Psychotherapeutic techniques to influence young alcohol impaired probationary drivers in training courses

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In November 1986 there was introduced in Germany a 2-years-probationary period. Every probationary driver, who has been found guilty of DWI has to undergo and pay for mandatory, fault-related education. These courses are called NAFA, which means a special training program for probationary drivers with drinking problems and consist of a preliminary talk and 3 sittings of about 3 hours each. They are held by specially trained traffic psychologist and have 10-12 participants.

The aim of the course is not only to teach the young probationary driver with drinking problems specific knowledge about alcohol and the risk of accidents, but most of all to achieve a higher self-awareness, interest for the concerns of the other road users and a higher degree of consciousness and sensibility through analysing their own experiences with alcohol.

But most of the participants of the NAFA courses are altogether not very motivated for the course work because they see themselves as unlucky fellows and don’t feel a high degree of strain imposed by suffering or any problem awareness. They can’t hardly find any sense in taking part in these learner group and very often they use to demonstrate their opinion through a provoking behaviour. They tend to consider the seminar as something they only want to sit through and they have little interest in an active cooperation because they cannot think of anything that they should learn there. Although they are on a high risk of relapsing into their former behavior (DWI), which is nearly 50% in 5 years, they themselves consider this possibility as rather unlikely.
Considering this difficult starting position for a course leader and moderator what can be done to initiate a group process where the basic foundations for it as confidence, openness, working attitude and cooperation are made possible. It is obvious that without any group dynamics a course with this kind of starting position will work out in a way that both the participants and the presenter will be rather dissatisfied.

What can be done to promote the development of a group process in the NAFA courses, how can the participants' willingness for co-operation be increased. According to my experiences this is only made possible through the moderator's attitude and behavior. This may sound very simple but it hits the problem, since it is the only possibility for having any influence at all. Moderators can initiate positives impulses with the participants through their personal attitude towards the group process and through their way of leading the discussion, which then will create a more relaxed atmosphere and thus a more pleasant work with the topics of discussion.

To put it in a more simply way one could say that the course leader in the beginning should get the group process going through psychotherapeutic techniques, so that once the group process is active he will only have a moderating function. Proven psychotherapeutic techniques that can be very well applied to the NAFA courses, are according to my experiences from systemtheory, hypnotherapy and strategic brief therapy.

According to systemtheory the organisation patterns of a system are as just as important as the single elements of a system. Through this the superordinate context into which the NAFA courses are embedded and that the moderator is working in is easier to understand. And through that it can also be explained why the participants very often consider the seminar as a kind of punishment or oppressive measure and think that the moderator is expecting an adjusted behaviour and that they have drinking problems.

Systemtheory explains the participants' behaviour in the preliminary talk and offers accordingly paradox interventions against it. Instead of expressing any expectations the moderator for instance should be interested in every individual and he should ask everyone: "What can I do for you?" (It is not me who wants something from you, but it is you, who wants something from me). In the beginning he should only act as a counsellor and the preliminary talk should be nothing more than a guidance. Or, another way could be that he doesn't start to speak about alcohol but waits until the participants are ready to talk about it.
According to the rules of system theory, none of the system's elements (e.g. the moderator) can have one-sided control over the other elements (e.g. the participants) or can change the rules of the system, if he wants to remain a member of the system (e.g. the group). This explains why in many situations no group process can evolve in the NAFA courses, because the moderator does not join in and is working against the group. For instance, if he tries to impart his idea of the problem to the participants and they are not interested in it, the group will simply show a refusal attitude or opposition - and then nothing work.

Group behaviour follows fixed systemic patterns and it should be the moderator's task to re-organize these patterns. But it is very important that the changes do happen in accordance with the participants and in very small steps, because a new pattern in the beginning creates insecurity and an unfamiliar feeling before it will be stabilized through positive experiences.

Many elements of hypnotherapy are particularly well suited for this kind of procedure in small steps. Especially the concept of pacing/leading. Here the group leader works according to the mood and the behaviour of the participants (pacing) and always uses his planned interventions in coordination with the participants following (leading).

None of the things that a participant of the course may offer has to be considered as an obstacle, everything can be an opportunity for the pacing/leading. The moderator should always limit his contributions and interventions in such a way as to meet with the participant's way of seeing himself, which may be followed by an offer into another direction. Most of the participants think that their driving ban was simply caused by bad luck because they have been caught. I pick that up in the first session and ask every participant: "what piece of bad luck has brought you here today?" Later on, it can be taken into consideration whether there may have been other factors that more or less contributed to the bad luck.

