

# Research in Brief

## Working Positively with Sexual Offenders

### Maximizing the Effectiveness of Treatment

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#### Summary/Conclusions

Using a strength-based approach, in addition to considering criminogenic needs and risk, can improve the effectiveness of treatment programs for sex offenders. Treatment benefits (related to sex offenders' attitudes, cognitive distortions, denial and other distortions etc.) were maximized when therapists were more empathic, warm, rewarding and directive rather than overly confrontational.

#### Limitations of Information

While the authors suggest methods for dealing more effectively with sex offenders, most of the literature they draw upon to support their arguments is based upon non-sexual offending literature.

The focus of the report is on therapeutic approaches used with sexual offenders to improve the effectiveness of treatment services. The authors did not examine techniques or approaches utilized by probation officers. Although probation departments may experience better outcomes when probation officers employ techniques similar to those therapists who had more successful outcomes with offenders, based on the information provided in this report, we do not know if that is, in fact, the case.

**Caveat:** The information presented here is intended to summarize and inform readers of research and information relevant to probation work. It can provide a framework for carrying out the business of probation as well as suggestions for practical application of the material. While it may, in some instances, lead to further exploration and result in *future* decisions, it is not intended to prescribe policy and is not necessarily conclusive in its findings. Some of its limitations are described above.

#### Practical Application

*The following ideas are offered for consideration by probation staff and were either specifically suggested by the authors of the article being reviewed or the contributors to this "Research in Brief."*

√ Keeping in mind that offenders may manipulate strengths to further offending behaviors, consider incorporating strengths in a pro-social manner into case management and treatment services for all types of offenders.

√ Consider using a framework of the "old me" (the probationer who committed the offenses and maintained values, goals and beliefs that directly lead to offending behaviors) compared to the "new me" (the probationer who lives a life that is socially acceptable and personally fulfilling) to help probationers develop their case plan.

√ Incorporate the probationer's personal goals into the case plan.

√ Develop goals with the probationer in a way that makes them easier to achieve:

√ Create "ideal" rather than "ought" goals. Ideal goals are intrinsic aspirations linked to the individual's personal value base, whereas ought goals are typically imposed from without and adopted by an individual in an attempt to avoid criticism or disapproval (or revocation from probation).

√ Create "approach" goals rather than "avoidance" goals (e.g. attend an event that allows for socializing in a drug-free environment vs. do not attend any social gatherings where drugs

and/or alcohol may be available).

√ Help the probationer understand that success is more than achieving the final goal. Set sub-goals and celebrate their achievement.

√ Instill confidence in the probationer's ability to succeed by expressing your expectations and confidence in his/her ability to succeed.

√ Work with the probationer to agree on the process to achieving goals.

√ Help identify multiple potential pathways to achieving goals so that obstacles do not seem so insurmountable.

√ Consider whether probationers have the following when developing case plans and implementing case management strategies designed to help probationers succeed: internal conditions – skills, beliefs, attitudes; external conditions – access to resources, opportunities, social supports.

√ Reframe offending behavior as the selection of inappropriate pathways to help offenders see themselves as distinct from their specific abusive acts, which shifts their feelings of shame to feelings of guilt. Feelings of shame may block attempts at behavior change ("I am a bad person and therefore unchangeable") whereas guilt motivates change ("I did a bad thing, but I can stop doing it.")