

Teenagers and Therapeutic Community

Creating a Residential Evidence Based Practice

By Country Joe College

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In every residential facility for teenagers (and in every situation where teens are in a continuing group situation) a hidden intruder is always present. This intruder is well known to program staff and usually management as well. This invisible intruder is an 800 lb gorilla. Its name is **teen peer subculture**. The **only** way we will ever be able to build a residential EBP is to handcuff and hogtie this gorilla so that it can no longer spread its negativity. **All** residential facilities spend virtually every single day indirectly attempting to achieve this objective.

There is one model, and one model only, that not only neutralizes the gorilla but also transforms his negativity into a positive force by first, forcing him into the sunshine, and then persuading him to join the party (residential “treatment”). That model is **Therapeutic Community (TC)**.

What is Therapeutic Community (TC)?

TC is both a **concept** (philosophy) and a **practice**. As a philosophy, **TC** believes that, while in group care, clients (residents, patients, inmates) **should participate in their own management and treatment**. As a practice, a **TC** will build elements of this philosophy into the daily operations of its programming.

How?

Some **TCs** may do nothing more than provide a regularly scheduled opportunity for all clients and all staff to meet and discuss **whatever the clients wish to discuss**. **TCs** which most closely follow the guiding philosophy and beliefs consciously create a living, breathing positive **culture**. Because **TC** is a concept as well as a practice, there is a wide variation in **intensity** and in application of the model.

What does this look like day-to-day?

At a minimum, clients in a **TC** can challenge policy and staff decisions at the designated times. These are usually called **community meetings**. They can also make suggestions concerning everyday functions of the facility such as food service, scheduled activities, or articulate on personal issues and the behavior of other “community” members.

Isn't this an invitation to chaos?

Sure sounds like it. The inmates running the asylum. And, it can get a little dicey in the early stages of building a **TC**. Staff with ego issues or on power trips need not apply.

But what actually happens is that a new gestalt, or norm, gradually emerges. The dirty little secret about **all** residential facilities, or situations where the same people are in a continuing group situation, is that **there is always a hidden power structure** which operates beneath the surface. In **any** group situation leaders emerge, others challenge, still other “go along with the program” and some end up at the bottom of the social totem pole. **This process is especially acute with teenagers** and has given rise to the dreaded “teen peer subculture.” The uniqueness of a **TC** is

that it **exposes** this subculture and then **uses it for its own purposes** which in the most advanced TCs is to **create a relentlessly positive CULTURE**.

Talk some more about this “culture.”

Culture, in its broadest terms, is the most powerful force known to mankind in controlling, modifying or changing human behavior. The Mafia is a culture. So are teenage street gangs, and individuals involved in the illicit drug trade. On the other hand, the Marines are a strong culture. So are volunteer firefighting organizations, and self-help groups like AA and NAMI. Motorcycle clubs can be either a strong positive or strong negative culture. Think of the civil rights movement attacking the entrenched culture of racism. Or the feminists going after the entrenched culture of male dominance. Or even strong and proud ethnic cultures like the Irish and the Italians. “Members” of a culture share explicit but often unspoken beliefs, assumptions, and expectations. **Everyone** who participated in the great 2008 economic meltdown, from Wall Street traders, to banks, to real estate operatives, to financial regulators, and all the way to people who signed up for mortgages they knew they couldn’t afford, all shared the same basic underlying assumptions and beliefs. So a **TC** harnesses this awesome human group “power” and uses it to change behavior in positive ways. If you think about it for a while, perhaps you’ll begin to realize that, in effect, a **TC returns us to an earlier state** when there was no hierarchy and everyone was socially equal.

But I thought you said every group – and especially teenagers – are always hierarchical?

Right. We are, and they are. But in a strong culture, **everything is dictated and governed by the culture**, or it wouldn’t be a culture! So when we build a strong **TC** culture to manage, educate, and treat adolescents, **the culture itself, and not specific individuals**, controls everything. As a member of the culture, everyone is equal. Supervising staff **are agents of the culture and acting on its behalf**.

Once again, tell me how this works OPERATIONALLY? Like in day to day interactions of the “members”?

