**Person-Centered Thinking**

As a PCA/CNA of a participants with a disability or special health care needs, you spend a lot of time making sure the important things are taken care of food, clothing, school, doctor’s appointments, therapy, and even a daily care routine.

Getting your participant’s help on the important things (or even the small everyday things) isn’t always easy. Some days, it’s hard to get your participants to help pick out their socks or shirt, and even harder to get their help with a medical decision. Understanding what your participants wants and needs can help things go more smoothly and help your participants feel less stress or conflict.

Person-centered thinking is a way to approach the things that are important in your participants’ life in a way that works better for them. It can be used for choosing medical treatments, making decisions at school, setting up a care routine, or even finding an activity they like.

Usually, once you’re using person-centered thinking, you’ll also be part of making a [person-centered plan](https://www.navigatelifetexas.org/en/family-support/person-centered-planning). But the best person-centered plans start with thinking in a person-centered way.

What is Person-Centered Thinking?

Person-centered thinking puts your participants ’s needs front and center when it comes to decisions or plans that affect them. It’s a way of supporting your child so they have as much power as they can to decide things for themselves. This is called self-determination.

Person-centered thinking has 3 parts:

* Learning what’s important TO your participants.
* Listing out what’s important FOR your participants.
* Balancing these 2 things so your participants can have a better life.

Things that are important TO your participants make them feel happy or fulfilled in their life. These might be:

* Getting their sensory needs met (like having the right texture of clothing, noise levels, or lighting).
* Eating food that tastes good or has the right texture for them.
* Feeling comfortable.
* Having fun.
* Having friends.

Things that are important FOR your participants keep them happy and safe. Here are some examples:

* Getting their medical needs taken care of.
* Practicing good daily care.
* Eating foods that are good for them.
* Learning social skills.
* Getting the right accommodations or modifications at school.

Often, when your participants start acting out or refuses to do something important, it means that the “important to” and “important for” are out of balance.

For example, maybe your participants just won’t eat vegetables. You know it’s important for them to have a healthy diet. But it might be really important to them to avoid the taste or texture of veggies. It could set off their gag reflex or hit another sensory button. Trying to force it might cause a conflict and giving in might not keep them healthy.

When you look at balancing the “important to” and “important for,” you have options. You might give your participants supplements to make up for missing nutrients, change the way you make vegetables so your participants can handle the taste or texture, let your participants fix their own vegetables how they like them, or see if your participants can work with an occupational therapist, speech therapist, or other professional on a plan to eat more foods.

These approaches all balance out what’s important to and important for your participants.

Discovering What’s Important to Your participants

It might be easy for you to figure out some of the things that matter to your participants. Maybe they like to play with animals, maybe they draw a lot, or maybe they seem happiest when they’re around family.

It’s not always easy to figure out everything that’s important to your participants child. They may not be able to explain it to you in words, but they can tell you through their behavior.

For participants who are nonverbal, behavior might be the only way that they can tell you when something is wrong. And many participants with verbal skills might get upset but not understand why.

There are a few exercises you can use to find out what’s important to your participants.

One is an exercise called [**Good Day/Bad Day**](http://helensandersonassociates.co.uk/person-centred-practice/person-centred-thinking-tools/good-daybad-day/)**.**

After a good day, ask yourself:

* What happened that made it a good day for your participants?
* What did they like or look forward to doing?
* Who did they like seeing?
* What gave your child extra energy to deal with a hard situation?
* What kept your participants happy or interested in their day?

After a bad day, ask yourself:

* Why was it a bad day?
* What threw off my participant’s day?
* What made my child frustrated or bored?
* What took the fun out of my participant’s day?

You can also ask your participants why they had a good or a bad day to better understand their point of view. The answers to all of these questions give you a lot of clues about what’s important to your participants.

For example, if your participants have a good day outside walking and moving, but not on the days they can’t go out, that’s something to think about. Maybe you explore more and learn that they get to walk and move while outside, but in the house they have to spend a lot of time just being still. These answers might tell you that it’s important to your participants to have chances to be active.

Person-Centered Thinking in Action

When you’re working to understand what’s important to your participants, what’s important for your participants, and what their behavior is telling you, you’re using person-centered thinking.

