

Lessons Learned: Mental Training with Young Offenders and Children at Risk

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Abstract

In this article three case studies are presented that focus on mental training with young offenders and children who are at risk of continuing to break the law. These young offenders are often adolescents who have experienced closed custody, imprisonment, and are returning to a home environment. They are usually defiant, have little or no focus and have very little self-confidence. A flexible mental training model that incorporates sports and mental training was used with these children. Lessons learned from working with this unique population are shared.

Background

I work with young offenders and children who are at high risk of offending. The young offenders are adolescents who have experienced closed custody, imprisonment, and are returning to a home environment. They are on probation with the legal system and may be under house arrest. In school they are closely supervised and are usually considered by school staff as trouble. Often they are suspected to be at the heart of a school incident before any investigation.

The children who are at high risk of offending are usually very young people who have experienced abuse of some form in their formative years. When these young children begin school, their conduct is unacceptable. They distract the teacher and their fellow students using inappropriate behaviors such as hitting, biting, kicking, swearing, and arguing. They are defiant and have little or no focus. Such children have very little self-confidence. Usually they are very sexually aware and

exhibit inappropriate behaviors in the classroom. Both the young offenders, and the young children at risk of offending, have fear as a constant companion.

I will present three case studies that focus on how I work as a mental trainer. Besides, I will share the lessons I am learning from working with the young offenders, and the children at risk of offending and, I will examine my commitment as a mental trainer. In my conclusion I make some general comments about lessons learned.

Case Study One: Alex

Alex was in grade nine when a third party referred him to me. He spent time in closed custody because of criminal activity. When he is not in school, he is under house arrest at home. He is the oldest of three boys. He moved with his mother, stepfather, and younger brothers to a rural community and a new school when he returned to his family from closed custody. His mother wants Alex to begin again, away from the low-income housing

neighborhood. Particularly she did not want her son ‘hanging out’ with the adolescents he had kept company with, prior to his entry into closed custody. She considered his friends to be negative influences that would possibly lead him back to closed custody.

When I began my work with Alex, I outlined my commitment and stated my goals. My goals were to help Alex become more focused, mentally stronger, gain self-control, remain in the public school system, honor his probation and live a better quality of life. A better quality of life would involve staying out of closed custody and successfully completing his probation, as well as public school. The opportunity for him to work with the Western Whale Swim coach was provided. By assisting Alex in the short term, it was anticipated that he would experience a better life, and his community would gain a better citizen.

Now, two and half years later, I can report that Alex is experiencing a better life, is presently passing grade eleven and is still honoring his probation. How did Alex progress to this point? As a psychologist and mental trainer I worked using many strategies that I will outline now.

Upon receiving Alex’s referral I began by meeting together with Alex’s parents, the principal, and the school counselor. When we met, the school principal was complaining that Alex was in trouble constantly at school for minor infractions of the school rules. In our meeting I listened to the concerns and watched. Quickly I realized that the school administration would need to be coached to stay optimistic and I intuited that the mother was a person who needed assistance herself with anger management. I would need to work with her informally as well as with her son. Furthermore I knew that I needed to

convey that I cared about their son and to state confidently to his parents and teachers that it was possible for Alex to successfully settle in school and serve his house arrest.

After the formal meeting with the parents and the school personnel, I met with the school counselor on my own and told him I wanted to work with Alex and use some mental training techniques. He gave me the go signal. Informally I began to watch Alex move around the school and I talked to his different teachers. I offered to teach in his classroom, and subsequently presented a conflict resolution lesson in his class. A visiting policeman who presented a guest lecture to Alex’s class left impressed with Alex’s openness and willingness to talk about his custody and probation experiences. He shared his optimistic views with the school administration.

