

Service, Support and Success: Important Announcement

The Direct Support Worker Newsletter has just expanded. Angie Nethercott has joined the team and will be serving as an editor with the Newsletter. This newsletter started with Vita's clinical team writing for our staff and has grown, in a few months, to have international readership. We want to encourage participation and Angie was willing to step in and assist with editing duties. It is also hoped that other clinicians, or direct care workers, or people with disabilities, or family members, will submit articles for consideration. We are working on submission guidelines – give us time, this has taken us all by surprise. Before we get to this month's issue, we'd like to introduce Angie:

Angie Nethercott, M.A., is the Senior Behaviour Consultant with the North Community Network of Specialized Care at Hands TheFamilyHelpNetwork.ca specializing in the area of sexuality and persons with intellectual disabilities. Angie's role is to provide clinical consultation to Behaviour Therapists across Northern Ontario, including socio-sexual and risk assessments, public education, and conduct research. Prior to her current position, Angie worked for Behaviour Management Services of York and Simcoe as a Behaviour Consultant and Coordinator of the Sexuality Clinic for seventeen years providing assessment and treatment of children and adults with intellectual disabilities engaging in sexually inappropriate and sexual offending behaviours. Angie is a published author and has presented at a number of national and international conferences, including NADD and the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers. Welcome Angie!

Service, Support and Success: The Direct Support Worker Newsletter Volume 1: Issue 7

Breasts, Buttocks and Boundaries: Confident Clothing Choices for Direct Care Professionals

Desmond Bailey, Katie Miller and Dave Hingsburger
Vita Community Living Services

People who work in banks and offices, or restaurants and machine shops have it easy when it comes to dressing for work. Partly because what they wear to work and what they wear at home come from very different parts of their closets. When you work with people providing support with their everyday activities, the distinction between work and home can become difficult. Working in someone's home calls for really subtle decisions to be made about how to be

professional while fitting into a relaxed atmosphere. Clothing can turn a ‘home’ into a ‘facility’ and no one wants that. However, clothing that doesn’t demonstrate an understanding of boundaries and appropriateness can send mixed messages about relationships. This subject is way more complex than people give it credit.

A bit of research shows that there are over 35 “dressing styles”. To name a few: Geek, Jock, Trashy, Skater, Athletic, Fashionista, Rich Girl, Indie, Scene, Trampy, Gangster, Preppy, Vintage, Cheerleader, Nu-rave, Metro-sexual, Tom Boy, Emo, Goth, 70’s, 80’s, Jock, and the list goes on. Fortunately, Direct Care Workers who support individuals with intellectual challenges don’t have to worry about fitting into any particular style genre. “Dressing for success” does not only apply to staff that work in institutions such as banks, insurance companies, design firms and advertising companies. The way Direct Care Workers dress or their personal style can absolutely and will definitely have impact on how safe environments are maintained.

Direct Support Workers need to take into account many things; the unique needs of their work environments and the predictable and unpredictable situations that may arise due to involvement with the individuals both at home and in the community. They also need to think about their relationships with those beyond the people they support such as community professionals like doctors and nurses, as well as representatives from other agencies and, of course, families. With each group, they need to consider how they represent themselves, the organization they work for and the individuals they support.

Consider the following questions: How do you dress for work? What considerations do you take into account when choosing your work clothes? Is this something that you even think about? Do you feel that the way you dress will make a difference in whether or not your day will be successful? Do you feel that the way you dress could influence the interrelationship between yourself and the individuals you support? Do you feel that the way you dress will affect your effectiveness on a whole? And the last question: Before you get dressed, what do you think of first? Is it comfort, style, culture, fashion...or is it safety?

Answering these questions makes it clear that the way Direct Care Staff dress for work does matter. The following tips should help make this a whole lot easier.

1. It’s a Job

You are accompanying someone to the beach; you aren’t going to the beach. The distinction here is huge. Very few people get to work at the beach. Interestingly, those who do, often have a dress code. Are you aware that most public beaches and public swimming pools have a dress code for the life guards who work there? These codes emphasize that the guards are dressing for ‘water rescue’ not for fashion, sun tanning or flirting. It’s clear that, even in a place where everyone is there for fun and recreation, staff are there to perform a service. The same is true for those who work in direct care. You are providing a service; therefore, you

dress in a way that befits that role. This doesn't mean, of course, that you don't dress for the beach, but you do so in such a way that demonstrates an awareness of your role and a deep awareness of your relationship with the person you serve. Clothing can give mixed messages and can end up in inappropriate behaviours resulting from inappropriate clothing choices.

This is obvious at the beach, but it should also be obvious when working in someone's home or at a workshop. The first thought you have when getting ready to go to work is simply this, 'I'm going to work.'