There are also some tools to support your participants that you might create using person-centered thinking:

* A [person-centered plan](https://www.navigatelifetexas.org/en/family-support/person-centered-planning) is the main tool families usually create.
* A map of the people in your child’s life, also called [a relationship map](http://www.helensandersonassociates.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/relationshipcircle.pdf), shows how close people are to your participants, why they are important people, and how they relate to each other.
* A [communications chart](http://trainingpack.personcentredplanning.eu/index.php/en/person-centred-thinking-tools/communication-tool) that lists some of your participant’s behaviors, what those behaviors usually tell you, and how you or another caregiver can respond.
* A [one-page description of the things most important to and most important for your child](http://trainingpack.personcentredplanning.eu/index.php/en/person-centred-thinking-tools/important-to-for).

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| --- | --- | --- |
| Other Skills and Tools | ***Skills*** | ***Tools*** |
| 1. | Separating what is important to from what is important for and finding a balance between them. | A simple grid for recording what is learned. |
| 2. | Defining the roles and responsibilities of those who are paid to support. | The “donut-sort” – looking at core responsibilities, where to use judgement and creativity, what is not the responsibility of those who are paid. |
| 3. | Getting a good match between those who are paid and those who use the services. | A table to record the learning and techniques to structure the learning |
| 4. | Learning, using, and recording how people communicate (esp. with people who do not communicate with words) | A chart to record the learning and structured ways to use the chart |
| 5. | Supporting “mindful” learning | Sorting what is working and not working from the perspective of the person and those around the person  Using 4 questions to quickly and effectively record the current learning  Using a learning log to record what is working and not working |

Person-centered thinking might be a new way for you to look at things in your participant’s life. It’s an important tool to help your participants be happy and safe. By taking the time to go through person-centered exercises and learning what’s important to and for your participants, you can help them with care plans, certain decisions, other choices, and more.

The First Skill:

***Sorting important to from important for and finding the balance between them***

What do we mean?

*Important to*

What is important to a person includes only what people are “saying”:

* With their words or
* With their behavior

Remember that many people have lived in circumstances where they were expected to say what others wanted them to say. Where people are saying what they think we want to hear, we have to rely on “listening” to their behavior.

*Important for*

What is important for people includes those things that we need to keep in mind for people regarding –

* Issues of health or safety
* What others see as important for the person to be a valued member of their community

**The Balance**

The idea of the balance between what is *important to and* what is *important for* a person is rooted in the human condition where none of us has a life where we have everything that is *important to* us and none of us pay perfect attention to everything that is *important for* us. All of us strive for a balance between them. Learning what is *important to* and what is important for has to be done before you can help find the balance. Everyone finds that what is *important to* them and what is *important for* them are in conflict from time to time.

Recognizing *important to* and *important for* is the fundamental person-centered thinking skill. What we have seen over the years is that nearly anyone in need of long term services, who is in circumstances where others exercise control, has what is *important for* them addressed while what is *important to* them is often largely ignored or seen as what is done when time permits.

This skill must be applied daily in our work with people with significant disabilities; not only to address the presence of a disability, but also the absence of control many people experience in critical areas. We should all be trying to help people Maximize the positive control they have over their lives. This means that you are helping people find the balance between *important to* and *important for* that works for them. A balance that accounts for issues of health and safety but recognizes that perfect health and perfect safety are rarely achieved and all of us address what is *important for* us in the context of what is *important to* us. Again, this is a human issue, not just a disability issue.

***When to do it and how to do it!***

This is a fundamental skill and you want to find and use every opportunity to apply it. It involves asking three outwardly simple questions. (What is *important to* a person? What is *important for* a person? And what else do we need to learn?) Having people stop and think about the answers helps them determine whether they are taking both what is *important to* and what is *important for* into account and whether or not there are significant things that still need to be learned. People think they can do it as soon as they hear it, but we have found that they need practice and feedback

The Second Skill:

***Defining staff roles and responsibilities***

*What?*

One of the most difficult skills, but one that is critical for achieving outcomes, is creating clarity around the roles and responsibilities of those who do the implementation. You learned a way of doing this that is referred to as the “donut”. The donut is a tool that helps staff not only see what they must do (core responsibilities) but where they can try things (judgment and creativity) and what is not their responsibility. When you are explaining the concept, Figure #2 with the concentric circles works well. When you are using it, columns work better.

