. Many insightful observations were contributed by Patty Clugh. Helpful feedback and comments also were provided by William Ayres and Beverly Miller. And the volume would not exist without the support and expertise of Payne Thomas and Michael Thomas of Charles C Thomas Publisher.

Some of the material that follows is taken from my book *Crisis Intervention: A Handbook of Immediate Person-to-Person Help*, Second Edition, Copyright 1990 by Charles C Thomas Publisher.

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BASIC PSYCHOLOGICAL SKILLS
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

> We get shot down so many times. We get burnt out. It's just day-by-day living, and you're not reaching for tomorrow.

> Too many of our kids are just trying to get through day-by-day. They have no direction. This whole facility is about direction. It is about education. It is about a future. It is about not getting stuck in a dead-end life. Helping students set a goal gets them oriented. It gets them going forward in life.

I had just concluded my first cottage meeting with the residents of a veteran house parent, and I said to her "If you liked this style of group interaction, you could try it yourself with the students." She replied "They're out of control. They won't pay any attention."

Using the techniques described in Chapter 3, I had led a thirty-minute problem-solving session with her residents. They had demonstrated both self-control and the ability to pay attention.

Our conversation continued.

Supervisor:	See Brian out there. I can't do anything with him. Nothing I try matters. All he wants to do is play his miniature video game.
Leader:	It sounds like he really enjoys that toy.
Supervisor:	He plays it for hours.
Leader:	One approach would be for you to make access to the game dependent upon good behavior from him.
Supervisor:	He doesn't care about anything. Nothing I do has any effect on him.
Leader:	At the house parent workshop awhile back, we discussed behavior modification. That method involves finding out what students want and then trading those reinforcers for positive behavior.
Supervisor:	Nothing makes any difference. They do whatever they feel like.

Leader: Finding out what they feel like doing and then making access to it dependent on appropriate behavior would be one way of developing more control.

Supervisor: There's not one thing that has any effect on them. I'm so tired of it all. At least I'm going to be off the next two weekends.

Leader: I hope you have a good break.

Are you feeling like that supervisor? Or do you know individuals who feel like her?

Helplessness is a way of acting, thinking, and feeling that I have encountered in many staff members of residential youth facilities. It is a phenomenon worthy of a closer look.

LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

Martin Seligman and his associates assert that a condition termed *learned helplessness* may result if we come to believe that our efforts will have no effect in producing desired outcomes or in preventing undesirable events (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978; Peterson & Seligman, 1984). Their hypothesis states that one's perceived lack of control may create motivational, cognitive, and emotional difficulties. Although predictions derived from learned helplessness do not always hold true, it generally is viewed as a useful theory that can be applied to both students and staff (Friedlander, Traylor, & Weiss, 1986; Greer & Wethered, 1984, 1987; Terwogt, Schene, & Koops, 1990; Zimmerman, 1988).

According to learned helplessness theory, decreased motivation is reflected by fewer attempts to solve the problem. Such was the case with the house parent you just encountered. She rejected every one of my suggestions, and she refused to make any new efforts.

Cognitively, one becomes restricted and may focus on a single interpretation of events, to the exclusion of other possible ideas. This is exactly what that house parent was doing. She persisted in believing that her residents could not be controlled and that Brian did not care about anything, despite observing clear evidence to the contrary.

Emotionally, one feels depressed, sad, and hopeless. These certainly were feelings that Brian's house parent was having. She dreaded coming to work, and she looked forward only to her time away from the facility. Her job had become a burden that left her emotionally drained.

If we discover that our coping attempts are ineffective, a natural reaction is to wonder about the reason for our helplessness. The answer to the question "Why me?" is our *attribution* for the predicament, and that attribution influences how extensive and long lasting the motivational, cognitive, and emotional difficulties will be.

Seligman and his associates identify three dimensions of attribution relevant to learned helplessness: personal-universal, stable-unstable, and global-specific.

- *Personal-Universal.* Making personal attributions means seeing failures as resulting from one's own shortcomings, whereas an individual making a universal attribution believes anyone in a similar situation would fail because of uncontrollable external factors. In personal helplessness the difficulties may be so pervasive that one experiences lowered self-esteem, but the effects of universal helplessness are not likely to be so widespread.

  For example, let's say you believe that due to lacking a certain academic degree, you are incapable of implementing the ideas presented in this book. You would be making a personal attribution that could result in you having a lower opinion of yourself.

  On the other hand, imagine you attribute some of your past mistakes to the fact that you simply had not been aware of basic information regarding communication skills, problem solving, behavior modification, suicide prevention, or stress management. Anyone not exposed to that information could have made the same mistakes. (If you are a reader for whom that actually has been the case, it is no longer an uncontrollable situation. You now can encounter those fundamental concepts in the pages that follow.)

- *Stable-Unstable.* A person making a stable attribution does not expect things to change, whereas unstable attributions mean the individual anticipates new developments. Attributing helplessness to stable factors results in longer lasting difficulties, while unstable attributions tend to be associated with briefer difficulties.

  If you firmly believe that change is impossible, you may doom yourself to being correct. It has been said that by continuing to view things in the same old ways, you will keep on having the same old disappointments.

  But another approach is to admit you are dissatisfied with the current state of affairs, while also believing that change is possible.

In this book, you will encounter a number of examples that actually began with some of the participants thinking nothing could be done, and ended with significant progress being made. That is no accident. Productive change is the ultimate goal of every technique discussed in this volume.

- *Global-Specific.* Global attributions involve perceived similarities across a wide range of situations, whereas specific attributions are restricted to more narrow applications. Difficulties are more pervasive when attributions for uncontrollable events are global, but there are fewer difficulties when such attributions are specific.

    If you immediately look for the bad in a situation, you will find it. And you will then be reminded of other similar discouraging circumstances you have struggled with elsewhere.

    As you encounter different situations, an alternative strategy is to avoid over generalizing and to engage in fresh analysis. Although this book suggests standard ways of analyzing and responding to events, all of the recommended approaches are designed to be applied with an appreciation for the unique characteristics existing in each situation.

To the extent that one's attributions for failure are personal, stable, and global, there is an increased likelihood of lethargy, single-mindedness, and hopelessness. For example, if you think you can't be productive because you don't have the right academic degree, if you believe meaningful change never happens, and if you are quick to see the bad in any situation, you will do as little as possible, close your mind to new ideas, and feel depressed.

Seligman and his colleagues suggest several remedies for persons who are experiencing learned helplessness.

Within the constraints of reality, they advocate *attributing failure to universal, unstable, and specific factors.* For instance, if you attribute some of your past difficulties to a lack of information, if you can be dissatisfied with conditions and still believe that there are areas where change is possible, and if you can bring fresh analysis to situations, you can encounter events that involve unpleasant outcomes and still have the energy, flexibility, and realistic hope to persevere.

To the extent one can honestly do it, Seligman and his associates suggest *attributing success to personal, stable, and global factors.* For example, let's say you try some of the techniques discussed in this book and they