



Development
Training

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Does My Bum Look Big In This?

Self-image and the outdoors

By Karen
Stuart

“Just adjust that leg loop ... Put that waterproof on ... Yes, you must wear a helmet ... No that's not tight enough! ... You should only be able to squeeze a flat hand behind that waist loop ... Your wetsuit needs to be a close fit ... We will change in the car park ...”



When it comes to setting people up for taking part in activities, do we make too many assumptions?. Can we remember what it is like to see all this specialist kit as unfamiliar and perhaps odd?

As outdoor practitioners, we are accustomed to the clothing and safety equipment used for different activities, it does not seem alien to us, even so most of us are very selective about the colours / styles / brands and images that we sport. We have essentially embraced 'the great outdoors' look, some of us even carry this image into our social lives with karabiner key rings, approach shoes, logo-ed t-shirts etc.

This is usually not the case for the people we work with.

Many people are very conscious of the way that they look. Especially young people in teenage

years forming self concept, and susceptible to peer pressure. Statistics show that mental health issues are on the increase, this is often due to the unrealistic dual demands that society places upon us to 'look right' and yet also consume heavily marketed food and drink products. Young people are set up to fail – how can they look like Kate Moss and drink Bacardi breezers and eat McDonald's with their mates?

Imagine the scene then when 10 young people of mixed body size are asked to get kitted out for a caving session. Statistically at least a third of them will have low self esteem and will be desperate to 'look right' in order to get accepted by their peers, something they need in order to feel good about themselves.

- Some of the group will embrace the situation and enjoy 'dressing up' and have a laugh (in a relaxed 'free child'* state).
- Some will feel acutely embarrassed that they are being asked to wear close fitting clothing/equipment – they will feel exposed and uncomfortable.
- Some will present anger at being asked to wear things that they have no control over, and that spoil the hair-do/make-up that they spent ages doing (both anger and embarrassment can stem from 'adapted child'* reactions to feeling small and powerless)

* These are terms used in Transactional Analysis -a system model developed by Eric Berne for understanding our communications and emotional states (amongst other things)



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For many of the group these feelings will run together and be overwhelming, leading to rejection of an activity that they would really love to do. Our simple request to them to get 'kitted out' pushes them over their comfort zone. We get confrontation that was avoidable.

Observations like those above led me to run a pilot programme on body image for young women. What I present below is a brief summary of the thesis of the work, the methodology employed, and suggestions of strategies that we can employ in our day to day work to improve the outcomes on many other courses.

This explains why a young person would refuse an activity that they really wanted to do because they have to wear a helmet.

It is therefore vital that interventions offer opportunities to examine and redefine the self, to build an accurate positive sense of self as a basis for decision making. For young people, self esteem and body image issues are often associated with eating disorders.



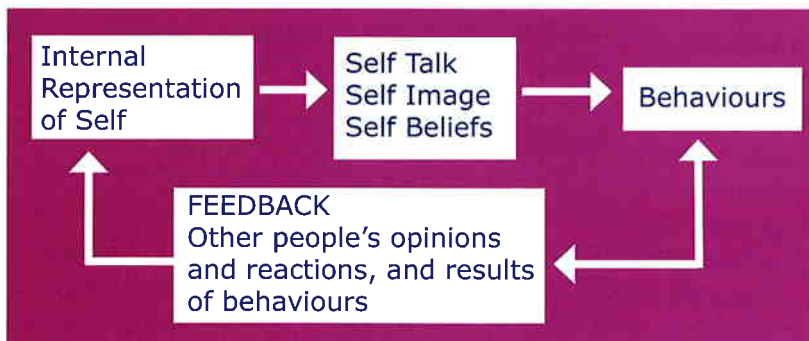
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Body Mapping

Body Image and Young Women

What is self esteem? For me it's the internal representation we have of ourselves. It is informed by a mixture of our judgements about ourselves, and other people's perceptions of us. It creates our self talk, self image and self belief which drives our behaviours. In such a way it is self fulfilling. (See diagram below.)

Key areas for consideration emerged in the programme design:

- A Safe Learning Environment
- Strong Effective Relationships
- Empowerment and Self Value
- Positive Feedback – NLP inputs
- Developing Knowledge and Understanding
- Opportunities to Experiment with Self Concept



A Safe Learning Environment

A 'person centred' learning environment featuring unconditional positive regard (i.e. accepting them warmly, for who they are, without judging them) is

essential to allow people to safely explore their identity. This value base requires us as trainers to work in a non judgemental manner and focus on:

- process rather than activity,
- the individual rather than the task or group.