*Why?*

There are three broad reasons to use the donut:

1. An absence of clarity supports a blame culture
2. Staff need know where creativity is and is not expected and within those boundaries to be creative without fear punishment
3. When paid staff know what is expected of them, turnover in staff decreases

You know you have blame culture when:

* Real responsibility is avoided
* “Thinking outside the box” results in psychic decapitation (creativity is punished)
* When people try something that did not work and the response from co-worker is to cover it up or otherwise avoid blame (rather than looking at what was learned), not how to improve supports.

A strong blame culture kills creativity, distorts learning, and eventually drives out many of those you want to retain. Some aspects of blame culture are nearly impossible to avoid as looking for someone to blame when something goes wrong is endemic in our culture (just watch the news or read a newspapers). However, the effects of blame culture can be avoided with on-going work. Part of that work is to create clarity about what is expected of each person in their day to day efforts. Where creativity is both safe and encouraged, and where there is clarity regarding where it is and is not expected, you begin to address another critical issue: funding

*When.*

You should do a “donut”:

* When people do not know their core responsibilities
* When people do not know where creativity is needed and encouraged
* When people do not know what is outside their area of responsibility
* When changes are made in how someone is supported
* When organizational changes are made that effect roles and responsibilities

Whenever the people who work within an organization are unclear about how to sort their responsibilities, the donut should be introduced and used until everyone is clear about the expectations for performance within their jobs. As someone’s supports change, the responsibilities of the people doing the day to day work may change. As responsibilities change the description of what is core, where to use judgment and creativity, and what is not responsibilities may shift and the donut sort should be updated. While the emphasis is on the roles and responsibilities of those who work directly with the people who use services, the donut sort should be applied throughout the organization. If accountability culture is to be dominant over blame culture, then this way of thinking must be pervasive within the organization.

*How?*

A completed donut sort that has been done well is very clear and very useful, but it is challenging to teach. However, there are some tips that will make the teaching significantly easier-

1. Start with a specific role in a specific situation. Your may recall that this was the method used in the training stories used to help you learn to use the donut (e.g. You go out with Levi into the community after school. You are the person who helps Maude take his bath.)
2. Complete (with those you are helping to learn) a “what is important to, important for, and what else you need to learn” sort before you begin the donut sort.
3. Only after you have done several specific situations should you do a global donut sort about supporting a person. If you jump to doing a donut sort about a person’s whole life before people have looked at specific situations (or are vey skilled) those participating will tell you that all they did is reformat the plan- it will not feel useful to them.
4. Use the same technique of going from several specific situations to the general when doing a donut sort with a manager or a licensed professional.

THE THIRD SKILL: Matching staff and those using services

*What!*

The form that you see in the figure, is simple way to what is needed to give you the “best match” between those who use services and those who provide them. The most important part of this is the central column where personality characteristics are recorded.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Matching staff supporting:* | | | |
| *Supports wanted and*  *Needed* | *Skills needed* | *Personality characteristics*  *Needed* | *Shared common interests (would be nice to have)* |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |

*Why?*

There are 3 powerful reasons why every effort should be made to determine what a good match looks like and why every effort should be made to act on the information.

The quality of the match is-

1. One of the most powerful determinants of quality of life of people who are dependent on others for support;
2. The single greatest determinant of turnover among those paid to provide services;
3. Related to the frequency with which issues of abuse and neglect occur – the better the match the fewer issues of abuse and neglect.

When agencies look at the skills needed to support someone, they typically limit themselves to the skills needed to address issues of health and safety and the general skills needed for the position. In completing this form those who fill it out should also address the skill needed for someone to have what *is important to* them as well as what is *important for* them. While having the right skills is a minimum expectation, the match regarding characteristics is critical. Where there is a good match between those who are paid and those who receive services there is less turnover.

*When!*

Helping people see the importance of a good match should be done as soon as the opportunity presents itself. Recognize that for organizations where one or few people provide services to a larger number of people, this will be a gradual process that will only be finally resolved when organizations look at the logic of how people who receive services are grouped, better rationalize those groupings, and move toward more individualized approaches.

*How?*

You can fill this out several ways. If you simply fill it out from left to right, there are caveats:

1. Under the supports needed include those things that are important to the person that require that the person providing the support have a skill ( If someone wants to cook some of his or her own meals and needs support, the person providing the support may need to know how to cook what the person receives support likes.)
2. Skills and personality characteristic are next to each other but are done separately.

