

Building Self-Esteem Through Adventure-Based Counseling

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Abstract:

Fostering self-esteem in adolescents is a common goal of community and school counselors, particularly counselors who work with at-risk populations and issues. Adventure-based Counseling (ABC) activities can enhance self-esteem through both prevention and intervention efforts for children and adolescents.

Article:

It is readily apparent to counselors who work with children and adolescents that self-esteem is an important variable for assessment and intervention (Briggs, 1975; McWhirter, McWhirter, McWhirter, & McWhirter, 1994; Thompson & Rudolph, 1995). Self-esteem literally refers to the esteem that one holds toward oneself, that is, a person's overall judgment of the self (Briggs, 1975; Rosenberg, 1979). A high self-esteem indicates a personal sense of self-respect and self-worth, whereas a low self-esteem implies self-rejection, self-dissatisfaction, and self-contempt (Rosenberg, 1965). Self-esteem is one dimension of a person's self-concept (Rosenberg & Kaplan, 1982), which refers to a person's overall thoughts and feelings about herself or himself as an object (Rosenberg, 1979).

During late childhood and early adolescence, individuals have a particular tendency to be concerned with the self. Rosenberg (1965) listed three reasons for the adolescent preoccupation with the self. First, adolescents face a myriad of decisions, including career and dating decisions. Second, adolescence is a period of unusual change. The physical and psychological changes that adolescents undergo force the individual to begin reevaluating the sense of self. Finally, adolescence is a period of unusual status ambiguity. When there are no clear expectations about social responsibilities or privileges, concern with the self is heightened (Erikson, 1963).

IMPORTANCE OF HEALTHY SELF-ESTEEM

Although it is apparent that a healthy self-esteem is a goal in and of itself, researchers often examine the relationship between self-esteem and other variables. The development of a healthy self-esteem among children and adolescents is important because it influences how the child or adolescent makes decisions. The self-esteem of children has been systematically linked to many at-risk behaviors (Rosenberg, Schooler, & Schoenbach, 1989; Wells, 1989). Children with a higher self-esteem have been found to have fewer emotional problems such as anxiety (Weiten & Lloyd, 1994) and depression (Hammond & Romney, 1995); are more likely to develop adaptive coping strategies (Weiten & Lloyd, 1994); have more appropriate approaches and interactions with peers (Grunebaum & Solomon, 1987; Hirsch & Dubois, 1991; Kahle, Kulka, & Klingel, 1980); are less apt to lie (Lowenstein, 1994); have lower levels of delinquent behavior (Kaplan, 1982; Rosenberg et al., 1989; Wells, 1989); and are less at-risk for suicide attempts (Overholser, Adams, Lehnert, & Brinkman, 1995).

Although the self-esteem of children is influenced by family functioning (Briggs, 1975; Cashwell, 1995; Kawash & Kozeluk, 1990), counselors also affect the self-esteem of children through community and school-based efforts. Because of the importance of the peer group for children and adolescents, this work often occurs in group counseling settings. Such group strategies have a preventive focus but have also been used in interventions with at-risk youth (Gibson, 1989). For at risk youth, increases in self-esteem have been maximized

when group interventions are activity-oriented (Page & Chandler, 1994). One specific group intervention that has become increasingly popular in recent years is adventure-based counseling (ABC). This article addresses the use of ABC concepts by counselors in school and community settings to influence the self-esteem of clients. Although increasing in popularity, ABC has not yet been given much attention in the counseling literature, although its goals (e.g., identifying coping strategies and facilitating clients' potential) parallel those of traditional counseling (George & Christiani, 1995). Thus, ABC may present a potentially innovative intervention for counselors to integrate into their eclectic personal styles.

ADVENTURE-BASED COUNSELING

ABC is one alternative therapeutic intervention that has become popular in the last three decades. This approach differs from traditional counseling approaches in several ways. The most apparent difference is in the setting. Typically, an adventure-based program takes place in the outdoors. Regardless of setting, however, two elements that are common to all adventure-based programs are a break with the familiar and an element of risk and challenge (Priest, 1990).

