Places for Struggling Teens™

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"It is more important to get it right, than to get it first."

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Essays:

Answers For Parents/ 2

Visit Reports:

Boys Town of Nebraska/ 4

New Perspectives:

Brain Potential Institute/ 7

Laurel Oaks Behavioral Health Center/ 7

Spruce Point/ 8

Extended Insights:

Schools Use Discipline To "Treat" Troubled Teens/ 8

Seen N' Heard:

Anniversaries: 10

New Programs: 10

News: 10

People: 11

Program Closures: 11

Program Enhancements: 11

Upcoming: 11

The Power of Labeling



By Lon Woodbury

In some circles, the term "labeling" is used as a criticism. I frequently hear this from mental health professionals who are dubious of commonly used diagnoses. These people seem to feel that by labeling behavior, the person in treatment is stuffed into a predetermined category where everyone with that label is the same and requires the same therapeutic treatment. Critics claim that when a person is labeled their uniqueness is lost in a regime of rote actions. They might have a point.

However, labeling everything seems to be a universal human trait. It gives us the feeling of understanding; as if once you label something, you know about it. Perhaps using that knowledge gives us the ability to control it.

This concept of knowing or controlling something through labeling is an ancient belief and seems to be deeply ingrained in people. For example Adam's naming of all living things in the Second Chapter of Genesis seemed to be an important task, at least according to the ancient writers. Also, people in some cultures hid their real names possibly for fear that if someone knew their real identity they could be controlled by that person.

Look at the popularity of developing lists or bulleted points. Lists are used to help understand something better and allow the person defining the list to have control over its use.

This attitude is further enhanced in modern times by the success that has come from the use of categories in the physical and life sciences. One of the most important elements in gaining and communicating scientific understanding has been through categorization schemes that have been developed through experimentation and scientific endeavors.

However just naming something does not mean it is understood.

An example of this type of labeling is when people use buzz words in a conversation, but upon questioning really have very little knowledge of what they are talking about. Another example is when two people in a conversation use the same term, but the meaning and understanding of what they are saying is completely different.

The major system of categorization in the mental health field is the Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM-IV). Although this manual is considered the diagnostic "bible" of the mental health industry, it has attracted a lot of criticism for its imprecision. I have worked with a number of mental health professionals who have radically different understandings of the same diagnosis. They appeared to agree on something but subsequently determined each had a distinctly different understanding.

This kind of confusion doesn't enter into the physical science systems, or even in the life sciences, anywhere to the extent it is found in mental health fields.

As it stands, labeling is seductive and we are hardwired to naturally try to understand things by naming them. Labeling without really understanding the term is confusing and can be misleading. Unfortunately for those needing therapeutic intervention who receive labels, treatment is cookie cutter and often ineffective. Those lucky enough to enter the private, parent choice network often receive personalized assessment that enables treatment professionals to tailor the client's treatment program, regardless of previous labels.