

Wisconsin Women's Resource Center

Sensory Connection Program Training

Winnebago, WI

June 12 - 14, 2012

The Sensory Connection to Helping Offenders in the Wisconsin Prison System Women's Mental Health Units



This training was designed to educate the staff of the Wisconsin Women's Resource Center (WWRC) on sensory approaches to helping women on their high acuity, moderate acuity and specialized mental health treatment units. The focus of the training was on assisting staff to become comfortable with sensory techniques for self-regulation, to begin to recognize sensory issues that could be contributing to

maladaptive behaviors and to learn about sensory connections to trauma sensitive treatment. Another purpose of this training was to assist in the development of calming rooms by educating staff on the purpose and best use of these rooms and how to implement the safe use of sensory tools and equipment in these rooms.

The same SCP Training was provided on three mornings so that as many staff from WWRC could attend as possible. Some staff from the Taycheedah Correctional Institution (TIC) attended as well. TIC is the prison where many of the women will be returning post treatment. Having staff from the prison understanding sensory approaches will be crucial in supporting the women in using their coping strategies after discharge from the mental health units. Staff from Adolescent Units in Wisconsin were also included in the trainings on two of the days. In the afternoon these two days additional adolescent specific training was provided which included experiencing a Sense-ability Group. People commented that participating in the group helped them integrate the information and the philosophy behind sensory interventions.



WWRC

WWRC is a 45 bed mental health facility serving women offenders located on the shore of Lake Winnebago. It is a joint program between the Wisconsin Prison System and the Wisconsin Department of Mental Health. All three units have a high commitment to trauma sensitive care.



The embracement of sensory approaches to treatment and the education of staff in these sensory techniques are ways that WWRC demonstrates leadership in the prison system consistent with programs that have been shown to be both innovative and effective according to research by the National Institute of Justice. Key attributes of successful programs demonstrated by WWRC include caring dedicated and qualified staff, open communication, facilitation of women's self-esteem, programs that address empowerment and self-sufficiency as well as issues of victimization and domestic violence, and the encouragement of prisoners to support each other and to provide positive peer influence.

Calming Room Development

Consultation prior to the SCP Training included helping WWRC to plan and equip a calming room on one of the units. A list of suggested sensory tools and equipment was provided which was reviewed by staff; safety was a huge concern in selecting appropriate equipment.

Key Themes of the Training

- Self-Regulation begins with self-awareness.
- Attention to the present moment promotes calming and safety.
- Staff needs to be educated in sensory modalities and comfortable using tools.
- Trauma causes a dysregulation of the body's arousal system as well as a suppression of communication areas of the brain making body oriented approaches essential.



- Cognitive issues due to trauma and difficulties with attention and problem solving can interfere with clients ability to follow through with strategies without verbal and written cues and practice.
- Restoring rhythms is an important aspect of treatment.
- Taking control through threats, seclusion and restraint only helps temporarily; teaching self-control gives skills for a lifetime.

Non-tool Based Sensory Regulation Strategies

Suggestions were requested for non-tool based sensory strategies because of the high acuity of one of the units, the prevalence of self-injurious behaviors and the risk of using the tools inappropriately.

Proprioception and movement ideas include strategies such as chair push-ups, pacing, foot flexes, joint compression, rhythmic slap/clap activities, and stamping feet.



Vestibular input ideas include linear rocking, head and neck rolls, humming, and dancing.

Deep pressure touch ideas include self-hugs, pushing the shoulder and body against a wall, and self-massage of hands and feet.

Resources

Article from the Department of justice on Women Offenders: Programming Needs and Promising Approaches <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles/171668.pdf>

Overcoming Trauma Through Yoga by David Emerson and Elizabeth Hopper gives excellent ideas on using invitational language and being sensitive to trauma issues when doing body based therapies.