Alex is a strong, tall, individual with a solid frame, a pleasant smile and a twinkle in his eye. He is also a quick moving individual with strong emotional responses. As I watched him, I noticed that he appeared to want attention, and needed to prove something. There was an air of self-doubt about him. Alex was searching for attention. He seemed to want everyone to know he is a cool, tough, dude. To me, it seemed that he was tough and on the defensive to protect his disappointments. However, my strongest impression was and still is that he is a person who is potentially emotionally rich. I felt that his emotions were not blunted or numbed like other young offenders I have met. When I began to speak with Alex I found that although he appeared initially responsive, he had few words, and was unsure of himself, unfocused, lost, with a genuine ‘I don’t know’ attitude.

After observing Alex, and talking with teachers I requested a meeting with Alex, and his parents in the principal's office at school. At the meeting, I stated that I thought that Alex had a lot of goodness in him and I asked everyone present to commit to having Alex participate in the swim program. This is a major commitment. To swim he needs to travel a half-hour each way to the pool once a week. The parents provide transport - financial problems exist. Alex is excused from school one half day every week. When his parents agreed, I felt at that moment that they understood that I was committed to helping their son. Perhaps, by redirecting the principal's complaints to establishing future school goals helped me gain parental support. During the meeting Alex did not display any enthusiasm for the swimming program. I reminded him that his house arrest order required that he participate in organized sports.

In the beginning at the pool, Alex was not enthusiastic, although he followed through with the requests of Chuck, the coach. Chuck has a quiet steady manner that youngsters do not question. What was immediately noticeable about Alex's swimming was his choking in the water. He could not breathe properly. His swimming lacked fluidness. He gave up quickly and quietly. It was like he was braking himself. He came to two sessions and then he stopped. The school was not following through on their commitment and the parents were complaining about transportation difficulties. At this point, I decided to ask for another meeting with Alex, his parents, and the school principal and counselor to review the commitment, and to request an update on his school progress. When I asked for a school progress report, I was told that Alex was involved in a conflict on the playground with a younger child and was suspended

for two days. Teachers' reports indicated that he was having difficulty with mathematics and was easily distracted. Subsequently I held a meeting with the principal and the school counselor and I requested school personnel complete a formal academic achievement assessment. I decided to do a formal psychological assessment.

After the assessment was completed and before the school based meeting to discuss the results, I met with Alex in the counselor's office on two separate occasions. The purpose of the first meeting was to determine if he saw himself staying out of trouble, and not returning to closed custody. I found to my disappointment that he was unsure of himself and did not know. When I asked him to close his eyes, be strong and say he would not go back to prison, he could not. The strongest response at the end of the session was, "I suppose I won't." On the second meeting I asked him to go inside himself again and see if he wanted to go back to closed custody. He said, "No" quickly. If he did not want to go back, then I told him, he was not going to leave the office without saying he would not go back to prison. He said many times, "I can't say that." However, after saying many times, "I suppose I won't go back", he said that he would not go back in a weak and unconvincing way.

When the assessment reports were completed and reviewed, a meeting was held with the parents and school personnel along with Alex. I shared my findings. According to the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, Third Edition (WIAT III), his intelligent quotient results indicate that he is an individual of low average abilities. Overall the psychological assessment indicated that he has definite learning difficulties, particularly in arithmetic. As well, he has short-term memory

problems. Impulsiveness was noted as a behavior to target in any remediation program. At the meeting Alex's strengths were emphasized, a modified mathematics program was requested as well as a firm commitment to swimming.

During the assessment I had learned that Alex was concerned about his younger brothers and did not want them to follow in his footsteps. I was prepared when Alex voiced objections to swimming. I stated that he could bring his brothers swimming. The school staff and his parents agreed. Furthermore the school committed to developing an individualized mathematics program. Initially Alex was resentful. However, he was not permitted to make the final decision. I made contact with his court worker and told her of our decisions and asked for her support. After some discussion the court worker, offered encouragement and support. Funding for gasoline to and from the pool was given.

When his younger brothers began swimming, a new excitement was evident at the pool. A focus was placed on performance. Alex's breathing, and his stop and start performances in the pool were targeted. We had short breathing sessions. Slowly Alex's choking began to disappear. One day he swam four lengths in a relaxed and graceful manner. At the pool when I asked him if he was going back to closed custody, he firmly stated, "NO."