History and Philosophy of ABC

The earliest emergence of outdoor education concepts took place in Europe, dating back to the late 1800s. In France, a French naval officer discovered and became committed to the value of "natural" exercises such as walking, running, crawling, and climbing (Rohnke, 1989). This training philosophy slowly became integrated into naval training in that country.

At about the same time, a young physical education teacher in Germany named Kun Hahn suffered a severe sunstroke, leaving him disabled. With the help of one of his teachers, an inspirational mentor, Hahn was able to begin to view his struggle as an opportunity for growth and learning. He became a renowned headmaster of a school in Germany, and deciding through his work within the confines of a traditional classroom that a classical school curriculum simply did not foster the development of the whole child, he developed and implemented the first known adventure-based educational curriculum. World War II presented a great need for high-intensity survival training, and because of the parallel between such training and his adventure-based curriculum, Hahn was called on to develop and implement survival training programs for military seamen (Miner, 1990). Shortly thereafter, Hahn founded Outward Bound, an educational entity that embodies similar programs held in wilderness settings. To date, Outward Bound has schools in England, Germany, Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States.

In the early 1970s, Jerry Pich, son of the founder of a Minnesota Outward Bound school, recognized some of the obstacles facing potential Outward Bound clientele, such as cost, intensity, and duration (Schoel, Prouty, & Radcliffe, 1988). It became his goal to bring the ideas back to the setting for which they were originally intended (i.e., education). Through his guidance, Project Adventure began.

Basic Tenets of ABC

Adventure, by its very nature, implies venturing forward into unknown territory (Miles & Priest, 1990). As a society that places an emphasis on structure, routine, and control, the unknown encompasses an element that is in some ways diametrically opposed to our basic human routine. ABC does not adhere specifically to one model, but recognizes three aspects of the human experience: behavior (doing), affect (feeling), and cognition (thinking). Its primary goal is improving selfconcept through elements of trust building, goal setting, challenge and stress, peak experiences, humor and fun, and problem solving (Schoel et al., 1990).

Typical Adventure-Based Settings

Currently, most of the settings using Project Adventure activities and philosophy are educational facilities. However, in the past several decades they have also emerged within residential treatment centers, substance abuse facilities, school special needs departments, and psychiatric facilities (Schoel et al., 1988). Whereas the original outdoor education facilities operated in wilderness areas, the components of unfamiliarity and risk have been transferred to these other settings. Within this structure, students expand their abilities and realize

successes, ultimately encountering "real experience with a wide range of human reactions--fear, joy, fatigue, compassion, laughter, pain, and love" (Rohnke, 1989, p. xiii). Rohnke proposed that adventure education could be integrated into a variety of curricula, including counseling. Davis-Berman and Berman (1994) surveyed 31 therapeutic wilderness programs and found that program goals addressed issues ranging from mental health and school behavior problems to general health and enrichment. Targeted issues varied from those as severe as conduct disorder to developmental issues including school and family problems and self-esteem. Thus, although adventure-based education and counseling may be particularly relevant to at-risk populations, it can also be effectively used as a preventive strategy.

In a more traditional counseling realm, counselors often encourage clients to implement behavior changes with between-session tasks, sometimes referred to as "homework." From an adventure-based perspective, behavioral, cognitive, and affective changes all can be implemented, practiced, and processed during the session. Clients in traditional counseling may deny specific behaviors by modifying them for the duration of an individual or a group session, but this becomes more difficult in a setting where the client is a member of a group working toward a specific physical group goal. Existing behaviors are self-evident when exhibited, leaving little room for denial.

Research on Effectiveness of ABC

Although additional research, including improved research methods, is necessary to further evaluate levels of effectiveness of ABC interventions, overall effectiveness is clear. Cason and Gillis (1994) performed a meta-analysis of outdoor adventure programming with adolescents and found that adolescents participating in adventure-based programs show an average of a 12.2% rate of improvement. Although this rate of effectiveness is somewhat modest, Cason and Gillis also focused on identifying methodological flaws common in previous ABC research that undermine actual rates of effectiveness.

