SUPPORT GROUPS IN ICEHEARTS

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of my thesis is to provide a social support group model for the employees of Icehearts. The social support group model covers the mental health and well-being of the employees. The aim of the support group model is to give the employees a creative way of managing stress. The stress relief outlets can vary from creativity, exercise, and building relationships with co-workers.

The thesis describes in detail the context from the theories of how mental health may alter, or enhance work performance in the interest of the companies productivity. The thesis also discusses how a mentor needs to have sturdy mental health in order to help their clients. My study has been created to foresee the well being of the mentors mentally in Icehearts.

In cooperation with Icehearts, the social support group was created.The group applied the methods described in the thesis. The practical implementation of the thesis includes four meetings in which each meeting focused on different stress relief themes.

The feedback from the social support groups stated that workers were able to openly discuss stressful situations, it helped the employees start their week of work on a postive note, and gave them constructive goals. The different stress relief outlets aided the employees in relieving the burden of the working life in an interactive group setting. Icehearts was impressed with the results of the group sessions and is interested in implementing these methods in the future.

Key words: mental health, support group, Icehearts, stress relief.

SISÄLLYS

1 INTRODUCTION

There have been numerous studies about work stressors and how they thwart the employees' performance at work and how this affects the industries productivity (Karasek, Theorell 1990, 68). Throughout this thesis, I will be writing about social support groups amongst the employees in Icehearts. In these support groups, producing a social support system that can help prevent an employee from becoming burned out or over-worked will be discussed. Social support systems ultimately will equip those employed at Icehearts to have an infallible source of reinforcement and a healthier environment around the confronting work. As a plan for support groups was implemented for the employees at Icehearts, I will review what was accomplished and how each individual either benefited or suffered from support peer groups.

I worked two terms with Icehearts that amounted to a total of seventeen weeks. Throughout the duration of those seventeen weeks, I saw the work that the mentors accomplished daily and the demanding tasks they undertook. Through this, and after multiple discussions with various mentors, I found that the mentors were mentally, emotionally, and physically tired and burned out due to the challenging responsibilities. I came up with the idea about social support, or peer groups through books and studies. I am applying this method because it has been proven to relieve stress amongst the employees in this research.

This thesis is a product for Icehearts. This thesis is to help the mentors have a way to relieve the stress that they face on a day to day basis, and help them bond with their co-workers.

2 THESIS IDEA

I have served two working terms for Icehearts that added up to seventeen weeks all together. The purpose of these terms were to see how the mentors worked, the scope of their duties, how Icehearts functioned, and how they scheduled and organized the tasks they set out to accomplish. In this section of the thesis, I will go into detail about what I experienced and learned about this type of social work.

My first practical work term was ten weeks long. These ten weeks were challenging because the purpose and goal was to gain trust from the youth that Icehearts served. I worked with boys that were between the ages of twelve to sixteen years old. I was informed of their individual issues that had taken place from the time these same boys were ages six or seven, and how difficult it was for the mentor to gain the trust that was needed. The second purpose of my ten-week long working period was to work as a mentor for the youth. While serving as a student and not officially a professional, I was treated as a professional to an extent. One of the responsibilities I maintained while in the classroom included helping the youth learn a specific subject if the teacher and mentor had a meeting. To my advantage, the subject was primarily in English. The group would sit down, speak in English and read out loud to each other. I would personally teach and correct their grammar when needed. As I was not their regular mentor, the boys would try to test me and break the rules to see how far they could push boundaries. Once I clarified what their limitations and boundaries were, the boys acceded and they never crossed that line again. I also had to make sure that during *Sallibandy* practice the boys took turns playing and I monitored that they were playing safely.

The second working period with Icehearts was seven weeks long. During the seven weeks, I visited four different teams and was able to observe different age groups. I observed a team that had just been established a few months prior to my visit and I was able to interview the mentors and talk to them individually and discuss their viewpoints and experiences of working with boys

and girls that were socially excluded. Most of the mentors disclosed that they loved the job and liked the flexibility and benefit of being able to plan their jobs around their personal lives – even though the work was very difficult. One mentor who is in charge of twenty-five adolescences admitted that it was a very strenuous task.

