

Evaluating the Individual and Group Outcomes of Individuals Who Participated in Experiential Therapy Activities at a Challenge Course

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Abstract

Experiential therapy activities are events that the individual participates in that usually push them out of their comfort zone and into a place of self-discovery, confidence-building, self-awareness, and new insights of how to cope with issues in their lives (Laser & Nicotera, 2021; Laser-Maira & Nicotera, 2019). The experiential therapy activity can be a game, an activity, a mental puzzle, time in nature, or a physical challenge (Laser & Nicotera, 2021; Nicotera & Laser-Maira, 2017). Often experiential therapy activities are done as group activities (or sometimes family or couple activities), which take strategy, planning, and cohesion to make them successful (Laser & Nicotera, 2021; Laser-Maira, 2016; Laser-Maira & Nicotera, 2019). Experiential therapy activities transform into experiential therapy during the debrief of the clinical segues of the experiential therapy activity. The clinical segues shifts the understanding from what just happened to what insights can be learned from the experiential activity about themselves, their lives, their thoughts, and their behaviors. In this research, experiential therapy activities were activities groups participated in at an all-day (8 hour) Challenge Course. The results underscore the profound influence Challenge Courses have on its individual participants and group dynamics. In each outcome: problem solving skills, decision-making skills, cooperation skills, communication skills, self-awareness, enjoyment of the activities and the participant's likelihood to return to the Challenge Course and to recommend it to others, participants overwhelmingly found positive changes in multiple aspects of their lives.

Keywords: Experiential therapy activities, experiential therapy, group development, individual development, problem solving skills, decision-making skills, cooperation skills with group members, communication skills within the group, self-awareness

1. Introduction

Experiential therapy activities are events that the individual participates in that usually push them out of their comfort zone and into a place of self-discovery, confidence-building, self-awareness, and new insights of how to cope with issues in their lives (Laser & Nicotera, 2021; Laser-Maira & Nicotera, 2019; Nicotera & Laser-Maira 2017). The experiential therapy activity can be a game, an activity, a mental puzzle, time in nature, or a physical challenge (Laser & Nicotera, 2021; Laser-Maira & Nicotera, 2019; Nicotera & Laser-Maira 2017). Often experiential therapy activities are done as group activities (or sometimes family or couple activities), which take strategy, planning, and cohesion to make them successful (Laser & Nicotera, 2021; Laser-Maira, 2016; Laser-Maira & Nicotera, 2019; Nicotera & Laser-Maira 2017). Experiential therapy activities transform into experiential therapy during the debrief of clinical segues of the experiential therapy activity. The clinical segues of the experiential therapy activity shifts the understanding from what just happened to what insights can be learned from the experiential therapy activity about themselves, their lives, their thoughts, and their behaviors. Experiential therapy creates interventions that serve as a symbol or metaphor to impact the individual's life outside of the experiential therapy activity and therapy.

The results of experiential therapy are often enhanced team building, group member appreciation, awareness and valuing of others' skills and attributes, as well as, valuing one's own skills, tenacity, and growth (Laser & Nicotera, 2021; Laser-Maira, 2016; Laser-Maira & Nicotera, 2019; Nicotera & Laser-Maira 2017). Experiential therapy can dramatically improve the resilience and the well-being of the group and the individual (Laser & Nicotera, 2021; Laser-Maira, 2016). Therefore, through experiential therapy, the individual can participate in much more than just a fun experiential activity, but to use the activity as an opportunity for growth and understanding (Laser & Nicotera, 2021; Laser-Maira, 2016).

In this research, experiential therapy activities were activities groups participated in at an all-day (8 hour) Challenge Course. There were a wide variety of groups who participated in the experiential activities. The groups included: academic, community organizations, corporate organizations, non-profit organizations, religious groups, and sports teams. The experiential therapy activities included: on the ground team-building experiential activities (ice breakers and getting to know each other better activities on the ground), followed by low-elements experiential activities (activities not more than 1-2 feet of the ground) and finally high elements experiential activities (activities that need a hardhat and a harness system which are many feet off the ground). The Challenge Course activities were all partner or group activities, which support growth of the individual and group. After every experiential therapy activity, the facilitators debriefed the activity, which included clinical segues of what each participant learned about themselves, about their group members, how the group functioned, their enjoyment of the activity and lessons learned that they could use in the future. The debriefing of each experiential therapy activity helped participants connect what they learned about themselves, their group members, and their group to other spheres in their lives. By doing so, even though they had completed the experiential therapy activity, the impact of participation in the experiential activity had a residual effect on the participants and

the group.

1 State Hypotheses and Their Correspondence to Research Design

The research centered on evaluating participants self-evaluation of their problem-solving skills, decision-making skills, cooperation skills, communication skills, self-awareness, enjoyment of the activities, and the participant's likelihood to return to the Challenge Course and to recommend it to others at the close of 8 hours of participation at a challenge course. The hypothesis was that they would make some gains over the course of the day.

