

Service, Support and Success

The Direct Support Workers Newsletter

Positively Magical...

What We Think About What We Do



By: Dave Hingsburger and Angie Nethercott

Welcome to Volume Three

Well whoever thought this would fly. Two years ago when the first article, “Unwrapping The Perfect Holidays: Tips for Residential Staff Serving People with Intellectual Disabilities,” (<http://www.thefamilyhelpnetwork.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/holidaytips.pdf>) was circulated to staff at Vita Community Living Services, and then to a few agencies in Ontario we thought might be interested, we had no idea it was the first edition of a newsletter that would grow to be read in sixteen countries by hundreds of people who support persons with intellectual disabilities. We’re very pleased to bring you the first article of the New Year and Volume Three – “Positively Magical... What We Think About What We Do.” As always, if you have any submissions or ideas for future articles and would like support in developing them, please contact us.

Dave and Angie

The difficult thing about positive thinking is that we live in a world that has its focus on the negative. Police don’t typically pull people over and congratulate them for driving well. A job well done is most often met with silence while a mistake draws attention to itself. And of course, whenever your supervisor says they need to speak with you – it’s always to tell you that you’ve done an exceptionally good job and that you are a valued employee. Right? Right.

It’s odd working in service to people with intellectual disabilities that we are often taught, prodded and reminded to be POSITIVE in our approach to people with disabilities, that we need to use REINFORCEMENT and that we need to PRAISE more often. And yet, as a field we tend not to be particularly positive with each other and we are probably way more critical of each other than we really ought to be.

So it’s hard to engage in positive thinking about our work, our selves or our relationships with others. Negative thinking leads to a kind of talk that is damaging ... giving yourself constant messages that ‘no one cares,’ that ‘the problem will only get worse,’ that ‘no one ever listens to me,’ that ‘I don’t matter,’ and all that leads to a sense of hopelessness and a loss of joy. Ultimately, the conversations you have with yourself are more important than any other conversations you have. They shape the outlook you have on your world and the people in it.

This article is going to look at two things: It's going to look at what we do and what we achieve in our work with people with disabilities – and it's going to look at the conversations that we all need to begin to have with each other – and maybe, even, eventually with one another.

What We Do

1) *We keep people free.*

Behind that very positive statement is a very dark one. People were not always free; people lived lives behind institution walls. We know that for many the experience of congregate care was one of abuse and neglect. Research tells us that many have come to the community having experienced trauma without treatment, trauma without acknowledgement, trauma without comfort.

Direct support staff working with people in the community are serving those who have been hurt before by people in similar roles. We work at winning the trust of those in our care while people with disabilities are learning to trust themselves and their abilities in new ways. There are enormous stressors for both people with disabilities and their care providers.

It is predictable that there will be meltdowns and there will be moments of panic. It is predictable that a direct care staff will end up standing, speaking a calm that they don't feel, giving reassurance that they need themselves, demonstrating confidence instead of the bone deep fear they feel. In those moments, right in those moments – self-talk starts:

I can't do this.

Why do I have to do this?

No one knows or cares what I'm going through right now.

Your mind wants the feelings of insecurity to go away, your mind wants someone to be at fault, someone to blame. Focus becomes lost, confidence continues to crumble, a calm voice becomes louder. Catastrophe can follow. Self-fulfilling prophecies are appropriately named.

How about working at having another conversation:

I can handle this.

It's important that s/he makes it – my support can help.

I need to show him that I care what s/he is going through.

I'm not alone; I have a team of people to support me.

I matter, s/he matter, what we are doing matters.

Your mind is now focused on the task. You are reminding yourself why you do this, why you wanted to work with people with disabilities. You knew there would be tough days but you also know that freedom doesn't come easily and it doesn't come overnight. Building the skills to live in freedom is one of the coolest jobs around.

2) We do magic!!

You may not think of it as magic, but, maybe you should. Many people believed, and believed strongly, that people with intellectual disabilities couldn't learn. Several years back at a self-advocate conference it was noted that most adults with intellectual disabilities, who were attending, couldn't read. Most young people with disabilities could. It is only recently that expectations have begun to be raised for those who experience an intellectual disability. We were part of raising that bar.

Shannon, a young female staff, works diligently to teach a 65-year-old man to tie his shoes. He has worn Velcro all his life. In his mind tying shoes had taken on mythic meaning; it really mattered to him that he learn to tie a bow. Most people tried to talk him out of it. He wouldn't budge, this was his goal. Shannon, young and idealistic, listened to him. Over the next several months she would excitedly report very, very, small gains. When she came in to tell everyone that he had finally tied his first shoe – she wept.

