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Self Empowerment Seeing the Possibility for a New Life in just 5 weeks!

Odyssey House is a residential rehabilitation centre for people with addictions to drugs, alcohol or gambling. While some of our population are voluntary admissions, the majority are legally stipulated to the program. The name 'Odyssey' comes from Homer's epic poem describing the ten years wandering of Odysseus in returning to Ithaca after the Trojan war. Today it has come to mean any long series of wanderings and for the residents of Odyssey, represents the arduous journey they undertake to beat their addictions.

I came to Odyssey House as Principal of the Education Unit in 1998. On my arrival. I knew little about addictions or what caused them, so to some extent the last four years have represented my own Odyssey to discover what I could contribute to make a difference to a population battling to survive in our society. Today, I have no great words of wisdom for you just the opportunity to share with you what I've learned in the hope that it may prove helpful to others wishing to embark on a similar course.

I started on my quest to make a difference by adding to our education program a course which I naively thought would assist our population with skills in the art of living.

It included units on self esteem, goal setting, time planning, getting a job, financial planning and positive stress management. It was called Living Skills and ran for 10 weeks.

However, after attending several funerals I soon realised that the priority was a course which would empower residents with the *will to live!*

I came to the understanding that I needed to devise a package which would change attitudes. Specifically, to provide activities which would change self perception, empowering participants to take control of their own lives. Repeatedly residents disclosed they had been abusing substances and wearing facades to protect themselves for so long that they had no concept of self. In order to achieve their potential they needed to discover who they are and to feel good about simply being themselves. In essence, they needed a course which would build their self identity, their self esteem and make sense of their past- explain them to themselves.

On receiving a fifteen year sentence for drug related offences Helen Barnacle in her biography stated,

"How can they feel so pleased I'm going to goal for all those years?, I wondered to myself, feeling even more disillusioned. This lack of understanding of my struggle, of not knowing where I fitted in, was at the core of my drug addiction- it was the reason I used heroin, and right then heroin was the only thing that could have eased my pain" (p. 148).

While I refined the content of the course and teaching techniques I set about changing the physical environment in which it was being conducted.

I believe that non- verbal messages are equally as important as verbal messages and if residents were to undertake the difficult journey of self-discovery, then the teaching environment needed to facilitate that aim. I also believe that we should teach with the whole self- that is, use all of the five senses.

To achieve this aim I spent the first three days of my holidays painting with residents. Next followed new carpet and half- height bookshelves which have been stocked with novels, autobiographies and self help books including titles on co- dependency, grief, loss and sexual abuse. On top of the bookshelves stand photos of past group participants on outings to Sydney Theatre Company. Residents framed artworks adorn the walls and large indoor plants decorate the room.

The old school desks and chairs have been banished and replaced with an oval timber table and adjustable office chairs. The two adjoining rooms which were formally the shower and toilet block of a seminary, have had the shower partitions demolished and been similarly painted, carpeted and decorated. A floor to ceiling mural depicting key elements of Odyssey House covers the hallway wall. The mural also sports the credo of the education unit, "Learning Together."

Essentially, the teaching space and surrounds have been deinstitutionalized - they show that people care. *Barba and Barba* (1982) emphasise the importance of the learning environment. " Even the most expensively packaged kit with its many alternatives for self esteem raising will be rendered useless by an improper environment."

They describe learning environments which promote positive self- image building as, caring, open, non threatening, trusting, involving, nonjudgmental secure, nurturing, accepting, encouraging, learner- orientated, inviting, war happy, comfortable and positive." These needs apply equally to hardened criminals as they do to students, if not more so, given that the people we deal with have had long histories of failure.

As the course evolved the original title *Life Skills* no longer reflected the aim or content, so a more appropriate title was sought. After much deliberation *Self Empowerment* was chosen as this embodied the transformation desired. The course currently runs two mornings a week five weeks and in response to resident's suggestions has been made compulsory for everyone in the Odyssey House program. The maximum number of participants in each group is ten, and each session runs for 3 hours.

Moore's (1983) review of the substance abuse literature reveals the following traits for substance abusers: loneliness, low self esteem, helplessness, an inability to communicate in a genuine way and the loss of a Sense of control. The Self Empowerment course at Odyssey addresses all of these issues but above *all* it is a course about self identity and control over personal destiny.

Participants are encouraged to make observations and ask questions. When stressed they can excuse themselves briefly to re-group and can suggest the group move to the lawn or outdoor learning area when this is more conducive for them.

