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Don't panic when you're stuck!
Learnings from adolescent stories
of growth and challenge
in the Tasmanian wilderness

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Introduction

The critical milestones to which any new field can point are the development of substantial texts, manuals, specialised education and training and the establishment of an international forum where an interchange of ideas and vigorous debate can take place. Many of these events have now occurred within the adventure therapy movement and it is the intent of this paper to add to this body of knowledge by focussing on the types and characteristics of memories held by adolescents who have attended such program, Tasmania's Project Hahn.

Stories and memories of both pleasant and unpleasant experiences by adolescents over a four year period have been found to remain accurate and reliable (Denholm, 1990). In terms of hospitalization and illness with one adolescent patient who suffered severe trauma during a wilderness expedition, memories including smells, sounds and verbal statements to rescuers remained accurate for five years after the event (Denholm, 1995).

Whereas substantial anecdotal support abounds for the value of wilderness-based challenge programs for youth-at-risk (Reddrop, 1997), only scant attention has been directed towards the actual memories held by participants (Sveen & Denholm, 1993) and the types of stories they maintain as indicators of success and survival. Overall, there remains a lack of substantial evidence and understanding concerning the types of stories held by adolescents and the relationship between any long-lasting changes in relation to particular wilderness-based experiences and the elements considered most crucial in promoting long-term behavioural and attitudinal changes.

Details of the theoretical and philosophical tenets of Project Hahn have been reported elsewhere (Reddrop, 1997) and results reported in this paper have been combined with previous work (Sveen, 1991) and from the longitudinal study by Sveen (1994) of Project Hahn participants (Sveen & Denholm, 1997).

Collection of participant reflections and memories

Qualitative information in the form of responses to open ended questions have been regularly sought by Project Hahn over the years particularly in relation to positive and negative experiences. A variety of instruments have been used and have included questions pertaining to degree of participant coercion, group dynamics, leadership, impact of the program on employment focus and specific effects of stress arousing activities. Eighty three percent of participants in one survey (Sveen & Denholm, 1983) were able to describe in detail specific stressful and challenging events and the intensity of these memories did not diminish over time. Clearly such memories are coloured in light of the emotional states and levels of arousal of the event and do play a role in determining the level of interaction and significance of the program in relation to long term memory (Nettleton & Dickinson, 1988).

A comprehensive survey of all participants from the years 1985-1997 on a range of aspects including current activities and living situation is now being undertaken and should be completed in late 1997. In preparation for this survey, an analysis of the types and range of learnings and insights held on file for the years 1992-3 and written by 63 adolescent respondents, was conducted.

These writings were recorded during the program at three separate stages. Selected participant verbatim comments are included here to demonstrate the range, richness and frankness. Implications drawn from these writings are presented in the form of recommendations for future program offerings.

Themes from the pre-course interview

When participants are asked to write why it is they wanted to participate in a wilderness adventure challenge program it is not unexpected that they would comment on the enjoyment of outdoor activity, the opportunity to experience more of the island State of Tasmania and, in to new people. Some wrote that they saw it as the opportunity for a change away from negative peer influences and crises within the home environment such as a death in the family and abuse, and problems at school. The need to have a temporary escape was clearly portrayed by a 17 year old male who wrote: I bashed anybody that abused me. Every day I got the cane at school. I wanted the experience and needed to get away from everything. This theme was also captured by an 18 year old male who added: My parents just had a divorce before we left. It will give me a lot more confidence & make my family life a lot easier.

One 19 year old male willingly made several poignant yet honest remarks capturing the value in escaping from his home environment for a brief period: Lacked independence from my family. Both my brother and father are alcohol dependant. I am a scapegoat for their difficulties. Course is a chance to get out of the firing line.

One unexpected comment was recorded by a 15 year old male who stated that he "thought it would be fun as I am blind", while a male, aged 21 years stated that it would be of benefit as he was "extremely depressed".

Along with standardized information about each participant, the recording of pre-course attitudes, expectations and anticipations has assisted not only to educate and inform leaders but also to place participant reasons for volunteering within a context or a story. Many of these comments can also be viewed as exhibiting ways of coping with personal and living situations and demonstrate a range of coping styles (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1993). As an initial observation, observed reasons for undertaking Project Hahn suggest a predominance for emotion based coping strategies rather than more productive problem based approaches.

Themes from written participant comments during the course

Seven themes emerged from participant writings during the course; physical demands, team work and leadership, food, safety, independence and self growth.

Participants were particularly expressive when describing the strenuous nature of the activities and the physical impact on their body. For example: Found muscles in my legs I didn't know existed (female, 17 years) I don't know about you guys, but my arms ache, my hands ache, my whole body is shaking. Apart from that everything is fine! (female). Very strenuous, especially if you are fit and need a break (male, 19 years). Felt nervous, adrenalin-pumping action (male, 22 years).

Observations of positive teamwork suggest that the experience of working and achieving tasks was a new and enriching experience as reflected by a 22 year old male participant who stated: The activities are excellent, just a blowout. I felt scared but safe. The course brings out the team atmosphere and makes me more positive.

Descriptions of the leaders ranged from being "cool" to "an absolute zero when it came to talking to the crew" (female, aged 23) and the only comments to be recorded about the food were infrequent albeit terse statements such as "horrible food" (male, 18 years). Comments about issues of safety were detailed and expressive and indicate that specific events remained powerful and vivid, some over a 10 year time period.

One fellow broke his leg and we had to carry him three days to get back to camp (male, 18 years)

Worst things were getting sunburnt and the backpacks too heavy (female, 16 years).

