

Thinking for A Change: An Integrated Cognitive Behavior Change Program for Offenders

PROGRAM HISTORY

In December 1997, NIC introduced a new integrated cognitive behavior change program for offenders and sought a limited number of state, local or federal correctional agencies to serve as field test sites for the ***Thinking for a Change (T4C)*** program. An overwhelming response from the correction's community seeking participation in the project necessitated immediate program expansion and the inclusion of a much broader scope of participation for the field test. Since its introduction, correctional agencies in over forty (40) states have implemented ***Thinking for a Change*** with offender populations. These agencies include state correctional systems, local jails, community based corrections programs, and probation and parole departments. The offender populations included in the project represent both adults and juveniles, and males and females. Over five thousand (5000+) correctional staff have been trained to facilitate offender groups. Nearly five hundred (500) individuals have participated in the ***Thinking for a Change: Advanced Practicum*** (Training of Trainers) which enables their agency to train additional facilitators to deliver the program.

As research of the effectiveness of the program continues to mount, so does the interest from the correctional community to adopt a quality evidenced-based cognitive behavioral change program.

PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATION FOR THE CURRICULUM

The ***Thinking for a Change*** curriculum uses as its core, a problem solving component, embellished by both cognitive restructuring and social skills interventions. While each of the concepts are presented systemically, the participant quickly learns and appreciates that cognitive restructuring does require some cognitive skills methods, as does cognitive skills require an objective, systematic approach to identify thinking, beliefs, attitudes, and values. The Cognitive Restructuring concepts are introduced and emphasized during the initial nine lessons of the program, interspersed with targeted critical social skills that support the cognitive restructuring process. This is followed by the problem solving techniques (lessons 16-21), again supported by appropriate social skills to embellish that concept. Simultaneously, the problem solving portions of the curriculum relies upon the restructuring concepts and techniques already introduced to the participants, thereby integrating all three approaches. By the time participants reach the 12th lesson of the program, the cognitive restructuring techniques are so ingrained in their repertoire of competencies, that it is no longer required to be emphasized as a separate entity, becoming second nature to the offender participant. By the 22nd lesson, participants are ready to evaluate themselves using a skills checklist, in order to develop their own cognitive skills (advanced) curriculum.

The ***Thinking for a Change*** Curriculum is comprised of 22 lessons with a capacity to

extend the program indefinitely, depending upon how many cognitive skills are taught. It is recommended that the group meet for an additional ten sessions which is based upon the self evaluations each participant completes in the 22nd lesson. These additional skills are the result of further assessment of the skill deficits for each participant, and then aggregated across the entire group. In this way, each group member is invested and empowered to participate in their own learning and self development, providing a forum for continued skill and cognitive development.

Each lesson is formatted similarly. It begins with a summary and rationale section in which the scope, breadth, and reason for teaching the lesson is provided. This is followed by concepts and definitions, which outline the key points for the lesson and any definitions necessary for the trainer to facilitate the lesson. The lesson objectives are then outlined, followed by major activities in the lesson. Any supplemental material, equipment and materials are listed. The content of the lesson is then detailed. Within each lesson, there are both suggested trainer scripts in which at least the fundamental and required information is provided. There are also specific trainer notes given in parallel columns which further embellish the training script.

Participants should be pre-screened after a brief individual interview. Such a meeting which need take no more than fifteen minutes, should set the tone of the learning sessions, direct and focus the participant to their need for the program, and affirm the expectation that positive participation would greatly enhance their options.

TARGET AUDIENCE

The program was developed to be appropriate for a wide-range of offender groups. It has been used with juvenile and adult offenders. It has been implemented in all phases of the juvenile and adult criminal justice systems including pre-incarceration (Probation), in prisons and jails, as well as in community (Aftercare and Parole). The format of *Thinking for A Change* is designed so that sessions are accessible and meaningful for offenders of varying social, emotional and intellectual/academic abilities. The self-insight and interpersonal skills offenders learn in *Thinking for A Change* are also applicable to other treatment programs, either provided simultaneously or consecutively with *Thinking for a Change*.

ASSESSMENT STRATEGIES

The curriculum incorporates assessment as a part of each lesson. Offenders learn how to report on situations that could lead to criminal behavior and to identify their thoughts, feelings, attitudes and beliefs that may lead them to offending. Participants learn how to write and use a thinking report as a means to determine their awareness of their risk thinking that leads them into trouble. Within the Social Skills component of *Thinking for a Change*, offenders try using the newly demonstrated social skill in role-play situations. After each role-play the group discusses and assesses how well the offender did in following the steps of the social skill being learned. The offender practices the newly acquired skill during the time before the next group session in order to practice using it in an actual real-life situation. They report how well they did (how well they used the steps of the skill) in a written homework sheet to be completed and brought to the

next social skill group session.

Offenders apply problem-solving steps to problems in their own lives. This application is done both in class and as homework. Role-plays, problem scenario discussions and homework applications provide assessment information on each offender's ability to problem solve.

The *Thinking for a Change* program culminates in an individual assessment of skill use . Using a structured learning skills checklist, program participants self-report their use of 50 social skills, using a Likert type scale. They also engage a person who knows them well to rate them on the same set of skills. Based on information from these sources, a class profile of social skills most offenders need is developed. These skills comprise the curriculum of topics for additional lessons.

Beyond assessments that are incorporated within the curriculum and within lessons, there are efforts to collect program evaluation data to determine the effectiveness and efficiency of the *Thinking for a Change* Program. Several jurisdictions, both State and Municipal have initiated evaluations on the program. However, there has not been a coordinated effort yet. The National Institute of Corrections has initiated a multi-site evaluation that will test the efficacy and efficiencies of the program. These will include both process and outcome variables that test program integrity, and its effects on skill acquisition, perspective taking, and reduction in criminal thinking and action. Recidivism will also be measured as a distal variable of interest.

SIZE OF GROUPS

The ideal group size is between 8 to 12 individuals. *Thinking for A Change* is a highly interactive Cognitive Behavior program. Feedback is central to the process of developing Cognitive Behavior skills. The feedback process is greatly hindered as group size increases. The larger the group size, the greater the challenge to ensure that all group members participate productively.

PROGRAM DELIVERY

Thinking for A Change follows guidelines for most Cognitive Behavior programs. Sessions should be offered at least twice a week with the option of offering more sessions if time allows. No more than one lesson should be taught in a day. Course participants need time between sessions to identify problem situations, examine their thinking, and practice new skills. Sessions should last between one and two hours depending on the size of the group, time of day, availability of break time, and attention span of participants.

CURRICULUM FLEXIBILITY

Thinking for A Change is designed to be a close-ended group. The lessons are sequential, therefore it is necessary for all participants to begin with lesson 1 and proceed in order. In high turn over situations or situations where offenders are moved to different facilities, lessons 10 and 16 could be considered lessons where groups could be combined.

The program is designed to be continued after Lesson 21. Lesson 22 provides information so that participants could negotiate further skill development based upon their own self-assessments. Lesson 22 also offers suggestions for other types of programs that would help course participants extend their skills to other treatment programs.

SUMMARY

NIC provides the *Thinking for a Change* program as only one option correctional agencies may consider as they develop their continuum of programmatic interventions to address the diverse and multiple cognitive, social, and emotional needs of the increasingly difficult correctional population. If you would like additional information about the program you can visit the NIC Web Page at www.nicic.org or contact Steve Swisher, Correctional Program Specialist, phone 800-995-6429 or e-mail at www:sswisher@bop.gov