I interviewed a select few of the leaders in Icehearts: the members who make Icehearts function. I asked if they had some sort of therapist or somebody they themselves could confide in. The leaders communicated that, of course, they do have one counselor available that comes in and provides mental health counseling to the mentors. Also, the employees of Icehearts organize a "sports day"; sports day is a form of appreciation and support for Icehearts employees in which they congregate from all over Finland to play sports such as soccer, hockey, etc. After playing the games, the employees engage in lunch or dinner, depending on the time, and eat together for enjoyment.

Having a counselor is very important for a mentor. Not only because the schedule is demanding, but because of the difficult situations and interactions they may have with the boys or their families. This is when I came up with the idea of conducting social support groups within the Icehearts community for mentors. Social support groups allow the mentors to engage in genuine conversation and allows them to learn, acquire new ways of thinking, and observe coping skills from other mentors. This method has proven to strengthen the mental health of a mentor in a substantial way.

In February of 2016, I, along with the Icehearts employees, began to hold social support group meetings. These meetings are set up as a model for Icehearts to acquire knowledge from and emulate, so that they may be able to conduct the meetings when I depart. In a collaborative effort, we agreed to have a total of four meetings. During the meetings, we discussed various and creative ideas to help relieve stress. This resulted in the employees discovering and implementing fresh ideas that can be applied within the social support group setting that will reduce stress.

3 ICEHEARTS

Icehearts was started by Ville and Iilka Turkka in Vantaa, Finland in 1996. The idea of Icehearts was to give the youth of Finland an opportunity to play a sport as well as have a valid social support system. The targeted youth are children who are at risk of being socially excluded for reasons such as: race, gender, ethnic background, financial class, and social status. (Icehearts 2016.)

Icehearts has been expanding in Finland since 1996 and functions well in various parts of Finland including: Vantaa, Turku, Helsinki, Oulu, Seinäjoki, Riihimäki, and Espoo. Icehearts receives their financial stability through multifarious sources such as Ray Oy and the municipal government. (Icehearts 2016.)

Icehearts is in the Child Preventive sector of social work. The goal of Icehearts is to help children six to eighteen years of age who are at risk of being socially excluded. Icehearts also wants to prevent the child or adolescent from going into a child protection center. The mentors have professional qualifications to be able to work with the at-risk youth. The program is a twelve-year program; during which, the child establishes trust and rapport with their coach. More than teaching a sport, the role of the "coach" is to provide support, guidance, and empathy whenever the kids need. The mentor has to be able to know the boy or girl on a personal level so that they are able to further help them throughout their emotional development. (Icehearts 2016.)

Through an interview with an Icehearts leader, I have found that the players assigned to this team may begin at the age of six, and end by the age of eighteen. The players that are chosen to a team are recommended by the municipality, a social worker, a teacher, or the family themselves. When a child is in need and someone just so happens to know that Icehearts is available in their area, they may be recommended to, and can contact, the team mentor. The mentor then may meet the family. Next, the child and mentor makes the decision on whether or not to advocate with the help of the leaders of Icehearts.

The employees that work on the field for Icehearts are called either coaches, mentors, or educators. The reason they call themselves educators is because they implement what is called "informal education." Informal education is defined as teaching someone without the proper credentials, such as a Father teaching his son or daughter a life skill (Eaton PH.D, 2010). Icehearts focuses seriously on this aspect of learning. In fact, they are serious-minded enough about education that they work under the school drop-out prevention aspect of social work. There are times when a mentor shows up to a class, and the student did not. The mentor would then call them on the phone to see where they were. If there was no answer then the mentor can proceed by going to the child's house to pick them up.

Icehearts provides safe, long-term adult support through the stages of development. The employees who work on the field for Icehearts have an immense and advantageous job. The mentor is working independently, and their priority is to support the boys or the girls on the team with the cooperation of the professional authority. The mentors work with the child and they attempt to correspond with the parents for the child's benefit. The mentors also may visit some of the children's classrooms to help the teacher if they are having arduous times. Depending on the child, a day at school can seem insurmountable. The mentor may help the teacher in the classroom by having a reliable and trustworthy relationship with the child. Most of these children trust the mentors enough to listen and obey. The mentor also may work with the principal of the school, and sometimes they might even work with a social worker depending on the childs' situation.

