RELATIONAL RESOURCES FOR CHANGE

Rangatahi are the centre of our mahi

Research tells us that keeping our focus on rangatahi leads to better outcomes (Hubble, Duncan & Miller, 1999; Sparks, 2007; Sparks & Muro,2009):

> The (rangatahi) is the hero of the therapeutic drama and they play the most important role in their own change (Duncan, Miller & Sparks, 2007,34).

Usually, rangatahi need our support because the adults in their networks have let them down (Bell, 2002). Often the adults who are supposed to care for them, have put their own needs ahead of the rangatahi. If our mahi is to be effective, we need to make sure that the rangatahi and their needs are our priority. This might sound very obvious. But what we learned in our research, was that often kaimahi forgot to do this. Other pressures such as from within the office or demands made by the adults around the rangatahi got in the way. Sometimes kaimahi accepted the labels that others had used such as delinquent, dangerous or non-compliant (see Understanding and working with resistance). They did not always take the time to get to know the rangatahi and to hear their side of the story (Munford & Sanders, 2019).

Keeping rangatahi at the centre of our mahi means we have to really understand them, we need to see things from their point of view even when we do not agree with them. We also need to understand how the changes we are supporting them to achieve will impact on their lives. We need to learn about how their experiences impact on the way they respond to stresses and challenges, and the capacities and resources they use to problem solve (see Hearing rangatahi; Agency and voice; The helping alliance; Change steps).

It is important to keep them in the centre of the mahi because, in the end, they are the ones who have to make and sustain the changes. Our mahi has to fit their world. In order to achieve this, we need to fit our work around the theory of change of rangatahi by building a deep appreciation for the reality, meaning and life they have lived.

RELATIONAL RESOURCES FOR CHANGE

Here are some ways to keep rangatahi at the centre of mahi:

(Adapted from: Beresford,Croft & Adshead, 2008; de Boer & Coady, 2007; Duncan, Miller & Sparks, 2007; Turney, 2018).

Use curiosity to learn about the things rangatahi do well, their interests and strengths. Seek out their stories about how they have dealt with challenges in the past. Ask how they achieve and maintain change. Take time to understand their perspective and how they see the world. Learn their 'back story'. When we see rangatahi as the change makers, their resources and past successes become critical (see The importance of time; The helping alliance).

Support rangatahi to strengthen their networks so that they can be supported in their change. Identify people who can support them achieve their goals and who have been an enduring source of support for them.

With rangatahi at the centre of our focus we use strategies such as power sharing. This helps rangatahi gain a sense of control over the relationship and the change. Establishing trust is an important first step in building a helping alliance and keeping rangatahi at the centre of plans and support (see Power; Building trust).

Use critical reflection/coaching/supervision to keep asking ourselves, what does this rangatahi see as their critical issues and how is our mahi contributing to meaningful change for them. Listening to what rangatahi say, and then responding to that, helps sustain the focus (see Critical reflection).

The helping alliance keeps our focus on each rangatahi. Careful use of reciprocity and sharing of our experiences (where relevant) can strengthen our relationship. If we share our experiences we must be clear the reason is to support the rangatahi, not to benefit us. Sharing is intentional, planned in advance and talked about in reflection processes. We may plan a strategy in supervision/coaching and reflect back on it after. This helps keep our focus on the rangatahi and their needs (see The helping alliance; Critical reflection).

RELATIONAL RESOURCES FOR CHANGE

HOW DO I USE THESE IDEAS IN MY MAHI?

This practice story comes from a youth worker in a health organisation. It shows how this youth worker pays attention to keeping rangatahi at the centre of their mahi.

I had a young person who had been invited to meetings at the mental health service, so we could talk to him about his wishes and goals and his experience of services and how they helped him with his challenges. However, once we got to the meeting, the staff who had invited the young person, mostly talked with each other and talked over him. The few times he did say something, it seemed from their responses they were judging him. One person even told him he was being unrealistic.

This experience helped me realise that if we were going to keep him at the centre after the meeting I needed to challenge them about giving him a voice and listening to him and I also needed to prepare the young person, so he didn't become overwhelmed by all the professionals either talking at him, judging him or talking amongst themselves and ignoring him. I also needed to remind the staff that they needed to talk directly to the young person, explain jargon and provide clear information, check with him regularly, and honestly answer his questions.

RELATIONAL RESOURCES FOR CHANGE

Here are some places to look for more information

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Sanders, J. & Munford, R. (2019). PARTH practices and better outcomes: Creating 'lucky' encounters between social workers and vulnerable youth. In R. Munford & K. O'Donoghue (Eds) New theories for social work practice: Ethical practice for working with individuals, families and communities. Jessica Kingsley, London.

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