We decided on an experiential programme where challenge would be optional, and as the work verged on the therapeutic, we had a counsellor on standby to help address any issues beyond the trainer's skill.

We tend to only notice events (feedback) that are congruent with our internal representation of ourself. The implication of this is that an intervention is needed to break a negative self esteem cycle, and we will need to deliberately create positive feedback.

"Damaged self esteem is a consequence of an inaccurate, distorted sense of self which, because it is inaccurate, provides an invalid basis on which to make decisions." (Peel 2003, p55).



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Strong Effective Relationships

The ability of the trainers to build rapport and trust quickly with the participants was essential:

'the success of minimal and preventive interventions depends in part on the relational skills of the person providing the intervention'. Streigel (1998 p15)



We recognised it was important that a group of practitioners engaged in such therapeutic work had time to develop as a team themselves (a luxury not often afforded outdoor practitioners). A period of build up work was carried out prior to the participant's residential course to ensure this happened.

We discussed and recognised that we needed to abandon some typical styles of working:

outdoor notions of 'overcoming fear' rather than 'listening to fear' and 'challenging the physical body' rather than 'nurturing the physical body' ..are commonplace and need to be challenged." Richards (2003 p108)
The "go on you can do it!" cajolement into achieving tasks was unsuitable.

This was not to say that participants could easily choose a 'soft option', but that they were encouraged to be true to themselves, and given a real option.

Staff needed to build the correct learning environment, build rapport, give unconditional positive regard, offer positive role models and empower the group whilst also remaining human themselves – a 'super woman' role model would not serve the group well. Additionally, the trainers needed to acknowledge and bring their own

issues to the table as they too may have a complex relationship with their own body image, weight, food etc. What became necessary then was a learning community where it was explicitly acknowledged that trainers would be a part of the process as well as delivering the programme.

Empowerment and Self Value

The group was given a sense of empowerment by being involved in a truly participatory way in the programme design.

They put together their own contract for working with each other, planned a weekly residential programme, and created their own piece of evaluation work.

"experiences of power, voice, authoritycounter experiences of powerlessness, silencing or violation often associated for women with their bodies". Piran (2003 p176)

As they engaged in the residential they also changed programme details to suit their needs (within logistical constraints). In this way they were empowered to join in a programme that they had ownership of. Being listened to, valued and empowered immediately sent messages of self worth.

Empowerment (even on this small scale) countered the group's feelings of oppression in society, and so countered their need to take control of their lives through disordered eating. The message of self worth was also reinforced by everything that we did, and everywhere they went. They had nice accommodation, good food, lovely resources etc. They were made to feel valued by everyone and everything.

A powerful message of empowerment was to get the group to write their own certificates (that were then professionally produced). Who are we to say what they should be congratulated for? They as individuals know best their achievements from the week. This became one aspect of the course that they most enjoyed – it also gave us evidence of how far we had come in improving their self esteem by the list of positive self statements they made.

'nurturing' rather than 'challenging the physical body'



Positive Feedback - NLP and TA inputs

Neuro linguistic programming (NLP) was useful in two ways~ firstly for trainers to give powerful positive feedback to the group, and secondly as a toolkit for the participants to use for themselves in future.

As a result the group were able to stand under the high ropes course Pamper-pole and fire their mental 'anchors' to help them feel they could succeed (this is a technique used by many elite athletes and performers).

From this the group developed an awareness that they could have control over their own thought patterns, and began to monitor their own thoughts and take control of their own habitual thought patterns. What better way to ensure sustainable, transferable learning?

The trainers and group also used 'Permissions' from Transactional Analysis** to allow new behaviours to emerge, and to model affirmations.

(**Permissions are positive statements allowing participants to complete their current stage of development and to move on to the next 'Its OK to try new things' enabling exploration stage of development. For further info see <http://www.umext.maine.edu/onlinepubs/PDFpubs/4427.pdf>)

Developing Knowledge and Understanding

We delivered sessions on how and why self esteem is created, and how it can be influenced as part of an upfront and open approach to working on self esteem. Sharing our thinking and methodology with the group made the learning more effective as they could then become experts with us.

