

Dual Diagnosis and Challenging Behaviors: It Takes a Village ...
A multi-disciplinary approach to address the needs of individuals with
developmental disabilities and mental illness who live in our
communities.

Mission

To support behavioral, psychological and emotional needs of persons with developmental disabilities using approaches that assure continued full participation in community life.

Discussion

Supported life for persons with developmental disabilities is most effective when it promotes Full Community Membership and assures individual choice (Self Determination). Within this lifestyle most people lead overall meaningful, productive and healthy lifestyles.

Support to some people includes added attention to emotional, behavioral or psychological needs. Such needs, if unmet, are commonly termed “challenging behaviors”. The community team is challenged to, on behalf of the individual, understand and meet these needs. This can sometime present a daunting task. Any “typically developing” individual striving to sustain his/her own emotional health knows this to be difficult enough. Understanding and meeting such needs on behalf of someone else and in this case a person with cognitive and/or communication challenge is most often quite complex.

Challenging behaviors can be expressed overtly (tension, emotional or physical distress) or covertly (withdrawal or isolation). The cause or life situation that may be stimulating the challenging behavior can be wide and varied. Included here is a list of common “stress triggers” for people with developmental disabilities. These can occur individually but are often a combination of stress triggers.

When challenging behaviors occur more often or with sufficient intensity it is not uncommon for support programs to consider moving individuals to lifestyles where safety for the individual and others is better assured. This often results in more restrictive locations where community membership and choice is limited. In doing so the supported program often only serves to increase the number of stress triggers that can result in challenging behaviors. In fact, the challenging behaviors may have been occurring because the supported living program did not offer enough choice and community involvement in the first place. This is, unfortunately, a common life dilemma for people with developmental disabilities.

A better blueprint for supporting people with developmental disabilities and challenging behaviors in the community is outlined here.

- I. Develop a supported living model within the County that subscribes to “best practice” standards for Full Community Membership and Self Determination.

Apply these standards to all persons with developmental disabilities, including people who present challenging behaviors. Continue to apply resources and training to this end. Practices that are essential to this model include:

- a. Person Centered Planning and a team approach
- b. Meaningful relationships
- c. Self Directed Services
- d. Living, working and recreating in the community
- e. Living with only a few house mates
- f. Meaningful work and recreational activities
- g. Opportunities to explore spirituality

II. When challenging behaviors are of concern look first and foremost to the community support program to assure that it is truly “best practice” as described above. Continually resist pressures to move individuals to, or create, more restrictive settings. Develop a program within the County where additional supports can be added to the existing community lifestyle and only as much as is required. Included here are examples of gradually adding behavioral supports in an effort to assure continued supported community life:

- a. Provide a consultant to the existing community team who can offer insights and direction on supporting persons with challenging behaviors
- b. Use the Personal Futures Planning style to develop a written plan to support challenging behaviors (behavior support plan). Assure that the wording is straightforward and accessible to all direct providers.
- c. Offer training and support to direct providers on sensibilities in developing relationships with people who present challenging behaviors.
- d. Build in more intensive supports that assure safety within the existing community support program. Reduce the need for these supports as the behaviors lessen.
- e. Provide learning opportunities to direct providers on positive behavioral supports and dealing with potentially dangerous challenging behaviors.
- f. Assure that psychiatric consultation with expertise in disability issues is available to people when needed.
- g. Develop a crisis response that offers an alternative to unnecessary stays in psychiatric hospitals, mental health centers or jail. The response should assure a quick return to the supported living program.