The first session encompasses an introduction to the course and a length getting to know you exercise. To enable group members to work well together it is imperative to develop group bonding and trust. It is equally important for the teacher to be nonjudgmental, inviting and nurturing of all participants, demonstrating a belief in the positive qualities of all involved. The teacher's role is to act as a facilitator. The Latin word 'educo' means to draw from within. In other words, it is the teacher's role to assist participants to find their own answers.

After the bonding exercise the key units of the course are an introduction to personality styles, reflective listening, Maslow's hierarchy of needs, effective and ineffective behavior and self esteem. The theory is explained and then practical applications in the residents own lives are explored. Exercises, role-plays, analogies, fairy stories, visualizations, and body language are all used to make the material easily understood and digested.

Manilla folders are distributed to each participant for them to keep their course notes in and tins of coloured pencils are left on the table. Inevitably someone will start drawing on their folder and a debate will ensue about whether this is disrespectful to the facilitator. It will be argued that people can't draw and listen at the same time.

This argument will be hotly contested by the pro- drawing group who maintain that drawing improves their listening skills. This debate provides an excellent introduction to personality styles and the concept of understanding and respecting differences. Using the folders as a teaching tool other differences are explored.

Physically active residents report drawing helps keep them engaged while others find it helps them cope with stress - they find it therapeutic. At the conclusion of the course the colourful folders reflect the personality of their owner and often document their journey of self discovery, supporting the benefits of art therapy.

I'll give you examples of other activities that you can experience yourself. Write your name on a piece of, paper. Now, swap hands, and write your name again. Introduce yourself to someone near you and discuss the difference you experienced, how did it feel for each of you the first time you wrote your name? (Easy, spontaneous, comfortable, effortless, natural, etc.) How did it feel the second time? (Difficult, contrived, uncomfortable, draining, unnatural etc,) All of you could do the task, but the second time required more concentration and energy. Just as you have an innate preference for which hand you write with you also have innate preferences for the way in which you do other things. These preferences define your personality- the way in which you interact with the world and get energised (extroverted/introverted), the way you take in information (through senses/ intuitively), the way you make judgments (by thinking/ feeling) and the way you live your life (planned and orderly/ spontaneously).

We all operate in both modes at various times but just like writing our name we have a distinct preference for one of them, and this takes less concentration and energy. For example, are you well organised but find it difficult to adjust to last minute changes; or are you spontaneous but have to concentrate to remember where you left the car keys? Do you need time out to re-energise or do you need the stimulation of other people?

Personal strengths and weaknesses and the dynamics of different personality styles are explored. Links between residents drug use and personality are discussed. We explore how misunderstandings arise due to different personality styles and how better communication can be achieved. The emphasis is on self understanding, validation and self acceptance.

To further develop communication skills reflective listening is taught. Some residents struggled with the concept of reiteration, so the ugly duckling fairy tale is now used to explain this technique. The visual imagery of a reflection is easier for residents to grasp, and this fairy tale can be drawn upon later to illustrate how self esteem can be damaged and how it can be enhanced. We practice reflective listening in groups of three with an observer, listener and speaker and then get back together as a whole group for discussion.

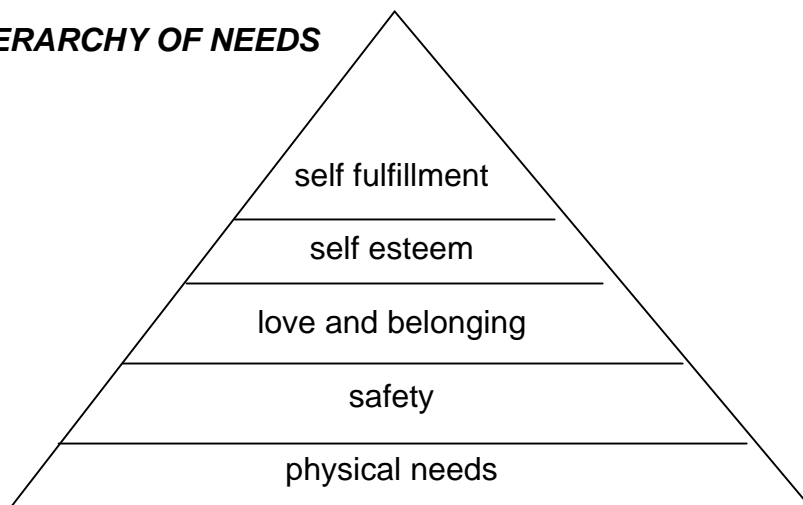
(Draw a triangle on the white board.)

Write down as many things you can think of when you see this shape.

