



Rhode Island Behavioral Health Training

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Person-Centered Care: Honoring Individual Journeys on the Path to Wellness and Healing

By Khara House

The fields of behavioral health prevention, treatment, and recovery have long focused on reducing the negative consequences of behaviors, particularly in traditional systems of care. Over the past decade or more, we have seen a dedicated movement away from stigmatizing or deficit-based models of treatment to humanized, individualized, and strengths-based models of care. This is perhaps most evidently reflected in the evolution of person-centered care. Person-centered care shifts traditional systems and care models toward holistic, individualized treatment that prioritizes autonomy, compassion, and dignity. It calls on those of us offering support and care to listen first, respect individual choice, and recognize both that there are many paths to wellbeing and that each person's path is their own. As our understanding of care grows and evolves, so must the ways we put these values into practice.

Within health and human services, we have come to a greater recognition of the fact that effective care is defined more by relationships, trust, and consistency than simply by outcomes. Person-centered care helps us to find ways to both address long-term goals and

identify what helps people at the individual level stay safe, stable, supported, and alive. There are several core principles that guide the field's work in person-centered care:

1. **Supporting Safety:** recognizing where each person is on their journey toward wellness, and helping them with safe tools and supports to get them there
2. **Dignity in Decision-Making:** respecting individual readiness for change and individual choice in how they navigate that change
3. **Risk Reduction:** reducing immediate risks while scaffolding supports for long-term wellness and personalized goals
4. **Cultivating Credibility:** prioritizing trust over compliance and leading through relationships rather than regulations
5. **Personalized Progress:** recognizing that progress isn't linear, looks different for each person, and can take on many forms

Person-centered care focuses on meeting people where they are, empowering people to have a voice in shaping the course of their care, and honoring the value of incremental change. It also models individualized goals established through a collaborative process in which individuals are empowered to participate in their own treatment and wellness planning. Finally, person-centered care calls on us to recognize the impact of trauma in each person's life to design services and supports that are safe and supportive. To do so, we should also focus on building relationships through which people are seen, respected, and not judged. By leading in these ways, we are better able to foster trust and empower each person to control their health journey.

Person-centered care may sound deceptively simple, but we know it is built on layers of complexity. We know that people navigate complex circumstances, through past adverse experiences, lived and living experiences, and personal experiences of harm. This often leads to a lack of trust in systems, services, or service providers. Leading from a strengths-based approach, this naturally means that just as past and current experiences look different, success can look different from one person to the next. A person-centered care approach leaves room for this complexity, allowing care to remain flexible, responsive, and grounded in the lived and living experiences of each person as they need.

We know that person-centered care works, with many positive impacts for the people who are supported through its principles. When people feel respected and supported, on their own terms, they are more likely to stay engaged in services. People can build stronger connections, feel a sense of belonging, and build personally meaningful communities of care and healing. Each person's goals become more sustainable, particularly through an approach that considers their personal needs, strengths, readiness, and desired change. For these and more reasons, person-centered care strengthens, rather than replaces, the commitment to long-term wellbeing we see in traditional treatment models in a more balanced and sustainable way.

We recognize that we are in a time of rapid shifts, in our landscape, our language, and beyond. What remains consistent is our commitment to care and supporting people on their wellness journeys and toward positive lifestyle changes. Person-centered care allows us to focus on stability, wellbeing, and reducing risk in supportive ways. Rather than forcing people to fit systems that may not work to advance their healing, we are able to adaptably and flexibly support people on their unique, individualized paths toward readiness for and embracing of change. This work continues to call on us to maintain our commitment to approaches that center people in both theory and practice. Through this commitment, we are better able to meet people where they are and walk alongside them toward where they want to go.