

The Healthy Helping Cycle

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There are cycles to almost all professional activities, and this is no different for helping professionals. The cycle of taking on new clients, helping them with their lives, and releasing them at a better state is at the core of all helping work. No matter what sector one works in-- child and family services, child and youth counselling, sexual or violent assault and emergency shelter work, family support intervention, or patient support--helping professionals experience a cyclic nature in their work. The following passage summarizes the cyclic process involved in helping or social work.

Social workers traditionally use a series of steps or processes to help clients resolve their problems. These steps include collecting information about the client (assessment), making sense out of the information (diagnosis), collaborating with the client to develop a plan to change the problems being experienced (the treatment plan), and determining whether the process has been helpful (evaluation).

http://www.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/11883_Chapter_3.pdf

This article looks at the importance of the helping cycle as a paradigm of activity that underscores all the work of helping professionals. It looks at how that cycle can form a basis not only for individual productivity, but for agency productivity. The article then introduces the idea of levels of capacity in agencies, that can serve as a model of how much agencies focus on and, in fact, thrive on the support for this simple cycle.

The Helping Cycle

As they do their work, helping professionals interact with a number of individuals in different roles. These include the clients themselves and their families, and also intervention specialists such as doctors or medical clinicians, counsellors, legal aid workers, law enforcement personnel, housing specialists, sports and recreation professionals, travel and transportation persons, educators and teachers, trainers and rehabilitation specialists.

These intervention specialists form a network that the helping professional calls on with varying degrees of regularity to assist in all phases of the helping cycle. And these people also form a network of relationships that may or may not be healthy, or, put another way, may or may not provide opportunities for pressure and strain on the health of the helping professional. Sometimes building relationships with others is source of strength, but at other times, or in specific instances, relationships can be a source of tension and stress.



The Phases of the Helping Cycle

1. Connecting Phase: Intake and rapport building
2. Learning Phase: Psychosocial study, investigation, exploration
3. Assessment Phase: Psychosocial diagnosis, assessment
4. Intervention Phase: Intervention, treatment, problem-solving process
5. Monitoring Phase: Monitoring and evaluation
6. Releasing Phase: Follow-up and termination

In a similar way, helping professionals also use a number of life and work elements to do their work. They use tools (assessment forms, reporting templates, toys, posters, whatever), have training (whether academic, on-the-job, professional development), have agency support (pay and rewards, facilities, scheduling, travel support), social and community supports (family, friends, clubs, jogging tracks, entertainment), and

personal care (health and diet regimes, exercise routines, relaxation habits). Life and work elements provide opportunities for excitement and encouragement, but the pressures they bring can also provide opportunities for stress. Those pressures, if it is not matched or balanced, or better, exploited, can lead to unhealthy stress.

The healthy helping cycle lies at the heart of all human-service agencies. Agencies depend on the success of this process because it is the basis for their contract negotiations, their funding requests, their accreditation, and their overall performance in the marketplace. If the helping process is weak or failing or unhealthy, then the agency faces problems. To maintain a healthy helping process, agencies invest in professional development, conferences, process innovations, and other frameworks (some provided by the government) to help assure effective client outcomes.

