

Awareness into Action: How Communication Skills Training Enhances Traditional Substance Abuse Treatment Programs

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Abstract:

Treating substance use disorders and co-existing mental health disorders requires sophistication and professional training. This client population can be difficult to treat and providers often have to do so within limited timeframes. These individuals face numerous challenges throughout their course of treatment and their recovery post treatment. This article will review the potential benefits of communication skills training (referred to as CST throughout the remainder of this text) as a value-added treatment component both during residential treatment and post-discharge. CST is the process through which an individual is taught how to appropriately use a range of behaviors in order to convey a message. CST seeks to develop both language and expression, so that one may communicate effectively with others. This article will identify the reasons as to why this client population would likely benefit from skill strengthening even more than, as a field, we might consider. The words coping skills, social skills, and communication skills will be interchangeably used throughout this article.

In addition, the authors will provide evidence and discussion related to the existing research on CST used with those who have been diagnosed and/or treated for substance use disorders. The benefits of CST in regards to increasing clients' treatment outcomes and incorporating these skills into their daily life, post treatment, will be identified and discussed. Practical difficulties in regard to incorporating CST will also be presented.

Keywords: communication skills training, substance abuse treatment, substance abuse, social skills, relapse prevention.

Communication is a fundamental element of our daily experiences, thereby creating the misconception that communication comes naturally and without impediment. For this reason, CST may be an area of skills training that may be overlooked when considering client needs in treatment. Basic social nature demands that we seek out communication with other people (2). However, not everyone possesses the ability to communicate effectively, and for individuals with substance use disorders, this particular skill may be especially challenging. The importance of developing and maintaining this skill set may be unnoticed and even considered unimportant as a necessary and key component of substance abuse treatment.

Effective communication coaching can enhance conventional treatment program regimens by providing clients the opportunity to work towards the objective of clear and productive communication. With substance abusers, both in residential and outpatient programs, CST can aid these individuals in areas that are directly tied to their daily experiences and offer insight into any deficits that may exist.

When a substance abuser enters treatment, immediate focus is typically and necessarily geared towards their physiological and psychological stabilization. Throughout the course of treatment, clients participate in therapeutic interventions both to continue stabilization efforts and to initiate their personal recovery process. Many treatment facilities have also begun to include non-traditional integrative interventions. There is growing evidence that both conventional and non-conventional therapies are legitimate treatment choices (3). The use of CST as a value-added treatment component is especially effective as a social component to the therapeutic design, by both increasing the client's ability to get the most out of social aspects of treatment and by enhancing skills that translate to their experiences outside of the context of treatment.

Communication Needs/Research Study Results

Communication is generally considered simply “something we all do”. Therefore, the importance of good communication skills may be disregarded as something that may be improved upon but not as a clinically relevant or critical skill to develop. What we say, how we say it, and when it is said, can have a significant impact on how we relate, converse, and socialize with others. Behavioral communication, including the use of eye contact, body language and the ability to listen to others, is vital to an individual’s ability to relate well to others. Skills that are not developed can interfere with central relationships and contribute to an individual’s difficulty with managing conflict and maintaining or setting personal boundaries, resulting in unnecessary misunderstandings. All of these potential issues can be considered therapeutic challenges for a client and can create preventable frustration, social alienation, and feelings of helplessness.

When researching the topic of CST as it relates to the medical/treatment profession, the authors were able to identify numerous articles and research, however, few related to training skills for the consumer. The majority of scholarly articles reviewed tended to focus on the importance of how professionals communicate with their patients/clients as opposed to the actual importance of the substance abuse client/consumer enhancing their personal skill sets.

There are only a few studies that have focused on researching the effectiveness of CST when applied to consumers of substance use treatment. However, such identified studies are considered outdated and tend to focus on a specific subset of this particular population. Some studies have researched only individuals with a diagnosis of alcohol abuse or dependency and have not included those with secondary mental-health disorders or those struggling with polysubstance abuse/dependence. Despite the limited research available for review, the results are promising.

One study conducted by Rosenhow et al., and published in 2001, resulted in the following conclusions: Communication skills training continues to show value for alcoholics in intensive treatment programs (1). CST appears to yield good results especially during intensive treatment (1).

There is a need for more data to support whether programs and providers could or should expand services to include communications skills training and social skills training as fundamental components of their respective programs. A recent and yet to be published survey (11) shows results indicating the need to consider the importance of training and developing this particular skill set.

The survey assesses the need and usefulness of CST and focuses on three groups of people. Respondents include professionals in the field of addiction and mental health who are in a position to refer to treatment programs, consumers of treatment programs, and the families and support system of treatment center consumers. The following research results are an abbreviated version of the research.

When selecting a program, 65.4% of professionals surveyed indicated that communication skills training/coaching was important when selecting a program for a client.

In regards to identified challenges clients seem to encounter post treatment, professionals indicated observed difficulties in the following social/communication realms: General problem solving (40.8%), difficulty with family boundaries (51.%), ability to communicate personal needs and feelings (46.9%), getting along with others in general (40.8%), and setting boundaries (59.2%).

