



Cognitive Behavioral Theory, Young Adults, and Community Corrections: Pathways for Innovation

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Executive Session on Community Corrections

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When you are out in the field and so many things are out of your control, having a concrete tool like CBT that you can utilize in your hard conversations with young men is a game-changer. It took our work to a whole new level.

—Anna, a Roca youth worker

CBT is a "what to do" rather than just a "what not to do."

—Josh, 21, a Roca participant

Innovating in community corrections sometimes seems like an impossible task. The field's challenging population, underresourced and overworked agencies, and the disconnect between cutting-edge research and front-line realities often result in stagnation where innovation is needed the most. There is, however, another way. In this paper, we review a collaborative effort to tackle one of community corrections' most troubling challenges: the shortage of effective tools to reduce the infamously high recidivism rates among young adults. The design of a new cognitive behavioral theory (CBT) curriculum tailored to the needs of this specific population is not only an important addition to the field's toolbox, but also a new path in community corrections innovation.

A Systemic Challenge: Young Adults in Community Corrections

Like most criminal justice institutions, community corrections agencies experience overrepresentation of young adults. Individuals ages 18 to 24 make up about 9.9 percent of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Yet, these young adults make up more than double that share in the community corrections population: 26 percent, or approximately one million people out of the four million or so under supervision by the criminal justice system through parole or probation nationally (Maruschak and Bonczar, 2013). Young adults also account for approximately 30 percent of arrests and 21 percent of prison admissions (Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2015; Carson and Golinelli, 2013). Once young adults leave prison, they have the highest rearrest rates of any age cohort, with 78 percent rearrested within three years (Durose, Cooper, and Snyder, 2014).

At the same time, a growing body of research suggests that young people are in need of social support, and that community-based interventions may yield better results. Developmentally and neurobiologically, young adults have been shown to be more behaviorally impulsive in emotionally charged situations; more susceptible to peer influence; less future-oriented; and greater risk takers, especially in

the presence of peers. Sociologically, young adulthood is a time when offending rates begin to decline, especially if youth attain stable intimate relationships or steady employment. But over the past several decades, marriage age and gainful employment have been pushed further back in the life course of young adults in America, particularly among poor youth and youth of color (Schiraldi, Western, and Bradner, 2015; Scott, Bonnie, and Steinberg, 2016).

Although the research suggests that tailored interventions for young adult offenders may be effective, the field of community corrections has yet to adopt developmentally appropriate programs for this age group. A recent report by the National Institute of Justice found only seven probation- or parole-led young adult programs and six young adult courts around the country (Hayek, 2016). In the meantime, poor justice system outcomes with this age group continue to generate disappointing individual results and hinder public safety. There is a clear need for evidence-based interventions and innovation in this space.

The Promise and Limitations of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Programs

Cognitive behavioral theory, also known as cognitive behavioral therapy, combines the two distinct psychological fields of behaviorism and cognitive approaches. The combination of the two approaches was started in the early 1960s by Aaron Beck; it offers specific skills that individuals can learn, practice, and use for managing behavioral and emotional problems.

CBT asserts that emotions, thoughts, and behaviors are interconnected and suggests that individuals can develop skills to foster healthier “emotions-thoughts-behaviors” cycles (or “feeling-thinking-acting” cycles). CBT includes strategies for developing healthier and more balanced thinking (e.g., cognitive restructuring) as well as behavioral strategies for improving social and interpersonal relationships. In the context of reducing engagement in violence and crime, CBT offers individuals a practical way to address the emotional causes of these behaviors and helps people develop more effective and prosocial strategies (Milkman and Wanberg, 2007).

CBT is not new to community corrections and is known as one of the most promising evidence-based practices in the field (Landenberger and Lipsey, 2005; Milkman and Wanberg, 2007; Crime and Justice Institute at Community Resources for Justice, 2009; Polaschek, 2011). Among the dozens of CBT programs tested in the U.S. and abroad, Thinking for a Change (T4C), a program developed in collaboration with the National Institute of Corrections, is the curriculum used most often in American correctional and community corrections agencies (Milkman and Wanberg, 2007). T4C focuses on cognitive self-change, social skills, and problem-solving skills in a curriculum of 25 classes of one to two hours each. Since its first edition in 1997, more than 40 states have implemented T4C, thousands of correctional staff have been trained, and hundreds have become certified trainers (Golden, 2002; Lowenkamp and Latessa, 2006; Milkman and Wanberg, 2007; Bush, Glick, and Taymans, 2016).