Sure. Since this is about teenagers let’s use them as the example. As a **TC** culture begins, teens at first don’t really believe that they can say anything they want to staff members (during the community meeting) without repercussions. Then, they begin to exploit their freedom (teenagers are always all about learning **power** and **freedom**). They may go on ego trips, treating others to their extensive vocabulary of cuss words. But the “community” (all the others) soon tires of this. As negative leaders emerge, so – eventually – do positive ones. Because leadership comes from the culture itself – from other teenagers – there is no staff vs. kids issue.

As agents of the culture, staff participants in advanced **TCs** operate from a clear set of written guidelines. One of them could be something like **Be Relentlessly Positive**. Another might be **Ask Questions. Don’t Make Statements**. And a third is **Nonsense In, Nonsense Out**. So a typical staff response when a negative teen leader is temporarily dominating the meeting by showing her ability to swear and to “put staff down” might be to finally ask the others if they’ve had enough of

Petula's nonsense. **Because all of us -- and especially teens -- instantly know the INTENT** of Petula's remarks, the community itself, in the form of other emerging leaders, will always put a stop to this kind of power tripping. As the culture matures, and as teens get used to the freedom of verbal expression, treatment issues indicative of individual problems always emerge. Someone has a temper, or has to dominate, or does stuff "off camera" (away from the meeting) that is a problem for others, and needs to be called on it. Still later, as other cultural norms kick in ("You're all teenagers. You're all struggling with the same issues. We expect you to help each other because you know each other better than we (staff) do."), teens begin to eventually bare their souls and openly discuss deep individual issues. But this occurs only in **TCs** that enforce the cultural norm of **Make No Judgments**. Trust -- the kind of trust that facilitates a deep level of sharing, can only be built by being relentlessly positive and not descending into specific labeling of behavior or actions. Once again, teens **absolutely know** when they've messed up and will always feel free to share that within a culture of trust and caring.

What about controlling behavior?

As teens use their freedom of expression in a **TC** to join with and help others, they move quickly to control negative behavior. And this always includes **staff behavior**. There are no secrets in a **TC** and nowhere for control-freak staff to hide. And that is why there is no issue with restraints and seclusion. A well run **TC** is an absolute administrative tool. Experienced staff can walk into a living unit and instantly discern "that something is wrong" because they can "read" the culture.

What are the negatives?

TCs need constant vigilance. Running a **TC** is like running a nuclear power plant. No complacency is allowed. But **TCs** are very predictable. There are very specific issues and patterns which repeat over time and which staff can learn to recognize.

TCs are very **right brained**. It's difficult to run a **TC** in an unbalanced **left brain** world. And the learning and training of staff is mostly **experiential**. You won't really know what a **cultural meltdown** is and how to handle it until you've lived through one or two. Ditto "giving up the need to be right" and "make no judgments." You can't learn it sitting in class or from a power point. And because a **TC** is a concept as well as a practice, there are a lot of **TC derivatives**. One of them is the very successful **Sanctuary** model taught by Dr. Sandra Bloom, MD. But others have taken parts of **TC** practice and used them in an unbalanced way, thus giving the whole approach a bad name. **Guided Group Interaction (GGI)** and **Positive Peer Culture (PPC)** were early adaptations of **TC** specific to delinquent teenagers that worked like a charm until later practitioners abandoned "fidelity to the model." And staff raised in a left brain oriented world have more trouble learning the practice than those raised in earlier times.

So -- finally -- tell me why this is the only approach that can achieve the status of a residential EBP?

Already did. Every institution, group home, residential facility, etc. **must** address the issue of the peer group. **TC** is the **only** methodology that turns this power into a positive, rather than a

negative force. And when working with teenage delinquents, only the best will do, meaning an advanced **TC**. Even the derivatives won't get us there in the long run. And perhaps you can already begin to visualize how a strong positive culture can stimulate teens to be all they can possibly be. A **TC** like this **is** "treatment." And it facilitates kids going further in individual therapy. And moving seamlessly into aftercare with the confidence that can only come from helping themselves as they have helped others in the community. A residential EBP is **not** a pipedream. But for the most difficult of clients – delinquent teens – there really is only one way to get there...