Alex was found in school quietly working with a calculator. His grades began to improve. His mother's face began to look softer, and generally she is appearing more relaxed.

Among my duties as a mental trainer/psychologist is to keep everyone informed about Alex so he does not get lost. As well, it is important to ask for in-

formal progress reports. Always being on the spot at the pool to talk with the coach, Alex, his brothers, and his parents when they are present is important. I have noted in our conversations that he is often not aware of consequences and he does not seem to realize that to stay out of trouble he needs to choose his friends well. I have reminded him of the adage, "Birds of a feather stick together."

Alex can still be difficult in school. For example, he failed to take advantage of tutoring offered before a social studies test. When his results came in, and it was evident that he needed the extra tutoring, he was held accountable.

After almost two years without a charge, Alex was required to appear in front of the Provincial Judge. He was in the industrial arts workshop at his junior high school. Hot glue guns were being used. His partner was burned on the hand and taken to emergency. He faced charges. He was suspended from school for six days, and has faced his intensive intervention court worker and an unsympathetic school staff. My role as a mental trainer with Alex was to hold fast and not give up. I realized when I met him at the pediatrician's office he knew that I had not given up on him and for a short moment I experienced a flash of energy from him that told me he had found hope and he was not giving up either. Later he came to the pool where I was working with other children and swam his best. In the water he put forth an effort to excel. He swam with grace and confidence and he practiced his dive with the swim coach until it was perfect. Somehow, I knew that finding his best in the swimming pool was critical to refueling his commitment to try. As a result of the charges, he was facing an appearance in court and most likely, house arrest. However if he did not have the control he

exercised over himself in the pool yesterday, he could be placed in closed custody. Alex's achievement in the pool yesterday is the equivalent of another person winning a gold medal and just as important for our human community. His renewed commitment possibly was fostered by observing and feeling hope and realizing someone else had not given up on him. Persistence seems to be a quality that can be modeled.

Alex has not returned to closed custody and he is still attending high school in a modified grade eleven program. His physical education teacher has confronted him on his bullying behavior and he is seeing slow changes in Alex as a result. His high school principal went to court officials on his behalf to report Alex's school progress when his court date came up concerning the glue gun incident. His principal, a tall power lifter, also took Alex aside, and talked to him about commitment, appropriate behaviors and indicated that he would not be going back to court on his behalf. I appeared in court and when I was called to the stand I told the court officials that I believed that Alex could stay 'clean' but he would ultimately have to make the decision. His case was thrown out of court for insufficient evidence. Alex returned to school quickly saying he had a test to write. His story is of course not finished. However, he is still in school, not in closed custody, has improved his swimming skills and is trying hard to show his brothers a different path. His mother expresses appreciation.

I have learned a number of lessons from working with Alex. As I reflect now on what happened, I realize that my thoughts, feelings, actions and intuitions were critical to working with Alex. I worked in flow. (Flow refers to the state in which people are so involved in an activity that

nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it, Csikszentmihalyi, 1191, p.4).

Meeting and communicating with school personnel, his parents, as well as with his court worker when necessary, was important. Continuing to meet and to problem solve was crucial. Observing and participating in the daily life of the school was necessary. Focusing on his potential and keeping others focused on potential was necessary. Furthermore, I learnt that my quiet talks after the swim session with the swim coach assisted me to evaluate and plan. I made some key decisions. For example, I decided to confidently predict success. Making the decisions centered me, and alerted me to be persistent. It signaled the school to carefully consider Alex's possibilities. It gave his mother hope. Focusing Alex to formulate a commitment to stay out of prison was also important. As well, providing Alex with the opportunity to bring his brothers swimming gave him a chance to be a positive role model, and to develop self-confidence. Swimming now is an outlet for the family to express themselves. When the mother and father have come to watch, it has been rewarding for me to observe them enjoying their sons' successes in the water. It has fueled my commitment as a mental trainer.

