

Using Personal Behavior Change to Teach the Therapeutic Recreation Process

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Introduction

The purpose of this article is to illustrate how the therapeutic recreation process can be taught through an assignment that fosters change in personal behaviors. Examples of how students assess the target behavior, develop an individual treatment plan, implement the plan, document progress over time, conduct transition planning, and evaluate results via a reflection paper are presented. Lessons derived from implementing the assignment during the past 6 years will also be highlighted.

The assignment is founded on the belief that in order to be a competent therapeutic recreation specialist, individuals need to develop the ability to: a) perform the basic skills required of the therapeutic process (i.e., assessment, planning, implementation, documentation, transition planning, and evaluation), b) be empathetic toward the challenges clients face when attempting to change behaviors, and c) comprehend the theory behind behavior change. The assignment fosters the development of these basic skills by requiring students to practice them over a six week period of time.

The resources used to prepare students how to perform the basic skills involved in the therapeutic process come from a number of texts within the field (Austin, 1999; Stumbo, 2002; Stumbo & Peterson, 2004; Sylvester, Voelkl, & Ellis, 2001). The reflective paper encourages students to critique their ability to change their own behavior and to contemplate how their experiences were similar or dissimilar from the experiences their clients are likely to have. Finally, the students develop an understanding of how attitudes impact intentions to perform behaviors by introducing them to the Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein & Azjen, 1975), and the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977). These theories illustrate to the student how individual attitudes, social norms, and perceived control influence an individuals intention to act. Intentions are highly correlated to behavior however, students are also informed of the role of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural constraints and the effect they have on behaviors (Jackson, Crawford, & Godbey, 1993). After introducing students to this foundational knowledge, they are given guidelines and begin the behavior change assignment.

Learning activity: The Behavior Change Assignment

The Behavior Change assignment is implemented over a six week period of time and requires students to a) select a behavior, b) assess behavioral patterns and compile the results, c) develop an individual treatment plan, d) implement the plan, e) write weekly documentation, f) complete a transition plan that includes an evaluation of the results of their efforts, and g) write a reflection paper.

Students are encouraged to select observable and measurable target behaviors for this assignment. Once a student has selected a target behavior and it has been approved by the instructor, s/he must develop an individual treatment plan that includes an assessment, goals and objectives, and intervention plan. Examples of behaviors commonly selected appear in Table 1.

TABLE 1

Sample target behaviors, assessment, goals and interventions

Target Behavior	Assessment	Goals	Interventions
Physical Fitness	BodyMass/ Weight	Decrease Body Fat %	Combination of free weights and aerobic activity
	Cardiorespiratory function	Improve endurance	Jogging and kick boxing classes
Study Habits	Time Diary	Improve grades	Guidance counseling

Throughout the assignment students record their progress in meeting their goals using the progress note (SOAP) format. Students are limited to one half sheet of paper when completing the SOAP note. In addition to the weekly progress notes, students must keep a daily journal of how they are behaving, thinking, and feeling during the assignment. Entries often include information about what is working, what is not working, what are their triumphs and frustrations, and a host of other possibilities. The journal is turned in with the final reflection paper.

At the conclusion of the 5th week of intervention, students develop a transition plan or discharge summary that includes the services received, their response to treatment, progress toward completing their goals and objectives, remaining problems and concerns, and plan for discharge. Prior to completion of the transition plan students re-assess their progress using the assessment tool and compare their current functioning with their level of functioning prior to the intervention.

The final component of the assignment involves a reflection paper. The paper is designed to help students think about the treatment process and evaluate their success

at facilitating change. Students must provide a clear and accurate description of the degree to which they met their goals and objectives. Students conclude the paper by reflecting upon their overall impressions of the experience. Topics addressed may include: lessons learned about oneself or the profession, challenges or changes in personal attitudes or beliefs, difficulty or ease with which they were able to change their personal behavior, things that facilitated or were barriers to their success or failure, and their beliefs regarding if this experience was similar or dissimilar to clients' experiences.

Expected outcomes

The Behavior Change Assignment provides students an opportunity to implement the therapeutic process, experience what it feels like to change one's behavior, and to assess and reflect upon their skills and abilities as a leader responsible for facilitating behavioral change. Students typically come away from this assignment being much more skilled in writing goals and objectives, selecting and administering an assessment, interpreting assessment results, developing individual treatment plans, facilitating interventions in their target area, documenting progress using the SOAP format, and writing transition plans. The students also have an increased awareness of how difficult it can be for recreation therapists to facilitate behavior change in others.

Considerations and recommendations

As educators we have an obligation to provide students with an opportunity to develop the skills required for professional practice. The Behavior Change Assignment has demonstrated that it is an effective way to begin to develop the skills required to complete the therapeutic process. Following are several suggestions that have helped to make the assignment more successful in preparing students:

- 1) Most students will initially struggle to identify a target behavior. It is imperative that when the assignment is introduced the students have ample time to determine the behavior. In-class exercises that help students find a suitable behavior are also encouraged.
- 2) Students are likely to do very poorly in their initial attempts to complete the assessment, treatment plan, SOAP notes and transition plan. Adopt a mastery based learning style where students are allowed to turn in each component of the assignment more than once as a way to facilitate skill development.
- 3) It is helpful to give students examples of various aspects of the treatment process. These examples may be found in text books or developed by the professor.
- 4) Keep the due dates for the assignment realistic with professional practice.

This will require a quick turn around time by the students and the instructor in terms of grading. Doing so will facilitate a realistic understanding of what is expected of them on the job.

- 5) Students should be encouraged to select very difficult behaviors to change. Offer them the analogy of trying to help a person in treatment for substance abuse stop thinking about and abusing drugs or alcohol. If students are not forced to select a very difficult behavior they are unlikely to develop the empathy for the work that clients must do while receiving services.

In conclusion, the Behavior Change Assignment has proven to be an effective way to introduce students to the therapeutic process. Not only do they develop empathy for the challenges that their future clients face in treatment, but they also derive personal benefits and experience a sense of empowerment from knowing that they have the ability to control and change personal behaviors.

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