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## **Conflict, troubles, problems.**

### **They're part of life, what can you do about them?**

**A workshop by Peter Slattery for  
the Youth Action and Policy Association Conference**

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#### **Workshop description**

This workshop will do two things. Firstly, look at an easy to understand - but really quite hard to do! - four step approach to sorting out conflict. Secondly, we will look at the stuff that gets in the way of us actually doing just that; things like anger, pride and hurt. We will also look at what can help us move in the right direction: things like knowing who we are, being confident and comfortable about ourselves, being in charge of ourselves and having good people in our lives who can help us out when times get tuff.

#### **Creating a process to explore a person's life**

- ◆ It needs to be inviting and interesting, challenging and supportive in equal measure
- ◆ It helps to move from the playful to the serious
- ◆ From the general to the personal
- ◆ From the imagined to the real.

#### **Needs, beliefs and actions**

Everything happens in our heads. We can like ourselves or dislike ourselves; see the person in front of us as persistent or as a pain in the neck; see an event as a set-back, a chance to learn, a disaster or an opportunity to strive. What we think is powerful. What we think of ourselves, how we see ourselves and talk about ourselves to others and to ourselves, will have an enormous impact on our actions.

### **Needs**

What do I need as a person? As a partner? As a worker? As a student? As a parent?

### **Beliefs**

What do I believe about myself as a person, what I am worth, what I deserve, how I get my needs met, what is the place and value of others in my world?

### **Actions**

Given what I need and what I believe about myself and the world, what do I actually do to get my needs met? And how successful am I in doing this? What impact am I having on my life and on the lives of those around me?

### **As workers, where to focus our attention?**

A lot of history has gone into a person being who they are. Sometimes though, with all this history in mind, our contact with a person seems to be reduced to the moment we have then and there. And it becomes a question of: what can I offer this person right now? What can I do? What will be useful? What will work? The following might be helpful to you if you find yourself in this situation

### **Three things to think about**

1. To be useful. Which means:

- ◆ Having some sense of who this person is
- ◆ What their life circumstances are.
- ◆ Where to focus? On the 'thing' or what drives it?

2. Focus

- ◆ On the 'thing' itself that is, the drug-taking, the anger, the conflict, the sadness or
- ◆ What might be underneath it, what might lie behind it and drive it
- ◆ Or of course if possible address both.

3. Focus on what helps or what hinders?

- ◆ What stops a person doing what they want to, need to, are able to?
- ◆ What helps a person do what they want to, need to?
- ◆ And again, a combination may be useful.

No matter how brief or how tentative, once you have some sense of the above three things, you will also start to get a sense of the following four areas of the person's life and where to focus in an attempt to offer the person something helpful, for this moment in their life, here and now.

## **Four human aspects to think about**

### 1. Within the person

- ◆ The person's sense of self, of place, of purpose, of meaning, of belonging
- ◆ The person's sense of being male/female/Australian/Greek/part of a family .

### 2. The person and others

- ◆ With others in general
- ◆ The significance attached to relationships with key others
- ◆ What sort of relationships would this person like?
- ◆ What are this person's qualities and abilities in relationships?
- ◆ What relationships, short or long term, are most important right now?

### 3. Emotional well being

- ◆ Feelings about key issues
- ◆ Feelings about key people
- ◆ Feelings about key events
- ◆ Feelings about key relationships
- ◆ Strongest feelings right now.

### 4. Situational and strategic

- ◆ What situations is this person encountering?
- ◆ Which of these may lead to something damaging for this person and/or someone else?
- ◆ What strategies and/or skills are needed to help this person manage these?
- ◆ Do I need to act to keep them or someone else safe now?
- ◆ Is there a straightforward strategy that I can offer this person which will 'hold' them for the time being?

## **Getting through the day when angry**

Not everyone with troubles, problems or conflict will be angry, but there's a good chance some people will be. And unless those underlying things get sorted then the person is likely to keep on being angry. In the meantime, it makes sense to try and keep the anger under control as they work on the deeper things.

