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## Planning for a Better Tomorrow

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### Introduction

Tomorrow it is such a common word in our language. "I'll do it tomorrow. I'll see you tomorrow". Or, as the famous Scarlet O'Hara once said, "I'll worry about that tomorrow."

Planning. Another over used, and under realized, word. Put them together and you have planning for tomorrow. But just planning for tomorrow isn't enough. It is our responsibility to plan for better tomorrow. For we have taken as our responsibility the tomorrows of needy and troubled young people.

When we talk about the care and treatment of troubled young people (with whom we hope to plan a better tomorrow) we are talking about the most abused and misused of youth. These are young people who were often used as chattels, as objects and tools in the abusive dynamics of the dysfunctional psychology or relationships of others. These young people who are placed into our programs are damaged (often it's seems damaged beyond repair). They are placed into our programs in the hopes that we might help them salvage some of the wonderfulness and the beauty buried beneath the pain and the punishment of their lives. They are, indeed, among the most unfortunate inhabitants of our society and our responsibility to help them plan for their tomorrow is an awesome one.

As professionals working with these young people and their families, we have been given a rare and precious opportunity to participate in a significant way in their lives. We have been given the opportunity to make a difference. We have been given the opportunity to help them experience life in a more meaningful and rewarding way; to help a life once painful, become more joyful; to help a life once hopeless, become more hopeful; to help a life once shattered, become more whole. We have been given the opportunity to make a difference in the life of a troubled young person and to do so without adequate planning is to violate their right to the care and treatment to which they are entitled.

This is no average task - this task of the care and treatment of troubled young people. It is not about the satisfaction of everyday wants and desires. It is about meeting

needs. It is about today, and tomorrow, and all the future tomorrows of these young people. It is about how we can utilize our knowledge, our skills, and our presence to help them have a future life of less pain and more satisfaction. Ultimately, it is about how they will lead their lives and how they, in turn, will raise their children to lead their own respective lives. Their futures, like all of ours, are built one day at a time - one tomorrow following indisputably after another.

It is not my intention today to offer you a detailed plan for how all their tomorrows may be better ones for such a plan, for each and every young person or family, is an individual plan. Nor is it my intention to tell you what you must do to insure that your own tomorrows are better than they would have been if you marched into them unplanned and unprepared. That too is an individual issue. But I do appeal to you to take your work seriously, to treat it almost religiously, and to beg you if necessary to incorporate planning into all aspects of your work, and environments, with these young people, their families and ultimately with yourself.

There is an intricate relationship between the work we do with a young person and the environment within which that work is done. How the environment is - how the young person experiences it to be - impacts upon how the youth grows, develops or changes.

If the environment within which we work is disorganized and chaotic, with no expectation of what tomorrow may bring, the young person lives and grows in a world of chaos and uncertainty. This makes it difficult to depend upon the reliability of tomorrow, let alone to plan for a better tomorrow. The more predictable tomorrow is the more secure a young person will feel and the more we plan for tomorrow, the greater the likelihood there is that tomorrow will be a predictable experience.

### **Early Indoctrinations:**

But let me digress ever so slightly. For tomorrow is, ultimately, only another way of saying 'the future'. And so to say we are planning for a better tomorrow is only a euphemism for saying we are planning for a better future. As a child growing up on the West Coast of Canada, I heard many statements about when the future begins. You probably heard them where you grew up as well for they were cries common to the Western world and the state of our development at the time. For example:

*"The future is yours"* - the future is yours - a statement designed to encourage all of us, especially the young people, to believe that all the riches of society were available regardless of our present position or status. But how many of our troubled youth could honestly believe that the future is theirs.

God, some of them don't even believe that they will have a tomorrow. Some of them cringe in their darkened corners late at night in their own way praying that they might see yet another sunrise. Some of them, in the abusive homes of our countries or in the streets of our cities have good reason to worry that there may be no future for them, even if they live through the night. Out there on the streets young people wander about hungry, lost, confused, angry and rejected, treading gently on the borderline between life and death. There are thousands of young people in our countries whose very lives are at risk at this very moment. Would you dare to walk up to them and tell them that 'the future is theirs.'

*"Today is the first day of the rest of your life"*. Today is the first day of the rest of your life. This statement which is so beautiful and magnificent in its simplicity suggests that what you do today will impact or determine how the rest of your life might be. And surely this is true. But let me change this expression just a little and offer it to you as a guideline or a beacon for you in your work with troubled children and their families. "Today is the first day of the rest of their lives."

This is how important your work with troubled young people is and this is why it is so important that you work with them to plan for a better tomorrow for them and their families. I don't mean that you should plan in the simple sense of write a treatment plan and stuff it in the drawer and then watch as it gathers dust as so many of us are tempted to do. I know that planning is a cognitive exercise - that it means developing an organized approach to something - and I think that this is important. But I don't just want you mulling over in your head the various pros and cons of why planning is important. I want you to believe it in your gut and in your heart. I want you to be desperate to plan for a better tomorrow for the young people with whom you work. I want you to be in a state of panic that their tomorrow should be better than their today for, if today is the first day of the rest of their lives, tomorrow is where they live the outcome of today. How you are with them today will impact on how their tomorrows will be. For, as another revolutionary statement of the '70's said, *"The future is now"*. If you are concerned about their tomorrows you must be concerned about their todays.