Family/social support respondents, many self-identified as being “extremely involved” in their loved ones treatment process, indicated that in regards to treatment programs which had offered skills training, only 18.9% reported participation in this program component.

58.3 % of this respondent pool indicated that their loved one seemed to have difficulty asking for help when needed. Issues with social anxiety (40.4 %) and social isolation (34.6%) were also identified as post-treatment issues for these individuals.

Consumers of treatment were also asked to participate in this research study. In regards to whether they were offered social skills training components in treatment, only 16.7 % of respondents indicated in the affirmative, while 20.8% had been offered communications skills training/coaching while in treatment.

Pertaining to communication and social skills issues, the following had been reported in terms of challenges faced: 45.8 % reported communication skills deficits, 41.7 % indicated social skills development and maintenance were lacking, 54.2 % reported difficulties with maintaining boundaries with self and others, and 50.0% had indicated that they struggled with issues related to conflict resolution.

Based on this research, there appears to be sufficient evidence that supports the benefit of skills training, both in residential treatment as well as post-discharge.

Substance Abusers and Skills Training

Beginning in residential and throughout the continuum of care, clients are encouraged to maintain their personal boundaries, respect those of others, increase their social support systems, establish healthy connections with others, and maintain healthy relationships.

Therefore, it is suggested that program professionals formally assess the need and properly introduce skills training as part of the client's treatment plan. People in treatment for substance addictions who have struggled with building healthy relationships may benefit from skills development in the area of interpersonal communication, given that it is so integral to recovery capital (4).

This particular client population may be especially prone to communication and interpersonal skill deficits. Many clients being treated for substance use disorders report their experience of communication being chaotic, abusive, and manipulative. Additionally, they may have been raised in an environment where the substance use of others hindered exposure to healthy communication styles.

This population is also exceptionally vulnerable to social isolation, repeated patterns of involvement in traumatic or abusive relationships, and ongoing difficulties with low self confidence and self esteem.

Healthy interpersonal relationships may feel foreign and unnatural to them. Intrinsic issues of mistrust may color their relationships with others. Additionally, ongoing use and abuse of substances can severely and negatively affect the relationships with family members as well as with friends, employers, and co-workers.

Individuals with secondary mental health disorders, in addition to their substance use disorders, may encounter even more struggles in the areas of communication, social functioning, and coping.

According to NAMI (National Association on Mental Illness) a consumer's social support is critical. Their immediate environment has a direct impact on their choices and mood; therefore consumers need help strengthening positive relationships and jettisoning those that encourage negative behavior (7).

One particular subset of this clinical population that may especially benefit from CST is those individuals who have previously participated in more than one program, or otherwise considered "chronic relapsers". These individuals, because of their repetitive treatment experiences, tend to already know what they "need" but have little training putting new skills to the test outside of treatment.

As a real example, Mary P., who is considered a "chronic relapser" self-admits into a local day treatment program for those with co-occurring disorders. This woman had previously been in more than 12 formal treatment programs for issues including alcohol and depression. She is clinically savvy and seems to know what to say to her treatment providers as she continues her course of treatment. On the surface, Ms. P. appeared highly motivated, intelligent, and to be truly benefitting from the program. In groups, she shared freely, provided feedback to her peers, and was extremely attentive. She was able to communicate well and was articulate in her verbal correspondence. Staff and peers alike often complimented her in her progress and her participation. However, when one looked at her history, much of what she said and did merely reflected her ability to manipulate and avoid her true challenges- by saying what she felt others wanted to hear. Sadly, her real challenges, including maintaining boundaries, setting limits, socializing with others, and being able to manage and negotiate conflict, initially went unaddressed. Thus, she

continually experienced the same discharge and re-entry challenges without truly knowing why. Once she began to participate in both individual and group CST, the client's struggles with communication became clearer to her and those who worked with her. Initially, she had expressed feeling "insulted" that CST was being recommended as part of her course of treatment. She indicated that she was able to communicate well and there was no need for this training. However, as her work in CST continued, Ms. P. began to identify the skills she needed to develop post discharge. As her training progressed, she was able to notice positive changes regarding her familial relationships. Her self confidence in the area of socializing improved and, as a result, she reported feeling less isolated.

Incorporating CST into Treatment

There are several ways in which CST can be implemented and utilized during the course of treatment. Ideally, skills training would first occur in the residential setting as this would allow for ongoing monitoring, feedback, and flexible learning formats. CST can be easily built into mainstream treatment protocols, provided its importance to treatment outcome is recognized and understood.

Treatment plans for substance addicted clients often include strengthening interpersonal skills and increasing the ability to interface with others effectively. Since building supportive and healthy relationships requires effective communication skills, (4) providing education, support, and highlighting the benefit to communication skills building can be helpful to clients participating in treatment programs.

