

New Beginnings Expands Mental Health Services

Power Source Plus Project Summary

In a continuing effort to provide the most current, effective services for runaway and homeless youth, New Beginnings recently added mental health group education to its programs. The agency adapted the acclaimed *Power Source* curriculum, created by the Lionheart Foundation, for use in New Beginning's emergency shelter, transitional living, and outreach center programs. An independent evaluation of the program, conducted by CERES Associates, found that youth participating in *Power Source Plus* demonstrated improvement in important mental health outcomes.

From over 30 years of experience working with this vulnerable population, New Beginnings identified the clear connection between the trauma-affected lives of these youth and the difficulties they experience in their adolescent development. While often resilient in the face of substantial barriers to healthy growth, youth experiencing traumatic stress have additional challenges that are interfering with psychological development. Research has linked the impact of traumatic stress on youth's ability to establish a clear sense of self, maintain a sense of personal safety, clearly perceive and act with a sense of control and self-efficacy, forge and maintain healthy interpersonal relationships. In addition, there is a strong link between trauma and mental illness.

Aware of this reality, New Beginnings has incorporated a trauma-informed care perspective into all aspects of its service model. This new effort adds a service that directly addresses the effects of traumatic stress by seeking to improve youth's abilities to achieve the tasks associated with healthy adolescent psychological development.

After an initial trial run of the original *Power Source* curriculum, agency staff determined that some revisions were necessary to better address the needs and perspectives of local youth. The core of the curriculum, with its emphasis on mindfulness training, impulse control, conflict resolution, self-

Are youth better able to relate to others?

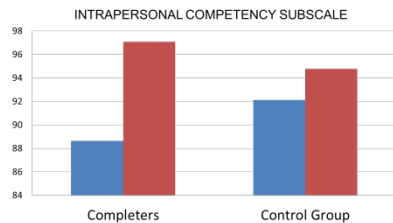


Figure 1. 64% of youth completing the program showed improvement in intrapersonal competencies from pre-test to post-test compared to 52% of control group.

motivation, empathy, and social competence was retained. Staff facilitators worked with an educational consultant from CERES Associates to align activities more closely to the experience of Maine youth, strengthening the focus on developing self-awareness, incorporating new activities on mindfulness and coping strategies for working through difficult situations.

Youth responded favorably, and in some sessions enthusiastically, to the revised program. In written feedback forms completed after each session, they rated each activity presented in the session and reported on whether it would be useful to them in real life. They rated the meditation and active mindfulness activities most highly. Activities focusing on building self-awareness and social skills training also met with strong approval. Youth found that sessions addressing emotional regulation and skills for dealing with emotionally charged situations were particularly helpful.

Each session began with the meditation and mindfulness activities, then focused on specific mental health skills such as identifying emotions, practicing assertive communication, dealing with anger or

disrespect, or tolerating distress. In a session on risk-taking, for example, youth identified risky behaviors (something that could cause harm to oneself or someone else or violate someone’s rights, then potential consequences of such actions. The youth discussed reasons why people take such risks, what triggers such actions, and how a cycle of risk-taking develops. They then related the exercise to their own risk-taking histories and identified the features of their own risk cycles. With these concepts in place, the adult facilitators then taught the youth how to interrupt the risk-taking cycle by applying mindfulness techniques to counter impulses for risky actions. Using the phrase, “Cool Thoughts, Good Moves,” to signal these techniques, youth practiced constructive ways to address situational triggers.

Other sessions followed a similar format of introducing a theme from the trauma-informed literature, building youth awareness of important concepts, helping youth relate the ideas to their own lives, then providing training in skills to transform harmful or unhelpful patterns of behavior into constructive, useful action.

In the formal training evaluation conducted by CERES Associates, youth completed a validated survey on emotional literacy before the program and another survey after completion.

Results showed that youth demonstrated gains in self-understanding, interpersonal relationship skills, being adaptable to new situations, stress management, and overall emotional literacy. The most significant gain came in the ability to be self-directed and self-controlled in one’s thinking and actions and to be free of emotional dependency. This finding showed that the program effectively addressed major consequences of traumatic stress.

Did youths’ emotional literacy improve overall?

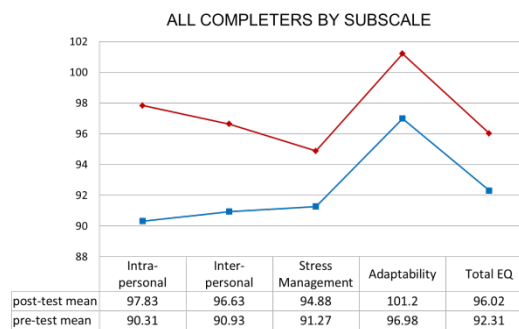


Figure 3. Mean scores for all of the youth completing the program showed improvement from **pre-test** to **post-test** in five subscale areas of emotional literacy.

The design of *Power Source Plus* accommodated the realities of working with homeless youth. The evaluation found that the greatest effects occurred for youth participating in nine or more sessions. Findings showed that significant mental health gains happened if youth participated in at least five sessions.

Evaluation results were presented at the 2015 National Runaway and Homeless Youth Grantees Conference sponsored by the Family and Youth Services Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. New Beginnings received numerous requests for information about the project from conference attendees from across the country.

For further information about the project, contact Mary Ruchinskas, Managing Department Director, New Beginnings, at mary@newbeginmaine.org.