(N.B. Some people will see practical, tangible things- stop sign, bikini bottom, half a star etc. Others will see abstracts or concepts- the holy trinity; a new society, strength, etc, illustrating the different ways in which we take in information).

Today, this triangle represents a hierarchy~ there's more of it at the bottom than at the top, and as it rises there is more power, just like the gaol system. This is how Maslow's Hierarchy of needs is introduced.

MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS



The need for safety is discussed in relation to phobias that residents experience- fear of people, fear of knives, fear of loud voices, fear of intimacy, fear of men etc. The consequences of coming home to alcoholic parents, domestic violence and physical or sexual abuse is openly discussed.

The ways in which participants have tried to protect themselves is explored. It can be a very confronting and painful process but can also be very healing. At this stage participants often choose to pursue individual counseling to explore their issues in more depth.

Each of the needs in Maslow's hierarchy are dealt with in a similar manner. The extent to which participants haven't had these needs met is explored. Inappropriate behaviours they have engaged in are discussed, and related to which needs they were trying to get met. At this stage, many residents make the connection between their childhood, and substance abuse, for the first time. It all starts to make sense to them. Like a jig-saw, the pieces start to fall into place. Participants learn that they weren't "born bad" or "the black sheep" of the family, or worth less than others.

They come to understand that their environment, for whatever reason was not conducive to their personal growth. This realisation appears to release them from some of the demons plaguing their past.

They also learn that they are no longer children who have little control over their lives, but adults who have the power to make positive choices to get their needs met. They begin to see glimmers of hope for new life.

Exercises to build self esteem form the conclusion of the course ending the journey on a lighter note.

Course evaluations are completed, giving feedback from the residents perspective. In answer to the question regarding what they have what learned; one of the most common replies is, " That it's okay to be me. "

During the course, many participants facades crack. For some they fall away, exposing a softer, more vulnerable core. There is a discernible difference in their physical appearance.

One of the residents. eloquently explains his transformation in the following extracts from his proposal t(graduate the Odyssey House program.

* *"When I look back on my life prior to this induction to Odyssey House feelings of otherness, or difference, disconnectedness and an absolute hatred of the external world, spring most to mind. This, when I choose to be honest with myself, stemmed from my own feelings of inadequacy, fearfulness: and ~and self-loathing.*

However prior to this Odyssey, I protected myself by displays of hostility toward those who tried to get close to me or by emotionally hurting anyone who tried to get close, by standing in judgement of the outside world and playing the role of the cynical social observer. Unfortunately, this eventually made my increasingly difficult to live. Although, I did gain some self satisfaction from my belief that those not directly at fault, were too stupid to see the truth.

When I came back to Odyssey House on the last occasion, I had decided that I would have one last attempt at learning to live life without drugs and at finding some serenity. It was very much a : lack of the latter that necessitated the former. Failing that, I would execute a judge and thus remove the responsibility for living my life from my own hands and place it with the NSW Criminal Justice System. Of course, I could, at that time, easily justify my actions with generalisations and my repertoire of judgments and projections. By this stage in my life all judges had become child molesters; all police; alcoholic drug dealers; all solicitors, trash; all politicians, corrupt; all prison officers, morons; all people, a threat..... "

'Self Empowerment was where it all happened for me. The facilitator was really patient with me; as it took a little time for me to place trust not so much in her, but in everyone who was in the group. Self Empowerment certainly got me to level 3 and what I learnt there has continued to get me across the line in my Odyssey. Specifically I realised that I was not different or sicker, that it was ok to be myself, that people were not necessarily out to screw me over, and that there are two ways to look at half a glass of water, it can be either half empty or half full"

(1. Unpublished Graduate Proposal, 2001, Odyssey House)*

After having spent more than a decade of his life in prison the graduate is now in full-time employment; is in a satisfying relationship and completing a university degree. For the first time in his life his glass is full.

Having a business background I am aware that there are always competing priorities in any organisation and cost is a major consideration in the provision of services. However, since teachers have the potential to facilitate personal change in offenders, in the long term I believe education will prove to be a cost effective intervention. If Corrective Services are serious about wanting to change inmates lives so they can become productive members of the community, then education is the key. With a current recidivism rate of * 60% and the cost to the community , not only financially, but also in terms of human suffering, the question is, can we afford not to make education a priority in our correctional systems?

2. (* Australian Social Trends, 1997 Crime and Justice – Corrective Services: Prisoners in Australia, Australian Bureau of Statistics.)

Notes

1. Unpublished Graduate Proposal, 2001, Odyssey House.
2. Australian Social Trends, 1997 Crime and Justice- Corrective Services: Prisoners in Australia, Australian Bureau of Statistics.

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