INside the OUTcomes: A Rehabilitation Research Podcast

Episode 27: Motivational Interviewing and Person-Centered Services: Microlearning for HCBS Direct Service Professionals  
  
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**SHARON PARMET, HOST:**  
On this episode of [**INside the OUTcomes**](https://www.sralab.org/research/labs/cror/projects/inside-outcomes-rehabilitation-research-podcast), we'll be talking about a new [**training**](https://www.sralab.org/research/labs/cror/news/motivational-interviewing-and-person-centered-services-microlearning-hcbs-direct-service) for direct service professionals on using motivational interviewing to provide more person-centered supports and services. Researchers in the [**Center for Rehabilitation Outcomes Research**](https://www.sralab.org/research/labs/cror) at Shirley Ryan Ability Lab, who created the free training, are currently looking for DSPs to test it and provide feedback. If you're interested, I'll place a link in the show notes to more information on how to participate.

My guests are Dr. Linda Ehrlich Jones, associate director of the Center for Rehabilitation Outcomes Research and a research professor of physical medicine and rehabilitation in the Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, and Bob Sattler, a partner of Support Development Associates, a specialized consultation and training organization helping organizational providers of services and supports, as well as state systems, to become more efficient, effective and person-centered.

Bob, let’s first, maybe define what are direct service professionals, also known as DSPs, and what kinds of services and supports do they provide?

**BOB SATTLER:**  
Sure. DSPs, direct service professionals, really are probably the most important role in someone's life. These are the folks that work on a daily basis with people with disabilities. They're teachers, they're role models, they're friends, they're confidants. And DSPs support people to really learn activities of daily living, such things as cooking, laundry, managing their money, as well as helping them achieve the goals and outcomes that the person desires to have a meaningful and purposeful life. And DSPs really have a difficult job because they wear so many hats.

And often, they may not see themselves as having such a significant role in someone's life, but they have a huge impact on anybody that they come in contact with. So DSPs support a wide variety of people. Typically, if we're looking at the human service industry, it could be people with developmental disabilities, it could be people with cerebral palsy, people with autism, people who are aging, so we may get CNAs, also fall into that DSP category, certified nursing assistants.

And so it really is those people who we would classify as vulnerable people in our world today.

**SHARON:**  
And I know that there's a lot of emphasis on providing person-centered services and supports. What does that mean?

BOB:

Well, you know, person-centered services and supports really is about how we support people by learning what's meaningful to them and what makes them happy, content and fulfilled.

I like to call it the Platinum Rule. We're all familiar with following the golden rule, treating others as we would like to be treated. But the reality is I may not want to be treated the way you do and vice versa.

So when we think about this, the Platinum Rule is really to treat others the way they want to be treated, which means we need to learn what that is. And typically, our focus has been on things that are important for someone, those things that keep people healthy and safe. And the happiness factor really was kind of an afterthought.

But person-centered services and supports, this approach really is to make sure that there's a balance between those two things so that people are happy and healthy, they're satisfied and they're safe. It really is the way we need to be treating everyone in our lives. And it's been around for almost 30 years now and is now taking a more formal role in how services and supports are designed and delivered.

**SHARON:**So that leads into my next question. If we are to treat people how they want to be treated, we need to know how they want to be treated. And Dr. Linda Ehrlich-Jones is an expert in something called motivational interviewing, which in this training is going to play a central role in finding out how people want to be treated. So Dr. Ehrlich-Jones, can you talk a little bit more about motivational interviewing?

**DR. EHRLICH-JONES:**  
Sure, Sharon. Motivational interviewing is a counseling style that's used to help people change their behavior. So it's not making people do anything, but actually having good communication and ways in which to help motivate people to want to do things for themselves in order to get to where they need to go.

There's no way that we can make other people change. So this is an alternative in terms of helping people to help themselves.

**SHARON:**  
So how how did it come about that you decided to develop a training geared towards DSPs on providing person-centered services?

**DR. EHRLICH-JONES:**  
So as part of a grant from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research, there is a Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Home and Community-Based Services that Dr. Allen Heinemann is the director of.

And we did a little bit of a study in another part of the projects that looked at what were those competencies that people needed in order to help and improve the services that people do receive in home and community-based services. And a couple of the issues that came up that we're going to talk about today are person-centered supports as well as motivational interviewing. And Bob and I, we've known each other for a while and we both have looked at trainings and done trainings in our respected areas, and found that these actually kind of meld pretty well together.

And so we thought that this would be a good opportunity.

We also have an advisory, a couple of advisory councils that we went to, an advisory council made up of persons with disabilities as well as organizations that support people with disabilities, and ask them, what did they think as being some of those important issues that we should be including in a training for direct service professionals?

**SHARON:**  
And Bob, how did you get involved in this project?

**BOB:**  
Well, Sharon, SDA, Support Development Associates, really has been a leader in person-centered practices since around 1997. And we've worked internationally to help organizations and governmental systems really build these practices into how we do our work.

My background, I come from the provider world. I actually started as a DSP myself, stayed in that world, eventually had my own service agency and really focused on supporting people in a person-centered way.

Before, person-centeredness was the catchphrase that it is today and really looked at how can we work with the system to really help people have meaningful and purposeful lives. So I think that experience has been helpful as we looked at training for DSPs.

**SHARON:**  
And so what are some of the challenges that DSPs face in their day-to-day work? And how is this training? I understand that it's very unique. So how is it geared to make it easy for DSPs to engage with the training and complete it?

