

Thriving at the Front Lines:  
Where we are and Where We want  
to be

MnATSA 2009

**David Prescott, LICSW**

**Welcome!**

# Focus

- Who are we?
- Where do we struggle?
- Who can we be?
- How can we get there?

# Who are we?

- Effects of the media
- Fundamental Attribution Error
- Zimbardo Experiment (a/k/a Lucifer Effect)

# The media

## Sample and Kadleck (2006)

- Themes of high recidivism rates were consistently apparent throughout news articles.
- Sex offenders were commonly portrayed as persistent in their behavior despite punishment and rehabilitation.
- An “increase in news accounts of sexually-motivated homicide [which] could well support public perceptions that sex offending is often synonymous with murder” (p. 20).
- The media can “affect public perception regarding the prevalence of sex crimes by over-reporting single incidents of behavior” (p. 8).

# Media (Sample & Kadleck, 2006)

- Interviewed 25 politicians in Illinois, who agreed that sex offenders were a “growing” problem.
- Most politicians described sex offenders as “sick,” commonly characterizing them as compulsive, persistent, and irredeemable, and none thought that rehabilitation was possible.
- When asked how they customarily obtained knowledge regarding sex offenders, the politicians cited the media as – by far – their primary source.
- Thus, the media appears to play a leading role in shaping opinion both among politicians and their constituents. As a result, public policies are proposed which are designed ostensibly to protect the public but which are more likely to promote only an illusion of safety.

# Festinger, 1957

- Fundamental Attribution Error:
  - The tendency for observers to overestimate the influence of personal characteristics and to underestimate the influence of situational characteristics.
- Question:
  - Does overseeing scores of sexual offenders lead one to conclude that they are little more than sexual offenders?
- Confirmation bias

# The Alex Trebek Effect



- Ross, Amabile, & Steinmetz (1977) - Used a game show situation to examine what attributions students would make of the intelligence of the contestants and the game show moderator.
- Dependent V: The intelligence rating given to the game show contestants and the moderator by the observers.
- Independent V: People were randomly assigned to be either the game show host or the contestants. People who were selected to host the game show were allowed to come up with their own questions.
- Results: Observers (and contestants) rated the intelligence of the game show host as higher than that of the contestants.

# Interrogations

- Lassiter & Irvine (1986): changing the visual perspective in a police interrogation affected observers believability in a suspect's confession.
- Dependent V: How genuine the suspect's confession was seen as by observers
- Independent V: Whether the camera was focused on the detective conducting the interrogation or the suspect who was being interrogated.
- Results: Observers rated the confession as being more genuine when the camera was focused on the suspect. Observers who saw the camera focused on the detective were much more likely to conclude that the confession had been coerced.

# Zimbardo Prison Experiment

*More than 70 applicants answered our ad and were given diagnostic interviews and personality tests to eliminate candidates with psychological problems, medical disabilities, or a history of crime or drug abuse. Ultimately, we were left with a sample of 24 college students from the U.S. and Canada who happened to be in the Stanford area and wanted to earn \$15/day by participating in a study. On all dimensions that we were able to test or observe, they reacted normally.*

[www.prisonexp.org](http://www.prisonexp.org)

*Less than 36 hours into the experiment, Prisoner #8612 began suffering from acute emotional disturbance, disorganized thinking, uncontrollable crying, and rage. In spite of all of this, we had already come to think so much like prison authorities that we thought he was trying to "con" us -- to fool us into releasing him.*

# Sexual Aggression in College Men

- Abbey, McAuslan, et al (JIV, 2001) surveyed 343 college men. 33% reported having engaged in some form of sexual assault. 8% reported an act that met standard legal definitions of rape or attempted rape (p. 799).
- Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski (1987) found that 24.4% of college men reported “sexual aggression” since age 14, and that 7.8% admitted to acts that met standard legal definitions of rape or attempted rape (cited in White & Smith, 2004, CJB, p. 183)

# My head hurts just thinking about it...

From the ATSA list-serve (with tongue in cheek):

- *Since the research indicates that most children are at risk from being sexual abused by someone they know and that offenses often take place in the offenders' residence, it is important that appropriate and rational residency restrictions be put in place that have the potential to reduce the number of sexual crimes. Thus, an effective residence restriction would require that sex offenders cannot reside within 2000 ft. of their residence. Additionally, they should not reside within 2000 ft. of anyone they know, or anyone they may come to know in the future.*

# We need transformation

- Our vulnerabilities
- Our cognitive distortions
- Our perspective on sexual abuse
- Our over-reliance on technology

# The antidotes

- Humility
- Teamwork
- Self-care
- Remember
  - Sexual abuse is a public health issue. No one perspective (psychological, criminological, medical, etc.) can address or reduce its harm
  - All adults have responsibility for reducing it

# Where do we struggle?

- Treatment effects
- Provider style
  - Helpful/supportive versus harsh/confrontational
  - How can we be at our best from the moment we enter the room until the time we leave?

