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Models of relationship and problem solving training for peer counselors

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Models of relationship and problem solving training for peer counselors

Abstract

One of the major considerations in the field of mental health had been the use and training of paraprofessionals in the helping process (Brown, 1974). Also called lay helpers or peer counselors, paraprofessionals are trained in using the basic skills of helping whether they are working in school or agency settings (Myrick & Emery, 1979). Peer counselors use these skills to enhance the functioning of professionals by adding to the number and range of people who can be helped, and by making sure that those who need professional help are referred (Rockwell & Dustin, 1979). In this way the visibility of counseling services is increased so that more people make use of the services.

MODELS OF RELATIONSHIP AND PROBLEM SOLVING
TRAINING FOR PEER COUNSELORS

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One of the major considerations in the field of mental health had been the use and training of paraprofessionals in the helping process (Brown, 1974). Also called lay helpers or peer counselors, paraprofessionals are trained in using the basic skills of helping whether they are working in school or agency settings (Myrick & Emery, 1979). Peer counselors use these skills to enhance the functioning of professionals by adding to the number and range of people who can be helped, and by making sure that those who need professional help are referred (Rockwell & Dustin, 1979). In this way the visibility of counseling services is increased so that more people make use of the services.

In the field of counseling, peer counselors have been used in the helping process which Clack (1975) defined as "assisting others to explore and develop and implement a course of action" (p. 4), as well as being an information giver and acting as referral agents for clients.

The philosophy behind peer counseling is one in which the professionally trained counselor is seen as giving away skills of counseling (Gray & Tindall, 1978). Because counselor skills can be viewed as basic to good interpersonal relationships, this becomes a valid way for counselors to view the process of peer training. Gray and Tindall described the training process as "deliberate psychological education" (p. 5). This refers to the fact that in peer counselor training, feelings

are the central focus, as the trainee learns to identify his/her own feelings and learns to do this in a counseling situation with others. A definition by Myrick and Bowman (1981) supports this by describing peer facilitators as "sensitive listeners who are able to give appropriate feedback and encouragement to others...and to help others to think about ideas and feelings, to explore alternatives to situations, and to make responsible decisions (p. 3).

There are many reasons for the use of peer counselors. In a world of rapid changes which are leading to stressful lives, peer counseling can make additional opportunities for children and adults to receive help (Myrick & Bowman, 1981). One of the most often mentioned reasons is the fact that peers can be effective as helpers because they are able to identify with the clients because they have similar values and experiences and because they are close in age (Carkhuff, 1969; Gray, 1978, & Woudenberg & Payne, 1978).

Research has shown that interpersonal skills such as empathy, warmth and genuineness are factors that relate to positive client behavior changes and peer counselors can learn and use these skills in order to help others (Truax, 1970). In addition to the growth that clients can have through peer helping, counseling research has shown that the helper also benefits, showing decreased problems in social, family and per-

sonal areas after training (Woudenberg & Payne, 1978; & Carkuff, 1971). Training results in positive growth in academic achievement and leadership ability as well as equipping peers in referral techniques (Varenhorst, 1974; & Rockwell & Dustin, 1979). Referral is an important part of training because it allows the peer counselor to bridge the gap between the client and professional (Paritzky, 1981).

Blain and Brusko (1985) identified two types of peer counseling. The open model trains in order to offer services of helping to other peers, while the closed model is based on a group counseling model and offers help to the trainee. While the program is determined by the needs of the setting, the open program is more appropriate if counseling is to be offered to others through the trainees.

This paper presents an overview of the goals of peer programs, as well as a summary of the four aspects of selection, teaching, practicum and supervision which are important to a successful training program. A variety of models which have been used successfully are also reviewed and summarized in order to give the reader an understanding of possible ways to structure a peer counselor training program.

Goals of Training

Although peer training programs share a common definition, teaching relationship and problem solving skills to peers,

the literature shows a difference in emphasis as to what the goals of training should be (Lopez, 1985). Listening, supporting and offering alternatives without advice is one kind of peer program (Samuels & Samuels, 1975). This kind of program teaches basic listening skills and primary level counselor skills during the training.

A different emphasis is teaching trainees to use problem solving skills. Lopez (1985) noted that early in training many counselor trainees have difficulty with problem clarification and lack of movement in counseling because they have only been taught the use of basic listening skills. He suggested that training would be more effective by using a four-step model of brief therapy in order to facilitate progress and decrease premature attempts at intervention.

Other approaches to training combine both of these aspects and teach trainees to process thoughts, emotions and decisions (Raiche, 1979). Carkhuff (1969) identified goals as being interrelated in a cycle of exploration (of the client's problem), understanding (for the client), and action (acting on that understanding). In this model the trainee uses responding skills early in the process, and later uses initiating skills which lead the client towards problem resolution.