Successful implementation of a curriculum such as T4C requires setting expectations with participants regarding positive participation, consistent attendance, and completion of homework assignments. Although these requirements may be reasonable in correctional settings and with low- and medium-risk individuals in community corrections, they are more challenging when applied to high-risk young people who are supervised in the community. High-risk young adults often reject services, fail to attend programs regularly, and are not ready to positively engage in programs that advance their skills (Baldwin and Zeira, 2017). Additionally, despite the fact that some adult and juvenile CBT programs are implemented in community corrections agencies with young adults, none of them have been developed with this specific age cohort as its main focus (Landenberger and Lipsey, 2005; Milkman and Wanberg, 2007; Polaschek, 2011; Hayek, 2016). Without targeted programs, young adults in community corrections, and particularly high-risk individuals, remain underserved.

A New Approach

Roca, a community-based organization in Massachusetts that serves high-risk, young male offenders ages 17 to 24, witnesses on a daily basis the shortage of effective tools for this population. The organization’s target population overlaps considerably with that of community corrections — in 2016, 40 percent of the 711 young men at Roca were referred directly from probation or parole, 20 percent were referred from correctional agencies (often on probation), 10 percent were referred from

police departments, and 30 percent were referred from other organizations and street outreach. All of them were assessed as high risk by criminal justice risk assessments and were found to be not ready, willing, or able to participate in traditional programming or jobs. Similar to high-risk individuals in community corrections agencies, the young people at Roca have been repeatedly involved in the juvenile and criminal justice systems, have dropped out of school, have little or no employment history, are using or dealing drugs, and are involved in gangs or street activity.

Roca's intervention model spans four years, and participation is generally not mandated by courts. The organization uses "relentless outreach" by youth workers, intensive case management, strategic partnerships, and tailored education, workforce readiness, and life skills programming to help participants thrive and reduce the likelihood of offending (Baldwin and Zeira, 2017). Together, these strategies address many of the challenges involved in engaging and retaining high-risk individuals in programming. All strategies are grounded in the principles of CBT, with a focus on creating positive cognitive, behavioral, and emotional changes for young people. Roca's programming provides multiple opportunities for young people to learn and engage in new behaviors that help them better manage their emotions, improve relationships, and attain their personal goals. Given the strong evidence that more robust use of CBT contributes to reducing recidivism (Crime and Justice Institute at Community Resources for Justice,

2009), Roca was looking to ramp up its use of this tool.

This turned out to be a challenging task. Multiple attempts to implement existing CBT curricula that are used by community corrections and correctional agencies (e.g., T4C) led once again to the conclusion that there is a considerable mismatch between these programs and Roca's group of high-risk young adults. The young people struggled with the dense content of these curricula as well as with the overly academic concepts, the long sessions, the expectations for sequential and consistent attendance, and the homework requirements that were inconsistent with their unstable life situations. In addition, Roca's highly competent and trained front-line staff were frustrated by the amount of training and preparation that each session in the existing curricula required, the rigid content and structure that could not be adapted to varying group sizes and settings, and the lack of flexibility to address participants' inconsistent attendance. In conversations with other community corrections agencies, including several probation departments that experimented with tailored services for young adults, Roca learned that these challenges were not uncommon in the field.

In 2014, Roca tried a new approach. The organization partnered with Community Psychiatry PRIDE, an implementation and dissemination clinical research center affiliated with Harvard Medical School and Massachusetts General Hospital, which focuses on reducing mental health disparities in racially and

ethnically diverse communities. The goal of the community-based participatory research the partners launched, which was supported by the Laura and John Arnold Foundation, was to design a curriculum that would meet the needs of high-risk young adults and would be a good fit for a community corrections setting.

The curriculum development process included the following stages:

1. Literature review. PRIDE reviewed the CBT literature and the landscape of existing CBT curricula, focusing on the overarching behavioral and emotional needs of Roca participants, which include substance abuse, aggressive and criminal behavior, and poor mental health functioning. Based on this review, PRIDE focused on the predictors of these problems: poor emotion regulation and interpersonal problem-solving abilities (Barlow, 2002; Barlow et al., 2011; Hopwood et al., 2015; Linehan, 1993; McNulty and Hellmuth, 2008; Landenberger and Lipsey, 2005). The literature review further revealed that based on Roca’s target population, a CBT program for this group should belong to the category called “high-level comprehensive” CBT programs. Programs in this category (1) focus on the highest risk group, (2) address a multitude of risk factors, (3) include 100 to 300 hours of participant engagement, and (4) are embedded in a comprehensive program (Polaschek, 2011). In addition, it was clear that the CBT curriculum should relate to young adults’ “maturity gap” — the gap in the early years of adulthood

between full intellectual development and still-developing emotional regulation capabilities (Scott, Bonnie, and Steinberg, 2016).

