OBSTACLES FACED BY COUNSELORS WHO WORK WITH OFFENDERS

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WHO ARE OFFENDERS?

• Simple definition is a person who is guilty of committing a crime
• But who do you think about when you hear the term?
WHO ARE OFFENDERS?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VfCYZ3pks48
WHO ARE OFFENDERS?

• Many people automatically add the word “sex” in front of “offender”
• But offenders are not so simple to classify. They can be:
  • Any age
  • Any gender
  • Any race or nationality
  • Any cognitive level
  • And have committed any type of crime
WHO ARE OFFENDERS?

- Sounds like it can be just about anyone, right?
- So that means that any counselor can and should work with any person with a criminal history who shows up at their office door?
- Well, yes and no…
WHO ARE OFFENDERS?

• The needs of offenders are similar to any other citizen, and these individuals would greatly benefit from the approach and skills of a counselor.

• BUT, there are considerations when working with this population, and a certain level of training you should have in order to ethically treat them. Not having this information can actually cause more harm than good. Some of these obstacles are difficult to overcome, but not impossible.
SO WHAT DO YOU NEED TO ETHICALLY AND EFFECTIVELY WORK WITH OFFENDERS?

- Treatment Specific Knowledge
- Ability to navigate a “system” that serves a purpose different than our own
- Good Support/Supervision
# KNOWLEDGE- ADULT VS JUVENILE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Juvenile</th>
<th>Adult</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus is rehabilitation</td>
<td>Focus is punishment</td>
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<tr>
<td>“adjucated”</td>
<td>guilty</td>
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<td>Tend to end up in community based programs</td>
<td>Jail (&lt;year) or Prison (&gt;year)</td>
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<td>Behaviors are seen as changeable</td>
<td>Behaviors seen as controllable</td>
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<td>May be able to “clean up” record</td>
<td>Crimes will follow for life</td>
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• Forensic Counseling is not a popular specialization, so schools do not necessarily offer many classes
• Forensic Psychology is more popular, but does not allow for Licensure as an LPC
• Many people don’t realize that there is more to Forensics than assessment or testifying in court
• There is no such approach as “sex offender treatment”. This is not a theory or school of thought that can be taught in a grad class
• Learning how to work with this population usually comes from “on the job training” and through organizations that specialize in Sexual Abuse Treatment
• Working with offenders means utilizing a therapeutic approach to address key treatment areas—these are triggers and struggles unique to this population
• There are also legal considerations (and language) that can hinder the therapeutic process
For offenders, part of the process involves identifying unmet social, physical and emotional needs, and teaching healthy ways to meet these needs.

There is also a focus on arousal and attraction—by understanding what they find arousing, the individual can work to recondition this arousal, and learn techniques to help control negative attractions.

Family history is examined to help understand how core beliefs were developed, and how individuals learned to overcome natural barriers that stop most people from acting out to hurt others (people are not born wanting to hurt others).
KNOWLEDGE- THERAPEUTIC APPROACHES

• Relapse Prevention (CBT)
  • Identify what behaviors and situations are high risk to that individual
  • Teach how to avoid or escape them
  • Identify a person’s unhealthy arousal, and use techniques to help them recondition the arousal
  • Learn basic skills to develop healthy relationships and interests
  • Similar to Substance Abuse Treatment
KNOWLEDGE- THERAPEUTIC APPROACHES

• Relapse Prevention is most often used with Adolescent Offenders
  • There is increased focus on teaching healthy social skills
  • Family involvement is key- the family is one of the strongest influence in a teen’s life
  • Especially with boys, there is a discussion of masculinity and how their acting out may be related to this
  • Often adolescents need to be taught how to express themselves
KNOWLEDGE - THERAPEUTIC APPROACHES

• Good Lives Model (Positive Psychology)
  • Growing up, some need was not being met, so the individual sought to meet this need by any means possible
  • They lacked the knowledge or access to meet these needs in healthy ways (obstacles)
  • Identify personal goals - which of the “goods” are most important to you
  • Once you know what a “good life” looks like, work towards achieving this in legal, safe ways by learning skills and building upon strengths
KNOWLEDGE - THERAPEUTIC APPROACHES

• Goods:
  • Life (including healthy living and functioning)
  • knowledge (how well informed one feels about things that are important to them)
  • excellence in play (hobbies and recreational pursuits)
  • excellence in work (including mastery experiences)
  • excellence in agency (autonomy, power and self-directedness)
  • inner peace (freedom from emotional turmoil and stress)
  • relatedness (including intimate, romantic, and familial relationships)
  • community (connection to wider social groups)
  • spirituality (in the broad sense of finding meaning and purpose in life)
  • pleasure (feeling good in the here and now)
  • creativity (expressing oneself through alternative forms)
KNOWLEDGE- SUMMARY

• This is a long term process
• For many individuals, they have developed many layers of defense mechanisms that will inhibit this process and requires work to overcome
• Especially with adolescents, there is a push to include systems (family, community supports) in treatment in order to help the individual maintain safety. However, community supports are key for all offenders
• Many want to change- they feel guilt and remorse, but may lack skills to do better
• Others don’t care- psychopaths
KNOWLEDGE- SUMMARY

- So the approach is similar to so much of what we do - group, individual, family therapy
- But the individual topics are a little more specialized
- Unfortunately, if not done correctly, “therapy” could actually reinforce unhealthy arousals and negative core beliefs - this is why it's important to be aware
CHALLENGES

• Some of the areas of need that must be dealt with are difficult to handle *(arousal to children, arousal to violence, personal victimization)*

• It can trigger our own histories and personal bias *(we all know someone…)*

• Unconditional Positive Regard can be tested *(how can we work with someone who is capable of hurting children?)*

• There are also those who don’t want to change, and this can also challenge our identities as counselors *(why wouldn’t you want to be a better person?)*
CAN YOU WORK WITH THESE SEXUAL OFFENDERS?
HOW ABOUT THESE?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BMzRIYQ59EQ
CAN YOU WORK WITH THESE SEXUAL OFFENDERS?