## **Triggers, cues and early warning signs**

If you are familiar with helping someone quit alcohol or other drugs you will find the following familiar. There is considerable overlap in helping a person quit a substance and helping someone get their anger under control.

I think of a trigger as the external thing which might prompt a response. A cue I think of as the actual response. That is, it is a warning sign that strategies need to be put into action. Whatever words you use, it can be useful to look at:

- ◆ What are early warning signs for a person that they may be starting to head for trouble?
- ◆ How does the person manage their anger at those moments?
- ◆ Identifying situations of risk. And ideally avoiding them.

### **Feelings on a day to day to basis**

- ◆ As at all points in this process, what works for one person may not work for another.
- ◆ Where and/or when is a person likely to become angry?
- ◆ Just how angry?
- ◆ What are the person's triggers?
- ◆ What are their cues?

### **Immediate strategies if an urge is experienced**

- ◆ Distract yourself
- ◆ Use self talk, 'relax', 'be calm'
- ◆ Breathe.

## **Sorting out conflict**

### **STEP 1**

Say clearly what is bothering you. Try to do this without lots of judgments at this point. Try and be clear and specific. And focus on what the person is doing and less on who they are.

**STEP 2** How do you feel when this happens? What feelings do you experience when this is happening? Make sure these are feelings.

### **STEP 3**

What do you think you need at those moments? Feelings usually stem from some need we have.

### **STEP 4**

Let the other person know what you want them to do. Let them know clearly what you want of them. Not what you DON'T want.

Adapted from 'Non-violent communication. A language of compassion.'  
By Marshall B. Rosenberg. Puddle Dancer Press. 1999

The above is really a variation on: 'When you do I feel because and I would like you to....' What I find particularly useful about this approach however is that:

- ◆ Firstly, it places considerable emphasis on the first part where you notice and/or describe what the other person is doing. This is done without judgment or criticism. This is both useful and difficult.
- ◆ Secondly it asks that we clearly identify our own feelings in relation to what the other person is doing. This can also be quite hard.

## **Sorting out conflict**

### **A variation**

For the above reasons I have developed the following exercise which focuses specifically on the above two points.

#### **Step 1 What is bothering you**

Think of some tension or conflict you are experiencing or have experienced with another person and write down exactly what is happening the other person is doing. Describe their behaviour. And your behaviour. Writing this down is important as it means you can come back and review what you have written.

##### **Check**

Now check what you have written to make sure it is genuinely value-free. Usually if you have used adjectives there is a good chance you are making a judgment. Circle these bits and reword them to make them value-free.

#### **Step 2 Identify your feelings**

Next write down how you feel about this argument, this problem, this interaction.

##### **Check**

Now check to see if what you have written down are genuine feelings. This can be difficult. For example, saying something like: 'I feel betrayed' is more a comment on how you think you have been treated than a real feeling. 'Betrayal' is not a feeling, whereas for example, 'hurt' is.

#### **Step 3 Identify your needs**

Now identify the needs behind those feelings. What are your needs at those moments that are not being met?

##### **Check**

This also can be tricky because it is important to avoid being unreasonable and demanding. Check that your needs are fair and reasonable.

#### **Step 4 What would you like to have happen?**

Lastly, consider what it is that you would ask this person for. This step is not always part of the process or may be held off to a later more appropriate moment. But it is important to identify what it is that you would like the other person to do. This is best stated in terms of what you want NOT in terms of what you don't want.

#### **Check**

Check that what you are asking for is fair and reasonable. Check that it is as clear and specific as possible so the person knows what you want. Check also that as much as possible you are saying what it is that you do want and not what you don't want.

#### **Comment**

These steps are simple, useful and quite hard to do. They also need to be done in a genuinely respectful way and with a sense of wanting to resolve an issue. And again, for a more detailed approach, go to the original source.

