Healing Trauma: The Power of Group Treatment for People with Intellectual Disabilities by Nancy J. Razza and Daniel Tomasulo

The Traumatic Stress Institute would like to recommend a book entitled: Healing Trauma: The Power of Group Treatment for People With Intellectual Disabilities, by Nancy J. Razza and Daniel Tomasulo (American Psychological Association, Jan 2005). This book is one of the most noteworthy books that explores the overlap between psychological trauma and developmental disabilities. This work explores specifically discusses people with intellectual disabilities, mostly in the mild to moderate range. Razza and Tomasulo maintain that the fact that people with intellectual disabilities suffer higher than average rates of trauma and sexual abuse has been ignored. In addition, this population has been thought to be unable to benefit from traditional psychotherapy. The book introduces the reader to a specific group therapy method called interactive-behavioral therapy (IBT) that the authors created for clients with developmental disabilities and psychiatric difficulties.

Razza and Tomasulo feel that group therapy is the most effective treatment method for this population, and specifically that group therapy which prioritizes creating relationships between the members is the most powerful vehicle for change.

Razza and Tomasulo use case examples throughout the book, and begin with the story of Martina. This story demonstrates how a woman with developmental delays and a history of early neglect and abuse used the group to gradually improve both practical issues in her life and her depression and self harm. These changes took place over a period of several years. The book demonstrates the need for long term involvement to solidify changes in this population.

Razza and Tomasulo next review the literature about the prevalence of abuse, neglect and psychiatric disorders in the developmentally delayed population, which many sources have found to be high. They
review previous attempts to help individuals who have been sexually abused and those who have sexually abused others.

The authors offer advice on choosing group members, and describe the stages of both the ongoing group process and each individual group. A key component of their method is a psychodrama technique called doubling. In this method, one person stands or sits behind the person who is exploring their issues (the protagonist). The double restates what thoughts and feeling the protagonist may be having. This allows the protagonist the sense of being heard and understood, and of having support.

The authors use other techniques to involve the group members with each other. These include having group members choose who will speak next; stopping a member who is talking and asking others to paraphrase what he has said; and encouraging members to describe experiences they have had which are similar to those being worked on.

IBT has been used with several specialty populations, such as trauma and sexual abuse survivors with intellectual disabilities; sexual offenders with intellectual disabilities, and as sexual abuse prevention training. The authors clarify the group composition that can produce the best results in each kind of group. They then describe typical session in each group, using case examples that clearly illustrate their methods. They are vigilant in taking advantage of every opportunity to build and strengthen connections between the group members.

When an individual with offending behaviors is referred to group, Razza and Tomasulo recommend a first step of meeting with the individual and the important members of his family and support team to clarify exactly why he is being referred. They discuss how to handle both intake and treatment with the individual who is denying his offenses. Then, when the person joins the group, the doubling technique helps them feel supported. A detailed description of a particular group illustrates exactly how the technique is used.

While Razza and Tomasulo present specific methods for treating individuals with intellectual disabilities who have experienced trauma, there are also many lessons for treaters working with any population. Razza and Tomasulo are deeply respectful of their clients. They do not push or force them to accept therapy if they are not willing, despite pressure from their families or helpers. Self-direction is central to every aspect of the treatment. Razza and Tomasulo modify the treatment to be effective within each client’s disability, which often involves working slowly and having great patience. However, they continuously act on their belief that the clients can get better, can learn, and can feel justifiable pride in themselves and their role in society. Their combination of realism and respect could be useful to anyone in the social services field.

We recommend this book to all treaters and especially those whose client population includes individuals with intellectual disabilities.