

## Treatment Challenges in the Correctional Setting

In your treatment work within the correctional system you face challenges not faced by treatment professionals outside the corrections system. One of the biggest challenges to treatment success is the corrections environment itself. The corrections structure – the custodial environment and security requirements – create powerful barriers for positive, healthful change in the men and women we see in our programs.

So what is it within the corrections environment that has such a debilitating impact on motivation for change? And, if we know what it is, can we do anything about it?

*“Self-determination Theory (SDT) provides a helpful way of conceptualizing the motivational problems inherent in a typical criminal justice culture that emphasizes coercive control and authoritarianism.”<sup>1</sup>*

This is more than marginally interesting for those of us concerned with improving program outcomes and preventing clients from giving up before completing our program. Self-determination Theory describes three basic human needs that strongly impact intrinsic motivation: *autonomy, relatedness* and *competence*. The *Changes Program*, designed by HeartStream Education, supports intrinsic motivation for change by addressing these three basic human needs as described in the SDT literature: You may already realize that meeting those needs is extremely difficult in the incarceration environment. (Remember the opening line of this article about challenges “not faced by treatment professional outside the corrections system?”)

Motivation – even the extrinsic kind – can feel so difficult to nurture in the environment within which we work. In fact, several studies in the late 90s found that “inadequate motivation” was most frequently the reason that offenders dropped out of some programs. . But *intrinsic* motivation can possibly feel like the pursuit of the “holy grail” of motivation!

But, if you are working in any type of modified therapeutic community (TC), you have real opportunities to factor these needs into your environmental design. Let’s look at these three needs and how the general corrections environment limits the meeting of these needs.

### **The Need for Autonomy**

The first need as described by SDT is for personal *autonomy* or experiencing one’s behavior as determined by oneself and under one’s own control rather than the control of external forces. Research on SDT has shown that when behavior change is autonomously motivated, changes are more lasting than when change is extrinsically or non-autonomously motivated. Extrinsically motivated changes tend to last only as long as the change-focused contingencies that prompted the change remain in place.

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<sup>1</sup>Miller, William R. and Rollnick, Stephen. **Motivational Interviewing**, second edition. © 2002 The Guilford Press. Pp.335-336.

Extrinsic motivation can be a necessary and helpful starting place with our forensic clients, but autonomous motivation must be developed in order to create lasting change.

The criminal justice environment is strictly controlled 24/7. Obedience – not autonomy – is the “vocabulary” of this environment. Inmates are told when, how, and where for most things. “Because I said so” is the frequently given reason for any direction they receive, if given a reason at all. An individual becomes “institutionalized” to the extent their desire for personal autonomy is dampened. How often have you heard in your classes, “Just tell us what to do and we’ll do it.” In other words, “Please don’t make us figure out what we are to do!” There are good reasons for institutional control and this aspect is not likely to change. There are ways, however, to foster personal autonomy without compromising institutional safety or staff control. HeartStream’s *Changes* Program provides both an *experience* of personal autonomy in group process that invites personal choice and a *cognitive framework* for participants to intentionally develop autonomy, by practicing tools for making responsible choices.

### **The Need for Relatedness**

The second need as described by SDT is for relatedness or believing that others value and respect one’s thoughts, beliefs and feelings as part of a caring group. In some cases inmate culture addresses some of this need but it does so in a coercive manner. Disrespect someone at your peril, in prison culture. Caring group? Some inmates might argue that their gang affiliation causes them to feel a part of a group that will take care of them but caring? Don’t think so! Also, in a criminal justice environment peers may reinforce antisocial attitudes and behaviors in an inmate, resulting in either program refusal or minimal program compliance.

Of course creating just such a caring group is a significant part of any modified TC. Without it, effective TC treatment is virtually impossible because, as George DeLeon writes in his book, **The Therapeutic Community**, community is *a way of treatment* i.e., community-as-method. So, this need is critical to TC success. The deep listening and respect inherent in the *Changes* program provides a context where participants can experience true connection to one another. One *Changes* participant wrote, “for those three days we formed a bond – not a bond as convicts, but a bond as human beings.”

### **The Need for Competence**

The third need, for competence, is a need for coming to believe that one’s behavior is efficacious in producing desired outcomes. Again, what the offender might desire for outcomes is way down the list after institutional and staff desired outcomes. In the correctional environment there is little tolerance for noncompliance, whether through ignorance or willful disobedience. In addition, institutional staff themselves, often express the view that inmates will never change.

By offering simple but powerful models for understanding their experience, the *Changes* program helps inmates imagine the possibility of a positive outcome. Another *Changes* participant said, “I had lost hope in regards to living a normal “crime free” life due to my past. However, since this program, I have come out of my state of despair and acquired new hope. I have reconnected with my positive desires to

achieve something out of life using my skills and not to take short cuts. I am now willing to make sacrifices due to the motivation of CHANGES.”

Again, coming back to TC, addressing these three needs for autonomy, relatedness and competence is seen as essential in any modified TC. For example, an essential element of the addiction disorder, in the TC view, is the failure of individuals to take responsibility and be accountable for their decisions and actions. This is fundamental in the TC’s self-help view of recovery.<sup>2</sup>

A modified TC can create an experience that includes paying attention to autonomy, relatedness and competence. But the limitations of the correctional environment can make cause the development of these conditions to be painfully slow. This is one area where the *Changes* program can impact: speeding up the movement toward an environment marked by personal autonomy, relatedness and competence. The 3-day *Changes Workshop* can be the precipitating event to accelerate a sense of satisfaction in each of those three elements.

However, there are *two* – not one – environmental challenges you most likely face. The first one described here is the custodial environment. The second one is the primary “release” environment. While having participants complete your program is one measure of success another success measure for program effectiveness is very often reduced recidivism. And the release environment is definitely a determinant factor in the recidivism equation. The central question is how can you possibly impact the release environment?

We know it will hardly be sufficient for your program graduate to look back on his/her time in your program. They must be equipped to move forward, to continue to change and grow. In other words, while creating the institutional learning environment you must also provide participants with the tools necessary so that they can create their living environment upon release. The *Changes* Program helps you provide them with those necessary tools so that they can create their community – something not normally provided through the TC experience.

The earliest TCs expected community members to be present for years, not months. A modified TC must not only excel in the unique characteristics which make the TC in fact, the TC but must also provide something it never really intended, helping TC members know how to live apart from the TC. It takes more than giving a person confidence that they can “make it” outside the walls. If community, as experienced in your program, fosters positive life choices and healthy living then it seems to follow that showing your participant how to create that environment on the outside is a necessity.

“Give a person a fish, feed them for a day...” An experience of TC can be like the first part of this well-known economic development truism. It does not necessarily follow that a TC member will know how to build their new community once released. “Teach a person to fish, feed them for a lifetime.” Feeding for a lifetime is what HeartStream’s *Changes* can bring to your program.

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<sup>2</sup> De Leon, George. **The Therapeutic Community: Theory, Model, and Method**. ©2000 by Springer Publishing Company, Inc. Pp 41-42.

*“Offender motivation remains a priority in the criminal justice system given the competing motives, incentives, and punishment that face offenders.”*<sup>3</sup> Intrinsic motivation does not have to be specifically geared to reducing recidivism. Helping offenders consider change, commit to change, engage in the treatment, remain in treatment, and learn how to create their living community can have the ultimate effect of creating citizens in our society who contribute to everyone’s success.

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<sup>3</sup> Miller. op. cit., P.345.