# Take-Away Message

- People change
  - We have proof
- Punishment does not reduce recidivism
  - We have proof
- When all else fails, get back to the basics
  - Effective treatment gets young people to change the way they think and gets families to support those changes
  - **We will never change the way they think; they have to**

# Predicting the future: a rich tradition

- Astrology
- Palm-reading/phrenology
- Tarot cards
- Crystal balls
- Tea leaves
- Bones, coins, yarrow sticks, I Ching, etc.
- Clinical opinion

# Healing people: A rich tradition

- Leaches
- Bloodletting
- Trepanning
- Lobotomy
- Some early 20<sup>th</sup> century “cures” for alcoholism contained alcohol
- Etc.....

# 1974

- Martinson
  - *Nothing Works*
  - Later discredited
  - Long since replaced by “what works”
  - ... But the damage was done!
- 
- Let's explore what's happened since that time...

# Smith, Goggin, & Gendreau, 2002

- Meta-analyzed 117 studies since 1958 (n = 442,471 criminal offenders)
- No sanction studied reduced recidivism (including juveniles)
- “Prisons and intermediate sanctions should not be used with the expectation of reducing criminal behaviour.”
  - Includes intensive surveillance, electronic monitoring, DARE, Scared Straight, etc.
  - Some indication of increased risk for low-risk criminals
  - [www.publicsafety.gc.ca/res/cor/sum/cprs200205\\_1-en.asp](http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/res/cor/sum/cprs200205_1-en.asp)

# Levenson & Prescott (2007): Treatment Effectiveness?

- Furby, Weinrott, & Bradshaw (1989).
  - Combined analysis of numerous studies that was unable to detect a significant treatment effect due to methodology variability.
- Hanson, R. K., Gordon, A., Harris, A. J. R., Marques, J. K., Murphy, W., Quinsey, V. L., & Seto, M. C. (2002).
  - 17% untreated
  - 10% treated
  - Equivalent to a 40% reduction
- Losel, F., & Schmucker, M. (2005).
  - Recidivism reduced by nearly 40%
- SOTEP:
  - No overall differences between treated and untreated groups, but:
- Sex offenders who successfully completed the SOTEP treatment program reoffended at lower rates than those who did not demonstrate that they “got it” (Marques, Wiederanders, Day, Nelson, & van Ommeren, 2005).

# Can they be cured?

- Treatment won't work equally well for everyone, and 100% success should not be expected.
- Sex offender treatments, like many other types of medical and mental health interventions, don't focus on a cure but on a reduction of symptoms.
- Treatment for diabetes doesn't cure the disease, it manages the disease. Likewise, entering weight watchers with the expectation that simply being in the program will create weight reduction won't work. It takes collaboration and commitment.
- Auto Mechanic versus Home Depot manager  
(from Kevin Creeden)

# Beyond “does treatment work”

- Can people change?
- Under what conditions can they change?
  - Ward's readiness model
- Under what conditions can they maintain change?
  - Containment models, etc.
- Some approaches appear more effective than others, and it is unconscionable to do nothing.

# Beech & Fordham, 1997

- *From the abstract:*
- A successful group was highly cohesive, was well organized and led, encouraged the open expression of feelings, produced a sense of group responsibility, and instilled a sense of hope in its members. A helpful and supportive leadership style was found to be important in creating an atmosphere in which effective therapy could take place. Over-controlling leaders were seen to have a detrimental effect upon group climate.

# Beech & Fordham, 1997

- Other findings suggest that leaders tend to overestimate the help they provide in groups, perceive that they are more in control than members do, and see the group as facilitating diversity and change much more than do the members. It is not unusual for there to be differences between perceptions of members and leaders... Those who have responsibility for running groups tend to perceive the social climate more positively than do members ... Some group leaders have an overly optimistic view of the work they were accomplishing...

# Beech & Fordham, 1997

- Some group leaders seemed unaware of the power of the group process itself in instilling change, and perhaps more importantly, they failed to recognize their own role in setting group norms. A better knowledge of group dynamics may help some leaders to use the group process to facilitate change. More training in this area for those engaged in sexual offender treatment programs seems appropriate. This should focus not only on the content of treatment but also on the leadership style.