Icehearts prides themselves on being a non profit organization which helps children mentally, emotionally, and physically. They believe that playing a sport helps with preventing depression, diabetes, and other varieties of diseases that may appear. The sports that Icehearts provides and teaches include ice hockey, pesäpallo, soccer, and floor ball. The team collectively chooses which sport to play during the first year of the "draft" process when the municipal government chooses the children to join the team. Each team has a different practice time, but a team can coordinate to practice with another team in order to help each other. Some teams might train separately but then they can play games as one

team. A mentor from another team can help a fellow coach during practices as well. This collaborative effort can tremendously assist a fellow mentor if they do not know how to either run practices or how to play that particular activity. Icehearts additionally believes that team sports help to co-exist with other people. They embrace the United Nations law of the child having the right to play act. This is very important to Icehearts.

4 STRESS FACTORS IN THE WORKING ENVIRONMENT

There has been research speculating whether or not the environment affects mental health or if the individual affects their own mental health. The debate has been contemplated between psychologists and medical professionals, as they were trying to determine the effects of mental health through stress responses (Karasek, Theorell 1990, 7). Throughout the 1920's, there was an experiment consisting of social relations and productivity called the Hawthorne Experiments (Cummings, 1978, Theoroell, Karasek 1990, 68-69). These experiments supported the allegations that the employees' performance was enhanced while having good social relations at the work place. A recent study shows that having social relations and peer support lowers the stress, and strengthens the overall health of the employee. This debate generated various points. Firstly, the individual should change their diets, behavior, and the way they organize themselves for work. Secondly, the environment should focus more conclusively on the wellbeing of the individual without compromising the company's productivity. (Karasek, Theorell 1990, 7, 68). The book also states how, though the company may provide relaxation therapy, the environment itself has not changed. Robert Karesek and Tores Theorell have stated that this can help an individual to an extent, but this does not solve the underlying problem. They predict that this will be a futuristic problem if it is not taken care of. (Larasel. Theorell 1990, 2.)

"Healthy Work" (Karasek, Theorell 1990, 65) explains in detail the stages of work stress that may eventually lead up to various health issues. They go on to explain that heart disease can be found in the work place and they have presented us with three different stages of harm that is brought by the working environment. These stages there are the vigilance stage, the immersion stage, and overt illness stage (Karasek, Theorell 1990, 109). The first stage-or the vigilance stage- is where the employee is trying to master the challenges in his or her environment. The immersion stage is when the individual tries to accomplish difficult tasks. The overt illness stage is the sickness itself meaning back problems, heart attacks, heart failure, or other types of heart problems that

may occur even though there are now machines doing work in factories and other preindustrial places, because this causes work stress on the employees as well. This is due to having to bend over and work in very unnatural positions. This can also cause strain because the machine settings are set so that personnel cannot control the pace of the production of the machine (Karasek, Theorell 1990, 65). They do, however, also acknowledge that this does not occur in only one group of workers; this may occur in various types of work such as blue collar jobs or white collar jobs. (Karasek, Theorell 1990, 109.)

The book "Job Stressors and Mental Health" (Belkic 2013, 1) starts out by explaining that in a human beings' life, working can bring a sense of purpose. This can help the individual mentally. They continue by explaining the dangers of the workload and how this can affect the nervous system and cause depression and other mental illnesses. The problem with such studies though, is that they are generally biased. (Belkic 2013, 1.)

The early Native Americans believed that an individual who helps people deal with their problems are giving pieces of their souls away. As they keep working with these people, soon enough they, too, will need help. This relentless chain reaction is continual. This is an example that Mark A. Stebnicki represents to us in the novel Empathy Fatigue: Healing the Mind, Body, and Spirit of Professional Counselors (Stebnicki 2008, 1). In today's world there are, coincidental to the previously stated observations, further studies that show how burnouts are caused by psychological, emotional, physical, mental, spiritual, and occupational stresses of the everyday life. (Stebnicki 2008, 1.)

Sherrie Bourge Carter is a psychologist who specializes in women and stress. She introduces us to what a burn out is defined as. Carter states that a "burn out" is chronic stress that can lead to physical and emotional exhaustion, cynicism and detachment, and feelings of ineffectiveness and a lack of accomplishment (Carter 2013). She goes on to explain the signs in each area of chronic stress. Such symptoms occur while being in an environment that is chaotic or difficult. Carter continues to apprise us that these warning signs are most likely to befall the persons who are high-achievers. High-achieving individuals are known to take on long, strenuous hours at work; and they

possess an attitude that causes them to think that they can accomplish every task. (Carter 2013.)