• What was triggered in you when you saw the pictures?
• What are your thoughts about the people vs. the crime?
• What about the teenagers? Do you think you can work with one, or both of them?
PERSONAL BIAS

• It can be difficult to separate the person from the crime
  • Is a person defined by their actions?
  • Is there hope for change or improvement?

• Can we accept:

  My Past is not My Potential
SELF AWARENESS

• It’s okay if you cannot work with everyone

• While our code of ethics tells us that we should be open and accept all clients, sometimes by doing so, we can do more harm than good

• Good Supervision is important so that we become aware of when we are being triggered, and to help us manage counter transference

• It is also unethical to try and work with a client that we are not properly trained to work with
• Remember that we are working with people who have learned how to manipulate others in order to survive. Why would we be any different?

• We may fit the role of “parent” for damaged individuals and we must be aware of our impact upon them, both good and bad

• We are working within a system that is focused on punishing someone who has done wrong, and we may be viewed in a negative light if we can see the good in our client
SUPERVISION

• It is important that as supervisors we have some knowledge about working with criminals in order to help our students and supervisees.

• Often, counselors struggle with expressing their struggles out of fear of being judged, so it falls on us to help them express their struggles.

• We also need to help them see when a case is too complicated or demanding— with SO’s it can be dangerous if a counselor is not well prepared.

• Burnout can be caused by all of these factors!
CAUSES OF BURNOUT

• Lack of knowledge/preparedness
• Lack of peer or supervisory support (feeling alone, not able to seek supervision)
• Over identification with clients
• Vicarious trauma
• Client manipulation
CAUSES OF BURNOUT

- Frustration with “System” (helplessness)
- Client relapse (failure)
- Ethical challenges and dilemmas
- Judgement by peers and family- how can you work with *them*?
ADDRESSING BURNOUT

- Normalize struggles
- Create a supportive, non judgmental environment
- Encourage conversations with peers (often safer) and supervisors
- Time off/mental health day
- Address personal trauma through counseling
- Consider if this is the right population for you
- Self Care
NAVIGATING THE “SYSTEM”

• There is a stigma attached to the label “criminal”- NIMBY (not in my back yard)
  • People don’t want me around them- they won’t trust me
  • Life in jail is easier than life on the street

• I will never be more than my crime
  • Low self esteem and fear are common
  • It is often difficult to identify any positive trait or accomplishment
NAVIGATING THE “SYSTEM”

• There is inherent mistrust
  • We are part of the “system”
  • Are we here to help them or judge them?
  • If I tell you the truth will you send me back to jail/get me in trouble?
NAVIGATING THE “SYSTEM” - JAILS, PRISONS, AND LOCKED FACILITIES

• Working with clients often means entering a “secure perimeter” so we are limited in what we can bring inside, what resources we can bring to therapy

• We are operating in someone else’s “house” and have no control over the environment
  • Noise
  • “lock-downs”
  • No real privacy
  • And so much more…
NAVIGATING THE “SYSTEM”- COMMUNITY BASED CLIENTS

• Many who are released into the community are under supervision (probation, parole) and will require regular updates

• They are given restrictions as to where they can go, what they can do
  • No computers/internet
  • Curfews

• Missed sessions or bad sessions can have greater implications
  • Violation of parole
  • Relapse
COUNSELING OFFENDERS IN THE AGE OF COVID-19

- Community based clients are still mandated to attend therapy, but may not be allowed internet access.
- Locked facilities stopped “non essential” staff (non DOC staff) from entering, so therapy is not consistently happening.
- Computers, tablets, internet, etc. is not usually allowed in facilities so telehealth is difficult to do.
- Sexual Offenders are probably the last group that was considered for release when states started to “clear prisons”.
COUNSELING OFFENDERS IN THE AGE OF BLM

• It goes without saying people of color are over represented in the correctional system
• Therapists, medical staff and officers usually do not “look” like them
• Racial inequalities have been magnified, but “standing up for rights” can result in very different consequences for individuals with a record
• Police violence is nothing new for them- prisoners “don’t have” the same rights as non prisoners- racial injustice is common in some facilities
WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE INFORMATION

- Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers [https://www.atsa.com/](https://www.atsa.com/)
- NJ Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers [http://njatsa.org/](http://njatsa.org/)
- International Association of Addictions and Offender Counselors [https://www.iaaocounselors.org/](https://www.iaaocounselors.org/)
- IAAOC’s Sex Offender Treatment Committee [https://www.iaaocounselors.org/iaaoc-sex-offender-treatment-committee](https://www.iaaocounselors.org/iaaoc-sex-offender-treatment-committee)
WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE INFORMATION

• National Association of Forensic Counselors http://www.forensiccounselor.org/

• National Institute of Corrections https://nicic.gov/

• Counseling Today Article https://ct.counseling.org/2016/09/seeing-people-not-prisoners/
THANK-YOU FOR YOUR TIME!

Any Questions