# How Dolphins Learn



# Tony Ward and “Readiness” (2004)

- Internal Readiness:
  - Cognitive
  - Affective
  - Behavioral
  - Volitional
  - Personal identity
- (To which DP would add psychiatric comorbidity)*
- External Readiness:
  - Circumstance
  - Location
  - Opportunity
  - Resource
  - Support
  - Program/Timing

# Tony Ward and “Readiness” (2004)

- Motivation of low readiness:
  - Modify the client
  - Modify the therapy
  - Modify the setting

Who can we be?

# Provider style

- Warm
- Empathic
- Rewarding
- Directive

# Treatment

- Cognitive-Behavioral
- Community-based
  
- Manualized or provider-determined?

# Treatment Plan

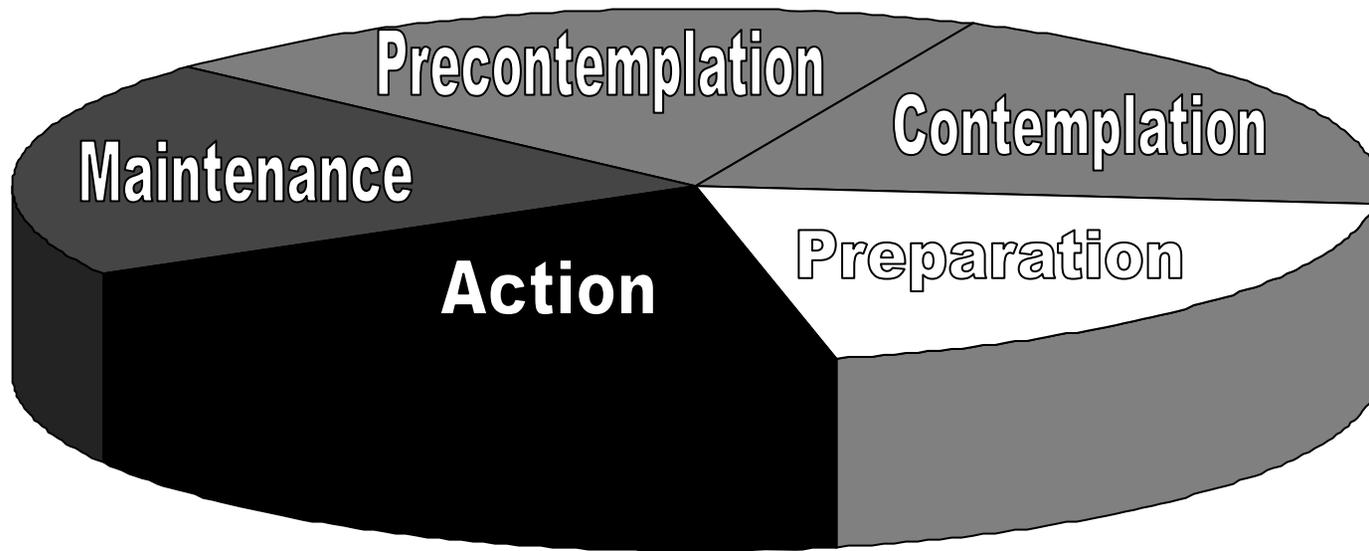
- Problem: Coercive measures rarely work
  - Smith, Goggin, & Gendreau, 2002
  - Andrews & Bonta, 2003
- Goal: Efforts at change work best from within
  - Bem, 1972
  - Ryan & Deci, 2000; Deci, 1980
  - Miller & Rollnick, 2002
  - Jenkins, 1990; 1994; 2006
  - Cialdini, 2001

# Resistance Traps

- The question-answer trap
- The taking sides trap
- The expert trap
- The labeling trap
- The blaming trap
- The pouncing trap
- **The “righting reflex”**
- The need to...
- Fix things
- Set someone right
- Get someone to face up to reality
- **Premature Action Planning**

