

Promoting Generalization in Social Skills Training for Serious Mental Illness

VA Psychosocial Rehabilitation Training Program
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Generalization

- Occurs when a skill is transferred from one situation to another.
- Generalization of learning occurs by making the skills highly relevant to individual's specific situations and goals and by encouraging use of skills in their "natural environment."
- This occurs largely through "home practice assignments"

Promoting Generalization

- Rationale for home practice
- SMART home practice assignments
- Environmental cues
- Allies
- Reinforcement
- Accountability/Group norm
- What if a group member does not do the practice?
- Creative ideas

Rationale

- Discuss the rationale behind the home practice assignments: Home practice helps you move toward your personal goals. Group members will get the most out of their group if they practice.
- Another reason for completing home practice is so that you can discover which steps you are successful with and/or which steps you are struggling with.
- In the group we simulate what happens in the community to prepare for weekly practice in the community.
- Practice makes progress!

“SMART” PRACTICE ASSIGNMENTS

- **Specific:** The assignment should clearly define what the group member wants to do. How exactly they will use the SST skill.
- **Measurable:** The group member should be able to report back whether or not the assignment was accomplished and the degree to which they stuck to the steps of the skill.
- **Achievable:** The assignment should be something the group member is capable of. It may present a slight to medium challenge to the group member but be doable. Start with easier assignments and with success move to more challenging ones.
- **Relevant:** Develop with the group member a meaningful assignment, tailored to the individual, linked if possible to his or her personal goal for the SST group.
- **Time-bound:** The group member should be able to accomplish the assignment before the next group.

QUESTIONS TO ASK FOR “SMART” ASSIGNMENTS

- **Specific:** Ask what exactly the group member plans to do to practice the skill. Where, when and with whom?
- **Measurable:** Ask the group member to record how many steps of the skill he or she was able to accomplish.
- **Achievable:** Ask questions to make sure the assignment can realistically be accomplished. Do they have the means to be able to make it to the location to talk to the person identified on the planned day? Ask if the person has a task similar to the practice assignment before and how that went. Optional: Ask from 0-100 how confident the group member feels that he or she will be able to accomplish the assignment. If the confidence is below 90, rework the assignment.
- **Relevant:** Ask if the group member can link his or her personal goal to the practice or if he or she has another meaningful assignment in mind.
- **Time-bound:** Ask when the group member plans to do the assignment (make sure this is before the next group).

Environmental Cues

- Have every group member write down his or her specific assignment and ask him or her to keep it somewhere they will notice it.
- The sheet with the steps of the skill is available on the SST website and can be modified to include a space to write down assignment and record how it went:

http://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn5/training/social_skills.asp

Environmental Cues

- Ask how the group member can remember to do the assignment: put note in smartphone calendar, appointment book, post-it on their door, etc.
- If PRRC or similar program, put up skill of the week on a bulletin board that can be seen by group members as a visual reminder.

Allies

- Ask group members if there is anyone in their life (family member, MHICM case manager, etc.) who might be able to help them with the SST group.
- Get consent to contact an ally or allies and orient the ally to the purpose of the group and how he/she can be helpful.
- Allies can help with outside practice, reminding the group member to come to group or of their home practice assignment, and encouraging generalization and work on goals.

Positive Reinforcement

- When reviewing practice, positively reinforce every attempt at completing the practice assignment, however small (shaping).
- If the group member did not do the specific assignment, ask if he or she had a chance to use the skill in another context. Then reinforce that use of the skill.
- Use group reinforcement, clapping, etc.
- Ok to use concrete reinforcers in some settings.

Accountability/Group Norm

- Make sure to mention the practice assignments when recruiting for the group.
- Establish the expectation from the very beginning that the home practice is completed.
- Ask about each person's home practice assignment every group. (If you don't ask about it they will think you do not believe it is important).
- Develop practice every group .
- Group leaders should write down all the group members' assignments so you can ask specifically about it at the next group
- Group members should write down their own assignment each week.
- Remind folks at the end of the group that you look forward to hearing how the home practice went.

What if a group member did not do the practice?

- Ask what got in the way and problem solve barriers.
- If have time, do a roleplay on the spot simulating the home practice scenario.
- Be careful in designing the next practice assignment, make sure that it is a SMART assignment (especially that it is within the group member's capabilities) and the group member feels confident in completing it.
- Consider involving an ally

Creative Ideas

- Have a practice group at a living facility to further prepare folks for community practice
- In vivo practice group: staff member takes group members out to the community to practice
- Regularly involve an ally in helping a group member to have opportunities to complete practice assignments.