Findings of both outcome- and process-oriented research also support the effectiveness of ABC. In an attempt to develop a theoretical model describing adventure-based wilderness programs, Wichmann (1991) administered the Wichmann-Andrews Behavior Intervention Scale to a group of wilderness experience participants and a control group. Results suggested significant increases in prosocial behavior among wilderness experience participants.

In a more process-oriented study, Welch and Steffan (1993) examined affective statements made by participants of an adventure-based program to identify a structure or sequence of stages of adjustment to the program. They found that participants experienced six distinct stages characterized by adventure, apprehension, affiliation, animation, accomplishment, and appreciation. Regarding the adventure stage, Hastie's (1992) process research, which compared pre- and post activity enjoyment ratings of participants of an adventure-based program, found a relationship between programs described by participants as "exciting" and those labeled as "peak experiences."

Davis-Berman and Berman (1994) measured behavioral problems, self-efficacy, and locus of control among participants of a wilderness therapy program. In addition to post treatment measures, measures were again taken 4 months, 1 year, and 2 years after program completion. One year and 2-year follow-up data suggested improvement on the measures of interest that were maintained over time. Hence, an additional advantage to using adventure-based concepts is that effects may yield longer term improvement than more traditional counseling interventions. Although additional research is needed, the effectiveness of adventure-based interventions has been minimally established.

Integrating Adventure-Based Concepts

ABC groups parallel those of any small counseling group in that they undergo initial, transition, working, and final stages as described in the counseling literature (e.g., Corey, 1995). Aspects of special consideration from an adventure-based leadership perspective include ensuring common ground, facilitating group balance, identifying abuse potential, assessing cognitive and physical abilities, and measuring degrees of intensity

(Schoel et al., 1988). Some of these can be considered during early stages of group formation, whereas others require ongoing evaluation.

ABC may bring to mind remote wilderness settings, or perhaps an expensive system of obstacles constructed of ropes, walls, or other elaborate props. Although many adventure-based programs do occur in such settings and under such circumstances, counselors may integrate many adventure-based philosophies and activities into their own settings.

ABC involves facilitating a series of exercises over a period of several hours to several weeks. A very brief synopsis of the technique is to place the participants into a situation of unfamiliarity and to challenge them to engage in the activities that will ultimately lead to successful outcomes. Activities could include overcoming a series of simulated obstacles or actual tasks (perceived as) necessary to the survival of the group, such as cooking outdoors or setting up a campsite.

When participants are placed in a new situation, they usually use familiar, practiced coping strategies like leading or following, listening or monopolizing, cooperating or manipulating, or other such skills that contribute to the overall group process. Within the ABC realm, those strategies are easily identifiable to skilled group facilitators. These often become the focus of processing sessions dealing with resistance, listening and observing, and group termination (Rohnke, 1989).

The experiential component described involves a physical exercise that is noncompetitive and relies on group dynamics for completion. Rules can be established to adjust difficulty levels and to pinpoint specific issues. Following is a list of some sample activities (Rohnke, 1989; Traverse City Area Public Schools, 1990):
All Aboard. Each person must climb "aboard" a 2 x 2 foot surface at the same time. A simple (but sturdy!) platform can be constructed, or the area may simply be marked on the floor with tape. The goal is to get all group members on the platform for at least 5 seconds, and to see if they can progressively decrease the time it takes to complete the task.

All Screwed Up. Each group of 4 to 6 participants is given a 6-inch threaded rod with nut to fit it. The object is to see how quickly each group can thread its nut the entire length of the rod.

Ball of String. Participants stand in a side-by-side line holding hands. The player at the end turns in and rolls up the group into a spiral. The goal is to move the group at least 20 feet without letting go of hands.

Blind Maze. The group must be blindfolded, except for one appointed leader. The constructed maze is "electric" inasmuch as the entire group must start over if anyone touches a boundary of the maze. The goal is for leader to verbally lead the group through the maze.