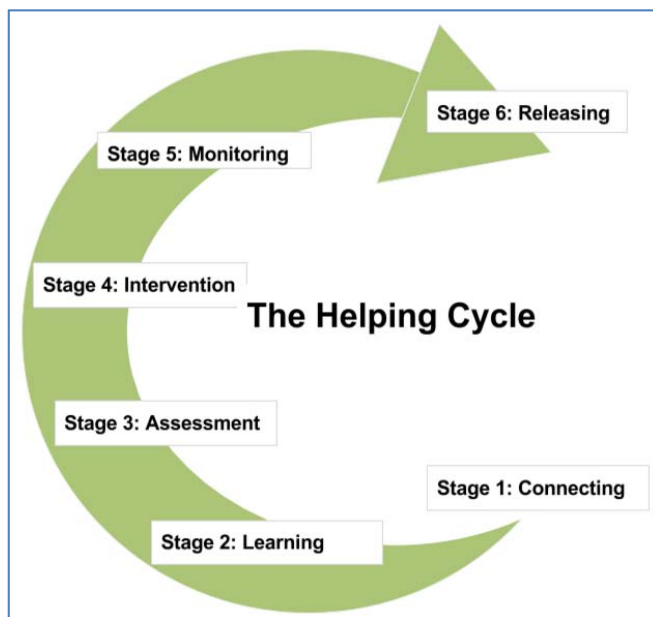
Individual and Agency Levels

In the Healthy Workplaces project (hwHP.ca) we look at the helping process from two levels, from the point of view of the agency and from the point of view of the individual worker. From the agency point of view, interventions to make the experience of workers more healthy--to promote health and wellness among employees depends, as Graham Lowe has rightly stated in his book *The Healthy Organization*, on the link between wellness and performance. According to the Lowe's research and analysis, when wellness and performance are linked (through vibrant workplaces and integrated policy) the value chain becomes complete. Employee wellness leads to performance and wellness becomes the driving force of a healthy agency or organization.

From the point of view of the worker, the issue with the healthy helping process is where on that process cycle do pressure points occur. Stress, contrary to what most people take for granted, is not a necessary part of helping work or social work. A better way to look at stress is to see it as excessive pressure, as an instance where a hazard--such as a bully, a client with violent

tendencies, a cluttered schedule, lack of information, lack of social support--overcomes the worker's abilities to cope. If these pressure points become stress points, then the process is unhealthy, can break down, can lead to negative outcomes, burnout, and low performance.

A healthy helping process, on the other hand, is one in which the people, the tools, and the life and work elements all work together (ideally) to inspire, encourage, uplift, and strengthen both the individual and the agency. A healthy helping process, seen as the basic focus of employee health and agency performance, is the key to effective outcomes for clients, and, in the broader picture of things, a happier society. And that happy society--strong communities, strong families, strong nations--is what we all want. It is the payoff for all our hard work.



The healthy helping process does not just pop out of thin air. It is the result of a focused, intentional attempt, by leaders and by staff members, to build agencies in which all aspects of business support the helping process. Without it the agency falters, but when all aspects of an agency--administration, human resources, management, planning, advertising, social and community relationships--support it through good communication and integrated strategies, the agency thrives. If all these operational elements of an agency focus on that one process as the heart of the business, then the agency will thrive. It will thrive not because it allows the process, but because it exploits the process. Agencies thrive because they

realize that each stage of the process presents opportunities for learning, for innovation, for new business opportunities, and, in the long run, for healthy people, whether they are employees or clients.

Growing the Healthy Helping Process

Growing the healthy helping process, then, should be the focus of a helping agency. For some agencies, the helping process depends on the heroic work of talented individuals with an intuitive understanding of people and a will to make the world better. Many helping professionals you meet have something of this heroic individual in them. But if that person were to leave the agency, or lose their connections with the supports that allow them to do their work so well, then the agency is left without a core asset. Not good. The smart agency will soon



learn that relying on heroic, talented individuals is not a good long-term strategy. Nor is having a whole room of these individuals a good long-term strategy. What an agency needs is a way to build the core of the helping process into its policies and systems, so that, should the hero leave, another person could step in, and, using the supports of the work environment, take over, maybe faltering at times but at least making it, so that the agency will continue to thrive.

This illustration of the need for the helping process to be built into agency or organizational processes is an example of the relationship of wellness to performance. It also tells how an agency needs to build ways to make that process central. Most healthy agencies already realize this, so it is not a new idea. Universities that teach human resource management style business programs are all about the idea of building around a core service. But where agencies falter is where they do not realize either the importance of this helping process or the importance of building it into the very fabric of everything that happens. Agencies may not fully realize and implement the idea that the pressure points on this process make all the difference in the health of the organization. Such agencies may not be growing its own heroes.

In the Healthy Workplaces project, we are attempting to map out, for human service agencies in Alberta, Canada, the determinants of growing a healthy helping process into the agency fabric. It starts with employees understanding their role to support the health of the process--having good relationships, and taking care of themselves--and it starts with agencies realizing that the process of making the helping process healthy is a matter of constantly improving. Constantly improving, through evaluations and assessments, based on recognized standards and levels of integrated performance, is the key to realizing greater focus on the healthy helping process.

Our goal is to help identify what that constant improvement might or can look like. What are the recognizable levels of improvement? What does an agency need to do to move from one level to the next? How can an agency tell whether it has “arrived” at a level? Through our surveys and our focused work with specific agencies, and through our work with actual staff members--to learn what makes them healthy--we hope to build a map or a picture of the stages of agency growth that can function as a template for healthy agencies and a thriving human services sector.

