

Introduction

The Power Source Program for At-risk Youth



The immense challenges facing highly at-risk youth are apparent to virtually anyone who has worked with this population. Finding one's way in the world, developing a strong sense of self, and functioning productively in a community can be challenging for adolescents with every resource and support system available to them. But for youth who are not afforded "safety nets" from their families and communities, mastering these developmental tasks can be overwhelming. During our years of work with highly at-risk youth, we have witnessed their struggle to navigate the transition into adulthood. Despite appearances, most of these young people are desperately seeking guidance, support, and inspiration from the adults they come in contact with. And this is where the challenge is extended to all of us. How can we help these youth increase their self-awareness, improve their ability to control their behavior, and lead them toward discovering a sense of purpose and hopefulness about their futures in the short time we have with them?

The material presented in this manual is modeled on the book *Houses of Healing: A Prisoner's Guide to Inner Power and Freedom*. Since 1988, the Houses of Healing Program has been used in prisons and jails across the country to teach emotional literacy skills. It is best described as a course that gives participants an increased ability to read and understand the emotions that motivate their choices, perceptions, and feelings, as well as teaching coping and stress management strategies (for additional information see www.lionheart.org). Although written for adults, *Houses of Healing* has been used by many youth detention centers and juvenile justice programs over the years. In response to requests for a program that addresses the unique developmental needs of high-risk adolescents and young adults (14–22 years old), we created *Power Source: Taking Charge of Your Life*.

Using the Book and Manual

There are many ways to use *Power Source* and this accompanying manual. The flexible format of the book and manual facilitate their use in a wide array of settings serving at-risk youth, including youth detention centers, juvenile offender programs in adult institutions, group homes, residential treatment facilities, community centers with programming for high-risk youth, as well as public and private schools. For youth willing and able to read, copies of the book can be made available for them to work through at their own pace. Sections of the book, including the stories written by at-risk youth, can be read during group or individual sessions. Parts of the book can be copied and distributed as independent work. Throughout there are “Stop and Think” activities designed to promote discussions about many issues and topics pertaining to growth and healing. These Stop and Think exercises closely relate to the material in this manual and can be integrated into group sessions.

Likewise, there are many approaches to implementing the material in the manual. The emotional literacy skills, anger management techniques, self-regulation exercises, and trauma-based concepts lend themselves well to augmenting existing groups. Throughout the manual you will find both general and topic-specific meditation, guided visualization, and relaxation exercises. These can be used as supplemental materials to enrich and expand ongoing groups. Or the program can be used in its entirety as an eleven-module treatment approach consisting of as many sessions as time allows. The manual is equally effective as a tool for both individual and group therapy.

You will notice that the ordering of the book and manual are slightly different and that some of the chapters in the book have been omitted from the manual. These variations reflect the different processes inherent in reading a text individually versus working with the material in a group setting or with a therapist. Although the ordering of the material in the manual is a suggestion of how to present the topics, feel free to create a format that best meets the needs of the youth in your care.

Length of Course

Like every aspect of this program, the length of the course is flexible. Many detention centers work with youth for short periods of time, whereas residential programs and schools in the community have the benefit of long-term treatment. Ideally, the more intensively youth are exposed to the material in *Power Source*, the greater mastery they will develop over its concepts and techniques. An eleven-module program is presented in this manual. Each module can be presented across several sessions depending on the

group's time frame. Some of the material, such as taking responsibility for one's offending behavior, often requires repeated exposure for genuine and lasting change to occur.

We have used the materials to facilitate twelve session groups, as well as ongoing process groups in which group composition changed as adolescents were admitted and discharged from the facility. Often certain topics or issues seem to strike a chord with particular groups. When this occurs, you might choose to devote more time to that section of the manual and book. Obviously, the length of the class must fit into the youths' larger schedules, but we suggest conducting groups that last between forty-five minutes to one hour—shorter than this and it can be difficult to accomplish your objectives, longer and it can become challenging to keep the attention of the group focused.

