

:practice

Tips for supporting young people in therapeutic care through COVID-19

● Introduction

How do we keep to the therapeutic care principles of safety, consistency, predictability and routine in a world that feels like it has turned upside down overnight? It's near impossible! If we are feeling this way, imagine how the young people may be feeling.

You are all working very hard to put plans in place that ensures the safety and well-being of all young people and staff. If your organisation is like ours, this process is consuming a lot of time and energy, including emotional energy. There is so much uncertainty surrounding what we knew our lives to be about – it's changing in ways we could never have predicted. It's impossible not to see the parallels of our current realities with the world of traumatised young person.

Humour is great way of relieving tension but remember that for many staff and young people it also masks underlying anxiety and fear about COVID-19 that they need our support with.

At these times, the perceived and felt sense of safety of young people with trauma is easily undermined by the uncertainty brought about with COVID-19. As we know, when young people are feeling unsafe in their world they can have a range of responses that can include escalations in behaviour. We need to remember the drivers of the behaviour are a lack of safety and thus our focus needs to be on building safety in a time of uncertainty.

As we move further into a world where our movements are restricted due to stay at home directives, self-isolation and quarantine requirements there may be

additional challenges for young people who may find it difficult to comply with the restrictions that will be required of them within the house or in their community.

Here's a few things to think about in fostering the experience of safety of young people in your care:

● Stay connected



Relationships are the best vehicle for supporting young people and engaging their support in complying with what is being asked of them.



Consider who has the strongest relationship with a young person and try to maintain that relationship even if at a distance (phone or video/ face time).



Acknowledge with young people that it is normal to feel worried or concerned in the face of the uncertainty, and that you are feeling it too – even if their bravado suggests they are not worried at all.



Physical distancing should not mean social distancing. Get creative about how to stay connected. App based and other digital platforms for shared communication/gaming etc can offer great opportunities to stay connected even when not physically present. Use technology creatively to create inclusive approaches to activities and connection.

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**Pre-planning and Predictability**

- COVID-19 is our new normal for the foreseeable future. Integrate safe hygiene practices and physical distancing into the daily, normal operations of the house, rather than young people seeing them as additional/exceptional requirements.
- Prepare and plan early with young people for what steps will be taken in the house if a young person needs to self-isolate or quarantine. Don't wait until you are in that situation. Safety and compliance will be promoted if you work through with young people what will be needed before the need arises!
- Be honest and open about the situation, acknowledging that the situation is changing, and we are all having to adapt in the face of it.
- Allow opportunities for young people to ask questions and have their concerns addressed.
- Encourage young people to share their thoughts and feelings about what is happening so that you can offer reassurance, clarify any misinformation and ensure them that support is available.
- Where you can, whilst things are still unfolding, keep as much normality as possible in the daily routines and operation of the houses.
- Keep clear lines of communication open with staff and young people so that any changes can be communicated ahead of time, and where possible allow for the preparation of the young people for change.
- Plan and structure daily activities for young people and staff as much as possible within the limits of physical distancing

**Participation**

- Set up processes that support young people to be involved as much as possible in decision making about what is going to happen next.
- Reassure young people that for vast majority of people the virus is not serious and much like a cold or the flu.

- Remind them about the things they can do to keep themselves healthy, reinforcing messages about hygiene, social distancing and telling someone asap if they start to feel unwell or have been in contact with someone who is unwell.

**Individualised support plans**

- Therapeutic Specialists, Carers and House Managers should assess, review and plan for the individual needs, vulnerabilities and risks for each young person.
- Many young people have difficulty self-regulating, this is even more challenged under the stress and uncertainty that COVID-19 presents. Focus on supporting young people to identify and use strategies that help them to feel less stressed, calm down and/or relax as part of the daily routine. This will look different for different young people.
- Understand the triggers, likely emotional needs and behavioural responses of young people to the uncertainty, changes to their daily and responsiveness to limit setting.
- Remember, the need for a young person to isolate may be experienced as rejection!
- Understand the impacts of steps that may need to be taken to ensure the health and safety of young people, recognising and responding to potential triggers.
- Ensure that the young people clearly understand the motivations for decisions that need to be made and help them to see that the decisions aren't personal.
- Develop a support/response plan that clearly addresses the needs of the young person re complying with the requirements of the COVID-19.
- Review these plans regularly as the context changes.

Social climate

- The culture of care, or social climate is critically important during this time. How staff and carers are managing and conducting themselves will have a profound impact on the behaviour of the young people, and ultimately their willingness to comply with the restrictions that may be necessary because of COVID-19.
- Ensure a positive social climate as the basis for building positive relationships and engagement with young people in what will be required of them.
- Ensure the atmosphere in the house is calm, relaxed and there is a sense that things are under control.
- Don't lose sight of the importance of humour!
- The following table provides an important reminder of how critical the approach of staff is in generating an atmosphere where the safety and well-being of everyone will be the priority.

Table 1: Critical Elements of the Social Climate





 Positive Social Climate	 Negative Social Climate
Staff are empathic, friendly, warm and supportive	Staff are emotionally distant and unfriendly
Young people are encouraged to seek help from staff who are viewed as resources and supports	Staff show disinterest in young people
Young people feel safe to share their thoughts and feelings with staff who are viewed as responsive	Staff are not seen as approachable or understanding
Staff have the capacity to tolerate and safely contain psychological distress	Staff are intolerant and rejecting
Open and supportive of growth, personal autonomy and change	Repressive and focussed on power and control
Young people experience fewer behaviour difficulties	Young people display higher levels of emotional and behavioural disturbance with staff using punitive rather than relational approaches to support young people to regulate emotions and manage behaviour
Strong relational connections between staff and young people	Absence of relationships between staff and young people
Young people feel that they belong or can come to belong	Higher rates of absconding and absence of young people
Young people and staff share activities, mutual enjoyment and fun	Staff are disengaged from young people

Table 1: Critical Elements of the Social Climate (continued)

 Positive Social Climate	 Negative Social Climate
Staff morale is high	Staff morale is low
Staff feel well supported and trained	Staff feel unsupported and are poorly trained
Limits, boundaries and expectations are negotiated, understood, accepted and calmly applied	Rule based approach that is not negotiated and often not well understood. Application of punitive consequences, often arbitrarily or haphazardly applied.
Routines and daily rituals are able to be flexible to meet the changing needs of young people	Strong emphasis on rigidity and adherence to institutionalised process to structure the daily care experience
Mutual respect is shown between staff and young people	There is a lack of respect shown in interactions between staff and young people
High levels of engagement and hopefulness	High levels of boredom, disengagement and hopelessness
High levels of motivation shown by young people and staff	Low levels of motivation are shown by young people and/or staff
Young people have a right to physical and psychic privacy	Young people feel exposed in a climate of surveillance and monitoring
Staff are reflective and use a problem-solving approach to responding to the difficulties and needs of young people	Staff are reactive and crisis oriented
Staff are able to consistently and effectively use authority	Staff are focused on control and authoritarian approaches to responding to young people

Mitchell, J. (2019).

There are no easy answers to the unfolding realities for young people in therapeutic care but calm, reasoned and sensitive approaches will always be helpful.

As staffing/carer situations for young people may to change due to illness we will need to ensure that replacement staff/carers in are aware of the best ways to understand and respond to the needs of the young people.

● Reference

Mitchell, J. (2019). Practice Guide: Creating positive social climates and home-like environments in therapeutic care. Centre for Excellence in Therapeutic Care: Sydney NSW. <https://cetc.org.au/publications/>