Comments also suggested a development of self appraisal and self examination in relation to independence and identity as can be seen in the following: Given the opportunity to do things without being told what to do (male, 20 years). This camp is specifically designed for you - The course is memorable particularly as I wasn't prepared for it. My picture of who I am is just as murky though (male, 19 years).
Still not sure of who I am (female, 17 years).

Themes from written participant comments at the end of the course

Most participants wrote long and detailed responses concerning personal learnings and reflections and number of self explanatory themes emerged. These are presented as verbatim and were classified within one of nine categories:

Recognition of a specific accomplishment

- o I'm not as scared of heights as I was (male, 1993).
- o Today caving at Mystery Creek was a new experience for me. I had been in the caves once before but did not nearly go as far in. As far as accomplishment went I found that I loved it and want to do it again as soon as possible. I also conquered a minor fear of the dark and that was an accomplishment in itself (male, 1992).
- o I became more daring when I got back into the community (male, 17 years).
- o That caves could be very dangers (dangerous) and you help other people (male, 1992).

General learning

- o Learned I could do other things to what I hadn't done before (male, 21 years).
- o I've learned that I'm able to do more by myself (male 15 years).
- o Gave me time to have a good think about myself and prepared me for different ways to cope (male, 20 years).
- o I am more confident and have a more positive outlook of myself (female, 1993).
- o I've become stronger to deal with situations. I've learned what I lack in self (female, 1993).

Contemplation

- o I now know who I am, but not sure why I'm here (male, 16 years).
- o Given me more things to think about (male, 22 years).
- o Be prepared for anything. Gives you a sense of belonging back in the community as a whole (male, 25 years).

Recognition of coping strategies

- o I learned not to panic, take my time & not rush into things (male, 16 years).
- o Found I had a lot more guts than I thought I had (male, 19 years).
- o Better now at coping with stressful situations (female, 22 years).
- o Today we went caving and it was so scary, every step I took I thought I was going to fall and some of the tight squeezes I thought 'No Way' but everyone else managed so I thought 'If They Can I Can' (female, 1992).
- o I learnt not to panic when I think I am stuck. They back you most of the time to squeeze into places which are small (male, 1992).
- o I learnt about myself and others that if you try and keep going at it you'll finally succeed. It might help when I get back, that if I try I'll eventually succeed, so I might have a go at a lot more (female, 1993).

Social development

- o...I can go out and meet people. It's built up my esteem and my confidence. It's helped me a lot in confidence and actually having a go at things (female, 1993).
- o...a good chance to meet new people and to get to know yourself better. I'm now more outgoing (male, 1993).
- o I learned to like people (male, 1993).
- o a) caving helping and cwoprat (co-operating)

- b) tooking (talking) and cwopratt (co-operating) with uth (others)
- c) thear (their) cwopratt (co-operation) with me and uth (others) (male, 1992).

Personal motivation

- o It's given me time to get away and think a lot about myself, more motivation, plus it's easier to understand and cope with other people that I would normally not like. I now have a lot more motivation to get off my arse and do something (male, 1993).
- o I learnt it is not easy to paddle a ciak (kayak) and you have to push yourself to do something you don't really want to do but you fill (feel) better after you do it (male, 1992).

Reflections on failures

- o The water was pretty scary too it was strong for only knee high water. There was one cave which I wouldn't go in, one of the matchbox caves it was so small and I hate things being closed over my head so I just sat back and watched (male, 1992).
- o We then got changed ready to learn how to roll in our canoes. It was scary, the more I thought about it the scarier I got. It ended up being okay except I didn't put my legs right down because I wasn't confident enough. We then went for a longer canoe I was in a double one with AP3 and then with AP99 fell out which was amusing. I guess I wasn't the only one who made a mistake. It was a good afternoon. I can't wait to go again (male, 1992).

Catalyst for follow-up experiences

- o Went onto the Young Endeavour two years later (male, 18 years).
- o Went to the mainland for the first time after the course by myself (male, 17 years).
- o I learned that I enjoyed the new experience and am looking forward to more of them (male, 1992).

Changes in impulse control

- o I've now have a better attitude by learning to control my temper (male, 1993).
- o Helps you mature, become more independant. Go off by myself now instead of doing my nut or getting in a punch up. It kept me not thinking of grog continually. I couldn't quit thinking or talking about the camp when I got back (male, 22 years).
- o Helped to learn when to stay out of trouble and how to avoid all the agro and arguments at home. My basic survival skills would seem to have improved (male, 19 years).
- o When I'm back at home and I get stressed by something I usually go and sit by myself on the water shore or up in the bush. I feel I learn alot by this and sort things out, the peace and tranquility I experienced kayaking renewed this habit and I think I will do this more often to sort myself out (male, 1992).

Summary

The task of reviewing comments such as these has been both a useful exercise for staff currently involved in the operation of Project Hahn and as a method of induction for new staff. In recent years major government funding has been committed to this program and it is now a widespread belief within the community that adolescent participants will be challenged to change their behaviour and to grow and develop in new ways. In this type of program it is no longer sufficient to state that "there were no injuries, major catastrophies or litiginous events - this must have been a successful expedition!"

The need for program accountability over the years now involves close monitoring of participants during and following each program offering and the completion of detailed reports on each individual. Participant writings that are included in this paper thus form an important aspect within the matrix of data collected from each expedition and are considered as rich sources of information as much about adolescent developmental needs as about the

particular challenges and tasks within each program offering.

As suggested by the title of this paper, reflections on the multitude of learning experiences during a wilderness-adventure challenge program are often reduced to a sentence or two. In the analyses of participant writings about their memories now being undertaken, we will be attempting to isolate the key themes and metaphors for we believe that learnings experienced in this type of environment become propelling and life-changing events.

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