Treatment also tends to focus on the development of "self" and aims to improve self esteem, self efficacy, and self confidence. Understanding one's new "role" as a recovering individual and what that entails may be particularly confusing. These individuals may receive benefit from evaluating their new roles and responsibilities. Skills training in this particular realm could consist of assisting the client in identifying the variety of roles they assume and how to best interface with others in this new role. Emphasis would be on developing an understanding of how roles create conflict, must be negotiated, and require an

understanding of perceived responsibility. When a client begins to experience the benefits of CST, his or her confidence in their ability to communicate and problem solve may improve.

In treatment, CST training may be combined with other forms of therapeutic programming, such as individual and group therapy. The ability to incorporate CST in these modalities and the ability to continue strengthening these skills can serve as a stepping stone to improved social connections post treatment. Anticipation of specific challenges post treatment can be discussed in these modalities as well.

It is important to note that when a client is participating in a residential program, coaching may occur informally and via several treatment team members and disciplines. When a client traverses along the continuum of care and is expected and/or encouraged to apply the skills into their daily life, coaching experiences can be of significant use to the client. The person is generally participating less in therapeutic environments and is beginning to face challenges common to a newly recovering person. Upon discharge from residential or moving from one level of care to another, the intensity and frequency of their therapeutic exposure lessens. As a result of this re-entry, the client will begin to encounter a set of stressors common to their new experiences.

Social support is critical for the recovering individual, especially as they transition through the various stages of recovery. Skills training teaches alcoholics how to seek support and resolve conflict, when faced with emotional distress (8). Research shows that these skills play a role in recovery from addiction (4).

Therefore, it may be especially useful for outside treatment providers to provide CST. Navigating the challenges one may face post-discharge can be stressful. Ongoing assistance with skills training can better equip the individual to meet these challenges in a rehearsed and constructive manner.

Practical Limitations

While evidence points to the fundamental need to provide CST to clients, both in residential and outpatient programs, there are limits to the practical implementation of CST.

Many clients are only afforded the ability to participate in shorter term programs due to finances or other reasons. Limited time in treatment may complicate a program's ability to provide CST to their clients.

If clients lack insight into the nature of skill set deficits, they may perceive skills training as a criticism of their person and may be reluctant participants in CST. In this circumstance, the provider may want to present skills training as an avenue to better cope with stress. That is, "Being open and willing to discussing and resolving personal disagreements, misunderstandings, and areas of conflict that could otherwise lead to stress" (9).

Though skills training can be an important element of treatment, it does require ongoing learning and practice. However, there are few programs that offer this treatment component. "Abstaining from substance use is a complex and multi-faceted challenge for those who suffer from addictions, and exposure to a few sessions of communication skills training is not enough to alter patterns of behavior that may have persisted over years" (4).

Outpatient skills training may be needed for those individuals who are unable to financially afford admission into a residential treatment program. Some substance dependent people are not able to afford any level of treatment and often are referred to 12-step meetings, which are free of charge.

12-Step programs, such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, require some degree of social participation. Meetings are conducted in a group format, and socialization with relationship building among attendees, is highly encouraged and touted as imperative to the continued recovery process. So critical is the social aspect of the various 12-steps programs that they are often referred to as "fellowships".

Recovering individuals have reported that they feel "at home" when they attend meetings and feel comfortable being with others with similar challenges. Other recovering individuals have opted out of regular attendance or participation and have cited the following reasons: feeling uncomfortable talking in

front of others, feeling socially awkward, and feeling uncertain about what is expected of them communication wise.

For this second group of individuals, their socialization anxieties may prevent them, or make it difficult for them, to participate in 12-step programs. As a result, they may not be afforded the same level of social support as their peers that do not exhibit these difficulties. Self-help group involvement then affects subsequent coping responses, life stressors and social resources. (10) It is surmised that if this group received CST as a therapeutic component, these concerns may have been addressed and possibly resolved.

Research suggests that CST can support ongoing recovery efforts and further research may be helpful to improving treatment outcomes for clients who seek treatment for substance use disorders.

Summary

Treatment programs that treat substance use disorders provide physiological, psychological, and social components. Clients of these programs are frequently provided with a wide range of therapeutic interventions to promote personal growth and ongoing recovery.

The use of CST as a value-added component, both in residential treatment as well as in outpatient, can be an integral part of a client's therapeutic and healing experience. Such training can serve as a tool that can be aligned with conventional therapeutic approaches to assist a client in the following ways: managing critical needs including establishing and maintaining boundaries, communicating more effectively in the various roles a person assumes in day to day life, negotiating conflict and improving conflict resolution skills, increasing social and relational skills, and promoting greater self confidence.

Clients who participate in treatment services require considerable degrees of social support. However, they must have the skill set to effectively gain support. Therefore, developing these skills, and enhancing relationships with family, friends, and professionals should be an important part of treatment (4).

However, CST is not a panacea for all ills. This intervention is not a cure all, but a way of putting awareness information into action.

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Biographies

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Conflict of Interest Statement:

We declare that we have no proprietary, financial, professional, or other personal interest of any nature or kind in any product, service, and/or company that could be construed as influencing the position presented in, or the review of, the manuscript entitled Awareness into Action: How Communication Skills Training Enhances Traditional Substance Abuse Treatment Programs; Except both authors provide services to ICM Associates, Inc.