2. Needs assessment and model review.

PRIDE conducted a comprehensive review of Roca’s programmatic materials, including its intervention model, program manuals, training materials, and organizational structure. In addition, two CBT psychologists on staff at PRIDE shadowed Roca’s youth workers, crew supervisors, staff supervisors, and administrators to gain a sense of “Roca in action” and attended classes, trainings, and other daily routines at Roca. As further explained below, focus groups with staff and participants were a key part of the needs assessment stage.

3. Curriculum development.

Roca and PRIDE have designed a new CBT curriculum that focuses on improving emotion regulation and interpersonal problem-solving skills, and pared down the key concepts of CBT to 10 core skills. The process also included tailoring the curriculum to the specific behavioral and emotional needs of the young men served by Roca, and adapting the intervention so it could be delivered by paraprofessionals (Roca front-line staff). In parallel with the enhanced CBT curriculum, PRIDE and Roca developed an evidence-based implementation strategy to ensure that the curriculum is delivered with a high level of fidelity, competency, and frequency (dosage).

4. Piloting. Roca and PRIDE conducted two pilot stages:

- a. *Pilot with Roca youth workers.* The first stage focused on the front-line staff best positioned to deliver CBT to participants — Roca’s youth workers. PRIDE psychologists trained supervisors in the newly developed CBT curriculum, and supervisors then trained the youth workers. Youth workers delivered CBT skills in classes and in daily interactions with the participants. The training involved one skill a week, whereby youth workers learned one skill the first week and then practiced that skill over the course of the following week. Thus, youth workers received ongoing coaching and supervision for their application of each skill over a 10-week period. Evaluation of this piloting stage once again included focus groups with youth workers and participants to inform adaptations.
- b. *Pilot with all staff.* The second stage expanded the use of CBT at Roca with trainings provided to all front-line staff, including youth workers,

educators, crew supervisors, and all other staff members who work directly with young people. CBT skills were delivered in a variety of ways: formal, informal, group, one-on-one, in a classroom, on the streets, and on work crews. Roca and PRIDE shared the facilitation and training responsibilities, a strategy that increased Roca’s capacity over time to train with the new curriculum and thread CBT skills teaching and practice into all aspects of Roca programming. Focus groups were also conducted during this stage.

The newly developed CBT curriculum consists of 10 skills that can be taught in 30 to 45 minutes each, both formally and informally. The sessions are titled by catchphrases relating to the main teaching point of each session, such as “Approach! Don’t Avoid” and “Flex Your Thinking” (see table). All sessions follow a similar structure: the session starts with an icebreaker aimed to shift participants’ attention to the class, followed by a review of the session’s guidelines, a short explanation of the principles of CBT, and a

New CBT Curriculum Core Skills

No.	Skill Name	Core Emotion Regulation Capabilities and Skills
1	Label Your Feelings	Identifying and labeling emotions
2	Feel Your Feelings	Understanding the natural course of emotions and urges
3	Filling Up Your Tank	Increasing positive emotions
4	Being Present	Focusing on the present moment and mindfulness
5	Facing Reality	Accepting the current situation nonjudgmentally
6	Act in Line With Your Values	Reducing emotion-driven behavior
7	Approach! Don’t Avoid	Reducing emotional and behavioral avoidance
8	Flex Your Thinking	Challenging unhelpful or inaccurate thoughts
9	Problem Solving	Developing complex problem-solving capabilities
10	Conflict Resolution	Managing interpersonal conflicts

Feel Your Feelings: From Literature Review to a Roca CBT Skill

Today, my participant who has incredible anger problems and destroys properties all the time, had a fight with a girl, and she kicked him out. He was still there yelling and he calls me, 'I'm riding the wave, I'm riding the wave.' And then he left and obviously he's still [going to] have a lot of emotional problems with that, but no physical action was taken. He didn't bust up anything in her house, he didn't break any windows, which he has tried to do here on multiple occasions. I didn't think I was ever going to get him to stop doing that.