Magic.

Many direct care staff report how often their families 'just don't get' why they are excited over such small accomplishments. But we all get it don't we. Doing this work requires a particular kind of self-talk. It isn't long into teaching a difficult skill that the negative begins:

S/he is never going to get this.

I am so bored.

This is so slow.

Why are we bothering with this? It's easier just to do it for them.

This kind of self-talk dominated service to people with disabilities for years. It moved from self-talk to a belief structure that people can't learn, and even if they could, it isn't worth the effort and the frustration involved in doing the teaching, doing the learning. Shannon used a different kind of self-talk:

What matters to him, matters to me.

Achieving success is his goal, achieving his goal is my success.

I have the time. I have the time. I have the time.

Every little step along the way is a massive achievement.

There are so many people with intellectual disabilities who are living unimaginable lives because someone dared to imagine that people with disabilities had potential, had abilities waiting to be discovered, had the capacity to learn what they needed to learn. It's those people who told themselves that magic could happen and those people who made magic happen.

3) We facilitate dreams

“I want to go to a Toronto Maple Leaf game.”

“I want to fly on an airplane.”

“I want to get a job at a garage.”

“I want to fall in love and get married.”

“I want to move into my own apartment.”

These things we call ‘goals’ are really something much more profound than that. For many people with disabilities these are long held dreams. Sometimes those dreams have been attacked either on practicalities: “You can’t do that because of this fact” or on perceived personal issues “You can’t do that because you can’t even do X.” You know what happened there, don’t you? Internal negative talk became spoken – dreams and goals were dismissed because someone first told themselves it wasn’t possible and then they shared this belief out loud with someone with a disability. (This is one of the major reasons we have to get negative self-talk to just hush up.)

Every single person reading this newsletter who has worked, for even a few months, with people with disabilities will know the story of at least one person with a disability who is just over the moon with excitement about having achieved a dream. Behind that achievement is a person, a person who took the chance to listen and believe. Those people had to move out of never-land:

He never

She never ...

He shouldn’t ...

She shouldn’t ...

They had to tell themselves that:

Dreams matter.

I get to be a dream maker.

There’s got to be a way to do this.

And because of that – things happen. Things change. And because things happen and things change – bigger things change. Everyone learns that discounting the dreams of an entire population of people is destructive and hurtful. Everyone learns that honouring dreams is honouring humanity.

The 2 Biggest Blocks to Becoming a Positive Thinker

1) Hurt, held on

When someone has hurt you, it's hard to think positive thoughts about them, hard to honour their goals and dreams. When the hurt is held onto, it's virtually impossible to avoid negative thoughts and negative self-talk:

Why should s/he get to go on a trip, doesn't anyone remember that he had a tantrum and hit me?

Why should s/he be allowed to develop a relationship, just a year ago she was still calling me names?

Hurt, held on to, demands punishment and retribution. Hurt, held on to, turns negative self-talk into quiet screams of anger.

As hard as it is ... letting go can be achieved – but it usually starts within. Actively working at adopting new ways of thinking, new ways of talking to yourself about what happened:

Part of what I do is get people through the hard times; it's good to see that we're moving on.

My anger is justified but I control what I think – I want and wish the best for everyone in my care.

They are in MY CARE so I've got to, actually, CARE.

This is hard. Really hard. But without it, without letting go of past hurts or past slights, your work will become unbearable – and so will the feelings you have. Start with trying a new thought, start with telling yourself a new story about an old event. After all, you are the narrator; the story depends on the teller, doesn't it?

2) Society Encourages Negativity

"I'm too fat."

"I'm too tall."

"I'm too short."

"I'm ..."

The list of internal criticisms, not about 'self' but about 'appearance' (something that is always entirely ignored) is very long and getting longer by the moment. A commercial the other day showed someone distressed, to the point of self harm, about their toenails! We are encouraged to think poorly of ourselves (our appearance) and believe that if we hate ourselves (our appearance) enough we will internally bash ourselves until we buy the product. Amazingly this works. Positive thinking would destroy the beauty industry – how can beauty be the product of industry?

So if in our private lives we spend a lot of time bashing ourselves, how the heck are we supposed to start thinking positively about others?

Well, we can.

How?

A Final Tip

Be intentional about being positive.

Intentionally guarding what we say to ourselves about ourselves and what we say to ourselves about others.

And when we do, we should have a lot to say – after all, we are freedom fighting, magicians who make dreams happen.

Who would have ever thought?

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