2. Know Your Environment

Some settings are more volatile than others, or may require a different dress code based on the profile of the individuals at that setting, or it could be based on the event for that particular day. Think about your responsibilities; will you be supporting the member to the opera, a ball game, a nice restaurant, or to visit the family; will you be working in a Day Program, or will you be at the residence? Dress moderately and respectfully. There will be controversy over the terms "moderate and respectful dressing;" people see it differently. Nonetheless, keep in mind that you may be interacting with different people with different needs; keep in mind your work setting, community facilities and events; keep in mind your role, and the level of support that the individual will require. If you are in doubt, wear something simple and comfortable.

3. Know The People You Serve

This was hinted at above, but let's be more specific. Wearing a tie when working with someone who has a history of strangling staff is – um – unwise. Some people with disabilities have problem behaviour that may really limit your clothing choices. Realize the same is true in the 'regular world' of work. Those who work with power tools don't wear things that can get tangled up and limit their range of motion. It's a question of safety. So, if you interact with someone who has issues with temper and aggression, be careful what you choose to wear to work. Ask the Behaviour Therapist or the Supervisor for advice. On the other hand, you may be working with people who have difficulty with boundaries, some may have even offended in the past; again, it's important to realize that clothing choices can reduce risks for everyone concerned. You remember that expression, 'If you've got it, flaunt it?' Well, that may be the very worst advice that anyone can give to anyone anywhere, working any place. Staff working with ADULTS must remember that they are working with ADULTS and that they see the skin and "bare-ness" of summer attire and react in the way any other adult does. Just because they have a disability does not mean that they will not be sexually attracted to the person who is showing lots of skin (whether they are staff or not).

4. Be Attractive Not Distractive

We all want to look and feel attractive regardless of whether or not we buy into the “fashion craze.” Being attractive does not mean that one has to show excessive skin and cleavage; if you paint on, rather than pull on your clothing, they are too tight; earrings that look like an invitation to pull off, pants that are so low that pubic hair becomes public, bending over shouldn’t make you a crack dealer...you get the picture... Remember, excessiveness is distractive not attractive...Stay simple and modest...Ensure that you clothes are able to breathe and allow for fluid movement. Over-accessorizing could inhibit your safety and the safety of others.

5. What’s Wrong With Thongs

Women, there is a reason they are called “Victoria’s Secret.” Wearing a thong should be your little secret! The individuals you support or your co-workers don’t need to know that you are wearing a “thong.” Remember that you may need to change your physiological positioning depending on your task, so if you simply must wear a “thong,” leave the hip hugger jeans at home or wear slacks that go up to your waist, that way, if you need to stoop or bend, your secret won’t be revealed. Another solution might be to wear tops that fall beyond your waist or cover your belt.

Guys, the term is ‘underwear’ that means you wear it ‘under’ your clothes. Seeing your boxer shorts may be ‘cool’ elsewhere, but at work, it’s just as dangerous as a thong. If it can be grabbed and pulled, it will be grabbed and pulled. Besides, anything that hints of outright sexuality, as thongs and boxers do, can blur boundaries and give messages that will be responded to. As mentioned earlier, consider the profile of the individual you are supporting, your responsibilities, your work setting and people you may interact with or meet.

6. Colour Your World / Cover Your World

It’s spring time and summer is just around the corner. Wear colourful tops or shirts. Colours can serve several functions. It’s a great visual for individuals that may have limited visual ability as it may enable those persons to see who they are communicating with. Colours can also serve as a sensory experience. Colours can show that you are confident, happy, cheerful, easygoing, and approachable. Colour is also an excellent way to bring individuality and your own sense of style into your clothing choices for work, yet still be able to support the individuals you serve in a safe and appropriate way.

Some fabric experts may argue that cotton, wool, denim and leather are the safest fabrics to wear versus silk, satin and nylon. It is believed that silk, satin and nylon are more susceptible to fire, while cotton, denim, wool and leather are not as equally susceptible. One may not have considered fabric when thinking safety...but we should.

7. Be Confident and Professional

A display of confidence and professionalism goes a long way when supporting individuals with intellectual challenges, as well as while dealing with families, people in the community, peers and management. Confidence and professionalism are not confined to the way we speak and write. They also embody the way we walk, our responses, our interpersonal and physiological conduct, and, of course, the way “we dress.” It has been said that people “act the way they dress.” Think about it, the way we dress and the way we act are psychological. First, it starts with the way we see ourselves, the way we view the people we support and the way we view our work environment. Second, we then make choices about the way we dress which communicates how we see ourselves in relation to those we work with and with the workplace itself.

In conclusion, consider “dressing for success” when providing direct care; consider safety, comfort and then style, all the while, keeping in mind, the profile of the individuals you are supporting. Think about the events you will be attending and the responsibilities that go along with your role. Consider, too, the people you will meet and who and what you represent. The way you dress for work tells a story about you! But it also tells a story about the agency you work for. Think about what story you want to tell. Be safe and keep others safe.