—Daniel, a Roca youth worker, talking about Michael, a Roca participant

CBT skill 2 (Feel Your Feelings), like all 10 CBT curriculum skills, was added to the curriculum following the preliminary stages of needs assessment and literature review. The literature review suggested that behavioral impulsivity and emotional dysregulation are associated with reactive violence, criminal behavior, and substance use (Barlow, 2002; Barlow et al., 2011; Hopwood et al., 2015; Linehan, 1993; McNulty and Hellmuth, 2008). It further suggested that equipping individuals with strategies for enduring and fully experiencing negative emotions may build up tolerance for negative emotions and the ability to experience them without engaging in impulsive behaviors (Resick and Schnicke, 1992; Linehan, 1993). The interviews with Roca staff and participants matched the literature review and reinforced the need to develop a skill around this topic.

PRIDE developed a CBT skill that was called “Emotion/Urge Surfing” and designed handouts that teach the natural course of emotions (using a metaphor of a wave) and the unhealthy course that is created when people avoid their feelings. The session followed the structure of an icebreaker, check-in about CBT skills practice, activity, teaching point, and check-out. It was accompanied by a two-page class outline that Roca staff was expected to learn before they taught this skill to the young men, and a 26-slide presentation that was used for training.

Among the issues that were raised in the focus groups and interviews after the first pilot, it was found that Roca staff had a hard time following the class outline, used the presentation for teaching the young men instead of educating themselves, and wanted more graphics and visuals. The second round simplified the process considerably — the training presentation became much more graphic, was shortened to 14 slides, and was used for both staff training and delivery for the participants. Instead of a class outline, youth workers were given the presentation with delivery notes. The structure of an icebreaker, check-in, activity, teaching point, and check-out was maintained. Roca created “quick guides” for the staff, which included only three components: the skill’s title, the improved graph, and the main teaching point.

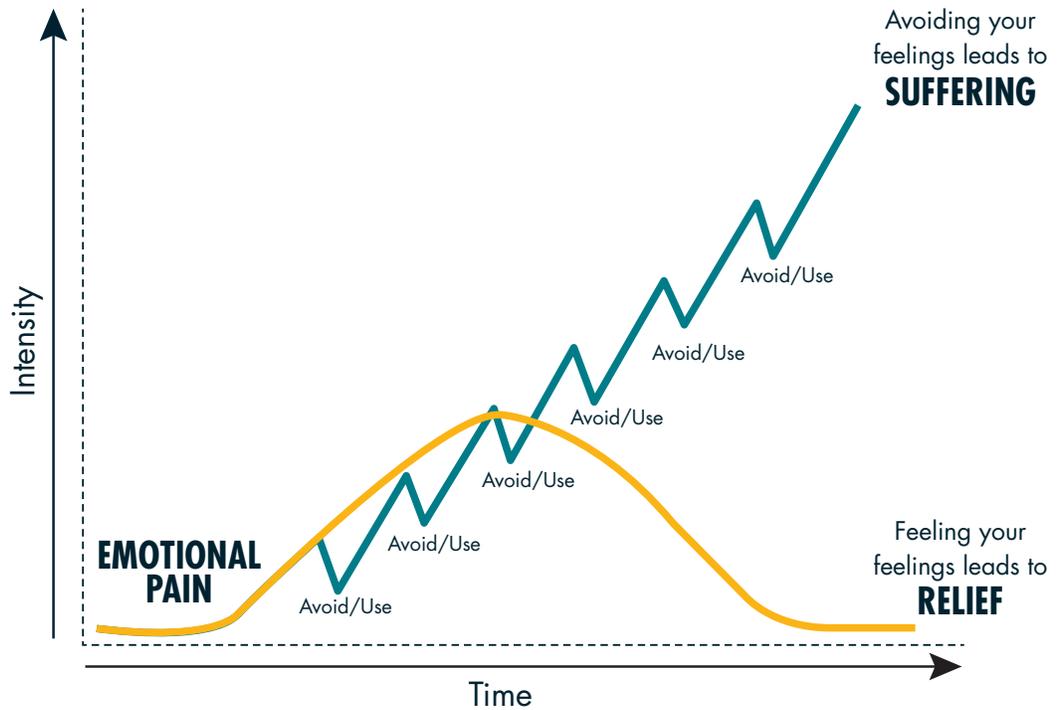
After receiving the last set of feedback, the main teaching point of this skill also became its title, which is now “Feel Your Feelings.” The expression “Feel Your Feelings” (and its matching graphic metaphor, “riding the wave”) is now part of Roca’s daily operations. It is a skill that all participants need to learn, and front-line staff are expected to use this expression in their conversations with the young men. After going through the session that teaches this skill at least once, the simple graphics and the session’s title resonate with both staff and participants, and they can refer to it and remember it. As a result, the complicated issue of emotional dysregulation that initiated the development of this skill becomes a simple set of practices that both staff and participants remember and use daily.

