SUPPORTING STRUGGLING PARTICIPANTS

MANAGING BEHAVIOR AND MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES ON WILDERNESS PROGRAMS

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Following is the list of tools for supporting struggling participants that we will cover during this workshop. This list is certainly not exhaustive.

PRE-PROGRAM AND START OF PROGRAM

Behavior Expectations

DURING THE PROGRAM: PROACTIVE SUPPORT STRUCTURES

Positive Group Culture
Rapport

DURING THE PROGRAM: RESPONSIVE SUPPORT STRUCTURES

Container Assessment
Verbal Feedback
Patient Assessment System
Documentation and Performance Agreements
Investigation
Evacuation/Expulsion

POST-PROGRAM

Reflection and Debriefing

WORKSHOP NOTES

SAMPLE BEHAVIOR CONTINUA AND RESPONSES

SAMPLE 1: GENERIC INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR

Behaviors
- Poor expedition behavior
- Isolated, unintentional
- Not severe
- Repeated
- Intentional
- Severe

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Responses

Feedback ➜Revisit expectations ➜Performance agreement ➜Eval consequences ➜Expulsion

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SAMPLE 2: POLICY VIOLATION – SMOKING

Behaviors
- Smoking in the field
- Repeated infractions
- No engagement in change

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Responses
- Performance agreement
- Grade reduction
- Reduced participation
- Expulsion

EVACUATION CONSIDERATIONS FOR MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

We don't need to diagnose or fully understand the problem. Our goal is to determine whether an individual should be in the field. Answering yes to any of these questions should lead you to consider evacuation and to seek support from a mental health professional.

- Is the individual a danger to self or others?
- Are the behaviors or level of distress beyond the instructors' ability to manage in the field?
- Is the individual requiring a level of attention or management that is interfering with others' experience or ability to achieve program outcomes?
- Is the individual adversely affecting the dynamics or safety of the group?
- Does the individual believe he/she is unsafe or unable to continue?
- Does the harm to the expedition or program outweigh the benefit to the individual?
- Are the individual's own coping mechanisms for managing a pre-existing condition overwhelmed or ineffective in this setting?
- Does the individual have prescribed medications that they are not reliably taking as directed?

BEHAVIOR DESCRIPTIONS

Effective behavior descriptions are specific, accurate, and observable.

Whether delivering feedback to participants orally, documenting behavior in a trip log, or writing a performance agreement, learning to describe behavior in objective (non-evaluative) language is a critical skill. Participants' success, and your program's ability to understand the issue and make informed decisions about how to respond depend on field staff's ability to do this well.

Here are a few examples of vague or evaluative statements made into specific and observable descriptions of behavior and/or specific expectations for behavior change.

VAGUE / EVALUATIVE	➔	SPECIFIC / OBSERVABLE
Behavior description: Kevin was being a jerk on the trail today.	➔	Kevin called Paul fat during the hike today, and then declined to share his snack mix at a break.
Behavior description: Anna is moody.	➔	Anna's mood alternates between cheerful and engaged with the group, to angry and withdrawn. She yelled at other group members for reasons unknown to the instructors four times today, and did not respond to her tent mates asking what was wrong.
Behavior description: Michelle is aggressive towards her peers.	➔	When another student said she should not walk away from camp alone, Michelle yelled, "You can't tell me what to do!" She called Carter "an idiot" while paddling today, and shoved Missy during an argument at dinner.
Expectation for change: Juan needs to display a positive attitude.	➔	Juan will work to eliminate the following expressions of negativity: rolling eyes and sighing, reading his book during meetings, sitting apart from the group during meetings.
Expectation for change: Jordan will do his share around camp.	➔	Jordan will cook one meal each day, will set up or take down the tent each day, and will clean group cooking utensils once every two days.

SAMPLE STUDENT PERFORMANCE AGREEMENT

This document is provided as a sample and should not be copied.

The student performance agreement is a tool for field staff to support students whose performance is not meeting expectations. This document includes sample expectations, organized by curriculum area, that were written for NOLS' unique programs. You will need to create a performance agreement for your program based on your curriculum, activities, mission, behavior expectations, and policies.