Some skills do suggest a characteristic – being wit someone in the community who has occasional grand mal seizures suggests that the person doing the supporting is competent but “ laid back” so that the community members witnessing a seizure see it as part of life and not something that makes you want to distance yourself. Other skills do not suggest a personality characteristic (CPR). Conversely, most personality characteristics are not connected with skills – needing to have someone who enjoys being silly may be a required personality characteristic but isn’t something that we teach).

1. For people who use services in a number of different settings, you may find that you need to adapt the chart to the requirements of the settings and the result may be multiple charts – someone who is in school may need one set of skills and characteristic for a teacher (or teacher aid) and another set of skills and characteristic for someone who supports that person to go out into the community and have fun.

THE FOURTH SKILL: Learning, using, and recording communication

What! and Why?

The communication chart is a simple but powerful way to record how someone communicates with his or her behavior. Everyone communicates and everyone should be listened to. Those who communicate in atypical ways are still communicating and we need to listen, understand, reply, and act. Everyone who is dependent on others for support has an especially critical need to have his or her communication understood.

While this is a critical tool to have when people do not communicate with words, it is also important to use when communication with behavior is clearer than the communication with words or when what people say and what they mean are different ( a woman who would say “there’s that boy” whenever she felt that she had made a mistake).

*WHEN AND HOW!*

The communication chart should be done with any and all of the people whose circumstances are outlined above, and it should be done as soon as an opportunity presents itself. Experience has shown that getting people to see the utility and to do it is an “easy sell”. The challenge is in keeping it up to date and available both to those who are new in the person’s life and to those who have experiences and learning that should be added as communication changes or becomes more complex.

Because the communication chart is seen as being part of the plan it tends to “live” in the file folder where the plan is filed and not in the hands of the people who actually need it and should use it. One of your challenges is to get in the hands of those who need it and to support them in updating it as they learn.

Regardless of how you have gotten input from the person, you need to find those people around the person, who are paying attention to communication, and get their input. Remember that even where the person communicates clearly with words, few of us are aware of all the ways in which we communicate with our behavior. The thing to figure out is *who to listen to.*

As with other parts of the planning effort, you want to first find those people who spend time with the person, but you also want to listen to people who have a personal connection with and who care about the person. We have found the best way to find out who to listen to is to ask three questions –

* + - 1. What do you like the most about the person?
      2. What do you admire the most about the person?
      3. When did you last have fun together and what were you doing?

Listen carefully to the answers and you will find that those who have a personal connection will tell you about the person’s smile, or energy, or sense of humor, and they will tell you reasons why you would want to have that person in your life. Those who have no personal connection, those who see their work as just a job, will answer with how the person makes their work easier and the nature of the relationship with the disability, rather than the person.

As you begin the communication chart, there are a couple of things to keep in mind. First, look for easy, simple, and clear communication – How do you know if she is happy or sad? Can you tell if he is angry How do you know is she likes or dislikes something? Notice that you are not starting with the 1st column in the chart… you are starting with the 3rd. The most typical way to fill it out looks below:

Communication Chart

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *When this is happening (or has just happening) ….* | *I do this……* | *It usually means ….* | *And I want you to …* |
| *#3*   * *The context, what is happening outside of the person* * *In the environment* * *What’s just gone on* * *The “trigger”* | *#2 or 1*   * *The behavior* * *What others notice* * *Can be seen, heard, and felt by others* | *#1 or 2*   * *What the behavior means* * *What the emotions and feelings are* * *What’s going on inside* | *#4*   * *What others should do in response* * *What you want people to do* * *Or not do ….* |

So, while it reads from left to right you fill out the 2nd or 3rd column first. You start with either the behavior, or the meaning of the behavior, and proceed as is shown. Once people become experienced with the chart, they can often fill it out starting with the left had column and working their way to the right. But when you are helping people learn, always start with the 2nd or 3rd column (what the person is doing, the behavior or what the behavior means, Happy, upset).

*THE FIFTH SKILL:* Being “mindful” and recording learning: the learning log; working/not working; the 4 questions format

Structured, “mindful” learning is critical to –

* The implementation of plans;
* Having plans that change as understanding deepens (and as the person changes); and most importantly
* Having the information which tells us when services and supports need to change (as the person and our understanding of the person changes).

Because this is so important and should happen across a variety of circumstances, we have provided you with 3 different tools. Each will work well, but each works best in a particular set of circumstances.

**Working/ Not working**: (aka – What makes sense/What doesn’t make sense

What!