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Feel Your Feelings: From Literature Review to a Roca CBT Skill *(continued)*

FEEL your FEELINGS

Skill 2



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This graphic is used as part of the formal teaching of skill 2, “Feel Your Feelings.” The “wave” describes the natural course of emotions, which includes relief, even after intense emotions. On the other hand, behaviors that help individuals avoid feeling their feelings, such as substance use, do not allow for relief and tend to increase suffering over time. This graphic helps young people understand the value of feeling their feelings — even hard feelings — and recognize the harm of avoidance behaviors such as substance use.

check-in about how each participant practiced CBT skills in the previous week. The session then proceeds to an activity that helps participants learn the session’s new skill, teaching points that explicitly state what the new skill teaches, and a check-out about how each participant plans to use the skill that week.

At the end of the curriculum design and piloting stages, PRIDE conducted a feasibility and acceptability study that examined the rollout of the new curriculum across all Roca sites with all Roca staff and participants. Roca used its data collection system to track program delivery (dosage), and PRIDE staff observed

curriculum delivery for fidelity and conducted focus groups and interviews with youth workers and participants. The recommendations of this study were translated into an implementation plan focused on training, coaching, supervision, and data collection.

To date, Roca is implementing the final curriculum and testing its effectiveness in preparation for broader use by other programs and community corrections agencies. Part of the next phase of the project is a thorough research and evaluation of the newly developed curriculum.

Pathways for Innovation: Lessons for the Field, From the Field

I have been trying to get my social security card, and I'm very lazy, so the reality of it was I am not getting a ride from my youth worker, so I have to get up and do it on my own.... So I got up and I faced reality [Skill 5], I was just like 'you know what, it's never going to get done if I don't do it, and no one is going to take me to do it so I might as well just get up and do it myself.' So I did that... CBT is one of the reasons why I'm more open to go try and do things on my own.

—Alex, a Roca participant

I use it all the time when all my friends, they might do things that are not my path, in my ways of doing things... Sometimes they might want to go out to a party and it's late and I might be like 'Okay' and immediately I start thinking about I got work in the morning, that might not be a good idea because I'd rather have some money than go out tonight and my goal is paying my bills and all that, so, CBT teaches me to start thinking about the things I need to do, and works better for me.

—José, a Roca participant

Since the new curriculum was implemented, young people like Alex and José share with their Roca youth workers countless stories regarding their use of CBT skills in both mundane and emotionally charged situations. Perhaps one of the most striking stories concerns a young man who shared that while he was waiting for a friend to bring him a gun so he could shoot another young man who he thought was disrespecting him, he suddenly remembered the skills of “Flex Your Thinking” and “Problem Solving” and was able to use those skills to think through the situation, ultimately deciding that he would not shoot that night after all. Although it is still too early to fully evaluate the effectiveness of the new curriculum, it is already clear that Roca participants and staff alike consider it to be a major breakthrough in their ability to work toward a meaningful behavior change as part of Roca's intervention model.

The feasibility and acceptability study that was conducted confirms these anecdotal reports and highlights the curriculum's contribution to participants' emotion regulation capabilities — the young men involved were found to be more open, aware, and interested in addressing issues such as domestic violence, the need for professional mental health care, and substance abuse treatment. Youth workers in the study reported that the young men were using CBT in their relationships with others and were having fewer behavioral problems. In addition, the young men showed substantial shifts in their thinking, opting for long-term over short-term solutions. Importantly, the youth workers

embraced the new curriculum, used it regularly, and were able to identify time and again how CBT was used outside the program in various situations by the staff and the participants. As the project continues to the next phases of external and more rigorous evaluation, these are encouraging early findings.

The promise of these findings stretches beyond Roca, PRIDE, and the new curriculum. The project demonstrates that in the face of challenging realities in community corrections, such as a dire need for effective tools to reduce recidivism among young adult offenders, innovative and targeted tools can be developed, tested, and refined. In addition, although further evaluation will determine the extent of this project's success, five major lessons regarding the path for innovation in community corrections have already emerged:

1. Simple is better. Although the literature review and the study of other curricula revealed an expansive set of skills that may benefit high-risk young men, the curriculum that Roca and PRIDE developed includes only 10 skills, and the delivery of each skill is designed to take 30 to 45 minutes. The titles of each session are straightforward, the handouts are easy to use, and the teaching points are simple. These were deliberate decisions that other programs serving young adults and high-risk individuals should consider adopting.