Blind Polygon. Blindfolded group members must use a length of rope to create a polygon or other designated shape. Hands must remain in contact with rope.

Bop. Groups of 4 to 6 must keep hands clasped with group members while attempting to keep a balloon in the air and move it 30 feet by using their bodies.

Knots. Circle of 10 to 12 participants stand shoulder to shoulder with their right hands joined with the right hand of someone across the circle; left hands are also joined with left hands across the circle. With one break in the circle creating two loose ends, the group must untangle itself into one continuous line.

Group Juggling. Circle of participants tosses a ball across the circle to a teammate; sequence is continued until everyone has received the ball. This same patterning must be repeated.

Swamp Crossing. The group is hiking through the (hypothetical) forest and comes upon a 20-foot swamp. As a total group, there can be a maximum of four contact points with the swamp, but each group member must cross the swamp.

Team Task. Groups are challenged to construct the tallest possible structure using tinkertoys, straws, clay, or other building materials. The tallest parts of structures able to support a weighted object determine the "official" height of structure.

Tin Shoe. Individual groups must pass a 10-pound can from foot to foot around their circle; two cans may be passed around in opposite directions. A penalty may be established for the can touching the ground.

Warp Speed. This activity is similar to group juggling; however, the goal of warp speed is for the group to devise strategies for increasing its performance speed.

The physical exercise is followed by an extensive debriefing session, facilitated with process questions such as the following:

1. Did the group accomplish the task? If so, how?
2. Did you feel well listened to? If so, at what points?
3. Did you feel that you were not listened to? If so, at what points?
4. Did you communicate well? If so, at what points?
5. Were you frustrated with your communication? If so, at what points?
6. Were you frustrated with the group's communication? If so, at what points?
7. Did you lead the group? If so, at what points?
8. Did you follow the group? If so, at what points?
9. Did the group cooperate? If so, how?
10. Did the group experience conflict? If so, how?
11. How did the activity end?

The debriefing period may be followed by a didactic component about the specific skill focused on during the previous exercise and processing session.

Ordering of curriculum topics should be carefully done with consideration to group formation stages. Each stage has specific tasks that must be overcome before moving on to the next stage. For example, the transition stage involves such group tasks as trust building and identifying boundaries. Therefore, the first several sessions might involve experiential and didactic components involving trust. A more sensitive topic, such as conflict resolution or confrontation, would not occur until later in the working stage of the group process.

CONCLUSION

Group counseling interventions have been successfully used as preventive mechanisms for serving general populations of children and adolescents as well as intervention strategies with those at risk who are more likely to suffer from low self-esteem. Adventure-based concepts, in particular, are a viable method for promoting self-esteem, as evidenced by a wide body of research literature. Clearly, this approach helps clients to broaden their repertoire of effective coping skills and to increase their number of "success" experiences in life, both of which are associated with higher levels of self-esteem (Schoel et al., 1988) and lower levels of anxiety (Weiten & Lloyd, 1994).

Although ABC has often involved special facilities or equipment, its concepts of unfamiliarity and perceived risk can also be integrated into more conventional counseling curricula. Because the dynamics of ABC groups parallel those of traditional counseling groups, adventure-based concepts can be integrated into traditional groupwork by creative endeavors on the part of group facilitators. For example, books and other resources exist on noncompetitive physical activities that can often be conducted indoors as well as outdoors, usually with a minimum of props or materials required. Group murals, drawings, and group dances can provide the atmosphere

in which to effectively process behavior in group that can be transferred to other settings (e.g., home and classroom) by expanding the debriefing process with questions such as, "Do you feel listened to at home? In the classroom?" "How was this experience similar to or different from home or classroom?" "If you led or followed the group, how was this experience similar to or different from your classroom experience?" "How could you change your home or classroom experiences to make them more similar or different?" In short, the success experiences facilitated by such activities can serve to enhance self-esteem through both prevention and intervention efforts for children and adolescents.

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