The Dimensions of Agency Wellness

To start building that map, we are looking in our research at the dimensions of workplace wellness. We started with three—overall workplace health, job satisfaction, and stress management capacity—and have expanded to incorporate seven dimensions. The seven dimensions of workplace wellness provide a broader view of the

The Dimensions of Agency Wellness

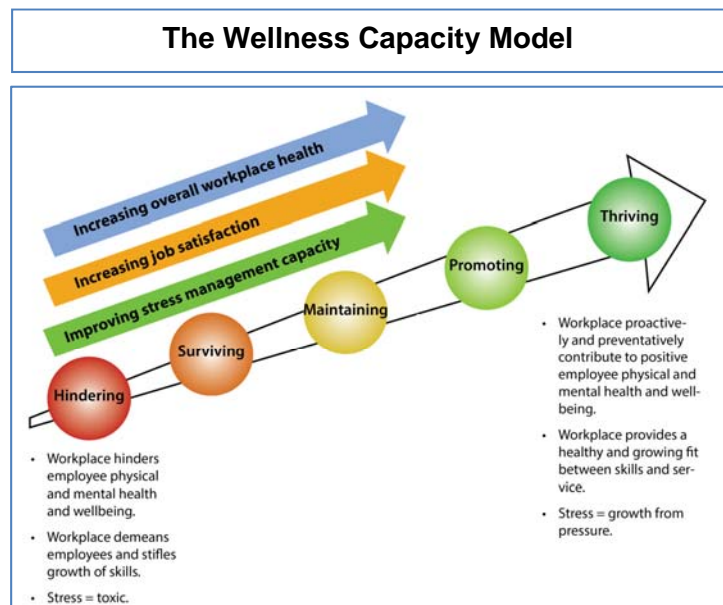
- Supporting health in the workplace
- Encouraging job satisfaction
- Decreasing unhealthy stress
- Providing job control
- Supporting strong work relationships
- Facilitating collaboration among all workers
- Providing strong agency support

phenomenon. They give us a range of elements to measure so that the model can cover as many aspects that can change as possible.

The Wellness Capacity Model

The resulting map of capacities to build a healthy work environment where the helping cycle is supported as the source of growth and human capital is called a Wellness Capacity Model. This model identifies five levels of accomplishment for agencies. The five levels, indicated in the figure, each represent a stage of development of support for the helping cycle. For example, in the lower stages, the cycle may not be supported by adequate training and so going through it is seen as a burden to employees. As an organization increases in its capacity to support the cycle, it begins to dedicate more resources to the process. At the Surviving level, for example, training, policies, pay, and hiring are adequate to support the process at the basic level.

But this level is not enough to grow the process internally. More explicit emphasis on the process, revisions of it, and implementation of it in areas like benefits and social supports are required for the process to be maintained. Similarly, at the Promoting level, all functional elements of an organization, including community supports, funding sources, human resources planning and strategic initiatives all focus on the helping cycle. Even further, at the Thriving level, systems for identifying revenue that is directly related to the helping cycle, such as sharing process improvements with the greater professional community, incubating innovations, and cultivating broad community and professional leadership characterize a fully mature wellness capacity.



The Wellness Capacity Model shown in the figure on this page indicates three dimensions of agency wellness: overall workplace health, job satisfaction, and stress management capacity. As our research progresses we will be adding four additional measures of capacity: job control, strong relationships among employees, collaboration in teams, and strong agency support. These addition dimensions will allow us to map the helping cycle more accurately along the continuum of the five levels.



Conclusion

As we build this model we hope to provide not just evidence that describes the levels in useful ways. We also hope to create tools that agencies and employees can use to evaluate wellness capacity and address capacity issues. The model seems complex at first, but as agency leaders work through it with their staff, they will see that by looking at the descriptions of each level, the action items needed to move from one level to another become easy to implement. Indeed, an incremental, step-by-step model is an easy way to make progress either as a whole agency, or as a functional unit within an agency.

Our goal, then, is to identify, for the individual employee, ways to make the helping cycle productive at the case-by-case level. In this way, employees can learn not just to survive the pressures of their work, but to thrive on them. At the agency level, we hope to identify a tool that can be used evaluatively and proactively to assess areas for growth and to recognize improvements.