### **A Communal Responsibility**

It is not just you and I in our daily work with troubled youth who should be planning for them to have a better tomorrow. It is a societal issue, a community question, and it is also a governmental responsibility. There are too many young people in our countries who are abused, or misused, or thrown away. There are too many who do not live a life that will allow them to get to tomorrow, let alone to plan for a better

tomorrow. As professional helpers, and as members of the society within which we find ourselves, we have a moral obligation to advocate for those changes in our society which we believe are necessary in order to build a better future for our youth.

I used to believe that I lived in a society that cared deeply about its youth but, with the passing of time, I have come to the point where I no longer believe that this is true. Young people in my country - especially those who have difficulty in conforming, or performing according to normative expectations - no longer seem to be important. They are not a priority. The next time an election swings around and your local candidate comes knocking at your door please sit him or her down and demand answers to questions about what they will do for young people. Ask what their commitment is to those youth in our society who are less fortunate than the norm. We, as members of this society, need to put pressure on the politicians and other elected representatives. We must force them to consider our young people a priority so that those who walk the streets of our cities will have some hope that there might be a tomorrow for them.

### **An Agency Responsibility:**

I mentioned earlier that the environment has a direct impact on their growth and development. This means that our agencies have a planning responsibility as well. Too many agencies focus only on today. And while the provision of quality services today is of the utmost importance, our agencies should be planning for the young people of tomorrow. We need to be considering the changing populations which will be coming to us, the changing needs of the worker who will encounter the young people of tomorrow and the evolving society within which we live. For when our agencies fail to plan for a better tomorrow - and when tomorrow finally comes - we find agencies that have programs that are no longer appropriate for the youth who are coming to them. When this occurs the organizations demand that young people fit the programs rather than the other way around. As a result we find young people not accepted, or rejected, by the very agencies that are supposed to service them because they do not fit the program. If the agency had adequately planned for a better tomorrow, and was aware of the changing needs of the population, we would have developed programs that meet the needs of these young people rather than maintaining programs that met the needs of yesterday's children. I have to ask 'what good is a program for yesterday's youth?'

The emergence of the increased aggression of the young people with whom we work is a perfect example. We all saw this coming. Years ago the researchers told us that the youth of the late 1980's and the 1990's would be much more aggressive than those with whom we had worked previously. Yet in many cases we failed to prepare programs and staff to meet this coming need.

As a result, we now scramble to teach workers skills to protect themselves in working with violent youth. If we had planned adequately ten or even five years ago, we would have had staff trained to deal with the level of disturbance which we are now seeing in our programs and we would be less concerned about aggression or violence. We would have many less workers today being hurt and injured in their work with physically aggressive youth.

### **A Programme Responsibility:**

It is not only the agency's responsibility to plan for a better tomorrow. It is also the responsibility of each and every program, within an agency. Let me ask you to imagine this scenario.

*A group home of teenage boys and girls all of whom are going to live there until the spring of next year. And in the next holiday period there will be two or three young people who do not have a family with whom they can spend the holidays.*

*Now imagine the first day of the holidays. Susan wakes up at about 7:30. The unit is quiet. As it turns out all the other youth went somewhere over the past few days. She is the only young person left in the program. Susan's father disappeared a number of years ago and her mother is so heavily involved in her own drunkenness and drug addiction that she disappears from time to time and it's not possible for anyone to get in touch with her. For the last few weeks no one has had any idea where Susan's mother is. And now on the first holiday morning she wakes up in a group home environment that she can't call home and she wonders who she'll find in the office or the kitchen.*

Ultimately of course the question is "did someone plan for Susan to have a better tomorrow?" Is it a regular staff that she knows well - and who knows her well - who will greet her on this day? Is there a plan for what they will do together so that, in spite of her pain, Susan's day might be at least pleasant. What are they going to do for dinner?

Okay. Maybe you think that's too blatant or too simple. Then let me talk just for a second about the eighteen and nineteen and twenty year olds who live out there in your city, floundering and/or barely surviving because we failed to plan adequately for the tomorrow which we call independent living. We let our young people go when they reach the formal age of majority without the skills to find or hold a job; without the ability to budget; without the strength to survive in a confusing and hostile world. Then years later we wonder why they never benefited from all our work. I know some of you will be angry but we have to admit, we let our youth go unprepared and unequipped because we - who are charged with the responsibility to care for them

- fail to plan for them to have a better tomorrow when they leave us.

It is our obligation and our responsibility as workers and programs to think about and plan for the tomorrow of the young people with whom we work. When we fail to plan for their tomorrows we fail to provide them with the services to which they are entitled.

### **A Daily Responsibility**

Planning for a better tomorrow is not something that only involves larger elements of our system - like our society, our agency, or our programs. It is something that should, ultimately, permeate our every interaction with the young people with whom we work. Planning for a better tomorrow should be a part of each and every intervention we make. When Johnny is struggling, and I intervene in order to help him get past the struggle, I should be asking myself how this struggle - and its resolution - relates to his tomorrow. The development of institutionalisation and excessive dependency of youth in care speaks directly to our failure to integrate a concern for their tomorrows into our every day interventions with them. Our work involves helping young people to develop the strengths, abilities and confidence with a greater hope that it will be a better tomorrow than it would have been if we had not intervened. And we must keep this in mind every single time we intervene with a young person, or their family. For when we fail to think about tomorrow as we intervene today, our interventions are focussed only on the present and not on the future. If we wish to plan for a better tomorrow, a concern about tomorrow must be with us in every minute of today.

Tomorrow does begin today. With a little planning, it can be a better tomorrow than it might have been otherwise.