Sherrie Bourge Carter (Carter 2013) indicates that "Chronic Fatigue" is a physical and emotional sign of burn out which leaves individuals feeling tired most of the day. As Chronic Fatigue intensifies, individuals feel emotionally and physically exhausted, drained, and depleted. One may have stress thinking about ones' future schedule. Other warning signs of burn out include: insomnia, forgetfulness, and lack of concentration. Insomnia is defined as having complications falling asleep in the early stages of sleep patterns; insomnia may increase persistently as the time moves on. Forgetfulness and lack of concentration are when some of the easier tasks may become complicated. Something that and individual may do every day may become a big ordeal for an individual who is burned out. If this continues, it causes employees to become "behind schedule" leaving tasks overdue and feeling overwhelmed with the workload. The physical symptoms of burn out can be comprised of several entities such as chest pain, heart palpitations, shortened breath, dizziness, and fainting. Additionally, individuals may experience increased Illness; since ones' body is so tired, the immune system becomes lethargic. Loss of appetite is another indicator of burnout; this can become a very extensive and potentially serious problem. Someone who has this symptom for an extended period of time may show a substantial amount of weight loss. Anxiety can also start of as a mild symptom, but this warning sign can build up and make the individual feel largely overwhelmed. At first, an individual may either feel depressed, hopeless, or tired. These can build up and result in suicidal ideations. Another indicator is anger; anger is irritability and interpersonal tension. The later stages of anger can occur as angry outbursts and arguments. (Carter 2013.)

Carter asserted there could be occurrences of cynicism and detachment (Carter 2013.) These cases involve loss of enjoyment, as when one no longer senses the joy of going to work. Even if the individual really finds pleasure in work, the concept can seem very negative if the individual is feeling burned out. An additional sign is pessimism. Pessimism can have a mild impact at first, but with time, this can increase to being negative towards one's self, trust issues to fellow counterparts, and it can leave one feeling no attachment to anyone. This

leads to the observation of isolation. In the beginning stages, this can mean not wanting to go out and meet friends, or have somebody over for dinner. In the later stages, this can make the person angry for even something as simple as somebody talking to him or her. Detachment is also a danger sign as this can occur if the individual feels out of place. Furthermore, they can call in sick more often, not want to go to work or school, and they can withdraw all of their responsibility. (Carter 2013.)

The last signs and symptoms are lack of accomplishment and ineffectiveness (Carter 2013). These signs are feelings of apathy and hopelessness. She says that this symptom is very similar to the depression and the pessimism aspects. It is the sense of everything going wrong. Increased irritability, being another indicator, can be caused from feelings of hopelessness. Hopelessness is stirred up feelings of unimportance and uselessness, and a sensation that certainly increases the risk of not being able to accomplish the tasks. Lack of productivity and poor performance are direct results of the above signs. Though an individual may work long hours, they may not be as productive as they once were, and this can prevent completing projects as well. (Carter 2013.)

In the book, "Healthy Work", (Karasek, Theorell 1990, 8) comes to an analysis that one effect of job stressors can result in some very unhealthy habits such as smoking. They said through their research that the habit may occur more when an individual is in a stressful or taxing environment. They talk about how taking an approach on behavioral changes may help a person to an extent, and that even if the person knows how dangerous smoking may be for them, they will still do it for relaxation and calming of the nerves. They have also denoted that job stressors may, indeed, have a very big part in heart disease. (Karasek, Theorell 1990, 8.) This can occur when a person has a job that requires tough decision-making and heavy burdens and tasks that say, a social worker may have.

The book "Supervision Concepts and Skill Building" (Certo 2006, 346) informs us that not only can high stress levels affect the organization due to poor performance, but it can distress the employee as well. Overwhelmed employees are more prone to take time off of work, or when they are in the workplace, may

be distracted from their tasks at hand. This is due to high stressors that are very negative to the staff member themselves. (Certo 2006, 346.)

Johnson and Ridley (Johnson, Ridley 2004, 91) warn the readers about an overworked mentor. They indicate that an overworked mentor can reach a point where they are counterproductive not only to themselves, but also to fellow co-workers as well. They question that if the mentor is counterproductive, what good are they to the company and the service user? If they preach about self-care, but they do not follow their own words, more than likely somebody in the firm will follow in the footsteps of the mentor. (Johnson, Ridley 2004, 91.)