Group Facilitators

Although the manual is written from the perspective of a co-facilitator format, it is possible for an individual to facilitate a group alone. We have found that when possible, having two facilitators provides more structure and support, which for many high-risk adolescents translates into an experience of greater perceived safety. From a practical standpoint, having two leaders enables tasks to be divided, including facilitating exercises and discussions and managing group members' participation when needed. The co-facilitator format also offers group members an opportunity to observe people working together collaboratively and resolving issues that arise in constructive and prosocial ways.

Our experience suggests that one of the most important things you can do to be an optimally effective group facilitator is to “practice what you preach.” If you are relaxing and meditating on a regular basis, your presence alone is likely to create the context of emotional safety that is needed to do the challenging work you are encouraging the participants to do. One of the authors of this program (R.C.) stresses over and over to the individuals she works with: “You will not find the time to do these things; you have to create the time.”

As you well know, working with highly at-risk youth can be extremely challenging for even the most patient and self-aware people. At times we wonder if anything we are saying is getting through. Yet we return day after day to try and reach even those who seem “unreachable.” At our best, we are aware of the enormous potential that lies in each of these youth. This is the fuel that drives our efforts. To the extent that we can see members' potential and possibility anew each time we are with them, we have the opportunity to awaken them to the power they already possess.

Note to Facilitators: As you go through the book and manual, it is extremely important to select only those exercises and topics that you are qualified to conduct. Many of

the issues in the book and manual are highly emotionally charged and may trigger intense reactions from group members. For some members expressing these feelings is an integral part of the healing process. And facilitators should ideally be prepared and equipped to manage these expressions in a manner that is safe for all those participating in the group experience. As a result, we strongly encourage that you only address these topics (see the list that follows) if you have received adequate training and experience in these areas. If you are unsure about whether to proceed with a topic, discuss your concerns with a colleague or supervisor. If possible, select a co-facilitator whose knowledge base includes expertise in areas other than where your skills are developed. This will allow a greater range of material to be covered during the group.

Topics/Chapters that should only be addressed by individuals who have had appropriate clinical training in these specific issues:

Module 3 – Lost Childhoods and Entitlement (note that some material from the entitlement section is appropriate for those with various training levels—use your judgment about which materials to use or consult with another professional with greater experience working with these issues)

Module 7 – Families

Module 8 – Grief and Loss

Screening

When possible, it is extremely beneficial to screen members before creating a group. Screening in our terms is simply a chance to meet with members on a one-to-one basis prior to the first group. The screening can be conducted as a formal interview or it can be a conversation about the circumstances leading to the youth's involvement in high-risk behavior. Screening serves several important purposes. First, it allows the co-leaders an opportunity to identify issues specific to the group members and create a course that best addresses their needs. For example, are there specific family issues, such as parental incarceration, that need to be included in the group? It is also an opportunity to assess what the group members identify as the problems, difficulties, or challenges facing them. During the program, do they want to address specific concerns, such as anger management, peer pressure, substance abuse, or domestic violence?

Screening also helps co-leaders determine whether a prospective member is “group ready.” This essentially means, Does the adolescent seem able to participate safely in a

group? A potential member who is uncontrollably angry, violent, or impulsive may not benefit from such a program or treatment format. Furthermore, he or she will undoubtedly detract from the experience of the other members. Although in some cases, due to mandated treatment requirements, it is necessary to include such adolescents in groups despite their open resistance to joining, we have found it most productive to include members who demonstrate at least a basic willingness to be involved. If you are running a group but you are not able to screen prospective members, talking with others who work with and know the youth can often provide useful information.

Number of Participants

Although the size of the group can vary, we have found it optimal to work with groups of six to ten members. When there are fewer than six members it is often difficult to conduct exercises, facilitate discussions, and develop a cohesive group feeling. And attrition, for a variety of reasons, is often a reality. Having more than ten members often inclines groups toward becoming chaotic. In general, it is easier to create a sense of safety and trust in smaller groups. And as many of these youth are desperate for attention and support, smaller groups enable facilitators to provide greater individualized attention to the members.

