SUPPORTING PRACTITIONERS IN DEALING WITH THE EMOTIONAL IMPACT OF THEIR WORK

A key component in building effective relationships with offenders is the skill of emotional literacy, defined as ‘the ability to recognise, understand, handle and appropriately express emotions…using your emotions to help yourself and others succeed” (Sharp 2001). This is associated with the concept of emotional intelligence used increasingly in business and education to improve relationships and enhance learning.

The literature on emotional literacy builds on this framework and includes the issue of how emotions are also key in motivating (or de-motivating) us in all aspects of our lives and work. Research undertaken in the Midlands region with probation staff working with high risk offenders examined their use of emotional literacy in engaging, motivating and enabling offenders to change. It also asked questions about the emotional impact of the work and the support systems and resources available to staff.

All of the workers interviewed were able to provide clear evidence of emotional engagement with some extremely difficult and damaged individuals; building trust, hearing their stories, withholding judgement in order to maximise the potential for honest disclosure, and supporting the change and learning that needed to take place. Alongside the evidence of this ability was the workers’ view that they had to keep their own emotions under control, or ‘masked’ and what they felt was lacking within the organisation was a recognition of the need for a safe emotional space to ‘let off steam’ and express the feelings they had contained whilst with the offender.

Some felt able to do this with understanding line managers, or through formal debriefing sessions. However, most sought other more informal routes such as chosen colleagues, friends and family. All would have welcomed a greater acknowledgement of the emotional content of their work and permission to talk about and examine the significance of emotion in their work as well as the emotional impact on them of dealing with some very complex cases.

Whilst counselling opportunities were generally available to staff undertaking group work with sex offenders, this was not routinely available to all, and interestingly, some felt it was not so much counselling they needed or wanted, as a ‘safe’ and immediate space to give vent to feelings without being judged as ‘unprofessional’.

'Research refers to:

Intrapersonal:
- Self awareness - recognising one's own emotions and how they are affecting your behaviour and using this to inform decisions
- Self management - having control over how you express your emotions, according to the situation

Interpersonal:
- Social awareness - observing and understanding others' emotions, using empathy
- Relationship management - being able to build and maintain effective relationships, managing conflict as necessary
Many felt that the current culture of target driven practice left little space for the articulation of the feelings surrounding the work, particularly the negative ones. Because of the perceived lack of permission to express their feelings in the work environment, they also struggled with the vocabulary to explain their feelings. Significantly, some, particularly those working with domestic violence offenders, were able to identify the importance of teaching these offenders an emotional vocabulary in order to help them better manage and understand their emotions.

The impact on practice outcomes of ignoring the emotional
There is a danger that practitioners who feel the emotional impact of the work is ignored may become de-motivated and less likely to want to engage in the sometimes messy worlds that offenders inhabit. Alternatively, they may continue to engage unsupported, but at risk of exhaustion and burn-out. In the longer term, either of these ways of managing can lead to a reduction in performance and increased sickness absence.

Adult learning theory (Kolb 1988) describes reflective practice as a pre-requisite of ongoing professional development and this includes reflecting on one’s emotional experience. This in turn informs practice decisions – when to challenge, when to support, when to probe, as well as when to make use of more structured tools and techniques.

Emotional data informs risk assessment: noticing the ‘music behind the words’ and using gut reactions to prompt further enquiry about an offender’s situation can lead to revision of risk levels. Relying on completing the processes alone cannot be enough!

The role of managers in maintaining emotional health and emotional literacy
Practitioners value reflective supervision, either within line management or facilitated by others in groups and teams. The Enabling Culture Change Project within the Offender Engagement Programme is looking at the kinds of activities that organisations can put in place to support practitioners in this way. Creating a team culture where practitioners feel they have permission to acknowledge and work with their feelings requires everyone to see why this matters.

Some questions:
How much do you use your emotional ‘antennae’ to inform your practice with individual offenders?
How are you enabled to develop your emotional literacy?
Is your team a place where it is safe to share your feelings about the work you are engaged in?

Email OEP@justice.gov.uk for further information.

All of the workers interviewed in the Midlands sample were able to provide clear evidence of emotional engagement with some extremely difficult and damaged individuals; building trust, hearing their stories, withholding judgement in order to maximise the potential for honest disclosure, and supporting the change and learning that needed to take place.

All would have welcomed a greater acknowledgement of the emotional content of their work and permission to talk about and examine the significance of emotion in their work as well as the emotional impact on them of dealing with some very complex cases.

Authors of this document
Charlotte Knight, Principal Lecturer in Community and Criminal Justice, De Montfort University, and Deborah Clow, Organisational Development Manager, National Offender Management Service

SUPPORTING PRACTITIONERS IN DEALING WITH THE EMOTIONAL IMPACT OF THEIR WORK