5 STRESS RELIEF TACTICS

The book "Supervision Concepts and Skill Building" (Certo 2006, 348-369, 350) informs us that stress is a direct result of personal and professional aspects of life. Due to this factor, they begin to tell the reader that it is important for people to have efficient time management. Managing time may reduce stress caused by unrealistic goals and time being wasted on something that may not be done by oneself (Certo 2006, 347). An additional way to reduce unnecessary pressure is by having a positive attitude. Certo states that people who have a negative attitude are more vulnerable to stress. Supervisors can share in relieving anxiety by focusing on giving the employees more control over their workday. Supervisors who understand different behavioral types can also have an easier time recognizing these negative factors in their employees and working with them to alleviate the stressful influences. (Certo 2006, 348-369, 350.)

Stress experts believe that tension is a body's natural response to help human beings handle danger such as being attacked by animals, war, and other types of physical dangers that can occur in life. Because of this, they also believe that a great way to relieve this stress, or tension, from the work place is exercise. (Certo 2006, 349.) In the book "Healthy Work" they say that exercise is a great way to reduce tension as well. Finding the time to exercise is important in a daily, or weekly routine (Karasek, Tores 1990, 9). Playing sports, dancing, and/or going to the gym is great exercise; not only does this burn off the anger and anxiety that has been attained, but it will also strengthen one's body to withstand conflict as well, whether it is mental or physical. (Certo 2006, 349).

Angela J. Grippo, who is a professor of psychology, states that exercise can really benefit a person who feels under pressure. She states, "Exercise has many benefits such as increasing muscle strength, keeping our hearts healthy, avoiding chronic diseases, and helping us lose a few unwanted pounds" She goes on to explain how physical exercise can really change a mood and boost our ability to cope with daily stressors we may have. (Grippo, 2014.)

Maggie Spilner, the author of "Walking" (Spilner 2015), writes about how walking can most certainly help prevent stress, anxiety, and depression. Spilner writes how taking a walk has the same benefits as taking an aerobics class. Taking a nice easy walk can help individuals mentally. This can take one's mind off of the worries of life, work, and of personal outlooks on life. (Spilner 2015.)

The book "Supervision Concepts and Skill Building" (Certo 2006, 350) states that the supervisors of any company can influence the environment for better or worse. Supervisors can essentially either make the working environment more relaxed or more intense. This portends that they also have a hand in the factors of stress induction- or the opposite-stress reduction. One helpful aspect is that a supervisor should have a better understanding of different personality traits. This will help each individual by knowing what makes them angry, sad, happy, and other feelings. Discerning this will benefit the employees in the fact that supervisors can then avoid certain mannerisms or habits that the employees may disapprove of. Certo writes how the workplace itself can have a hand in the situation. If the work environment is unpleasant due to dim lights, uncomfortable chairs, extremity of heat or chill, or just an overall unsafe environment, the management of the workplace should consider having it fixed. Wellness and organized activities have proven to be a stress relief factor amongst those in the work force. An organization that has programs such as exercise classes, stop smoking clinics, nutrition counseling, and health screening could help the employees have a better outlook on work. Some organizations have facilities, such as gyms or health classes, that the employees can partake in. (Certo 2006, 350.) The book "The Elements of Mentoring" (Johnson, Ridley 2004, 28) proclaims that the mentors should stay aware of the mental and physical health of the employees. The mentor should address the employees about the risks of unhealthy work habits. Unhealthy work habits include behaviors such as compulsive over working, social isolation, and prevalent conflicts with another co-worker. They should also address the employees about the signs of personal distress. Personal distress may include depression, anxiety, and chronic anger. While addressing such topics, the results reveal that these negative behaviors can affect not only the long-term health of the individual, but it can also inhibit an individual's careers' success. "Elements of Mentoring", (Johnson, Ridley 2004, 44.) is a book about a healthy mentor approach and it has recorded facts

about how to keep an apprentice healthy. They propose that a proper mentor provides friendly and open care to the apprentice. This will make them feel welcomed, respected, and sometimes admired which emboldens them to do the work to the best of their capabilities. The book also gives us an idea in what is called "active listening." The idea of active listening is not only just listening to the apprentice, but it is also full attention. It includes good eye contact, no interruptions, and repeating what the apprentices are saying to show they are being heard. This does not mean that one needs to repeat word for word, it only means that an individual repeats in ones' own words the meaning of what they thought was said to show one understands. Embracing humor is another great aspect of stress relief and a happy working environment. The writers explain that laughter is soothing to the human soul and mind, as well as teaching one not to be so analytical and that it is all right to be light-hearted. The writer continues to inform readers that individuals should not try resolving everything by oneself. It causes feelings of being overwhelmed, confusion, and might cause strong, discouraging emotions. Avoid trying to do everything by oneself and seek help. (Johnson, Ridley, 2004, 28,44,46, 51-55 117.)