This is an analytic tool that supports you in looking at a snapshot in time from multiple perspectives. It is a way to analyze a situation so that you capture what is working or making sense within that situation as well as what is not working. In appearance it is quite simple – when it is completed it may be just 4 quadrants on a page. One of its functions is to help build action plans. You can use the information as described.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| *From the Person’s*  Perspective | What makes sense the “up” side  D I S A G REEMENT  What is working right not  USE THIS INFORMATION TO BUILD THE  AGENDA  OF THINGS THAT ARE TO STAY THE SAME | What does NOT make sense  The “down” side  What is NOT working right now  USE THIS INFORMATION TO BUILD THE  AGENDA  FOR THINGS THAT NEED TO CHANGE |
| *From Our Perspective* |  |  |

WHY & WHEN

There are a number of times when this tool can be a powerful resource –

* When people get stuck in their day to day efforts and don’t take a step back and look at what they are doing.
* When plans have a good description of what is important to and what is important for but have goals/outcomes that have little to do with what was learned – in other words, the plans reflect the standard way of thinking about goals for people who use service.
* When small (but important) areas of disagreement are not resolved and those who should be working together see only the other’s lack of understanding and appreciation of their position.
* To help prevent us from inadvertently changing aspects of a person’s life that are working and are important to them – to help us understand the things that are working about a given situation before we begin to make changes to it.

In all of these circumstances the “working/not working” analysis will help if it is done well. If it has enough detail and if each person’s perspective is adequately addressed, then –

* It helps people gain perspective – to pause, step back and see the forest as well as the trees. This is especially helpful when people are just learning person centered thinking skills and easily revert to their “old” way of thinking.
* It serves as a bridge between what was learned about important to/for and action planning
* It helps get people unstuck as it contains 2 of the core principles of negotiation –
  1. When you get each person’s perspective on paper, they feel listened to;
  2. When you tease situations apart in enough detail you can find areas of agreement. This enables you to start with “common ground”
* It increases the odds that we can make a situation better through change by using those aspects that still work to the person’s advantage. It saves the baby from being thrown out with the bath (Cole hates living with his parents, but he still wants to see them often and he must live within 15 minutes of them in the same town).

HOW?

This analysis works best when it is focused on just one part of someone’s life. When you try and cover the entire spectrum of someone’s life it looks like a summary of the plan. To determine where to focus, think about what the plan set out to accomplish. Look at what you recorded under things to figure out/questions to answer and then start with an area or aspect of the person’s life. It can be as focused as looking at what is working and not working when helping the person bathe. It can look at a broader part of someone’s life – what is working and not working where someone lives. It can also focus on an “event” – what did and did not work about the respite services received.

THE 4 QUESTIONS (PLUS 1)

The 4 questions are – “Since the last time we got together –

* 1. What have you tried?
  2. What have you learned?
  3. What are you pleased about?
  4. What are you concerned about?

This is a simple but powerful tool for those who provide supports. The questions are useful when meeting in order to gather the team’s collective learning in a way that leads to answering a fifth question –

* 1. Based on what we know, how should we move forward

The process is straight forward. Each of the 4 questions is posted on a sheet of flip chart paper and as people arrive for the meeting, they are given a marker and asked to write on each page. Our experience is that the 1st few times that people do this it is awkward, but that after that people know what to expect and are thinking about the questions before they arrive. Everyone must be comfortable with writing; they must feel that spelling and grammar do not matter. Anyone who feels that they cannot write should be supported by having someone write for them. If the person being supported is present, then that person needs to be supported in having his or her thoughts posted as well. This may require some advance preparation and may also require that someone write for them.

WHY?

Starting meetings with this simple activity accomplishes a number of things –

* It prevents a “dominant voice” from drowning out the learning of those who are not as assertive in making their views known.
* It makes everyone feel that they were listened to
* It brings forward issues that might have been overlooked
* When it is time to move forward the group has a picture of their collective learning to draw on
* It serves as an easy way to update plans
* Where plans have not been started, the information from these answers will give the planner much of what is needed in areas, such as, what is important to the person and what others need to know and do to support the person
* It reinforces planning as a process
* It reinforces a positive habit – that of valuing mindful observation and learning

WHEN?

This can and should be started whenever and wherever there is sufficient support for it to be successful. This is a helpful process whenever a group of people gather to talk about the supports and services that a person is receiving. You do not have to wait for people to have plans. A skillful planner can build a plan on what is written here by moving the information into the appropriate sections of an.