



The Addiction Technology Transfer Center Network
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ADDICTION Messenger

Ideas for Treatment Improvement

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SERIES 19

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Counselor As Educator - Part 1 How Do Adults Learn?

*“ Try not to have a good time
 ... This is supposed to be
 educational.”*

~ Charles Schultz (1922-2000) ~

Addiction counselors have a primary obligation to help clients acquire knowledge and skills in dealing with the disease of substance abuse as part of their professional ethics. As an addiction counselor, do you see yourself as a true educator? This series of the Addiction Messenger will focus on the role of addiction counselors as educators, exploring principles of adult learning, teaching and learning styles and offering practical tips you can use with your clients.

If you are an educator, who are your students? They are your clients-and your clients' families and friends. The majority of your "students", more than likely, are also adults. Adult learners have specific instructional needs, motivations for learning, and barriers to learning.

Characteristics of Adult Learners

Adult learners share common characteristics, such as the following, which were chosen because of their relevance to substance abuse treatment and recovery:

Multiple Roles

Adult learners are engaged in multiple roles, which influences the amount of time and energy they can devote to learning. It is often a secondary role to being a spouse, parent or employee. The adult learner's commitments must be recognized and, at times, honored. For example, a client juggling children, treatment and work may not have time to complete lengthy reading assignments.

More Life Experiences

Having lived longer, adults bring more life experience to the learning environment than younger learners. Their experiences provide a rich resource for learning and a base for building new knowledge. You, as a counselor/educator, can facilitate a positive process by encouraging clients to apply new information to their own experiences.

Experiences can also create barriers to learning. An adult's attitudes, values, and beliefs develop as a result of their experiences, some of which may have been interpreted in negative ways or influenced by faulty thinking patterns. Respect differing beliefs and values, and help clients acknowledge that some of those beliefs may also be contributing to their problems. When their experiences conflict with new information you are presenting, encourage them to remain open and flexible in their views. Learning for adults frequently involves a process of reaffirming, reorganizing, and reintegrating their previous experiences.

Adults Need A Safe Environment

Adults, as all other learners, need an environment that is conducive to learning. Self-esteem can be at risk in a learning environment that doesn't feel safe or supportive. The adult learner may not ask questions or participate in learning if they are afraid of "being wrong". They will appreciate you providing them with an environment where they can freely express confusion, ignorance, fear, biases and different opinions.

Adults Are Self-Directing

Adult learners don't want to be "spoon-fed". They thrive in an environment where they feel engaged in a process of mutual inquiry, rather than merely having knowledge transmitted to them.

Adults Are Relevancy-Oriented

Adults need to see a reason for learning something. Help them generalize new information to their own life so they can see its relevance to their own thoughts, behaviors and environment.

Adults Are Problem Solvers

Adults want to know how new information can be applied in a practical setting. Adults generally want to immediately apply new information or skills to current problems or situations. They don't want to learn what they will never use.

Adults Learners Need To Feel Part Of A Learning Community

Adults want to be part of a supportive network of learners who provide both encouragement and serve as a sounding board for ideas, anxieties and concerns.

Motivation

Your clients (adult learners) enter a learning environment when they begin treatment. They will move in, through, or out of many different life transitions. Their motivation for entering treatment will vary, as will their motivation for learning. Understanding what influences an adult's motivation to learn can enhance your client's treatment. Research shows that adults are motivated to learn in order to cope with specific life-changing events—e.g., desire to change substance abuse patterns, divorce, a new job, being fired, retiring, losing a loved one, etc. When stress increases as life-change events accumulate, the motivation to cope with change can lead adults to engage in any learning that promises to help them cope with the transition. Adults are motivated to learn because they have a use for the knowledge or skill being sought; learning is a means to an end, not an