Student Name: _____   Course: _____   Date: _____

Below are basic expectations for NOLS students. Use the following scale to indicate positive performance and behaviors that need to change:

+ Exceeds expectations S – Satisfactory △ Needs improvement (does not meet expectations)

NA – Not applicable

RISK MANAGEMENT

_____ Demonstrates knowledge of objective and subjective hazards; applies knowledge to new situations.

_____ Displays sound judgment and decision-making based on knowledge of hazards.

_____ Consistently follows instructors' directions to reduce or avoid hazards.

_____ Requires a reasonable amount of instructor supervision to meet expectations.

_____ Adheres to NOLS policies while in the field and at NOLS locations.

Specific examples of behaviors identified above: _____

_____

Examples of required changes: _____

_____

LEADERSHIP AND EXPEDITION BEHAVIOR

_____ Demonstrates awareness of strengths and areas for growth; is open to feedback and implements appropriate changes.

_____ Contributes to a positive learning environment and inclusive course culture; supports others in their development.

_____ Uses inclusive, polite, and respectful language; treats others with respect.

_____ Takes responsibility for learning; sets and attains personal goals; demonstrates initiative.

_____ Works effectively as a member of a team; displays a positive attitude despite hardship.

Specific examples of behaviors identified above: _____

_____

Examples of required changes: _____

_____

SAMPLE STUDENT PERFORMANCE AGREEMENT (CONTINUED)

OUTDOOR SKILLS

_____ Demonstrates appropriate care for personal needs (clothing, food, water, etc.).

_____ Travels competently using maps and compass.

_____ Takes responsibility for the care and organization of personal and group equipment.

_____ Is punctual and organized.

Specific examples of behaviors identified above: _____

_____

Examples of required changes: _____

_____

DESCRIBE INSTRUCTOR ROLE

What support and structure can the student expect from instructors? How will change be measured? _____

_____

_____

TIMELINE AND CONSEQUENCES

Changes must be initiated immediately. Instructors will monitor engagement and effort to change behaviors identified above. Improvement must be measurable by_____ [date]? Lack of change will result in the following: _____

_____

_____

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

_____

_____

INSTRUCTORS PRINTED NAMES AND SIGNATURES:

_____

_____

STUDENT AGREEMENT

I have read and understand this agreement. I agree to change the behaviors described above. I understand that if I fail to make theses changes there will be consequences. I also understand that any behavior that is unsafe, threatens a positive learning environment, or distracts from the educational mission of my course may result in expulsion.

Student comments: _____

_____

_____

Student Signature _____ Date signed: _____

WORKSHOP SELF ASSESSMENT ACTIVITY

PART ONE

From the list below of tools and strategies we have covered here, circle two that you or your organization are adept at using already.

- Behavior Expectations
- Positive Group Culture
- Rapport
- Container Assessment
- Verbal Feedback

- Patient Assessment System
- Performance Agreements
- Investigation
- Evacuation/Expulsion
- Reflection and Debriefing

PART TWO

a. Identify two from the list above that are not current strengths AND that you have the ability to implement or improve from your position in the organization.

b. Finally, jot down one tool from the list that you think would help your organization (either as an addition to current practices or as something that could be used more effectively), which you are NOT in a position to implement directly. Write down the name of the person whose help you need to implement that tool.

ACTION STEPS: IDEAS FOR WORKSHOP FOLLOW-UP

1. Define two zero tolerance and five case-by-case participant behaviors for your program. Check alignment between administrators and field staff at the next opportunity, by soliciting examples of each and discussing.

2. Query field staff about challenging behavior or mental health incidents they have faced. Chose one or two as case studies for your next staff training or trip briefing. Discuss management strategies that may have be useful as well as whether the situation seems field manageable.

3. Make a list of five questions you'd like field staff to consider in assessing a particular behavior issue that has challenged your program. Aim for questions that will help your staff to either (a) think broadly about possible contributing factors, (b) frame the issue in terms of how to best support the individual, or (c) determine whether the participant should continue on your program.

4. Feel free to contact us if you have questions! kbm@nols.edu or emily_ledingham@nols.edu