The book "Diversity in Coaching, Working with Gender, Culture, Race, and Age" (Passmore 2013) has very similar outlooks as Johnson and Ridleys' book "Elements of Mentoring" (Johnson, Ridley, 2004). In Jonathon Passmores book, however, he focuses his information on coaches and how to be a better coach. One factor that he brings to the reader is the element that mental health issues can last for a long period of time. A mentor should be able to recognize the early stages of depression, low moods, anxiety, fears, stress, addictions, dependence, and learning disabilities. He goes on to write about the early symptoms of each of these factors. He claims that if coaches know these stages, he can better help his or her team. (Passmore 2014, 264.) While working with the Icehearts mentors, I discovered that this information is relevant to this thesis because in coaching the boys and girls in sports, school, or just life itself, the coaches or "mentors" do indeed need to know different types of signals at early stages so that they are able to help the youth that they serve and lead before the stages become too severe.

Maud Percell LCSW, CEAP (Percell, 2014) has said that keeping a journal is a very good stress reliever. Not only does he write about the benefits of journaling, but he writes how it is an ancient tradition that famous people have applied since the tenth century in Japan. He states that successful people throughout history such as presidents, famous writers, and other sorts of important individuals have kept journals. He writes how keeping a journal, diary, or writing letters, can help clarify thoughts to gain a better understanding of oneself, reduce stress, solve problems more effectively, and resolve disagreements with others. Barbara Markway is a PH.D. She suggests that writing in a journal is a great way to keep in touch with spiritual values. It keeps one's mind calm, reduces stress, and it is very personal when completing this activity. (Percell, 2014.)

In "Supervision Concepts and Skill Building" (Certo, 2006), the writer explains that having well-rounded life activities is of the utmost importance. Some people who do not get satisfaction out of the working life should find a hobby that he or she can take joy in. They state that no job will be advantageous at all times, and having a hobby outside of work can fill that void when work is not rewarding. Paula Davis-Laack, a stress relief expert, suggests that an individual should have some sort of creative outlet. She says that having a creative outlet might not come easy while at work but one should have some sort of release outside of work. (Certo 2006, 349.)

6 SELF HELP/ SOCIAL SUPPORT GROUPS

The book "Foundations of Interpersonal Practice in Social Work" (Seabury, Seabury, Garvin 2011) states that there are many different programs that provide social support. These include books about self-help in which the focus varies depending on the personal tribulations. She takes into account trials such as divorce, sexuality, and mental or emotional struggles including depression, anxiety, parenting, handicaps, and nutrition. Another form of self-help venues are the telephone services. These services provide mental and emotional help through the telephone for people who are immobile. There are also programs via the Internet that provide for those who are immobile and cannot easily leave the house. (Seabury, Seabury, Garvin 2011, 297.)

Another line of attack the writers of "Foundations of Interpersonal Practice in Social Work" (Seabury, Seabury, Garvin 2011, 297) implements are social support groups. Social support groups range from assistance for alcohol abuse (AA); to care for the elderly (Gray Panthers); for parents with troubled teens who struggle with substance abuse (Families Anonymous); single parent support (Parents without Partners) and other types of struggles. New studies have shown that an individuals' psychosocial, emotional, and life issues are strengthened when being a part of social support groups. In the book "Foundations of Interpersonal Practice" (Seabury, Garvin 2011, 198), the writer communicates about how having a social support group in an individual's life is important. Research shows that the mental stability of a person who is in attendance of a group improves by a substantial amount. They speak of the importance of being in a social support group, how stress levels plunge and mental stability becomes robust. (Seabury, Garvin 2011, 198, 297.)

In the book "Healthy Work" (Karasek, Tores 1990, 217), the writer states that there are a number of healthcare occupational organizations that have begun their own stress management groups. These groups are aimed at employees to help them cope with stress, anxieties, worries or concerns. These circles create an atmosphere that helps the employee become more adept at being able to

handle the stressors from their work, because the stress cannot be reduced from their routine due to their occupation. These circles, or groups, accomplish their goal by having meaningful discussions about the environment at the workplace and are, therefore, giving aid within the work setting. The most important thing to remember with this tactic, is that the support group should be operational in the same environment as those they are trying to assist. Evidence shows that while in these types of groups blood pressure is, more often than not, lower than it was while not attending support group activities. (Karasek, Tores 1990, 217.)