There were other lessons learned. The formal school achievement assessment and the psychological assessment provided information that helped to define possibilities and to set a realistic academic course. Assisting Alex set goals and coaching him to try, and encouraging him when he met failure or obstacles, has built confidence and perhaps even given him insight. Talking to him about the importance of choosing friends and also about how to

choose friends was necessary. Offering Alex continuous progress reports was crucial. A very important lesson was not giving up. Persistence.

Case Study Two: Gerry

Like Alex, Gerry, age fourteen has already lived in closed custody. However the difference is that Gerry became involved with the justice system earlier and has experienced horrific early childhood experiences that predispose him to a life ‘behind bars’. He was kept out of school for a year because school officials felt he would be potential trouble in their local schools. He did not have the opportunity to attend grade eight. As a result of government insistence, he was registered in grade nine in a junior high school. School Board officials were expecting trouble and Gerry was terrified. Gerry wanted to be in school for his younger sister and brother. The desire to stay one year ahead of his younger sister in school was alive within him.

Assisting Gerry visualize a successful day in school every morning became our goal as the school bell rang. It was not easy for him. He knows what it is like not to be allowed to go to school. Each morning I arrived to see him as he enters the school. When he sees me, he knows why I am present. Our commitment is renewed daily. On days when he stays home I am on the telephone to his foster home. On the days that he has court appearances for probation violations for staying out too late or swearing at his foster mother I am sitting in court.

I want to know as much of his history as possible. I search out his early school records, his court documents from another province as well as his present sentencing order outlining his house arrest. Using a journal to record his day to day behaviors

is important, and I encourage the school to maintain a journal as well.

From the very beginning it was critical to maintain a dialogue with all the people who work with Gerry: his intensive intervention court worker, school personnel, and his foster mother, the social workers, and the judges. It was important to inform others to offer him the best chance of survival in the school, and the community. I shared my findings: his fear, his motivation to do well, the fact that he was never a school behavior problem, as well as details such as his inability to deal with people who yell. Steering him away from loud teachers was an initial goal at school. As other teachers gained insight into Gerry, they become more involved. Soon school personnel begin to respond to him as someone they want to succeed. A transformation occurred. First he is a name with a history and a potential gangster in their school. Now he is a young adolescent who is well groomed, quiet, polite and a loner with a marked history.

For many reasons maintaining continuous communication is a necessity for a mental trainer working with an individual such as Gerry. For instance, once the legal system begin to see a person rather than a court file, they may begin to work with the person in a way that allows for growth and change. I suggested to the judges and lawyers who work with Gerry that they might choose to see Gerry as a person who needs positive father figures. I pointed out that until now he has only experienced father figures that beat him, and yell at him. To my delight two judges in juvenile court modified their approaches. Gerry is requested to report on a monthly basis in their chambers. He is asked to present his school reports as well as his general progress.

By keeping everyone informed, I build a support system around him that in different ways communicate their care and concern. Unfortunately Gerry was living with a single female foster parent who was having difficulties herself, so she is not well equipped to work directly with me in our mental training program. But she does offer him a bed when other people in the community will not, given his history. Fortunately for Gerry, his teacher assistant begins to assume a surrogate mother role, rewarding him for his academic accomplishments, commenting on his personal appearance and taking an interest in his day to day concerns. His female legal aid lawyer acknowledges the importance of his not returning to closed custody.

Very early into my work with Gerry it became important to understand how he solves problems, to know what his academic potential is, and to know about his academic skills in reading, spelling and arithmetic. This proved to be difficult because from the beginning Gerry told school officials that he did not want to be assessed. In his opinion he had been over assessed. Maybe he is frightened of being known. I did at one point tell him that if he wanted to get out of grade nine successfully we would need to know his strengths and weaknesses, to put in place an academic plan that he could master. I also assured him that it would be a way for him to gain full time access to school. Initially he was attending grade nine only on a part-time basis. With time and after many negatives he agreed. I expect he agreed after several months because he knew me better and he wanted to become more involved in school, to belong. At an early age he has learned that attending school is not something he can take for granted.