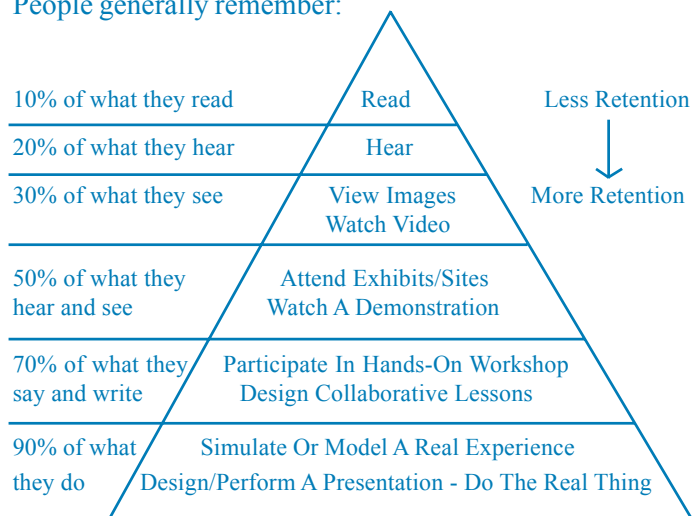
end in itself.

The best way to motivate adult learners is simply to *enhance* their reasons for learning and *decrease* the barriers. There are a number of well-tested motivational enhancement strategies, as well as stages-of-change principles, to help increase motivation. Please refer to *Addiction Messengers* Volume 6, Issue 1 and Volume 7, Issue 5 for more information on the Stages of Change.

How Effective Are Your Education Efforts?

The pyramid below, known as Dale's Cone, illustrates the effectiveness of various teaching strategies. You can see that giving a client a pamphlet to read, showing a lengthy video without discussion, relying too heavily on brochures or other reading materials, etc., may keep the client occupied, but they may be less effective learning methods.

People generally remember:



Active teaching methods, a few of which are highlighted below, can engage clients more fully in the learning process.

Reflective Writing

For clients who are able, ask them to write down their thoughts and reflections; can be done via notes, journals, fill in the blank handouts, etc.

Think - Pair - Share

After presenting a concept, allow clients to collect their thoughts (*think*) on an issue, then have them discuss their idea for 3-5 minutes with the person next to them (*pair*). Finally, ask/choose pairs to share with the group or report to you (*share*).

Concept Mapping

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Clients create diagrams or maps showing the relationship between concepts. This can be done in groups or individually, both inside and outside of sessions. The process offers practice with critical thinking skills such as categorization, and comparing and/or contrasting concept elements. An excellent concept mapping resource for counselors, downloadable for free, is available at www.ibr.tcu.edu (“Mapping New Roads to Recovery”).

Role Playing

Acting out an imaginary, but real-life, situation helps clients learn what it means to “walk in someone else’s shoes” or understand more about how they may respond in certain situations. Some people are uncomfortable roleplaying, so provide alternatives (for example, have clients write about their assigned role, rather than act the role).

Games Adding the element of fun and/or challenge is an effective way to enhance learning, so games can be a great teaching strategy. “Downward Spiral” is a game developed for addiction counselors and their clients; it is available at www.ibr.tcu.edu (free to download and make your own, or the game itself can be purchased for a small fee). In this game, players roll dice to move across a Monopoly-like board filled with potential downfalls related to family, health, friendships, finances, self-esteem, and legal consequences, which are described on game cards players

collect. The objective is to be the last player alive. Throughout the game players lose social support, health, self-concept and financial resources due to substance abuse. Just staying “alive” becomes more challenging the longer the player stays in the game. The game promotes adult learning by providing rich opportunities to engage players in thought-provoking discussion about substance use, its consequences, and their role in recovery.

Videos with Discussion Video length should be short (5 to 20 minutes). Prepare clients with reaction/discussion questions or a list of ideas upon which to focus. After watching the video, clients can work alone, or in pairs/groups, to answer critical questions, write a reaction (possibly as a journal entry) or draw concept maps.

In the next issue we will look at teaching and learning styles, two other critical factors in the success of our educational efforts.

Next Issue:

“Teaching Styles-Learning Styles”

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