

Strategies for Healthy Relationships and Mental Wellness

By George V. Nostrand

The first step in working with someone who has been diagnosed with a mental illness is to stop looking at this person as “mentally ill.”

Everyone struggles at some point with varying degrees of mental illness. We all feel depressed, anxious, paranoid, and angry. In addition to dealing with a host of other emotions, our thinking also becomes confused, we get lost in our thoughts, and we just plain have days when our brains don’t want to function.

As a result, mental illness is normal. A person becomes mentally *ill* when normal thoughts and emotions go beyond a point of “comfortability” and self-management. In these instances, thoughts and emotions cause extreme disruptions in people’s lives. When it comes to work, these interruptions to healthy functioning can lead to embarrassing situations, sporadic work history, and take a serious toll on people’s self-esteem.

Work plays a crucial role in recovering from these periods of disruption. Nothing: not medications, therapy, or any other element of treatment, can provide the wide-ranging and crucial elements of recovery that work can. It is the only way for people to regain their independence and reintegrate into their respective communities. This is why it is so important that vocational services be provided in a way that is empowering to the individual. It is also essential that the process be normalized as much as possible.

Effective Vocational Counseling

When it comes to vocational counseling, from the very beginning we should be focusing on helping the people we work with to see their strengths. Rather than worrying about diagnosis or focusing on clinical jargon, we need to stress to them that they are **ABLE** — not disabled. Certainly, there will be challenges and barriers, but that’s why we’re there...to help.

As coaches and counselors, we need to ask ourselves, “*What is my role?*” This function may



If You’re Planning on Going...

What: 21st Annual National APSE Conference on Integrated Employment, “*City Lights, Southern Nights... Employment First: Not Just a Slogan.*”

Where: Atlanta, GA

When: June 8-10, 2010

Keynote speakers:

• **Cesilee Coulson and Laura Owens** — *Community Conversation*. Change requires meaningful conversations. This keynote is designed to

help participants pursue their next bold move.

• **Kyle Maynard** — *No Excuses!* Kyle outlines how his philosophy helps him meet the numerous challenges that confront him daily, showing audiences how they too can overcome challenges in their own lives.

• **Cary Griffin** — *Employment First: Social Capital & Our New Roles*. This session demonstrates how bridging & bonding social capital help make sheltered/segregated work models irrelevant.

• **Kathleen Martinez** — Kathleen is Assistant Secretary of the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP).

For more information: Contact Jenny Levet, jenny@apse.org or visit www.apse.org. ■

vary dramatically since people with disabilities have often been grouped — not based on strengths — rather, due to the fact that their lives have been interrupted. In addition, our role also changes and evolves over time depending on the individual and his/her specific circumstances.

Natural Job Development

Over the years, I have developed a personal style best characterized by the phrase “*natural job development*.” Natural job development approaches the job-seeking process as one of building and maintaining long-term healthy relationships with clients, employers, and support people. Rather than focusing on “placements,” the actual job often becomes secondary to the relationship the coach or counselor has with a particular employer. Without a healthy relationship with an employer, and the proper support people, *any* individual will struggle and often be unable to maintain a job.

Like the name implies, this type of job development asks that supported employment professionals perform services they view as “*natural*.” For starters, this entails tapping into your existing network, as well as expanding this network in order to help facilitate further connections.

Sell Yourself

However, none of the models, programs, and techniques designed to “teach” job development mean a thing if the supported employment professional doesn’t know how to sell himself/herself. Too many human service people step into employment services without realizing that it’s basically a sales position. Selling oneself is vital before convincing someone to buy (or buy-in). You must believe in what you do, and you must believe in the people you are representing. If this isn’t the case, you might be in the wrong field. If basic salesmanship and belief isn’t there, you will come across as uncomfortable and unnatural. It takes all parties in this working relationship — the job seeker, his/her various supports, and the employer — to ultimately trust in you. The supported employment professional needs to be the glue that holds this relationship together.

Relationship Building is Crucial

When meeting with an employer, the supported employment professional should never “pro-

pose on the first date.” Your goal should be on developing a long-term working relationship. This relationship is not based on one person or placement, but on the fact that employers are always looking for good people, and you *have* good people to offer to employers.

Like any relationship, there needs to be mutual trust and respect. Before introducing a prospective candidate you should have a solid knowledge of the employer’s policies, hiring practices, and company culture, as well as both long- and short-term needs. The time that you invest working to build relationships with employers will pay off later. Establishing this relationship early on is also crucial when it comes to dealing with any issues that may occur later.

As well as getting to know the employer, relationship building also needs to include the person seeking the job. *Really get to know him or her*. This doesn’t mean assessments or paperwork — it means talking. *What makes this person feel good? What are his or her fears? What is this individual’s favorite movie?* Frankly, what you talk about initially doesn’t really matter. The point is, talk to this person — not down to or at him or her. The job seeker is the true expert on himself/herself, and you need to learn from this person.

Summary

For those of you who say you don’t have the time to build relationships, I would add that if you take the time you would avoid a lot of time down the line running damage control, picking up pieces, or having to start over.

There are numerous aspects to natural job development, many of which are quite elementary. Our jobs shouldn’t be so difficult, but we often make them harder than they have to be. Our job is to support, encourage, open doors, and most importantly, to help build and maintain healthy relationships. It’s these relationships that will make or break jobs. When we establish healthy relationships with employers and the people we work with, you will be amazed the storms we can weather and how much we can do. ■

George V. Nostrand is an employment counselor for Vocational Opportunity Works! (VOW) in Rutland, VT and is a regular speaker at national APSE conferences.