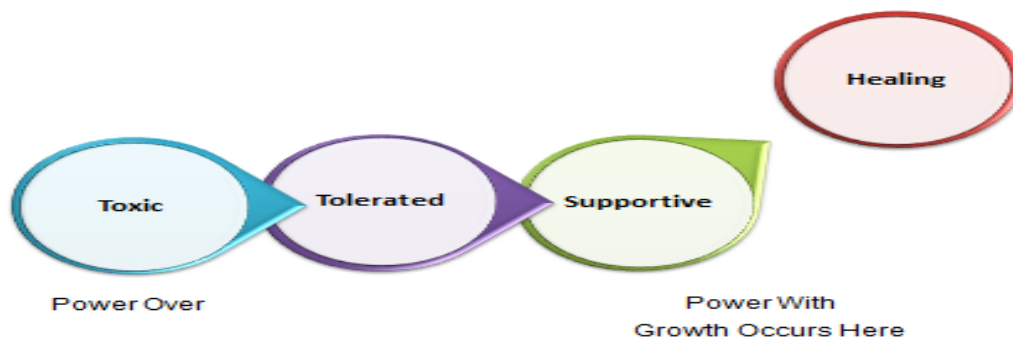# The Importance of Environment[1]

Michael Smull and Mary Lou Bourne

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All people respond to their environment. Whether we are happy or miserable is largely determined by what surrounds us. For happiness or even simply contentment to exist, certain things must be present and other things must be absent. What happens when we don't have control over what is present or absent? Many people with significant disabilities live in just this way. They do not get to choose their environment or what is in it. When people with significant disabilities move to a new home they rarely get to choose where it is located or give input into what will be present or absent. Because control of their surroundings is in the hands of others, we need to look at the person's response to the environment, learn from their response and act on what we learn. This learning needs to focus on the person's satisfaction and contentment with the new surroundings, including the presence of people, sounds, activity, and rhythm or pace of life. To do this successfully it is helpful to use a consistent framework when evaluating the environment. What follows is a simple, helpful continuum for thinking about what needs to be present or absent. (Even when people do have control the same framework can be helpful.)

The Importance Of Environment

Toxic — Tolerated — Supportive — Healing

Power Over — Power With / Growth Occurs Here

Toxic – When an environment is toxic (offensive, harmful, extremely unpleasant) what is present or absent causes people to complain about the environment with their behavior. The typical emotional response to a toxic environment is either anger or depression. What is seen or observed is aggression or withdrawal and is typically labeled as dysfunctional. By paying attention to how people react, by listening to their behavior, we can learn about what is dissatisfying and must change. While there are some things that are toxic to everyone there are other things that are toxic to some people but not others. Consequently, there are some settings toxic to all (e.g. - places where abuse or violence are common) and there are settings toxic to some individuals but not others. Interventions designed to increase a person's tolerance of toxic settings without changing the setting should be unacceptable (and considered unethical). Critical aspects of what is important to[2] the person are absent and make the person less healthy and less safe (adversely affects important for[3]).

Tolerated – In a tolerated environment activities and interactions are endured, withstood, or 'put up with.' Complaints about the setting are less dramatic but withdrawal and depression are still common. A key indicator is that growth is also absent. People languish where they live by simply tolerating what's around them. If depression and withdrawal are adaptive responses to the setting then the use of medication to treat the depression is simply addressing the symptom and not the cause. Often the withdrawal is an expression of helplessness, or despair at the lack of control or authority to change the unacceptable. Paid employees in these environments often see their role as caretaker with cooking, cleaning and paperwork more of a priority than building supportive relationships that promote learning for the person.

Supportive – In a supportive environment interactions between people are encouraging, reassuring and empathetic. What is "important to" as well as what is "important for" the person is largely present and balanced. In these environments there is recognition that no one willingly attends to issues of health and safety unless there is some aspect of it that is "important to" them. People who are in supportive settings experience significant growth. For people without significant clinical issues this setting is good enough. People who have been in toxic settings and do not have significant clinical issues "blossom" in these settings.

> While one person may find a setting with much commotion, loud talkers, loud music or tv, and constant activity very toxic, another person may find it satisfying, comforting or stimulating.

Healing – in a healing environment, interactions between the people present are restorative and focused on developing wellness. Where people have been wounded by prior experiences such as physical or sexual

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[2] What is important to a person includes those things in life which help us to be satisfied, content, comforted and happy. It includes:
- People to be with /relationships
- Things to do that are meaningful
- Going to places to go that you choose
- Rituals or routines
- Rhythm or pace of life
- Things to have
- Status, respect, and control

[3] What is important for people, includes only those things that we need to keep in mind regarding–
- Issues of health or safety
  - Physical health and safety, including wellness and prevention
  - Emotional health and safety, including support needed
- What others see as important to help the person be a valued member of their community

abuse or neglect or abandonment; where people have a significant mental health issue; an environment that promotes healing is needed. What is important for the person is seen through the lens of promoting emotional well-being along with what is important to the person. The staff in these settings have the capabilities and characteristics needed for the person to feel safe and to practice the behaviors that lead to healing in a manner that promotes trust and self-confidence. All of the characteristics that are seen in a supportive setting are present but there are also those things that are needed for the person to heal.

Using the framework

The thinking that underlies this framework is helpful and needed when we are learning about people (assessments), helping people move, responding to sudden, unexpected changes (crisis) and/or developing community capacity. This thinking is central to the development and management of crisis services. We need a system that seeks a good match between the person and all of the settings in which he/she will spend significant time. We need to know when a good match doesn't exist and have plans to develop the needed community capacity so that it will exist.

It is unacceptable to simply leave people in toxic settings. Moreover, it is unethical to attempt to make people adapt to toxic settings whether using behavioral interventions or medication.   It is not uncommon to hear that "we know that this is not the best place or situation but it is the best we have. We have to make it work as best we can." These people saying that is the absence of community capacity rather than an intentional desire to do harm. Developing responsive community capacity does take time and resources but the time it takes doesn't begin until development is started. The development of supportive and healing settings has to be a priority. Healing environments require specific skill sets and specific practices from the people providing support. But the skills and practices are known and teachable. Those responsible for the development of these capabilities must have in place a method for showing progress on a clear timeline.

For everyone who uses services we need to know the key characteristics of a supportive (or if needed, healing) environment. The characteristics of the environment in which the person is living needs to be compared with the characteristics of the environment that best supports the person. Where there is a significant discrepancy, changing the environment must become a priority. For people who need a healing environment this is critical. There are many people with significant disabilities who are also abuse survivors. As a result many have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and need an environment where they feel safe and can practice the behaviors that increase their capacity to cope.

When referrals are received for behavior support services, in addition to learning the function of the behavior, the consultant must also learn where the environment falls on the continuum of toxic to healing. The consultant needs to learn what must be present or absent in the environment. This requires identifying the things that comfort, satisfy, and create happiness for the person and the degree to which they are present. If the most significant things are absent, the first steps must be to change the environment rather than to try and change the person. Assuring the presence of what provides comfort and happiness is a simpler, more effective – and more respectful -- approach than trying to change a person.