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Counseling Students Learn Adventure Counseling as an Additional Mode of Therapy to Increase Their Repertoire of Counseling Skills

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Most graduate programs require their students to take a class in group therapy. The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) requires this and for students to also participate in a group experience. There are many types of groups and an adventure based or outdoor type of group experience affords the graduate student an opportunity to add a new skill to their repertoire of group counseling techniques. This technique is adaptable to many different age groups and types of groups.

Overall efficacy of Adventure Based Counseling (ABC) and its relationship to self-esteem has been investigated (Nassar-McMillan & Cashwell, 1997; Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002). Cason and Gillis (1994) conducted a meta-analysis of ABC and reported an overall rate of improvement of 12.2%. Davis-Berman and Berman (1994) looked at self-efficacy, behavioral difficulties, and locus of control at both posttest and long term follow up and found that improvements were maintained over time (one and two years). The conceptual framework of ABC is based on several counseling theories including the following: behavioral, cognitive, and experiential learning. Behavioral theory is evidenced in a stimulus activity which provokes a response which is then reinforced by the group. Modeling and imitation are reinforced in the group process. The Cognitive perspective is represented in the group as the group establishes rules, problem solves, and processes group work. The Affective perspective is expressed as the group constructs a full value contract, encourages other members to take risks, and enters into a state of disequilibrium; the resolution of which occurs during processing (Schoel, Prouty, & Radcliffe, 1988). Psychological benefits reported include new confidence in oneself, increased willingness to take risks, improved self-concept, greater reflective thinking, and enhanced skills in leadership and logical reasoning (Priest & Gass, 1997).

A group of high school senior boys ($N = 142$) ages 16-17 years at a private school in the Boston area participated in an adventure experience. The Student Self-Concept Scale, which measures adolescents' self-confidence and their performance expectations regarding behaviors or attributes in the areas of self-image, academic confidence, and social-self was significantly improved on the composite self-confidence score (Graham &

Robinson, 2007). The outcome confidence scale measures the students' evaluations that their behavior will result in a specific outcome. This dimension increased significantly for academic and social-self but not for self-image (Graham & Robinson, 2007).

The purpose of this paper is to present basic tenants of an outdoor experiential group and suggestions for implementation for graduate counseling students. Adventure Counseling begins with a full value contract (Schoel & Maizell, 2002). This is setting the ground rules for the group. Members delineate rules both for physical and mental health safety. Goals for the individual and group are determined and are pertinent to both the group life and beyond (Appendix A-1). Goals must be conceivable, believable, measurable, and desirable, without alternatives and growth facilitating. Rules for feedback delivery are composed and the family metaphor is often employed in the group process procedure. Individual differences are respected via challenge by choice. This translates into a group member possibly opting not to master a particular element, but still participating in taking on a different group role for that one particular element. Trusting and competent behavior are the next steps to move the group through the stages of growth. It is the responsibility of the leader to devise activities to build trust among the group members. Goal setting paves the way for this to be accomplished by balancing challenge and stress with humor/fun, regression, and tension release. Activity sequencing fosters group problem-solving and orchestrates peak experience opportunities.

Sequencing is cardinal to group facilitation. The leader must consider the following when sequencing the activities for the group: needs, program goals, type of group, adventure wave, briefing, activity, and debriefing. Sequencing of the activities in difficulty and anxiety level builds trust in group members. The above mentioned elements determine the particular type and difficulty of activity chosen. Assessing the group is essential to determine the correct sequence of activities. The GRABBSS system, (goals, readiness, affect, behavior, body, setting, and stage of development assessment) is a useful tool to assess one's group (Schoel & Maizell, 2002). Both individual and group goals are composed at the initiation of the group. Also of consideration are the leader's goals for the group and for his/her members. The readiness of the group; is this a mandated or voluntary group? Are they able to trust? What is the affect of the group and individual member's affect in the group? How will they handle frustration, confrontation, disclosure, challenge, and fear? What are the behavioral skills in the group? What roles are likely to emerge from this particular group of participants? What are adaptive/maladaptive behaviors you anticipate in this group? Body concerns regarding the group, such as physical limitations, stamina, body image, injuries, and medical concerns must be considered. What is the setting for this group; school, employment, residential, college, recreational or other? The last consideration is stage of group development. Is this a group of people who has an established relationship or are they newly formed? The stage of development of the individuals in the group is also of consideration.