Assessment results indicated that he is a young person of strong average abilities

and that he has strong reading skills well above his chronological age and grade level.

Communicating with Gerry is a challenge. He is often silent. He seems to trust nobody and he is defensive. Besides, he continues to tell me he is a bad person, and I do not really know him. As a mental trainer he does test my skills. He does not initiate conversation and when I am outside the school area he takes on a ‘tough boy’ gang leader stance. I feel culturally lost. Once when driving with him across town he pulled out a scarf wrapped it around his head and to me appeared to move into another personae. After some moments we arrived at the high school. I turned to him before we got out of the car and said, “Take that off your head. It is not appropriate.” To my surprise he did. Soon he was in an animated conversation with his prospective high school vice principal who showed a genuine interest in him. This was a spontaneous visit I had arranged to show him where he might go to school next year if he would continue to stay motivated and perform well in school, and respect his house arrest. I am introducing and offering him insight into the concept that you have very little control over those things around you, but you do have control over how you choose to respond to them.

One day I arrived at school to find out that he is in the lock up in the local jail. To continue to maintain my focus is difficult, but I reached deep inside myself and paid a visit to the lock up. Apparently he was found out after his curfew drunk and his foster mother did not want him to return home intoxicated. When Gerry told the judge the following day he would rather live in jail than with his present foster mother the judge decided to send him back to the lock up for awhile to let him think.

By the time I made my visit, he was strongly into nicotine withdrawal and looked lost in his oversized custody clothes in the meeting room.

The despair I feel inwardly as I meet with the adolescents like Gerry and the Alex challenge my focus. I remind myself that if I lose the focus, they have little chance, and our community has more at risk. Having a healthy and happy life when I am not working with such boys keeps me centered.

Today, two years later Gerry is in grade eleven in an academic stream and living out of closed custody with foster parents who take an active role in his life. A change in his home situation came as a result of constant dialogue with the social services agency. Working with school personnel I lobbied hard to have him transferred to a family with the ability, energy and commitment to offer Gerry. He lives in a surrogate two-parent family. Gerry did spend time in closed custody prior to his grade ten high school entry. He returned unhappy for the experience. Presently he is enjoying success in school and he has experienced a number of positive experiences with caring people in the past three years. Hopefully these experiences along with the kindness and commitment he experiences will continue to motivate him to be more confident. As a mental trainer maintaining hope is always a challenge.

Many lessons have been learned from working with Gerry. Probably the most important for me was learning not to be intimidated by him and his situation. How did I do that? I chose not to give up and to be optimistic. Besides I worked in flow. Sometimes I did not know what would happen next but I always faced the situation honestly and directly. I worked in

flow. For example, going to the judges who work with him and suggesting they work with him in a different manner was a risk taking measure, as was visiting him in the local prison. Driving him across town to the local high school one day after school when the situation presented itself may have led to a confrontation when he put on his headscarf. I took the risk and he had a spontaneous meeting with the vice-principal of the high school that encouraged us all. Always I responded honestly to situations even when I felt sometimes like walking away.

Digging deeply into his school records and learning he had never been a school problem helped me to predict the problems were not going to occur in school. It also led me to work with his probation officer to tighten up his order and exclude him from a high-risk community center, a mall where troubled youth are known to go. I learned how to communicate with police officers, probation officers and court officials in ways I had not known. I learned that boys like Gerry have lessons to teach me, whether it is about hope, communicating, or not giving up.

Case Study Three: John

John is a young child who is potentially a young offender. John has no trust in anyone including himself. Although he is eight years old and in grade two he does not know how to read and he has been suspended from school for long periods in kindergarten and again in grade one. Although he lives with his father and sister now, in the past he has lived in a foster home. His mother, who lives close by, has made and continues to make false promises. She is an active alcoholic. John does not believe anyone and he trusts no one. John believes he 'can't'.

