

Psychotherapy Guidebook

LIFE SKILLS COUNSELING

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Life Skills Counseling

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DEFINITION

Life Skills (also referred to as Life Coping Skills or Life Skills Education) is a planned counseling intervention designed to help people learn to cope more effectively with the predictable psychological and social problems, crises, and developmental tasks they face throughout life. Like other counseling approaches, it is aimed at helping people to clarify feelings and values, make decisions and choices, resolve conflicts, gain self-understanding, explore environmental opportunities and constraints, communicate effectively with others, and take personal responsibility for their actions. Yet, unlike those counseling interventions that rely mainly on non-structured verbal exchanges between practitioner and client on a wide range of general problems, Life Skills makes use of preplanned, carefully developed learning programs as well as instructional and counseling methods to help people learn to cope with particular problems one at a time. As such, Life Skills is part of an increasing trend in the field toward programmatic approaches to coping, exemplified by such courses and workshops as Parent Effectiveness Training, Assertiveness Training, communication skills, stress management workshops, and Career Education.

Life Skills can best be understood as an effort to create an alternate and complementary delivery system to provide counseling services aimed at making learning opportunities available to the large number of people who need but cannot obtain counseling. This system is designed to provide a wide variety of learning methods and processes to help people acquire the necessary knowledge, insight, and particularly the behavior for coping successfully with complex, emotion-laden problems. The system consists of a program design and learning model, a set of program development methods, a staff training program, and dissemination and installation processes. This system permits the development of programs for the common life problems of particular populations, such as disadvantaged adults, high school dropouts, women returning to the labor force, the physically and mentally handicapped, and persons facing divorce, unemployment, or retirement. The programs are designed to be delivered by specially trained teachers as well as counselors in a wide variety of educational, training, rehabilitation, mental health, and community agency settings.

Each Life Skills program consists of a cluster of Life Skills learning units, each of which is focused on a specific coping problem, such as how to present oneself effectively in a job interview, or how to avoid escalating marital arguments, or how to listen responsibly to children. The four-stage Structured Inquiry learning model serves as a guide for trained program developers who create a sequence of learning activities and experiences and

supporting video, print, and audio materials for each unit. In the design of each Life Skills unit particular attention is paid to such issues as learning readiness, peer group support, inductive and deductive reasoning, small-step learning followed by immediate reinforcement, behavioral modeling, role playing, and simulation with video feedback. The structure of each unit provides for the elicitation of feelings as well as prior experiences, the incorporation of new knowledge, and the translation of knowledge into actual behavior. Once the unit is completed, it is tested, revised, and then published. The Life Skills Educator Training Program prepares staff to deliver the Life Skills Units. The development methods and installation process ensure that excellent units are developed and installed effectively in actual learning centers.

HISTORY

The Life Skills approach to counseling has evolved over the past fourteen years as a result of considerable trial-and-error learning, research, and development. The initial ideas for Life Skills (Adkins, 1970) were derived from observations made in 1964 in a YMCA counseling and training program about the limitations of middle-class counseling methods for educationally disadvantaged clients. These ideas and observations led to the design of the first Life Skills program, which was tested in Project Try, a \$4.5 million anti-poverty training program in New York's Bedford-Stuyvesant area.

The initial program made use of problem-centered, experience-based and behavior-ally oriented learning groups and attempted to employ a mixture of teaching as well as counseling methods to facilitate learning. The development of resources and learning activities that could structure the learning sessions was mainly the responsibility of trained teachers and counselors. It was found, however, that practitioners were not able to create the kinds of resources that adequately met the design requirements for effective learning. The conclusion was that the learning tasks were too complex and the learning activities and materials needed were too difficult to develop on an as-you-go basis. More experimentation was needed. My colleagues and I had, however, worked out some critical concepts and learning methods during that period that later proved useful.

In the years that followed, I moved my base of operations to Teachers College, Columbia University, and continued the development of the program design. Gradually, the present four-stage learning model was developed, incorporating video and other learning methods. A program development process was created to permit the systematic development of Life Skills units by full-time trained developers. In 1971, with funds from the U.S. Bureau of Adult Basic Education, a Life Skills Development project was established and work began on making use of the learning model in developing a 10-unit Employability Skills Program (Adkins, et al., 1975) for adults dealing with the psycho-social tasks of choosing, finding, planning, and getting a job. Three

years later a field-tested multimedia program was completed. It was published by the Institute For Life Coping Skills, a non-profit organization.

Recently, steps have been taken to lay the base at Teachers College for the development of new Life Skills programs for other psycho-social problems of other populations. A new R and D Center for Life Skills and Human Resource Development and a new master's and doctoral specialty to train counselors of adults and program developers have been established. A research study (Adkins, et al., 1977) on the life-coping problems of unemployed, disadvantaged adults — documenting the psycho-social problems of career development, marriage, parenthood, relations with others, health, community living, and personal development — has been completed and several experimental videotapes dealing with representative problems have been created. A documentary film on the Employability Skills program and the Life Skills method has been completed and distributed and a book that will describe both the theoretical and operational aspects of a national program for Life Skills is now in progress.

TECHNIQUE

The Life Skills Structured Inquiry Learning Model is the central core of the Life Skills approach to the delivery of counseling services. Its four stages structure the sequence of learning activities and experiences for learners, and

the teaching and counseling functions to be performed by Life Skills Educators. The model also serves as a format for program developers. What follows is a description of how a fully developed Life Skills unit would be delivered by a specially trained Life Skills Educator in a small group of ten to fifteen learners.