The manner in which activities are presented is described by Schoel and Maizell (2002) as a wave. It is similar to what the military describes as; first I will tell you what we are going to do, then we will do it and then I will tell you what we did. The wave process is first a brief, then the activity, and lastly debrief. The briefing consists of

preparing the group for the upcoming activity, which includes setting the ground rules for safety and the rules and procedure for execution of the activity. The activity is described in the here and now in a manner that imbues it with a sense of adventure and often promotes regression to a childlike game atmosphere. This adoption of a game attitude promotes disequilibrium and invites participants to accept challenges and risk appearing silly. The activities involve a triad; behavior, cognition and affect.

The debrief is sequenced to progress spirally deeper into processing the experience. The sequence is described as the what, the so what, and the now what. The what eases into the process; one method is the memory game. Each group member factually recounts the activity. Then group members may fill in or correct details of the recount. Another method is the Gestalt, in that the participants speak in the present. Other methods are photographs and journals. The what leads into the so what, which is the interpretive aspect. What meaning did this have for them? Did it make a difference? Incomplete sentences can be used to aid in moving the process along, such as "I learned that I...", or "I was surprised that I..." This step promotes introspection about oneself and about one's interactions with others. The family metaphor can be enlisted to help process. The what step may also be used to have participants evaluate, modify, and review one's goals and or the group's goals.

The now what allows the group to problem solve and apply their learnings and insights to strategies for implementation in their future activities on the adventure course. Another aspect of this stage is to allow the person to extrapolate the manner in which this learning may be applied to their life outside the group. The metaphor concept is introduced, explaining that the activity is not unlike their life activities. The leader may pave the way by giving an example and then opening it up to the group for them to give their examples and the manner in which they may modify their behaviors in the future.

The outdoor group experience was a graduate elective course in a Counselor Education Department. It was co-taught with a section of graduate physical education students. The rationale for this was that each student would lead a group through an experiential activity and that it would be more meaningful and similar to a real life experience if they had a diverse group to lead. It had been taught previously as a counseling student only section, and the heterogeneous grouping proved more beneficial to their learning. There are pros and cons to a homogenous versus a heterogeneous grouping. The homogenous grouping offers shared similar characteristics, a faster progression in group growth and unity development, and it is easier for the leader in regards to planning, expectations, and prediction. The argument against this is that the likelihood that leaders will lead homogenous groups is slight. The con for a heterogeneous group is the members of the groups they will lead will be dissimilar, which will require more thoughtful planning and creativity on their part. The particular mixture of the physical education students with the counseling students offered some interesting contrasts. The physical education students were more athletic as a group and more action oriented, whereas the counseling students were more process oriented and less athletic. This afforded the leaders challenges in planning the sequencing and difficulty level and in the debriefing of the heterogeneous groups they led. It also afforded the students a wonderful opportunity, when they were a participant, to be

empathetic to the differences they observed in the group members as each struggled with the challenges.

The entire experience consisted of five days, approximately nine hours a day. Each student was to lead one group in the final days of the week. The leader evaluated him/herself as a leader (Appendix A-2). The participants evaluated the leader (Appendix A-3) and evaluated themselves as a participant in the group (Appendix A-4). The leaders received the feedback from the participants. All members kept a daily journal of their experiences.

Some of the comments that the participants wrote and shared in their journals are included below. Students gave permission to share these comments.

Sequencing: These are some of the comments regarding sequencing of activities.

- Doing the blind fold walk built trust; this was helpful when it came to the trust fall.
- I can see how sequencing plays a large role in setting the foundation to do higher elements. A great deal of trust is demanded.

Goals:

- I am glad that we went over our personal goals. It was good to know that Joe had a fear of heights.
- One person had a goal of speaking up, because he was always quiet in group.
- To observe others faced with challenges. In order to do this my strategy was to go last, which gave me a feeling of how others emotionally and physically prepared for the challenge.

