RELATIONAL RESOURCES FOR CHANGE

The helping alliance

The helping alliance is a way of thinking about how we work with rangatahi. We know a strong, positive relationship is the key to change (Duncan, Miller & Sparks., 2007; Kroll, 2010). The alliance is about making the relationship as equal as we can, so we work together on change (see Power). Working with rangatahi as partners is the best way to do this (Duncan, Miller & Sparks, 2007).

People make better changes when they are in control and we support them to make decisions, rather than when we try to tell them what to do. If we see rangatahi as partners, we see them as experts with important ideas about how to make change. After all, they know the most about their lives (see Positive youth development; Strengths-based practice).

Because it is an alliance, everyone is responsible for making it work (Kohli & Dutton, 2018, 93). Everyone gets a say in what the relationship looks like and what gets done. This makes it more equal. When people feel like equals, they find it easier to get involved and take control. It also stops us from making decisions behind the backs of rangatahi (de Boer and Coady, 2007; Duncan, Miller & Sparks, 2007) (see Building trust).

The helping alliance is about inviting rangatahi and their whānau to work with us to make life better (Duncan, Miller & Sparks, 2007). It also means that we don't always have the answers. Just like rangatahi, we can make mistakes. If we are partners, we can admit not knowing or mucking up, and the relationship can carry on. Also, we can still do difficult things and ask the hard questions when we work as partners. The helping alliance is a way of doing these difficult things while still keeping positive progress going.

The idea of a helping alliance, (or helping partnership) is a way of thinking about how to make this relationship work. Some people talk about the 'art of getting started' to explain we need to create the alliance first before we do the hard mahi (Kroll, 2010, 69).

We can use the idea of a helping alliance when we work with other professionals as well. It helps us listen to each other. This makes it more likely that a true picture of challenges faced by rangatahi will be gained and we will explore the most options.

Helping alliances can be very satisfying. People talk about a sense of genuine warmth, emotional depth, and closeness. They tell of success in working through differences and positively sorting out conflicts (de Boer & Coady, 2007, 41).

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Relationship-based practice is about creating effective relationships that support better outcomes. There is good evidence that when kaimahi build these quality relationships with rangatahi and their whānau, positive change is more likely. They play a role in good outcomes, no matter what type of service we are providing (Duncan et al., 2007; Hubble et al., 1999; Ingram & Smith, 2018). Putting effort into building strong, positive, and supportive relationships with rangatahi is therefore an important task for all kaimahi:

“RBP (relationship-based practice) is not a method or an approach to social work that can be picked from a menu of alternatives; rather it is at the heart of whatever approach might be adopted across different client groups and domains of practice” (Ingram & Smith, 2018,5).

Some important parts of the alliance

Reciprocity

Being able to share something of ourselves. This is intentional practice and helps make the relationship feel more balanced. It can include sharing kai and other small acts of warmth and kindness. Sometimes we can carefully share something of our own experience. We remember that the purpose is to support the young person, not to tell them things about ourselves, or to pretend we are similar. We give our time and support without expecting anything in return. We also are careful about our professional responsibilities making sure we do not exploit, share inappropriate information, or create a sense that rangatahi owe something back. This is carefully monitored through critically reflective practice (Turney, 2018) (see Power; Care ethics; Critical reflection).

Agency

Being in charge of your own choices and decisions. The helping alliance gives lots of chances for rangatahi to exercise their agency and to learn how to make decisions in a safe way. This is one way to reduce our power as kaimahi. Encouraging rangatahi to make decisions and tell us their views is important. This is about respect. It shows that we know that rangatahi, not us, have to make the changes. The changes have to fit with the goals of the rangatahi; they are the reason for the relationship (see Agency and voice; Power & PARTH in practice reflection sheets - Agency & Respect).

Trust

The helping alliance is based on trust. We need to prove by our actions that we won't let rangatahi down, that we won't hurt them or do things without telling them. We show them clearly and often that we have heard them, and we understand. When we have trust, we can start to do the hard stuff.

As adults and as kaimahi we have more power than rangatahi. Reducing this power difference is important. The helping alliance is about rangatahi feeling they are more equal and have a say in what happens. Rangatahi may not have had any experiences of sharing power. They might be used to kaimahi making all the decisions, labelling them and their needs, and telling them what to do. We might need to take some time to work with rangatahi so they know we really mean to share power (see Power; The importance of time & PARTH in practice reflection sheet - Time).

Sharing power, or collaborating, involves practical actions and showing rangatahi how this can be achieved, such as supporting them to make choices about activities. When people have some power and control over their lives, they are more likely to work towards change than when faced with threats and demands (Munford et al., 2006a & b). Kaimahi do not live in young people's lives, and if their work is to have long term effects, rangatahi must be actively and positively involved in the mahi (Gilligan,2004).

Kaimahi have special responsibilities to create and manage the relationship, so it achieves its goals. We need to be clear about the times we might need to use our power to protect rangatahi and make decisions. This can mean we need to exercise power or make

unpopular or unwanted and difficult decisions. We can use our power 'softly' (de Boer & Coady, 2007, 40), showing care and providing support at the same time. Use of power and authority is done carefully. We use critical reflection processes to make sure that it is necessary and we keep rangatahi in the loop about what we are doing. This helps keep the relationship going and shows our human side. But most of the time we can share power and we can collaborate with rangatahi (see Power; Critical reflection).

Useful skills and ideas for building the alliance

- Make sure your explanations are understood. Keep giving opportunities for rangatahi to ask questions
- Treat rangatahi and their whānau with kindness, respect & dignity
- Connect rangatahi to support networks that will provide enduring support
- Ensure rangatahi are fully informed
- Support rangatahi to prepare for important meetings, events and processes
- Support rangatahi to work out what they need from meeting and decisions.
- Work hard to make sure you understand
- Encourage rangatahi to bring supporters to meetings
- Be honest and genuine
- Listen carefully and clarify information, & check interpretations
- Return calls, don't miss meetings. If you say you are going to do something, make sure you do it.
- Share case records
- Create situations where rangatahi are able to make key decisions
- Be open to questions
- Encourage rangatahi to try out new things & support them if they don't work, to have another go

RELATIONAL RESOURCES FOR CHANGE

HOW DO I USE THESE IDEAS IN MY MAHI?

The example below shows key elements of the helping alliance that help create meaningful partnerships with rangatahi.

To form a partnership with rangatahi I sit with them, at the same height, and explain what our organisation does and what I do and how we could support them. I make sure I answer all their questions and I always come back to this to check that they are clear about what is happening. I spend time getting to know them by asking about their experiences. I usually start by asking them about what they like to do and what they do each day. I start with these topics because talking about concrete things can help them feel comfortable. I don't push – I take my time with rangatahi and give them lots of opportunities to ask questions. I keep reminding them in a gentle way that we are working together because it is about supporting them by drawing on their knowledge. I keep checking in with them about what we are doing and if our mahi makes sense to them. As time goes on, they come to trust me more and we can start working on the tough things. I take the time in my coaching meetings to talk about the things I am doing with the rangatahi and I also give space in my meetings with rangatahi to together reflect on what we have done together and the goals the rangatahi has achieved. I always take the time to prepare for my meetings with rangatahi and I appreciate that our agency gives us time to do this and sees reflection processes as very important in our mahi.

RELATIONAL RESOURCES FOR CHANGE

Here are some places to look for more information

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