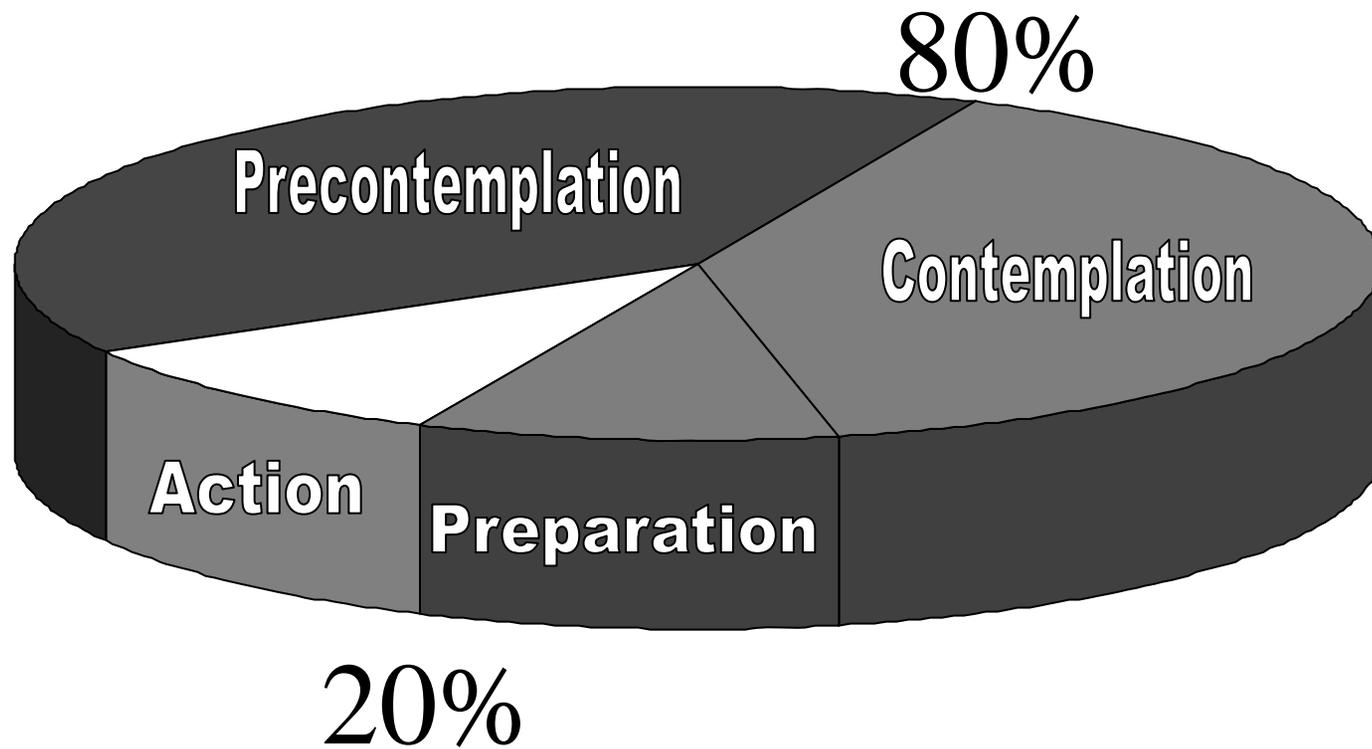
# Stages of Change

Prochaska & DiClemente



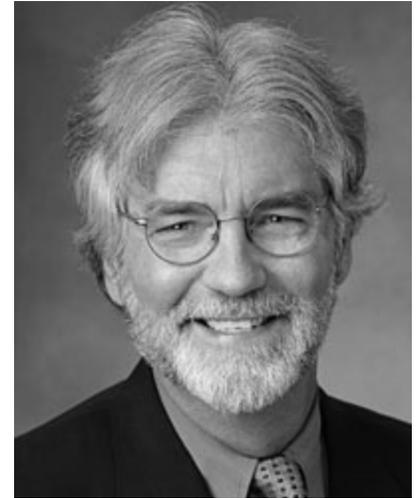
# Stages of Change

Prochaska & DiClemente



# Hope Theory

- Agency Thinking
  - Awareness that a goal is attainable
- Pathways Thinking
  - Awareness of how to do it
    - See works by C.R. Snyder
- *“Therapists who are burned out or otherwise fail to convey hopefulness model low agency and pathways thinking.”* (in Hubble, Duncan, & Miller, 1999)



# Parallel Process

- Professionals and clients alike are often more willing to learn new skills than to throw out the old ones that don't work. Worse, sometimes our negative skills actually do work sometimes...

# CONTACT

**David S. Prescott, LICSW**  
**Clinical Director**  
**Minnesota Sex Offender Program**  
**1111 Highway 73**  
**Moose Lake, MN**  
**55767**

**(218) 485-5300**

[VTPrescott@Earthlink.net](mailto:VTPrescott@Earthlink.net)  
[www.davidprescott.net](http://www.davidprescott.net)  
[www.neari.com/newsletter](http://www.neari.com/newsletter)