Group Cohesion

Healthy group process assumes safety, commitment, and confidentiality. Many at-risk youth enter new group situations suspicious, wary, and defensive. This makes developing a sense of group cohesion a difficult yet essential condition if work on deeply personal and emotionally charged issues is to occur. Only when members are convinced that you are capable of keeping the space safe will they be able to trust the environment enough to disclose their feelings and process issues productively. If a member develops a pattern of disruptive behavior, it can be useful to meet with him or her outside of the group to discuss what is going on and to determine whether continued involvement in the group really works at this time.

At times it may seem that even the most compliant and participatory member seems remote, oppositional, or disruptive. It is helpful to examine behavioral disruptions on several different levels. Some issues are so difficult and painful for members to deal with that they attempt to derail the group in order to avoid the feelings that arise. Sometimes simply acknowledging how hard it is to deal with some of these topics (especially family-related problems) can help defuse acting-out behavior. Let members know that they don't have to actively participate in activities that feel overwhelming or "too much" for

them. If possible, use these types of events to help members identify, label, and manage their emotions—the basic building blocks of any emotional literacy curriculum.

Using the Modules

Each module presents facilitators with a rationale for why the material was included in the program, as well as the module's primary goals. We appreciate that not all agencies, facilities, and programs have the luxury of seeing adolescents in groups for extended periods of time. Although we think it would be ideal if you could devote three or four months to the section *Taking Responsibility for Offending Behavior* alone, for example, we know that only a small, fortunate number of you will have that kind of time. Because each module contains more material than can be covered during one session, we encourage you to choose material that best meet your treatment needs.

In general, the most fundamental material in each module is present in the beginning. Supplementary exercises are placed at the end. Before constructing a session, we encourage you to look over the entire module and identify the exercises, guided visualizations, and vignettes that seem most appropriate. As mentioned earlier, we structured the manual in a way that seemed most suitable for groups, placing the more sensitive issues in the middle of the manual so that members might first benefit from the establishment of a certain level of group cohesion, trust, and safety.

We encourage you to integrate several elements into each session regardless of the order you present the modules. For example, the backbone of this program is a belief that becoming more self-aware and in control of one's feelings and behaviors revolves around the ability to quiet one's mind and become more aware of oneself and one's reactions. This goal can be dramatically enhanced through the practice of meditation. Therefore, we strongly urge you to include a ten-minute (or longer as the course progresses) meditation at the beginning of each session. *The course is simply not the course we had in mind without it.* There is instruction on meditation in the first module. We also believe that each session should be an opportunity to assist members in identifying and processing their emotions—a fundamental component of any emotional literacy program.

Although talking to adolescents about their feelings can certainly be an effective form of treatment, we believe that there is the opportunity to effect change at a level that goes beyond the intellect (or the thinking mind). Therefore, we have included guided visualizations in each of the modules. We strongly urge you to use as many of these as you can throughout the course as they offer an alternate and potentially powerful way to create change.

Course Completion

As with any group, some members will leave before the completion of the course. External demands such as discharge dates or transfers to other facilities are the most common reasons that members do not finish a group. Yet there are also internal reasons why group members do not want to complete the program. These include, among others, resistance to dealing with emotions that might be triggered by the course material, long-established patterns of becoming disengaged or disaffected from activities or programs, and wanting to leave the group before one can be essentially “left” or abandoned by the natural termination of the group.

Helping group members overcome their impulses to leave the group prior to its completion is a powerful intervention in and of itself. Allowing them to see the group through to its completion provides them with a sense of mastery. It also reshapes their internal beliefs about separating from people one has become connected to. In a sense, they learn that not all good-byes are necessarily bad or traumatic—even if they feel that way initially.

Finally, for those who do complete the course, it is a considerable accomplishment. We have found that group members like to receive a tangible memento of their participation. At the end of the manual there is a sample certificate, or you may want to create one yourself.

It is our hope that you find the book *Power Source* and this manual to be useful resources. We understand that no single approach will address the varied needs of highly at-risk youth. Nor is the material presented here a reinvention of the wheel. Some of the exercises and theoretical approaches may be quite familiar to you already. Other elements of the program, such as meditation, guided visualizations, and the spirituality section might offer novel approaches to be integrated into your work. However you choose to utilize the program, our primary goal in creating *Power Source* was to provide a tool that amplifies your ability to offer even greater help to the at-risk youth depending on us for skills, guidance, and hope.