The Role of Supportive Relationships in the TC: Can they foster Emotion Regulation?

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Overview

- Palmerston Association and the TC Program
- Introduction
- Salient factors in SUDs
- Therapeutic relationship & beyond
- Research study
- Implication of findings
Serving the community for over 30 years

Diverse range of services across Western Australia to support individuals and families affected by alcohol and other drug use

Core services:
- **Individual** (counselling, education, referrals)
- **Family** (Family Program, support groups)
- **Group** (women, men, parents, families)
- **Residential** – *The Therapeutic Community*
Palmerston Farm Therapeutic Community (TC)

- Located 20 minutes South of Perth, W.A.
- On a 10 acre property
Palmerston Farm TC Program

- 14 weeks is the minimum length of stay
- Opportunity to remain in the TC for up to a year
- 35 residential places
- Transitional Housing for 3 graduates of the program
Palmerston Farm TC Program

Aims: “to encourage a sense of purpose in life and to foster personal growth, self-knowledge and self-responsibility”

- Active involvement in TC as primary focus
- Counselling & group work
- Sport & recreation (yoga, meditation)
- Horticultural and gardening activities
- Art and craft
- Welfare support and vocational training
- Aftercare for residents who have left the TC program
- Transitional housing
Residents and Staff

Residents

- Men & women (18 years +)
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients
- Court diversion clients
- Significant AOD-related problems
- Mental health difficulties

TC Staff

- Collective wealth of experience
- The team consists of specialist AOD counsellors, social workers, mental health workers, support staff
- Staff as facilitators – supporting individual and collective journey
What is meant by “emotion regulation”? What do we know?

- It is a complex process
- Core to well being
- Core to healthy, happy relationships
Capacity to regulate distress develops early, through relationship with others.

Have a “larger container” to be with and tolerate emotions.
Emotion Dysregulation

At the core of most substance use disorders
What we see and talk about....

What we don’t talk about...
- Emotional Capacity
- Physiological changes
- Brain architecture
- “Flooding” of emotions
- Memory and learning
- Impact of trauma

Emotion Dysregulation

- Distractibility – can’t focus on tasks
- Rigid coping strategies – poor learning
- Reactive/or wanting attention
- Intense response – not in line with goals
- Emotions are not tolerable
- Poor impulse control
- Lack of awareness of emotions

Stress
The Therapeutic Relationship

- Most important in our work
- Clients’ perceived quality of the therapeutic relationship predicts positive treatment outcomes
- Frequently under-valued: changes are more than skin deep....
  - Experience of safety, empathy, and “holding” environment (“you will be ok”)
  - “Feeling felt,” a sense that someone “got” your lived experience – powerful human connection
  - Brain plasticity – brains change in response to new experiences!
Previous treatment outcome studies have looked at:

- Reduction in substance use
- Social adjustment
- Reduction of depression and anxiety

No studies to date have looked at emotion regulation in a TC context.
Beyond the Traditional Therapeutic Relationship

Peers play a large role in TCs

- Support and empathy
- New ways of relating and interacting
- Reinforce learning and practice
- Instilling hope
- Reinforce values of self, others, and the community

*The Therapeutic Relationship is built on these elements...*
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Methods

Participants
- 67 residents
- Recruited from Palmerston Farm TC
- Age 21-56 years

Drug of Choice
- Alcohol (55%)
- Amphetamines (36%)
- Cannabis (6%)
- Opiates (3%)

Study Design
- Repeated measures design was used to examine changes in emotion regulation at 2 time points
  - Week 2
  - Week 14
- Correlational analysis used to examine link between supportive relationships and emotion regulation
Measures and Procedure

The Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale  
(Gratz & Roemer, 2004)

“When I’m upset I have difficulty controlling my behaviour”

The Working Alliance Inventory  
(Hatcher & Gillaspy, 2006)

“What I’m doing in therapy gives me new ways of looking at my problem”

The Experiences in Relationship Questionnaire  
(research authors, 2012)

“I feel very understood and respected”
Results

Significant reduction in emotion regulation difficulties found at completion of program

Repeated measures $t$ test; $t(42) = 4.76, p < .001$, medium effect size.
Discussion

- Positive resident-counsellor relationship was linked to a substantial reduction in distress

- Experiencing a supportive relationship with another resident in the TC also linked to improvement

- Highlights the importance of relational factors in TC
Implications for TCs
Questions to Consider...

Supportive relationships may be an important pathway to improve emotion regulation

Issues:
- Exclusive relationships and sub-grouping
- Defining a "supportive relationship"
- How can we use supportive relationships in TCs to facilitate change?
- How can we maximize the use of the Therapeutic Relationship in TCs?
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