This kind of procedure strengthens the relation between the leader and the participants and enables the participants to a deeper confidence and the leader to a better understanding. Pacing is a fundamental requirement for every kind of successful communication and should be the stronger the less the participants are able or willing to follow the leader's suggestions. According to this concept resistance can be considered as an expression of individuality. The group leader's task then would be to understand and to use this individuality in such a way that the participants learn how to avoid his restricted viewpoint and to reach more positive aims for himself. So that
he will understood for instance that his uncontrolled consumption of alcohol will lead to further bad luck in the future.

If you succeed in dissolving the participants' negative behaviour then the group knows automatically into which direction it will continue with the work, either a more informative or a more problem related way, and whether at first the one and then the other topic will be talked over. At any rate, the participants know themselves what they need and what they want. If there is a motivation for a change then there will also be a definition of a problem, a definition of the aim and a definition of the solution. And then the moderator is working in his very own field - the presentation of the course topics.

Hypnotherapy also offers another effective element: suggestions. To find alternative possibilities to his former attitude and behaviour it can be useful to prompt the participant to look inside himself. For that suggestions in the form of indirect invitations, stories or metaphors can be interspersed into the group discussions, sometimes in the form of seemingly casual conversation. The moderator could for instance talk about drinking problems with a participant who doesn't have any, in reality meaning someone else thus addressing him indirectly because, naturally, that person listens to the conversation, too. In this way the moderator can avoid intruding his own ideas to the participants.

If the associations that will probably suggest themselves in a participant are valuable for him, then he will use them for his own process of evaluation for a pinpointing and solving of the problem. This process may happen subconsciously, just the way of informations may be grasped and digested subconsciously. This process is also called subconscious learning.

Strategic brief therapy offers methods for intervention, that have shown to be very effective in different kinds of situations. This can make the moderator's work easier insofar, as he can concentrate on fundamental aspects of a situation and has effective starting points for his further way of proceeding. Especially if he wants to achieve a solution of the problem or a change.

A change for instance should always be introduced where the smallest opposition of a participant or the group can be expected. Then even small changes may lead to the collapse of the entire system of keeping the problem alive, as for instance problem denial, often to be found in these groups. If someone assumes the bad luck viewpoint and if he is asked wheather he also has ever been lucky, that means if he has ever driven intoxicated without getting caught, then he may realize that the problem is not the police check
but his consumption of alcohol. It could also be usefull to continue with a participants earlier success or to look where he allows expectations from the rules of his behaviour.

The precondition of every possible change should be the building up of an attitude of expectation in the participants, the expectation that through the NAFA course they will change. It must be taken into consideration by the moderator that a succesfull change may mean something different for him and for the participant. The most important thing is, that there is the possibility of any change at all.

If I now once again summarize the above explainend psychotherapeutic techniques it can be said that the systemic concept helps to understand group dynamics. With the help of hypnotherapy there can be established relations with the group and with the single participants and through strategic brief therapy there may be achieved the solution of problems and changes.

All this kinds of procedures have only one aim: the activation of the group process. The work with the course topics, as they are described in NAFA handbook remain untouched by that. This means one starts with the definition of the problem ('why am I here?') then concentrates on the analysis of the condition ('how did my DWI happen, what were my drinking habits?'), after that goes on with an analysis of the aim and a choice of possible solutions ('how will I handle alcohol in the future to avoid DWI?') and then finishes with a final answer ('how can I keep my driving licence for ever?

I'll now come to the end of my paper. The before mentioned psychotherapeutic techniques are without doubt helpful for leading the initially fairly difficult group process in NAFA courses into a direction that is pleasent and effective for both the presenter and the participants. The fundamental element for a succesfull outcome is not only the technique employed but also the moderator's attitude. What I want to say is that it should be open-minded and impartial towards the participants and that there should be the endeavour to support them without offering ready-made solutions.

And I am convinced that there are many moderators who are already working more or less in the fashion described above because of preconceived attitudes, probably without ever having noticed this or thought about it. It is my endeavour to develop a method for the less experienced, that will enable moderators to run NAFA courses more succesfully. I do hope that I have been able to pass on several ideas for looking at the task from new angles.