Social support groups, according to "HealthlinkBC" (HealthlinkBC, 2014), are a group for people with similar problems. Meetings are best run by the members of the groups, however, it does not replace the counseling that some members may need. This is just another way for the members to talk to people whom they can trust, and who are there for the purpose of encouraging others. It is important for people to understand that talking in the groups is not always of importance. Sometimes just listening and learning from others is enough, although statistically, talking can be beneficial in helping people deal with the stressors that they may be experiencing. (HeallinkBC, 2014.)

In the book "Healthy Work" (Karasek,Theorell 1990, 312-313), the writer mentions that in the modern day working life, the social aspect of the workplace has been dismembered and considered of little importance. This is an issue that can lead to people feeling a great deal of stress and the writer suggests that this is unhealthy and unnatural. The writer advises that lack of socialism in the workplace setting heavily weighs upon the employees, and it is damaging the human race. Though there is no conclusive evidence from studies, the evidence is shown through the individuals themselves, and the economy as a whole. (Karasek,Theorell 1990, 312-313.)

I have, for Icehearts employees, proposed the idea of a social support system. This system has been proven to strengthen the psychological and mental health in the employees (Karasek, Theorell 1990, 69). The concept came to me while working in Icehearts for my seventeen-week period, when I gave multiple interviews. Through these interviews, I inadvertently discovered this lack of

resource and its' ensuing consequences. I also arranged meetings with teachers who helped me pave the way for the ideas that I had formulated, and they gave me some excellent proposals such as making the meetings fun and light by executing some absurd activities. Some of these activities may include art, music, writing stories, or making some sort of collage. I have also focused on the physical aspect of social support groups by encouraging walking, biking, going to the gym or any other type of exercise. This will be discussed further in section seven of this thesis.

7 MEETINGS WITH ICEHEARTS

The plans of the social support group had to be changed due to the schedules of the original mentors of the group. Owing to this, a new line up has been made. The only obstacle that I foresee is that the new members do not work in the same line of vocation. There are a few mentors who work on the field with the boys, and they have approximately twenty boys on their team. There are a small number of members who work primarily in the office, but do still work hands-on with the boys on occasion. They are on an entirely different level of skills, knowledge and needs, but I am sure that this will work out as I create a solution. I have already stated that it is very important for the members in the group to be working in the same kind of work because they understand each other and the individual demands of their positions. The upside to our particular grouping is that the employees do understand the mentors because they have already been through the process and they might be able to bring a new outlook for the mentors.

First meeting February 15th, 2016

This was the first meeting that we have had as a team. The goal of these meetings is to set up a social support system for the well-being of the mentors and the employees of Icehearts. This system is made specifically for the personnel to be able to have heart-felt conversations with fellow co-workers as this has been proven to lower the stress levels from the work stressors.

In this meeting I used the theory about producing a structure that every member should follow. This theory is based off of the book "Interpersonal Practice in Social Work" (Seabury, Seabury, Garvin 2011, 452). The very first thing that we talked about was the rules of the support group. The first rule is that everything that is said in the group should stay in the group. This is believed to help the atmosphere of the group feel safer. (Seabury, Seabury, Garvin 2011, 452.)

The second rule that we discussed was the fact that we must have commitment to the group (Seabury, Seabury, Garvin 2011, 454). We do understand that

everybody's schedule is busy, but having a person who is willing to commit can mean that they still do the work on their own, and they should let us know whether or not they are able to attend the meeting. I will note, there should be no concerns with the members of the group being able to attend, since we meet only once every two weeks. We have plenty of time to plan the meetings and the members know two weeks ahead when the meetings are.

Another aspect that must be addressed is the fact that there are risks about speaking about personal subjects openly in a group. This is of importance because things can slip outside of the group. When this happens we must sit down and work out the details of what had happened as a group. (Seabury, Seabury, Garvin 2011, 455.)

I have also based this last theory of operating a social support group that I, as the mentor should set aside fifteen minutes before the end of our meetings for feedback. There are many different approaches to this facet that can be used. One would be words of affirmation, or a questionnaire. We can also execute a simple thumbs up or thumbs down method. These methods will give advantageous input as far as how the members feel the group is progressing, or whether they have learned valuable applications to their lives. (Seabury, Seabury, Garvin 2011,456.)