**BOB:**Well, I can talk a little bit about some of the challenges that DSPs face, and I think Linda will be very helpful with talking about the training that we've put together.

First and foremost, as I mentioned earlier, DSPs wear many hats. They are very busy. They're on the go all the time. And so being able to take time off of supporting people and go to a day-long, two-day-long training, it's really challenging for folks. It makes it even more challenging because there's lots of turnover in the industry. And so DSPs really are covering shifts because of vacancies. They have limited time to do things. They've got to do the supports for people. They've got to do the paperwork that documents the supports that they provided. And another thing is because of the nature of this industry, DSP wages are not really a livable wage. So many DSPs are working more than one job. And so trying to do that with everything else that they've got to do in this primary job can be very challenging.

**SHARON:**  
So, Dr. Ehrlich-Jones, how did you address these challenges that DSPs have as you put together the training program?

**DR. EHRLICH-JONES:**  
Well, we started out as we normally do, thinking about training and having people sitting in a room and talking to them or doing it over Zoom. And as I mentioned, we have these two advisory councils. And as we talked about this training, they said, well, that's not going to work. And as Bob has said, DSPs are very busy. They don't have time. There's not enough of them for several of them to sit in a room and go through training.

And so we happened upon these microlessons by an organization called Learnie. And it was something that just sort of seemed to fit naturally.

And what microlessons are, are essentially these small bursts of information, about 30 seconds, maybe up to two minutes, that you give the most important pieces. There could also be some visuals related to that and have them be available not only on a computer or a tablet, but on a smartphone. So the DSP who may be having a few minutes between people that they're supporting is to actually then just sit there and do one quick lesson because they are so quick.

We're very excited about it. At this point, we are doing what we call alpha testing. So we have members of our advisory councils taking a look at what we've put together and incorporating them their feedback in order to then move on to the next stage, which will be beta testing.

And so from that perspective, I think right now we're very excited by the feedback that we're receiving. Nothing kind of stands out as being something we wouldn't have expected. Once you start working on a project and you're engrossed in that project, you kind of don't always see those little things that kind of make a difference.

And so those are some of the things that have been coming out from the feedback at this point.

**SHARON:**And what are some of the topics of the lessons?

DR. EHRLICH-JONES:  
So the way that the training is structured is that we have three trainings per week that last approximately somewhere between five and 10 minutes, pretty consistently.

One of them focuses on motivational interviewing skills. One of them focuses on person centered skills. And then there's what we call the third Learnie, and that Learnie is a combination of those two concepts, what you're learning in that particular week and actually how can you apply it and what it is you're doing with the people you support.

And so from a motivational interviewing standpoint, we have things about open-ended questions, affirmations, reflections, summarization. And so it's an opportunity for people to learn what those skills are and then actually practice it by the end of the week.

So the Learnies are, it's kind of like social media. It's very quick, but it gives you a piece of information that you learn a little bit, but then you actually get to utilize that information. And some of it will be some kind of quizzes. Some of them will be ways in which you can listen to an interview with the DSP that we talk about some of the concepts that we're working on.

It will also provide you an opportunity to actually have what we call a discussion board. So you can actually communicate with the other people that are participating in the in the training to learn from each other, not only from what it is that we're providing. And Bob, maybe you can tell a little bit more about the person-centered skills?

**BOB:**  
Yeah, the person-centered skills really are ways to apply that motivational interviewing to really take into account that Platinum Rule. What do we need to learn, and what can people tell us and how can we act on that? So it's not necessarily an assessment. It's more about how do you have a conversation with somebody to really learn what it is that is meaningful to them and then how we can apply that through the skills.

It's really hard to ask someone, so tell me what's important to you in your life, when that's a pretty global question, as opposed to, so tell me who are some people that are important to you in your life? What are some things that you like to do? What makes a good day for you? What makes a bad day for you? Those are some concrete ways that people can answer those questions and gives us more insight into what we do. With person-centeredness, specifics matter. So we really want to make sure we get those specifics.

And we also look at some of the system issues we need to think about. But how do we create some alignment with the rules that we need to follow and the practices that we want to make sure are in alignment with that? And that helps us bring the entire system together to really support people.

**SHARON:**What kind of people are you looking for to test the training?

**DR. EHRLICH-JONES:**So we're looking for some organizations who are interested in this kind of a training for their direct service professionals.

A lot, as you've learned from what Bob has said and I've said earlier, is it's a lot about communication and helping people to learn how to talk with other people, not necessarily talk at other people. And so we're looking for an organization that's interested in that because we don't only want the DSPs involved. We want to make sure that the organization is interested in and what we have to offer as well.

So we will be looking for the beta testing probably sometime early, either late May, early June to go over and test this and kind of get some insight, not only from the DSPs, but maybe also from the administrators. Maybe some of the other personnel that work at that organization to see, you know, are there other things that we've missed? Are there things that would be helpful for this training for that particular group? But the focus is on the direct service professionals. Okay, and I will link to more information if anybody is interested in participating in the training.

SHARON:  
Bob, is there anything you want to add?

**BOB:**I kind of think it's important to let people know that a Learnie really is an introduction to things. It's not going to give all of the details that people need, but it is an opportunity to get exposed to it. And that could lead to further training if people are interested.

**SHARON:**Well, thank you both for being my guests on this episode of INside the OUTcomes.

**DR. EHRLICH-JONES:**Thank you for having us, Sharon.

**BOB:**Yes, thank you.

**SHARON:**This has been INside the OUTcomes: A Rehabilitation Research Podcast. This podcast is supported by the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research. This is your host, Sharon Parmet, signing off.