

Behavior Support

“You’ve got to have something to eat and a little love in your life before you can hold still for anybody’s sermon on how to behave.” Billie Holiday

Behavior is first and foremost communication. Our behavior is almost always a reaction to our environment, our life situation, an outward sign about how we feel inside. There is rarely any real mystery about a person’s behavior when we take the time to really look. Understanding the behavior and positively supporting a person to no longer rely on that behavior can be much simpler than we often make it.

Quality in Practice

Start with general questions:

- Who is this person?
- What does she most want and need in this world and is she getting it?
- Who does she love?
- Who loves her?

When the answers to these questions are unknown or are based in the negative (“she loves food, but is on a weight reduction diet and can’t have any of the foods she loves” or “she doesn’t know anyone who isn’t paid to be in her life”), then we know where to start.

Spend some time getting to know the person. Pay attention to how she reacts to things – music, light, animals, people, foods. Put a collage together made up of pictures of her favorite things from magazines. Notice when she smiles or frowns.

Ask what she wants to do and try those things to see how it goes.

Research her history to see if there is someone she was once close to – perhaps a former staff member or family member she has lost touch with. Send the person a card with an update about her life. Invite them to meet her for lunch or coffee. Put together a gift basket of chocolates for her to give them.

Another way to think about this is to ask yourself, “If I lived this person’s life, how would I feel and how might I act?” Be honest about what you see and feel and develop your own capacity to walk in her life in order to better understand her reactions. Your own behavior is likely to become much more positive when you have this understanding.

Work to build things into her life that she wants and needs. Watch her when she is engaged in things she loves with people she is comfortable with. Does she still need those behaviors or do they go away during those times? If they go away, then you know that the behaviors are her way of letting us know that her life is not right. Make those changes permanent and don’t focus on the behaviors anymore.

Hold only one standard for what is right and acceptable in life. For example, a group of people made up of direct support professionals, people they support and a few managers could discuss what happens when people attend a day program together and need to get along and compromise over how they spend their time and where they go. Most professionals would think about their own lives and they realize that they have control over so much more than the people supported and that they don’t always recognize it. Most people choose friends, while the people attending a service/support program don’t choose the people they attend with. And while most people always have the right and the ability to literally walk away from a setting the people we support don’t. So consider what might our own behavior look like in that situation?

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Behavior Support (continued)

How can we support people to have more control over their daily lives?

Be respectful. If the behaviors show up again, pay attention, figure out what is going on in the person's life now and do more to make sure her life is full of the things she finds important.

If you have honestly, with care, examined all these issues and the person's behavior is still a mystery to you, then look to all the "professional" assistance available, but only as a last resort. Assessments, evaluations, behavioral analysis and psychiatric referrals should be the very last thing you consider, never the first or the standard by which you operate.

The people we support already have enough labels. If the person already has the labels, work tirelessly to remove them and put behavior back where it belongs – a means for people to share information with us – information we need to take seriously and learn from.