A Life Skills group begins with various group-forming activities and with an orientation to the program, frequently followed by a contracting session in which the learning objectives are explained and the roles and responsibilities of both learners and Life Skills Educators are made explicit and agreed to in advance.

The Stimulus Stage. Each learning unit begins with a provocative presentation of a problem, usually in the form of a five-minute dramatic, emotion-arousing video vignette that depicts a person such as the clients confronting a difficult situation and making a number of errors. The emotional impact of the tape and the details presented are designed to stimulate and focus discussion.

The Evocation Stage. In this stage, usually lasting about forty-five minutes, the Life Skills Educator (or LSE) attempts through a structured pattern of questions to elicit from the group elements of the problem that was presented, to identify the critical issues, and to get the group members to describe similar experiences they have had. The LSE makes every effort to

elicit feelings, thoughts, and experiences from all group members in order to get the group to define the problem, to suggest solutions to it, and to identify areas for further inquiry. Through convergent and divergent questioning techniques, and the skills of paraphrasing, reflecting feeling, and summarizing, the LSE endeavors to dignify the learners by helping them to realize how much they already know about the problem. As comments are made, they are recorded on flip charts as closely as possible to the language they are offered. By the end of the session the group will have become aware of what it feels and already knows about the problem, will have had its curiosity aroused, and will have identified further areas for inquiry.

The Objective Inquiry Stage. Once Evocation is completed, the learners engage in a variety of learning activities to find out and experience what others know about the problem. Through the use of specially prepared video modeling tapes, pamphlets, audio tapes, questionnaires, rating sheets, simulation exercises, and specific learning activities, the LSE aims at expanding group members' awareness about the problem conceptually and to help them gain insight into the problem's origins, its current manifestation and consequences, and what must be done to solve the problem. Prior concepts are challenged, confirmed, and tested by new concepts presented through various exercises. Opportunities to acquire new knowledge about how others view or have solved a similar problem are also provided. The predevelop-ed activities and materials are designed to be used by learne'rs

individually or in dyads, triads, or in large group exercises in ways that permit individuals to move at their own pace, make their own decisions, and to gain knowledge and experience in their own preferred style, either through reading, seeing and hearing, experiencing, or discussion. Learners also engage in a number of exercises that are designed to help them incorporate their new knowledge with their previous understanding and feelings and to practice specific subskills required for solving the problem. Video is used where relevant to model solutions, to present new concepts and knowledge, and to monitor and give feedback on the practice of new behavior.

The Application Stage. The purpose of this stage is to help the learner to translate his new understanding, insight, feelings, and knowledge into actual behavior in a simulated or real-life situation. Learners engage in role-playing or simulation exercises that, where possible, are videoed, rated, and critiqued by themselves, other group members, and the LSE. After appropriate feedback the learners are encouraged to repeat the behavior in simulated situations and then later in real-life situations until behavioral mastery is achieved. Throughout this stage the LSE functions in a manner similar to that of a coach, providing direction, support, and feedback as the learners attempt to gain increasing comfort in incorporating the new behavior into their basic repertoire. Throughout all four stages the LSE makes every effort to maintain a cohesive, supportive learning group and a nonjudgmental climate in which learners have the freedom to express their feelings, ask questions, to

disagree, and to make mistakes.

Development and training. Over the years my colleagues and I have created specific methods for selecting the coping problems for programming, for defining learning objectives, for designing internally consistent units, for developing, testing, and revising the learning activities and materials, and for evaluating the impact of learning units on the learners. We have also devised methods for disseminating programs and for installing them in existing learning centers in such a way that schedules, facilities, and administrative procedures support the effort. The training program for Life Skills Educators, which is designed to familiarize them with the learning model and the contents of the units, and to equip them with the basic counseling, teaching, and administrative skills to deliver the program, is essential for the success of the program. LSEs are given special training in managing the group process and the learning activities, in adapting the program to the local conditions and individual learner needs. The training program makes full use of small group interactive learning methods, behavioral practice, and video feedback.

APPLICATIONS

The most extensive application of the Life Skills approach has been in the previously described Employability Skills Series for disadvantaged adults and adolescents. It is now being distributed nationally and has thus far been installed in over a hundred and seventy learning centers (Adult Basic

Education, CETA, high schools, women's counseling, mental health, migrant worker, physically handicapped, prisons, drug rehabilitation, YMCA, hospital, and community college) in twenty-six states. Several research studies are in progress and evidence to date indicates that the program is perceived to be helpful and effective by learners, staff, and administrators.

For several years I have taught courses, given presentations and consulted broadly about Life Skills. As a result there have been numerous other applications of the Life Skills model in programs for such groups as middle-class women, Native Americans, Canadian disadvantaged adults, the handicapped, and such occupational groups as teachers, counselors, and managers. Though many of these programs are not fully developed, they do begin to illustrate the potential range of applications. Thus, many new applications of the Life Skills model are anticipated in the years ahead. It should be noted, however, that our popularization of the term "Life Skills" has recently been applied to competency-based literacy programs. Care should be exercised in distinguishing between those Life Skills programs that aim at modifying psycho-social coping skills and those that have other learning objectives. We can conceive of the day when there will be hundreds, perhaps thousands of different Life Skills units on coping problems in such areas as parenting, marriage, health, and personal development. We are currently experimenting with other adaptations and modifications of the learning model and ways of training program developers more efficiently. We are also

exploring a variety of alternatives for making use of the new R and D Center and the new graduate program to help others to set up development centers while at the same time maintaining and improving the quality of development and delivery within the framework of responsible research, evaluation and training.