## **Strategies**

### **Beliefs, needs, actions**

Each of the following can be explored playfully or seriously, by writing or drawing, by reflection or in conversation.

Beliefs:

- ◆ What is the most important thing in the world to you?
- ◆ What do you think really matters in life, and what doesn't?
- ◆ How do we succeed as people?
- ◆ What brings happiness?
- ◆ What brings sadness?

Needs:

- ◆ As a person?
- ◆ As a friend?
- ◆ As a person in a relationship?
- ◆ As...?

Actions:

- ◆ What do you do to bring yourself happiness?
- ◆ What do you do when you feel hurt?
- ◆ What do you do when you are in conflict with someone?
- ◆ What do you do that brings you peace?
- ◆ What do you do to make sure your life is meaningful?



## **Exploring the future**

This activity works really well in groups. With individuals it means picking your time carefully and you committing to the playful theatre of what you are doing.

Ask the person to imagine a conversation that might take place between the two of you in six months time. Write it out. A simple exchange a few lines long. Simple and short. You read your side. Project into it your tone and body language, something at odds with the words. Ask the person what might be really going on for you. Perhaps decide that something terrible or wonderful or confusing has happened for you. You can repeat it with the other person adding a 'subtext.'

This is simply a playful springboard for talking about the future, what it might look like, what the person wants it to be and how they might reach it.

## **Four strategies for checking on how someone is traveling**

The following four strategies are useful for groups or individuals. They are simple and quick and can be really playful. You can also be as imaginative as you like in how you use them; add to them, change them completely.

These strategies can be helpful

- ◆ For those who don't talk a lot. It gives them a vehicle for expression-For those who do talk a lot because it helps them contain their verbal enthusiasm!
- ◆ They give people a way to actually find out how they are 'traveling' when they might not actually know at that moment
- ◆ They can do this quickly because they help a person focus on how they are 'traveling'
- ◆ They can make it possible for a person to respond, when a question may just produce the response of: 'I don't know'
- ◆ They offer a means of expression for someone who may feel they cannot express themselves well
- ◆ They can provide a starting point for a person in what might be a complex, overwhelming or just plain confusing issue or event
- ◆ They can really help 'kick-start' a conversation
- ◆ They can be creative and intriguing.

Each of these simple strategies can also be extremely effective in inviting a person to be part of a process and actively contribute to that process. Again it is worth remembering that you can be really playful with these or quite serious.

### One word

- ◆ 'Can you give me one word to describe how the last week has been for you?'
- ◆ 'If you had only one word to describe how you are feeling right now .what would it be?'
- ◆ 'What is the one word which best describes how you feel about what has happened?'

### One phrase

- ◆ 'If there is one phrase to describe how things are for you at the moment ..what is that phrase?'
- ◆ 'What is one phrase that sums up the experience you have just had ..?'

### Rating scales

- ◆ 'Just how confusing has it been for you lately where 1 is “I have absolutely no idea what's going on” and 10 is “I know every detail about everything”.'  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
- ◆ 'How much fun have you been having lately where 1 is “Life is a non-stop party” and 10 is “Life is totally boring”.'  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
- ◆ 'How have things been since you moved here, where 1 is a “total disaster” and 10 is “absolutely fabulous”.'  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

### Events or actions

- ◆ 'If, right now, you had to walk 5 kilometres, could you do it?'
- ◆ 'If you had to go for a job interview in an hour's time, how would you go?'
- ◆ 'If friends came over tonight for a meal and a video, how would you be?'
- ◆ 'If you had a big exam coming tomorrow how would that be?'

### Seeking support

This too can be done as an open conversation or as a reflection through writing or drawing or just sitting thinking.

- ◆ What can you rely on in yourself?
- ◆ What sorts of help might you need?
- ◆ Where might you get this?
- ◆ What sort/sorts of person would be the best support for you?
- ◆ Where would you find such people?