As a mental trainer I set up situations where children may learn how to take control and learn to trust. In John's case it is teaching him how to swim. Although it sounds simple, it is actually a labor-intensive task that requires continual patience. John has been in a swim program with a private swim instructor for six months and he is still not swimming on his own. He does move about the pool with a life jacket and his personal swimming teacher. He is unable to trust enough to put his head back and float with out support. It took him months to allow his personal swim instructor to help him lie on his back in the water with her support. Still putting his head fully back is a problem. If let be, he would hang onto the edge of the pool for the entire session. Even though he is resistant, he wants to go swimming every week. School reports indicate he is behaving more appropriately at school and he is now attempting to learn to read. As I drive him to swimming, he is reading the street signs. For the first time in his school career of three years he has not been suspended from school.

Together he and I continue to discuss how 'can't' is a word that puts on his brakes, and stops him from being successful. Very slowly John is learning that by saying he can, he is taking control over how he responds. There have been occasions when he has turned to me and yelled, "I can't, I can't, I can't." Patience is important! Rewarding him is also critical. A behavior modification program that focuses on positive reinforcing 'I can' is in place. Incorporating a trip to McDonald's within the reward system has worked as a motivator.

Unfortunately at this moment John is not progressing as well as one would want to report. Several factors seem to be related to his faltering success. His mother does

not support the mental training plan, or other programs. She is actively destructive on occasions, phoning accusing the school or the swim coach of some infraction. She will on occasion call the police to report someone. She is bright, manipulative and vocal and people want to stay away from her. His father, now the single parent John lives with, is losing hope and is tired. This results in his being inconsistent with John. There are difficulties with the school and home communications. In the face of this adversity realism is important and commitment to what can be done, however small the act is. To believe that with time life may turn around for John is necessary. I realize that it is most important for me not to loose my focus. Continuing to provide positive opportunities for him is important.

John's case teaches me that I may not always realize the successes that I would like. However there are the small steps that may be very important and I need to learn not to overlook them. For instances, John is learning to relax in the water. He is trying to learn to read. By wanting to continue to go swimming he is indicating that it is an important event for him. He has not been expelled from school this year for whatever reason. Again with John's case as with Alex's and Gerry's cases, it is important to maintain a dialogue with everyone who is working with the person concerned. Responding in a creative way to each situation as it presents seems most important. Persistence, commitment and large measures of hope are mandatory. Keeping a positive focus when others may be discouraged is the challenge.

Commitment

I have learnt that it is my commitment that fuels my hope in the face of adversity. Young offenders and children at risk de-

mand patience and stamina. I am prepared to persist, to work through the adversity, and find the solutions. I do believe that my strength as a mental trainer with my clients comes from being positive and not feeling hopeless. There are opportune moments that present themselves, times when I am more receptive and observant, and when my clients are ready to receive my support or direction. When these moments occur, I am prepared to grasp the opportunity, and to make a meaningful connection. I am prepared to stay positive and focus on the solution until the moments present themselves because I have learned that there are many rewards when I assist an offender overcome his negative behaviors, or support very young children as they attempt to step into the greater world.

A best moment for me as a mental trainer came one week when I was at a social. The physical education teacher from Alex's school came over to me, and said, "Alex has changed. He is not out seeking attention as he was in the beginning". He said, "In the beginning I thought this boy is real trouble. Now he is quiet, relaxed, and like most of the other boys in school his age. He is a pleasure to be around." I was thrilled.

My commitment is to support my clients realize their strengths and if they have no goals, and are not focused, I attempt to help them discover their *raison d'être*. I find that young children at risk are often without direction and initially cannot articulate goals. With these clients I emphasize stating a goal. With a young child it may be simply 'I can.' Once they have a goal, it can grow as they experience a success, however small it may be. My work includes helping people refocus on their goals when they lose their focus, or experience set backs. It also includes estab-

lishing a plan to help them communicate better (Orlick, 1986). I also assist the adults who live and work with them to support and refocus the children and adolescents when they become distracted, make errors and loose their direction. Whether it is helping people set goals, developing strategies, focusing, refocusing or communicating, mental skill training is a critical to my work.

