

Transcript for Raising Difficult Issues Podcast

LR: Hello. My name is Dr. Lisa Razzano. I'm here with Dr. Judith Cook, Director of the University of Illinois at Chicago's Center on Integrated Health Care and Self-Directed Recovery. Today, we'll be talking about the self-determination tool called, *Raising Difficult Issues with Your Service Provider*, which is available from the UIC Solutions Suite.

LR: Thanks for joining me today, Judith. Please tell our listeners about this tool, and why it might be useful to people in recovery, their service providers, and other supporters.

JC: I'll be happy to Lisa. *Raising Difficult Issues* is a workbook designed to help people bring up sensitive topics with their service providers. It's based on the principle that good service providers value feedback from the people they serve. They welcome constructive criticism and suggestions about how to improve the helping relationship. Our workbook helps people plan how to introduce difficult subjects so that service providers are able to listen and then act in partnership with service users to resolve these difficulties.

LR: Sounds like a good idea, but don't service providers check in with their patients and clients about this already?

JC: Yes they do. But we wanted to encourage people receiving services to start the conversation. We found that many people wanted to raise a sensitive topic, such as being displeased with their treatment progress or wanting to work on different goals. But it can be hard to challenge someone who is trying to help you, or who you feel is an expert. It can be difficult to tell a case manager or psychiatrist that you don't like the way your treatment is going or that you're not ready to talk about certain topics. Yet, research shows that people who express their viewpoints and honest opinions about their treatment to service providers have better treatment outcomes.

LR: That's an interesting fact and it makes a lot of sense. What kinds of people might find the workbook useful?

JC: We designed this tool together with service users and other advocates. It's for people with behavioral health disorders who are receiving mental health services. We've also found that people receiving other types of services find it useful, such as those being treated for physical health conditions or substance abuse problems, and those receiving any type of social service. We tailored it especially for people who use publicly-funded service systems where providers often feel rushed, over-burdened, and unsupported. Other people who can benefit from this workbook include doctors and mental health clinicians, who use it to improve their own practices and ways of interacting with the people they serve. Finally, family members and other supporters have told us they like the workbook because it helps them understand what their relatives have a right to expect from providers.

LR: How does *Raising Difficult Issues* work?

JC: The workbook provides a set of "conversation starters" which are statements designed to introduce a need or concern to a behavioral health clinician. The statements are grouped into topical areas based on input from mental health service users. These include topics like refocusing on life goals that really matter to service recipients, such as employment, finances, or dating. Other topics include respecting privacy; partnering with a person rather than directing their treatment; honoring preferences about disclosing trauma; and being supportive in decision-making.

JC: Each statement is written in a way that clearly expresses the concern, places people in control of their treatment, and opens up honest communication between service users and providers. It also includes concrete suggestions about how to prepare for the conversation, how to carry it off successfully, and what to do if service providers resist or become defensive. Finally, the workbook provides encouragement by reminding people that learning how to stand up for yourself can take you out of your comfort zone and be a bit stressful. At the same time, it reassures them that self-advocacy is a process, not a one-time event, so they can set the pace by doing what feels comfortable.

LR: To give our listeners an idea of how the workbook has been used, would you share one of your favorite stories from the field?

JC: I'd be glad to. We've heard that people are using the workbook individually and in groups to summon the courage to start difficult conversations. One of my favorite examples is from a program that had just begun to offer integrated health and mental health services at the same location. Staff found that their clients didn't have experience starting potentially awkward conversations with their medical providers. So, this organization introduced *Raising Difficult Issues* to help clients better communicate with their doctors about their medical concerns. Over time, staff noticed that clients had started using the workbook with their mental health providers as well. This led clients to become more engaged in both behavioral health and medical treatment. So in this way, the workbook became an engagement tool for integrated health and mental health care.

LR: That sounds like a great use for the workbook. Thank you Judith. And thank you to all of our listeners, for your time today. We are pleased to offer *Raising Difficult Issues with Your Service Provider* as part of our Solutions Suite to promote wellness for people in recovery from mental health conditions.