2. Method

2.1 Sample

The participants in this research study were adults who had agreed to voluntarily participate in a full day of organized experiential activities at the Challenge Course. The participants came to the Challenge Course as an organized activity sponsored by their university, school, business, community organization, sports team, religious group or non-profit organization. There were 14 different groups comprising the sample. The sample for this study was 137 participants. The youngest participant was 22 years old and the eldest was 73 years old. The majority of the sample was female with 72% of the sample being female.

2.2 Data Collection Procedures

At the conclusion of the day's activities, the staff, who were included in the research process, co-authored the survey instrument, and were certified through the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) Program and the Institutional Review Board (IRB), handed out the written consent form. The staff explained that the anonymous surveys were being used to help understand the influence the Challenge Course had on participants. Specifically, the survey investigated participants' understanding of what they learned and gained from the experiential activities individually and as a group member and their enjoyment and endorsement of the experiential activities. The consent form was discussed with each group and signed prior to the survey given to the participants of the Challenge Course and after the final debriefing of the day's experiential activities. The surveys were anonymous, and participants put their own completed surveys into an envelope that was sealed and later delivered to the researcher who entered the data into SPSS.

2.3 Instrumentation

Experiential Activities Evaluation (EAE). The EAE was created by the research team, which comprised of experiential activity educators, who were also the staff at the Challenge Course, and experiential therapists, who were also academic researchers. The overarching research question centered on evaluating the influence of the Challenge Course on individual and group behaviors and attitudes. Additionally, participants' enjoyment and endorsement of experiential activities were investigated. Several outcomes were specifically evaluated: problem solving skills, decision-making skills, cooperation skills, communication skills, self-awareness, enjoyment of the activities, and the participant's likelihood to return to the Challenge Course and to recommend it to others. The EAE has 30 questions on a 5-point

Likert scale and takes about 5-10 minutes to complete.

3. Results

3.1 General Outcomes

The majority of participants (62%) had never been to a Challenge Course before. However, most respondents (80%) had previously participated in on ground team building activities prior to being at the Challenge Course. Almost all respondents (93.4%) agreed that they were fully engaged in the day's experiential activities, allowing for the full effect of the experiential activities to be felt by the participants.

3.2 Comfort Zone

Most participants (87.5%) agreed they left their comfort zone (pushed themselves to move past what they would normally do in typical circumstances) at the Challenge Course. This is important that most participants challenged themselves to get the most out of their day at the Challenge Course, hence they were endorsing the name of Challenge Course as it applied to their own behavior. Most respondents (87.6%) agreed they were glad that they left their comfort zone. Often leaving one's comfort zone increases stress, fear, and anxiety (Laser-Maira & Nicotera, 2019). However, for these participants there were not lasting negative repercussions for leaving one's comfort zone, but instead feeling of pride. Furthermore, due to the activities at the Challenge Course, most participants (76.5%) agreed they would be more likely to leave their comfort zone in the future in other activities in their lives. Thus, their success at the Challenge Course, helped participants move past their comfort zone in other spheres of their lives. Allowing them to better confront other challenges they have in their lives.

Each of the outcomes for the experiential activities at the Challenge Course is discussed individually.

3.3 Problem Solving Skills

Problem solving skills helps individuals solve real-world problems (Snyder & Snyder, 2008). Improved problem solving has been linked to better functioning at school or work, more satisfying relationships, and higher self-esteem and life satisfaction (Canada Mental Health Association British Columbia, 2019).

At the conclusion of the day, over three-fourths (76.6%) of participants agreed that their experiences at the Challenge Course increased their ability to problem solve on their own and with group members. Thus, these experiential activities had a strong impact on the participants future ability to problem solve.

3.4 Decision-Making Skills

Decision-making skills help individuals choose between possible solutions to solve a problem or problems (Decision Innovation, 2019). Decision making skills can be overwhelming if one has depression, anxiety, PTSD, bi-polar depression and indecision can occur (healthyplace.com, 2015). Healthy decision-making happens through a 7-step process

(University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, 2019). Beginning with identifying the decision, followed by gathering relevant information, identifying alternatives, weighing the evidence, choosing one or a number of the options, taking action and reviewing the decision and consequences (University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, 2019).

Decision-making skills were enhanced by participation in the Challenge Course. Seventy six percent of participants agreed their experiences at the Challenge Course would increase their ability to make good decisions in the future.

3.5 Cooperation Skills with Group Members

Cooperation skills are they opposite of competition skills; they are the skills the group needs to accomplish a goal (Performwell.org, 2019). The social skills of cooperation are often taught to children but have an enormous impact for a healthy workplace (Gilani, 2019). Teams have a greater ability to grow if group members possess a variety of skill sets, are diverse in their composition, have a shared vision, prioritize communication and collaboration, and their efforts are rewarded (Inc, 2018). Cooperation skills are also improved by an increased ability to trust group members (Mindtools, 2019).