Short sessions allow both staff and participants to stay focused, help them overcome a short attention span, and make CBT sessions part of the

program's daily routine rather than a daunting or burdensome task. In the challenging context of serving high-risk individuals, practical and repetitive skills can be much more useful than comprehensive and cumbersome curricula. Simply designed skills are also easier for front-line staff to remember and reinforce, and they may make training and supervision more manageable and effective.

However, simplicity should not be confused with superficiality. Each skill included in the curriculum is a simplified version of researched and evidence-based skills that have been proven to improve emotion regulation and interpersonal skills (the curriculum's manual includes a literature review of all related research). A key part of the curriculum design process was an emphasis on delivery style and easy memorization: only a curriculum that young people could remember and put to practice instantaneously would serve them in real life.

2. Start with those who know best: participants and front-line staff. Piloting a program and garnering feedback from staff and participants are part of many curriculum development processes, but they remain underestimated. If the goal is to create a simple and practical curriculum, it must be seen as such by the young people the program serves and by the front-line staff who would be expected to deliver the program. Therefore, input from these two groups cannot wait until final efficacy trials of the curriculum — their voice must be heard as early as the needs assessment stage.

At Roca and PRIDE's project, semi-structured focus groups and individual interviews with Roca staff and participants were woven into the preliminary study of Roca's needs. In the first stage of qualitative data collection, PRIDE spoke with 46 Roca staff and 38 participants via 17 individual interviews and 13 focus groups conducted at all four Roca locations. Focus groups were continued throughout the two piloting stages, and feedback from participants and staff directly informed revisions to the curriculum and implementation plan.

3. Find a partner with a different skill set. The behavioral health of offenders is a concern shared by community corrections agencies, community-based organizations, mental health programs, and others. As expected, each of these institutions has different knowledge, training, culture, and points of view on the issue. Programs that aim to create a substantial difference in people's behavior may need these diverse perspectives and the unique knowledge each institution possesses.

Neither Roca, with three decades of experience in working with high-risk, young adult offenders nor PRIDE, with mental health expertise, could have created this curriculum alone. As a community-based organization, Roca lacks the capacity to conduct a comprehensive literature review and design a process that would meet the highest scientific standards of evidence-based practices. PRIDE, as a clinical research center, lacks the access to young people and the understanding

of their real-life experiences, challenges, and opportunities. The curriculum that this collaboration produced builds on both PRIDE's academic rigor and Roca's hands-on experience, and is a result of a true partnership.

4. Staff can do it, even if they don't have a Ph.D.

It is critical for the community corrections field to develop more behavioral health interventions that can be delivered by agencies' front-line staff, even when staff do not have formal mental health training. Many of the existing CBT programs were developed to be delivered by mental health professionals — a scarce resource in disenfranchised communities. Interventions designed to be delivered by existing community corrections staff, especially probation and parole officers, would have a broader reach and potentially a larger impact.

Roca's curriculum was designed to be delivered by its front-line staff — the youth workers. This was a deliberate decision, intended to create a sustainable program that would improve the behavioral health of Roca participants based on the organization's existing model. Similar to probation officers, Roca youth workers are in direct contact with the young people on their caseload, which positions them well to deliver the curriculum. Building on the strength of the staff and giving them an effective tool to support young people's behavioral health was an important contribution to staff members' professional capacity.

5. Transform the culture. To make a tool such as CBT part of young people’s routine way of thinking, feeling, and acting, the tool has to become part of the organization’s routine as well. This requires creating a culture across the organization that brings the CBT language and principles to as many interactions between participants and staff as possible.

At Roca, the implementation strategy included expanding the circle of staff trained in CBT to all front-line staff and coaching staff in different roles to enhance how they use their position to reinforce and practice CBT with participants. The organization added basic training, consultation, observation sessions for all front-line staff, and additional monthly trainings for directors and supervisors. In addition, CBT “cheat sheets” were created, key rings with the 10 skills were given to all staff, and posters with CBT principles now decorate the walls of each Roca location. In other words, CBT at Roca is not only a curriculum — it is a holistic organizational approach.

An organizational strategy to transform the agency’s culture such that a newly developed tool will be ingrained in daily operations should be a key part of adopting new tools in community corrections. Training, coaching, supervision, data collection, and a deliberate plan to sustain quality are musts. These steps ensure that over time new tools are not only implemented but also maintain fidelity, continue to improve, and become second nature to both staff and participants.

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