My mental training model incorporates sports, but it could also involve the fine arts and the performing arts. Presently I work closely with the community swim coach. However, high performance in sports is not the central focus of my mental training with young offenders and children at risk of offending. Living positively is the focus and the commitment I offer, and I do it using the mental training model.

Consistency makes a difference. As a mental trainer I present myself as consistent and focused, and I provide a framework for my clients that demonstrates my commitment. I do what I say I am going to do. I am always on time, and often early. I know I am in for the long haul and I live my commitment. I focus on walking my talk. I believe they can and I don't falter. I am ever mindful that it is their commitment to their project, not my commitment to their project. For example, when working with a young offender I turned to him and told him that choices are his, and then I asked him if he knew what the saying meant, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink."

Hope grows with a consistent focused approach. I work at being a good listener, I am patient and I enjoy embracing the problem of the moment facing the individual. By being prepared, hanging around, or simply just waiting until the moment

occurs, I am able to responsibly provide service. I often receive a referral when a student or school population is in crisis. Although there are disappointments when people give up, or re-offend or others interfere in the mental training process, I try to take this in my stride. When I realize that I could have concentrated more, been more in the moment, I let go, and begin again. I do not believe progress must be a straight line.

My self-care is important. If I am going to continue to generate hope within my clients, I need to be well rested, eat well, have lots of fun in my private life, and be well organized. My physical environment both indoors and outdoors plays an important role in generating a peaceful and spiritual atmosphere for me to rest and let go of my work. By using a personal diary, I find that I know when I need to let go or push myself a little harder until the moment when I can rest. I am becoming more aware sooner that I need to let go of the stress and regroup and refocus. Since I have started to involve myself in the mental game, I have become more aware of my need to monitor my own self-talk, and to play with my own positive body language. Recognizing what I need to do to assist me when working with others has become critical. Once I have recognized the negative self-talk or my exhaustion, I release, regroup, refocus, relax, and get ready to work again. I do this through my recreational sports: cross-country skiing, swimming, biking and rowing. My yoga practice helps me to maintain my balance between working and caring for myself. Balance has been a skill I have needed to develop to a greater extent since I began working with young offenders.

Being committed seems to be involved in maintaining hope. If commitment exists and a problem arises and it always does,

solutions present themselves. With young offenders if hope exists, it is buried deep within them. They are often lost and without commitment. My role as a mental trainer is to help them find, uncover, and rediscover their hope and their commitment. Keeping it simple smart (KISS) is important (Halliwell et al.1999). By this I mean that it may be a very small achievement that will assist a young offender find hope within. Smartness seems to be connected with being capable of understanding that the big jump originates from the little jumps. Positive experience feeds hope. For example, for one young child at risk, it was the day she dived off the side of the pool that sparked her hope. From then on she was not constantly whining that she ‘could not’. She felt a ‘can’ and she found hope, joy. She continued to persist. Next week she jumped off the high dive three times with the coach standing close by. She initiated the dives herself. No one said to her, “Go jump off the high dive.”

Conclusion

I have learned a number of lessons from working with the Alex’s, Gerry’s and John’s of the world. For example, play one pitch at a time, be confident and focused in the moment (Ravizza & Hanson 1995). Another lesson is live in flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). When I am faced with a child who is out of control, or an adolescent who is about to be charged I focus on the process, not look at the outcome. For example, focusing on the fact that Alex hurt another through impulsiveness not deliberation, can not be my focus. My focus as a mental trainer is to have Alex renew his commitment to finish school and to not go back to closed custody. I have to assist him find within himself the courage and stamina to stay on task despite his present charge. Helping him realize that he

must take control of his actions and supporting him in the process is important.

What is making a difference to my commitment, is that I am learning everyday. I am keeping it simple. I am living in the moment. I act, let go, evaluate, and act again. I am letting go of the negatives, what does not work and replacing the

negatives with new energy. It is the process of breathing, of living in the moment. Oxygen in, carbon dioxide out. Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe in, breathe out. As I realize the rhythm I am becoming better. As the children and adolescents sense my commitment, they learn. They begin to act, let go, evaluate and act again.

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