Although goals differ, many of the skills taught in a peer counseling program are similar. Teaching trainees to ask clients for the meaning of the words they use is one way of ex-

ploring feelings and meanings (Varenhorst, 1983). Basic listening skills such as empathy, attending and summarizing are taught as well as the use of genuineness (honesty), confrontation and problem solving (Gray & Tindall, 1978; & Truax & Carkhuff, 1967). Other skills which have been taught are goal-setting, open questioning, and decision-making (Clack, 1975). Teaching communication skills allows peer helpers to respond and talk about sensitive issues with peers without judging or giving advice (Parkersburg, 1986). Programs which have attempted to go beyond teaching basic skills found that time limitations limited the teaching to primary level skills (Korn, 1979).

Aspects of Training

According to Raiche (1979), peer counselor training should include four areas of focus: deepening trainee awareness of their own values, thoughts and feelings; teaching basic counseling skills; training in specific information relevant to the client population (drug abuse, referral sources); and continuing inservice education. These areas may be addressed in sequence or at various times during the training.

In addition to these four, Truax (1970) noted that proper selection procedures and some type of practicum or experience are necessary aspects of a viable peer training program. Some kind of systematic training and supervision are also key elements in a training program (Myrick & Erney, 1979).

Selection

A variety of peer trainee selection measures have been used. Gray and Tindall (1978) stated that all interested people should be able to receive training, even if they are not used in the peer outreach program after training. Other approaches rely on methods of screening before the actual training in order to select trainees who will be effective as peer counselors (Myrick & Erney, 1979). Sandmeyer, Ranck and Chiswick (1979) used an application form which asks applicants to list their reasons, expectations and experience which would aid them in training. Personal interviews are then used in the final selection.

The use of preference or personality tests has also been used as a method of selection. Truax (1970) developed a scoring system for the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) and the Edwards Personal Preference Schedule (EPPS) which are combined with group counseling interviews. Other tests which have been used are the Rokeach Dogmatism Scale which measures openness and the 16 Personality Factor Questionnaire (Samuels & Samuels, 1975). Samuels and Samuels also recommended trainee interviews which are rated according to sensitivity, uninhibitedness, self-confidence and stability, as well as role plays during which a rater uses a check list of counselor qualifications. Student opinion surveys are another selection device (Rockwell & Dustin, 1979).

Teaching

Although learning takes place during all phases of training, most programs include systematic teaching. This is used to introduce the skills and may be through lecture, discussion, group process in structured exercises and testing (Walker & Gill, 1980). Textbooks or training manuals are also used such as Egan's (1975) "Exercises in Helping Skills: A Training Manual to Accompany 'The Skilled Helper'", and Myrick and Erney's (1978) "Caring and Sharing: Becoming a Peer Facilitator".

Korn (1979) supplemented the classroom experience with student journals in which they record any helping interactions which they had as well as the feelings and evaluations about them. Other programs use growth groups in which the students have a time to integrate the material learned with their personal strengths and weaknesses, and in which other students can give helpful feedback (Clack, 1975).

Practicum or Structured Experience

In most peer counseling training programs the aspect of experience is considered to be the most important (Myrick & Erney, 1979; & Truax, 1970). Lab sessions, simulation, use of videotaping and roleplaying and structured group experiences are all used to help the trainee to integrate the learnings into their work with peers (Myrick & Bowman, 1981). Some pro-

grams also include a more formal practicum in which trainees are set up with outside people requesting counseling services (Varenhorst, 1974; Myrick & Erney, 1979) while other programs use successful trainees to train other peer counselors (Archer & Kagan, 1973).

One part of integration is the use of feedback, a process which "informs the counselor of his behavior and it's consequences" for the situation and the client (Truax, 1970, p. 9-10). Feedback can be used as a way of evaluating role play, practice counseling situations, actual counseling (tapes or video), and structured exercises which elicit responses from trainees. One commonly used way of evaluating basic counselor responses is the research scale developed by Truax and Carkhuff (1967). The rater used a scale of 1-5 to indicate the level of facilitative skill usage which the trainee makes in responding to the client.

Supervision

Supervision, like teaching, takes place during all aspects of the training (LaFave, 1975). It is a crucial part of a peer counselor program because the trainer needs to assure that proper ethics and facilitative skills are being used when the trainees have contact with clients (Myrick & Bowman, 1981). Myrick and Bowman (1981) stated that supervision is also a way of individualizing the training and giving support and guidance

to the trainees. A definition of a supervisor includes the following four areas: to be a resource person; to be a source of supervision for counseling contacts of the peer counselor; to aid the trainee in personal growth; and to provide information about the counseling environment (LaFave, 1975). LaFave (1975) noted that supervision is important because it "is the process which translates training into improved behavioral effectiveness" (p. 1).