As all of the group were identified as having disordered eating, we delivered specific inputs on food, diet, nutrition, and eating disorders. It transpired that the level of knowledge the group had was much less than I had expected, indeed it was almost non-existent, and as a result this type of information input turned out to be a very important part of the course.



'Listening to fear' rather than 'overcoming fear'...

Opportunities to Develop Self Awareness and to Experiment with Self Concept

Journey mapping and body mapping (drawing around a body and in-filling the shape with statements about self) allowed the group to access and become aware of their thoughts and beliefs.

Activities that offered new ways of being were planned into the programme with the consent of the girls. These included experimentation sessions with body paints, costumes, drama and film making, and more reflective exercises such as mask-making and sculpture. These coupled with NLP provided powerful arenas to be someone new, and to get positive feedback for being that person.

Outcomes

- Involving the participants fully in the experiential learning cycle was invaluable in creating individual powerful learning.
- The experiential process focused style and supportive learning environment led to outdoor activities being non-problematic even for those who had previously refused them elsewhere.

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Implications for Outdoor Practitioners

This was a well funded, well resourced pilot designed to specifically remediate in poor body image, low self esteem and eating disordered 14 – 16 year old girls.

What can be drawn out that is of use to us in outdoor settings? What forms best practice?

1. Challenge your own assumptions: be aware of the difficulty that young people face when entering the outdoor arena in terms of image, don't assume that they are as happy as you are to wear the gear and have a go. Explain to the group what they may have to wear before you are at the lakeside.
2. Empower the group where possible to make decisions and offer them real choices – give them the information to make a reasonable decision for themselves.
3. Focus on process rather than activities, this combined with the use of an experiential learning cycle means that the participants will gain real self learning, regardless of outcomes.
4. Establish a sound learning environment that is supportive, non judgemental, nurturing, and offers unconditional positive regard.
5. Build strong staff relationships that offer trust, openness, honesty, non judgemental working.
6. Use theory and techniques (such as NLP) openly with the group to give positive feedback, to help to 'programme' new self belief and to show how we can build affirmations and permissions into our daily vocabulary.
7. Transfer Learning - through use of pre course meetings, residential components and post course meetings with the group in their own territory to ensure they take learning back into their everyday lives.

I wouldn't have thought I would do some stuff...

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- The group participated in more 'activities' than predicted.
- The climate of unconditional positive regard really impacted on the girls' ability to participate and self belief.
- A sense of value and self worth was built as a result of empowering the group and giving true choices.
- A great improvement in self esteem as recorded on the Rosenberg Self Esteem Inventory (Mean start score 11.3 range 3 – 16, mean end score 20.5 range 18 – 23) (<http://www.atkinson.yorku.ca/~psyctest/rosenbrg.pdf>)
- New self esteem was difficult to sustain on return to the home environment where disempowerment is the norm. This remained an issue to be addressed.



..be aware of the difficulty that young people face when entering the outdoor arena in terms of image, don't assume that they are as happy as you are to wear the gear...

Some comments from the group sum up the learning they valued:

“You have made me believe in myself!”

“I gave 100% and so gained 100%, I achieved what I never thought I could!”

“I wouldn't have thought I would do some stuff, but being able to choose somehow made it OK!”

It's often things that we, as outdoor practitioners, take for granted that cause much of the anxiety in our participants; think how much easier it can be to work with people when we create learning situations that enable our participants to tell us (and themselves) honestly 'who they are' 'who they want to be' and 'what their real fears are'. This approach is not risk free for us as trainers, we must be prepared to give up some of our power and our superior position. Can we let the group know as much as we do (can we share our knowledge to empower them)? Can we be honest and open about

our own fears (and still remain professional)? Can we truly empower our groups by offering real choices (and still run a safe and effective programme)?

What is possible on any programme or intervention will depend on a number of factors, not least the funding. I hope that our work will highlight some useful things for trainers to consider when planning and delivering programmes for vulnerable young people. ■



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Author's Notes

Karen worked as a primary school teacher, secondary school teacher, and head teacher of a private EBD school. She has run a paragliding school in Turkey and in 2005 she became the gold medallist in a world competition. Kaz has led numerous expeditions abroad. Brathay enables Kaz to create innovative developmental programmes. Kaz continues to push the boundaries of development personally and professionally.

Karen is now Assistant head of Consulting at Brathay Hall and leads the Professional Development courses such as Transactional Analysis for Youth Development. For more information see: www.brathay.org.uk or contact Karen direct on 015394 39760.

Photographs - all submitted by the author.