Trust:

- Learning to go outside of my comfort zone.
- Trusting myself belying another person.
- My partner failed to guide me properly [on a trust walk]. I hit my ankle on a cement block... it really hurt. He laughed. Needless to say I didn't trust him at all anymore.
- I learned that if I take a risk and trust others, I am capable of much more than I realized.
- It was scary having someone relying on me for their physical safety. If I hadn't developed trust with the other members of my group and the inner confidence from the whole week, I wouldn't have been able to belay.

Being a Leader:

- Outside my comfort zone.
- Being a leader is self growth. Now, I am more comfortable and I can transfer this into lessons in life.
- I missed the teachers being there when we led the exercises, I wanted their help.

Empathy:

- The inability for me to truly understand being frightened on some of the high elements reminded me that for some people these activities are scary and not fun.
- By going through this experience, I now know better what the group members will feel and I will be a better leader.

Introspection:

- I had great difficulty tying knots and that reminded me of when I was a child and I was embarrassed and I couldn't tie my shoes.
- I found that I observed others until I had a sense of what was going on before I participated. This reminded me of my mother saying that I was like this as a kid.
- I have learned a lot about myself, group dynamics, and team work. So the lessons learned here will remain with me for a long time.
- I feel shame, frustration, and anger. I still feel so much unfinished business between me and my work with heights. But, I have learned that I must be patient with myself and forgive myself for not being perfect.

Self Awareness:

- I am aware of which population I want to work with in the future, after being in these groups.
- I have ideas, but I am too afraid to say them because I am afraid that they will be shot down.
- I am the oldest member of the group. I feel insecure that people will think I can't keep up, and I don't want to be viewed as the weakest link. I learned that I am capable.
- I need quiet to do the activity and realized the perception group members had was that I was non-communicative. I learned to be communicative.
- I learned new ways of building trust, the value of debriefing and the effect on the group.
- I have learned the true value of the debriefing process and the wonderful effect it has on the group when laying out our feelings in front of everyone to consume.
- The greatest thing about the debriefing is that we learned to communicate as a group.

These were some of the journal writings of the students. This type of a group experience provided the counseling students an opportunity to become introspective and receive feedback about themselves and how their actions are perceived by others. This information serves to aid them in their formation of their professional identities as counselors. By participating in the experience, they became more able to empathize with future members of the groups they lead. It also afforded them the opportunity to learn a new mode of group therapy adaptable to most any age, diagnosis, or population. They had an opportunity to lead a group and receive feedback regarding their leadership style

and efficacy. This type of group experience has been well received and cited as profitable by the counseling students over the prior three years.

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Appendix A-1: Adventure Based Counseling GOALS

Describe your personal goals for this course. The goals should address three domains; cognitive, behavioral, and affective. How do you plan to stretch yourself outside of your comfort zone? Include the following in your goals: what do I want to accomplish during this workshop? How can I accomplish this and what actions am I willing to take to accomplish this? What resources will help me (people, information, etc.)? What support do I need from others? How do I know if I am reaching my goals? What will my criteria be for measurement?

Appendix A-2: Adventure Based Counseling Self Evaluation as a Leader

1. Describe the element you lead.
2. What aspects do you think you lead well?
3. With what aspects of the process were you not satisfied?
4. How would you incorporate the group's feedback if you had a chance to take this group through the exercise again?
5. How would you adapt this element to the group/level with which you work or intend to work?

Appendix A-3: Adventure Based Counseling Leader Evaluation

Very Poor	Poor	Average	Good	Very Good
1	2	3	4	5

Use the above scale to rate your group leader. N/A if not applicable.

1. Level of preparation.
2. Safety issues.
3. Activity description/explanation prior to initiation of the activity.
4. Leadership skills.
5. Conflict resolution.
6. Debriefing.

Comments:

Appendix A-4: Adventure Based Counseling Self Evaluation as a Group Member

1. Describe the role you played in the group.
2. Describe the manner in which you made a positive influence on the group process.
3. Describe how you think you may have hindered the group process.
4. If you were to attend another similar class, how would you function differently as a group member?
5. Describe your personal goals for the class and the outcome.
6. Surprises / self-revelation.
7. Disappointments.
8. If you had a chance to experience one more element, what would it be?

Additional comments: