

Caregiver Support Program

The Caregiver Support Program (CSP) was designed specifically for human service workers, particularly those working in group homes and half-way houses for mentally ill or developmentally disabled individuals. The primary goal of the program is to teach the participants skills that will help them cope more effectively with the stresses associated with their work. The program helps the participants recognize the importance of support systems for coping with stress, and it teaches them skills for mobilizing available support from others at work. It also teaches employees about participatory problem-solving approaches and helps them to build skills in implementing such approaches in work team meetings. Thus, it helps participants to develop several self-management and social skills competencies, including adaptability, communication, collaboration and building bonds, conflict management, and team capabilities.

The program was designed by staff at the Michigan Prevention Research Center, and it has been implemented numerous times throughout the state of Michigan. Over a thousand staff working in more than 50 different agencies have participated in it. A unique aspect of the program is that staff and their managers are trained together. One staff member and the manager from each home attended the CSP sessions, with the expectation that they would train the rest of the staff on the skills and concepts they had learned.

The CSP involved six training sessions. Each session lasted four to five hours. The first three sessions were held a week apart, and the remaining sessions were held two weeks apart. There were 10 staff and 10 managers in each training group. The groups were led by two trainers.

The first two sessions focused on helping networks. The participants learned about the various types of social support (emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal). Then they became more aware of how social support could help them to alleviate specific job stresses through a brainstorming activity. Next the participants mapped their own social support networks at work and identified strengths and weaknesses in the networks. Finally they “refined the interpersonal skills associated with exchanging social support with others, including clarifying misunderstandings, providing constructive feedback, and asking others for help” (Heaney, Price, & Rafferty, 1995, p. 95).

In the third session the participants learned how to conduct a training session back in their homes. They designed a session to train their coworkers in one of the network skills they had learned themselves, and then they practiced delivering it. Sessions 4 and 5 dealt with increasing worker participation in decision making. Participants discussed the value of such participation and then learned how to enhance it through using group problem-solving methods. The last session was devoted to techniques for maintaining the new skills over the long-term.

The learning processes used in the program relied heavily on modeling and rehearsal. Trainers modeled new skills and then had participants practice them in the training group. The participants continued to practice the skills until they had developed a feeling of mastery, at which point they were encouraged to try using the skills at their workplaces. The trainers used positive reinforcement throughout the learning process to help participants maintain high levels of motivation and self-efficacy.

The learning processes also were based on the premise that the trainers' relationship with the participants strongly influenced the change process. The program designers believed it was critical for the participants to view the trainers as "knowledgeable, likable, admirable, and accepting" (Heaney et al., 1995, p. 97). The trainers worked to promote this image by providing "unconditional positive regard for the participants" and praise for change efforts. They also made "moderate self-disclosures about their own attempts at behavior change."

The program also incorporated several elements designed to facilitate transfer of skills from the training sessions to the work setting. The trainers provided the learners with general principles along with specific skills. They used problems and situations in the training that were similar to those that are encountered in the work settings. They provided a wide range of examples. And they encouraged the participants not only to use the skills back on the job but to train other staff to do so.

The program was evaluated with a pre and post test control group design. Group homes initially were randomly assigned to either receive CSP or serve as controls. Data were collected before the program began and five weeks after training ended. The results showed that direct care staff who attended the training sessions reported increased supportive feedback on the job, greater ability to handle disagreements and overload at work, and a better work team climate compared to the controls.

For more information, see:

Heaney, C. A., Price, R. H., & Rafferty, J. (1995). The caregiver support program: An intervention to increase employee coping resources and enhance mental

health. In L. R. Murphy, J. J. J. Hurrell, S. L. Sauter, & G. P. Keita (Eds.), Job stress interventions (pp. 93-108). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.