We also conferred about the goals that the mentors wish to accomplish through the sessions that we will incorporate. Appropriate to confidentiality issues, I will not mention the names of the people involved in the group. There were some interesting aspirations such as being able to have in-depth, meaningful conversations; journaling; finding new ways to cope with stress; and obtaining new input on how to run the organization.

In this particular meeting, we compared notes about their hobbies- what they do outside of work. They each articulated that they have a workout routine that they participate in, some of whom perform with each other, such as running or lifting weights. One person communicated that they coach a hockey team outside of the company, and they really enjoy doing so. Some of them spoke about reveling in spending time with their families and doing some sort of

activity with them. My personal goal is to have them pursue a leisure interest outside of their occupation because this, too, can help the mental health of the mentors and employees of Icehearts. The one positive aspect that all of the employees have agreed upon was the fact that they have a very flexible work schedule, so they can easily organize personal events around their professional lives. That, to them, is very important. This is a good start to our stated aims.

I have provided the group members with a daily journal. This is their homework and I have explained to them the benefits of journaling. This is very important because not only does the individual have a safe way to air their emotions, but they can look back and see how they have grown as a person. This is vital for them, not only in their careers; but it can serve to relieve some strain from daily life, as well as get to know themselves better as individuals (Percell, 2014).

Just before the meeting ended, we had a period of time encouraging feedback. The criticism included how they felt the meeting went, and what they thought about it. The responses were a learning experience for me; how I should prepare for the next meeting, what they expect in this support group, and also how much of a success this meeting was all of the way around. The people in my group said that they were very happy with the first meeting, and they are looking forward to the next meeting. They were very excited about the fact that I gave them a daily journal to write in. Some of them had never done this before, and were excited to get started. Some people said that they want to have more heart to heart discussions within the group. This has helped me prepare better for the next meeting.

Second meeting February 29th, 2016

In this particular meeting, we focused on physical exertion to help prevent mental health issues. Many mental health professionals believe that exercise is a natural way for human beings to handle stress and danger (Certo 2006, 349.) We focused on the significance of having social relationships as well. Having these relationships at work are important for not only the companies well-being, but also for the mental health of their employees. (Karasek, Tores 1990, 57.)

The first activity that we organized was bowling. The responses that I received from this excursion was very helpful to me. They, to a man, agreed that after having one week off for winters holiday, were all very anxious about the week that lay ahead of them. They mentioned the extra workload they will have- to catch up on emails, finish paperwork that is due by the end of the week, and just merely getting back into the swing of things. One participant even mentioned he has a hockey season to finish up before his workload gets better. They each verbalized that bowling on Monday really helped them to relax, and to relieve some of the stress that they did have.

After bowling for about an hour, we sat down in the cafe in the bowling alley to have a discussion. In this conversation there were questions such as how their week was prior to the winter holiday, how their holiday was, if they met with any friends- and what they did with them- what their goals were for the week, and whether or not they utilized their journals.

The responses were very interesting because many of the members in the group said that usually they do not have much time to meet with friends. They said that their job is so social, and so tiresome that at the end of the day, they may not want to even talk to anybody. They did say though, that they usually meet maybe once a month with a friend and it is nice having something to look forward to. They acknowledged the fact that it is essential to have a social life with people who do not work for the company. Several cited that when they meet friends it is usually sports related. They either play some sport with each other, or they watch sports, or they talk sports. Sometimes they will go out to eat with a friend, or their friend comes over and they eat and watch some television.

As for writing in the journal, they said that they do write in the journal now, but not very many things. They write down their thoughts, or they write their schedule so that they can see what they need to do during the week. One person stated that they wrote down their schedule for this week and became very stressed just looking at it, but he also stated that it is very helpful to him because it keeps him a little organized.

Through feedback I found that this social support group session was a success with the members. Those that participated were very thankful for the fact that we could go bowling and just have fun. They noticed how relaxed they were during and after the bowling, and how they even felt energized to face the week. One person said that they understood now why we are here doing what we are doing, because of the fact that this is to help relieve stress and he sees that it is working.

Icehearts has now stated that they want to implement this social structure into their program for the employees. They are very excited to execute this program because they do see that it fits into the needs of the office employees, and for their mentors as well. