

This article reflects the second part of a series entitled “How to Maintain a Therapeutic Relationship when your Buttons are being Pushed – 21 Lessons for Supporting Individuals with Disabilities.” They have been found to provide useful skills for developing and maintaining a therapeutic relationship with anyone. This article will be focusing on lessons 7 through 12.

Supporting Persons with Disabilities (Lessons 7-12)

7 Provide reasonable safety while respecting reasonable choices:

It is our job as DSPs to shepherd our individuals through life, not shelter them from life. While safety will always be the job number one, our next priority should be assisting them to experience a full life, including failure, disappointment & sadness.



A **person-focused approach** requires us to support them through the **FULL** range of life experiences and challenges. In sum, both **success and disappointment** can be used as valuable learning tools.

8 Treatment should not sound parental or be punishing:

Often our tone may reflect a “parental tone,” to ensure control and safety. A **parental tone** can emerge as our default or “go-to response” when we assume the role of a DSP. If a participant demonstrates behavior that we, as staff, perceive as “child-like,” it does not give us permission to act authoritarian. **We are supporting adults and our tone should reflect that.** By attending to prosocial behaviors in the persons we support, we encourage more prosocial behaviors. A collaborative, relationship-focused style that is quick to reward positive behavior is much more useful in fostering prosocial behavior.

9 Difference between providing assistance & fostering dependence?

Our basic therapeutic task is mostly **“to do with”** and not **“to do for”** because it is easier for us. Supporting incremental successes in personally meaningful life activities should be among our top priorities.

10 Keep in mind the big picture:

Often, assistance can be withheld for fear that it will create dependence or “reinforce that behavior.” When in doubt, check with a colleague, or better still, ask the participant. Once, a DSP chose not take a participant to work because they refused to tie their shoes, and they felt it was fostering dependence to do it for them. In the big picture, allowing them the dignity of working and earning a paycheck should be the priority. We can fix “shoe-tying dependency” later.

11 Teach new skills to replace problem behaviors:

Behavior is often a communication that the person is trying to meet their needs in a particular context. A person’s needs are like their emotions, they are neither good or bad, they just are. Our job as DSPs is to **teach new skills (behaviors) to replace ineffective ones**, without reverting to a parental tone. Once we teach the skill, it is imperative that we consistently reward it by providing attention. If the goal is to achieve behavior change by replacing an ineffective behavior with a new positive behavior, we should be rewarding positives more often than correcting problems.

12 Providing control & predictability will reduce stress:

In general, stress can be reduced by increasing people’s sense of control and predictability. Often, the individuals we support can experience a lot of unpredictability in their lives because they are challenged to keep track of upcoming events. We can help enhance their sense of prediction by providing them with supportive and personalized reminders and memory aids. Part of our task as DSPs is about **enhancing the person’s sense of control and prediction** by designing supportive environments and schedules that increase a sense of prediction and control over the course of the day.



This is accomplished by providing **meaningful choices and responsibilities** daily, as well as creating living and work environments, and schedules that work for that person.

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