At the Challenge Course, almost all participants (93.4%) agreed that they grew as a member of their group. The experiential activities support group member appreciation, awareness and valuing of others' skills and attributes (Laser-Maira & Nicotera, 2019; Nicotera & Laser-Maira, 2017) thus increasing group growth. Most participants (81%) agreed that their experiences at the Challenge Course increased their trust in the other group members.

3.6 Communication Skills within the Group

Communication skills require openness and comfort to ask questions about meaning and to listen for understanding, not just listening to the words (Laser-Maira & Nicotera, 2019). Good communication skills are integral to any team's success and the overall success of the business (Kinsey, 2019). Therefore, the importance of improving communication improves the functioning of any organization (Kinsey, 2019).

The great majority of participants (86.1%) agreed that their experiences at the Challenge Course increased communication with others in their group.

3.7 Increased Self-awareness of Group Members

Self-awareness is having a clear perception of one's strengths, weaknesses, thoughts, emotions and motivations (Pathways to Happiness, 2019). Personal growth and awareness has been found to improve through experiential activities (Luke & Kiweewa, 2010).

Most respondents (79.1%) agreed they learned something new about themselves. Most agreed that they grew as individuals (82.5%) by participating in the Challenge Course. This new knowledge about themselves was found to be transferable, in that 82.5% of respondents agreed that they would bring this knowledge to support changes in their personal lives. Most respondents (81%) agreed that their confidence in themselves increased. Most agreed (83.7%) that because of the Challenge Course, they would be a better in the roles of their lives, which

included student, group member, and employee.

3.8 Enjoyment of Experiential Activities

Not only did the Challenge Course create growth in its participants, it was fun! Almost all respondents (94.9%) agreed that they thoroughly enjoyed their experiences at the Challenge Course. Specifically, 96.5% of participants agreed that they enjoyed the on the ground team building experiential activities, 93.4% of participants agreed that they enjoyed the low elements experiential activities, and 86.8% of participants agreed that they enjoyed the high elements experiential activities.

3.9 Return to the Challenge Course and Recommend it to Others

Most participants (92%) would return to the Challenge Course again. Additionally, almost all respondents would recommend the Challenge Course to someone with similar life experiences (97.8%) and their friends and family (98.5%). Thus, they strongly endorsed the value of their experience at the Challenge Course.

4. Discussion

4.1 General Overview

The results from the survey underscore the profound influence Challenge Courses have on its individual participants and group dynamics. In each outcome: problem solving skills, decision-making skills, cooperation skills, communication skills, self-awareness, enjoyment of the activities and the participant's likelihood to return to the Challenge Course and to recommend it to others, participants overwhelmingly found positive changes in multiple aspects of their lives. This is truly an amazing outcome for eight hours of activity. In comparison, it is generally regarded that it takes weeks to years for psychotherapy to be an effective change agent (Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research, 2019). Therefore, a short 8-hour intervention has the opportunity to impact individuals and group processes that in other venues take much longer to achieve.

4.2 Changing the Individual

The experiential activities acted as a catalyst to support change in the individual group members. Respondents believed that the experiential activities they had participated in actually increased their problem-solving skills and decision-making skills. Additionally, respondents felt that they learned about themselves and became more self-confident and that these insights would improve their functioning in other spheres of their lives. Thus, the experiential therapy through the debrief had moved individuals to contemplate changes in their lives outside of the experiential activity and the Challenge Course.

4.3 Changing the Group

The experiential activities also changed how the group functioned. The respondents believed that their participation in the experiential activities deepened their connection to the group, as well as, deepened their trust in-group members. Additionally, the respondents believed that group communication, cohesion, and participation in the group had improved due to the

experiential activities. The groups seemed to move through the group stages posited by Tuckman and Jensen (1977) from forming, storming, and norming to actually performing experiential activities together. The experiential activities acted as a catalyst for group development and transformation. Thereby, increasing future group functioning and performance post the day at the Challenge Course.

5. Conclusions

This research supports the use of Experiential Therapy at a Challenge Course. It is the hope that more practitioners use this effective modality with their clients to see real change in problem solving skills, decision-making skills, cooperation skills, communication skills, and self-awareness in both individual members and group dynamics.

6. Limitations and Future Research

The results are based on only one day long experiential therapy experience. Thus, it is hard to know whether the extremely positive experiences associated with the Challenge Course continued to exert as strong of an influence over time. Therefore, future research would benefit from follow-up surveys at 3 months, 6 months, and a year after the initial visit to the Challenge Course to investigate the residual benefits of a day at the Challenge Course.

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