Handout 4 - Behavioral Barriers to Self Reliance

Prior to commencing work with their new caseworker, some clients may have spent years repeating ineffective behaviours simply because they have never been shown that things can be done any differently, and believe that everyone else’s lives must be just like their own. Others may have lacked the freedom to explore new ways of doing things (eg victims of family violence, clients on powerful psychotropic medications, members of communities with very strong prescriptions for what are acceptable ways of doing things). Whatever the course that clients’ lives have taken, whatever social world they have lived in, a consequence (often unintended) may be personal disempowerment, an inability to handle their own lives or to live life in a way that reflects their actual values and beliefs. The consequence of self-defeating behaviours is often that problems are not effectively or sufficiently resolved, leaving many emotional, social and material needs to remain unmet.

The behavioural barriers to self reliance include:

- **Denial**: sometimes a problem is so overwhelming that a person will deny that it exists. They pretend that everything is okay until the concern and their thoughts and feelings about it fade out of their conscious awareness. Turning a blind eye becomes a form of virtual blindness to the whole thing. When a person consistently denies that a problem exists, they can become very vulnerable. “Repeated denial can lead to psychosomatic illness and other forms of psychological distress” (Bolton 1979:234)

- **Avoidance**: some people may know they have problems but they will do whatever they can to avoid them. Instead of facing the problems they withdraw or gloss over the problems. They may prematurely forgive someone with the intention of patching up the problems but find they still hold unresolved anger or hurt. These feelings, just as with 'denial', fade away until they become unconscious, only to resurface when they:
  - have another problem with that person;
  - when they deal with a similar problem with someone else;
  - when they are in a different situation which is stressful enough to undo the control that has been keeping their feelings pent up, or;
  - when they have been holding on to or 'stockpiling' the feelings for so long that the process of restraint reaches breaking point.

- **Passivity**: some people, when they are experiencing difficulties in their lives, give in without struggling to find a pathway out. They do not take responsibility for their problems, nor do they attempt to deal with them. This results in many of their needs remaining unmet and can result in the person resenting the world and the people or situations they consistently capitulate to. When people consistently capitulate in the small crises in their lives, they fail to learn the lessons that come from taking decisive action. They may not develop the courage needed to manage the risks associated with decisive action. This passivity can lead to greater problems and may create barriers to self-reliance when trying to manage the larger problems that can occur throughout life.

- **Domination**: another way of dealing with problems is to impose one's own will on other people, insisting that their views, their values and meanings define what is happening and what needs to be done. Strategies of domination are generally aggressive, and include violence and intimidation, threats, ridicule and humiliation, intellectual manipulation and withholding (eg refusing to hand over housekeeping money). While this will usually result in
resentment in others, such resentment is often hidden (again, eventually fading out of conscious awareness) for fear of escalations of violence or the gradual loss of the client's ability to believe in themselves or maintain a positive self-image. This can lead to interpersonal problems in the person's family, work and other environments, often without any understanding of what is causing these problems. It also means that the person fails to learn from the proposed solutions and experiences of others. This can result in 'less than best' 'peace at all costs' strategies being adopted to solve problems encountered in their lives

- **Learned Helplessness:** some people from an early age learn to believe that there is nothing that can be done to change life's circumstances. They are left feeling overwhelmed and helpless when faced with situations that other people will see as simply the difficulties that everyone encounters along the way, onerous but capable of being overcome, with effort and perhaps with the support of others. Some fall into a deep depression which prevents them from taking action to deal with their problems or engaging with people who could assist them.

- **Projection:** some people who are unable to take responsibility for their lives blame the world and other people in it for their woes. Their resentment and anger spills over and is projected onto others who are expected to take responsibility for the person's circumstances, choices and actions. These people are often noticeably outraged when someone does the same thing to them.

The purpose of casework is to help clients build self-worth, self-belief and a capacity to pursue effectively meeting their needs. Caseworkers can assist by:

- **Modelling:** people see others achieving what they would like to achieve and feel encouraged to try it themselves.

- **Encouragement:** people need to be encouraged to try new behaviours and new ways of dealing with old problems. They need to be challenged to try and supported in their efforts.

- **Reducing fear and anxiety:** if people are too afraid to act, they are usually certain to fail. The caseworker needs to help the client to find ways to reduce their fear and anxiety so they can become more effective. Looking for comparable situations where the client has either experienced less anxiety, or has felt confidence and enjoyment of the activity, may help them access feelings of competence and control

- **Helping the client to set achievable goals:** if a client is rewarded with success, they will be encouraged to attempt to achieve more difficult goals. It is important that a caseworker helps to temper the ambition of the client so that they do not 'bite off more than they can chew'. Perceived failure, even within the relative safety of a casework relationship, can reinforce other failings and reaffirm the barriers to self-reliance. Too often, reassurance from a caseworker is too little in the face of a lifetime's experience of self-criticism and doubt.

**Source:**

Egan, Gerald 1994 *The Skilled Helper* Brooks Cole Publishing Company Monterey


Slattery, Peter 2001 *Youth Works - A very practical book about working with young people* Peter Slattery, Dulwich hill