Examples of Training Models

Gray (1978) developed a model for training based on Ivey (1971) and Truax and Carkhuff (1969) which used what is called a "skill building pattern" (p. 62). The steps in this pattern are as follows: Explain the skill to be learned; model the skill (trainer); practice the skill; feedback to trainees; homework and discussion; and preparation for the next skill using the same cycle. When skills are taught in smaller segments there is greater probability for trainees to learn and integrate skills.

A model which is similar was developed by Delworth, Moore, Millick and Leone (1974) for use on a university campus. This approach differs in the practice of each skill because role play and actual clients are used in connection with performance feedback. Discussion after each practice session aids the trainees in the integration of classroom learning with their experience.

Two models which focus more on problem-solving are Lopez (1985) and Carkhuff (1969). Lopez used a "problem focused counseling." in which trainees are taught the fourstep model of brief therapy: Describe the problem; investigate client attempts at problem resolution; define the change that is desired; and formulate and implement a plan for change (p. 307-308). This model is easy for peer counselors and trainees in the first stages of a program to use because the stages are clearly defined and include a focus and an activity for the counselor.

Carkhuff's model (1969) is slightly different in that understanding for the client is seen as the basis for change. The goal of counseling is to get the client to explore the problem in a way that will lead to greater understanding. Trainees are taught to help the client to explore the problem in a way that will lead to greater understanding. Trainees are taught to use this client understanding as a basis from which to act in making the desired change. As mentioned earlier, this model includes both responding and initiating skills, according to the progression of counseling.

Truax (1970) developed a skill development model based on the use of research scales which taught trainees to discriminate between levels of skill usage (Traux & Carkhuff, 1967). In this model the trainees are first taught to identify skills by listening to tapes of professionals and noting the use of the skills. They are then taught to use the research scales by

listening to client statements which have been taped, stopping the tapes and making a response. Later in the training the scales are used to rate actual counseling sessions, the goal being to have the trainees use high levels of facilitative responses.

These five models include most of the methods which are commonly used in paraprofessional training. Other models differ in the kind of skills taught or the method according to the needs of the organization or school and the client population. Many are variations of these models or training which is specialized to the work that the paraprofessionals are doing.

One model which used a different method for training is a model called the "Pyramid Approach" (Archer & Kagan, 1973). This features the use of affect simulation films which trainees use to identify the way that clients show emotions. Another part of this program is listening to tapes of client statements which trainees analyze in order to understand the degree to which the client is owning feelings. Films and tapes were also used to increase trainee awareness of their feelings in response to clients, in teaching the use of empathic responding, and to help trainees to overcome fears in the counseling relationship. In this model trainees were used to teach and supervise new trainees, and as such this model is used to make the training available to a greater number of people.

Another unique model is a peer group counseling model developed by Etkin and Snyder (1972). This model relies mainly on the use of role playing in training peer counselors. Time is spent working through discussion as the group first identifies some common problems that members face. Using one of these problems, a presenter and a protagonist are chosen to role play and then to reverse roles and reflect on the feelings which they thought the other person may have had. After role play discussions are held, and new group members work through the same problem to add another perspective.

Summary

In looking at each of these models, it becomes evident that training in peer counseling programs will aid in the personal growth of the trainee even though the training is directed towards helping others. Peer counselors cannot replace professionally trained people, but their services can help to enhance the work that professionals do. This can be a way of reaching those needing help who may otherwise not be reached because of their reluctance or lack of trust in a professional counselor.

Two directions for peer counselor training programs are evident in the literature. The first are the programs that teach basic counselor skills and depend on listening and empathy to help counselees to work through and own the feelings they have. The other direction teaches the skills of problem

solving which trainees use to direct the counselee into goal setting and decision making. In either case, good communication skills are emphasized.

Important aspects of training programs are selection, teaching, practicum and supervision. Selection measures include a variety of testing and interviewing procedures, and may be offered to all, though another screening after training is used to determine who will offer services to actual clients. Teaching skills involves many methods such as discussion, textbooks and manuals and personal exploration through a variety of ways. Practicum offers trainees the opportunity to try out the skills learned in the classroom and to integrate their use with experience. Supervision is offered by the instructor during all aspects of training, as the trainees learn through role play or actual counseling. Supervision insures that the use of counselor skills is in accordance with ethical standards and it also serves to clarify the role of the paraprofessional.

Each of the training models has been used to train paraprofessionals in counseling skills, interpersonal skills, and problem solving skills. The goal of the school or organization program should be determined in order to choose a training program which will best meet the needs of the client population. Along with choosing the program and model to be used, methods of evaluation should be considered and planned in order to assess the effectiveness of the program in meeting it's goals.

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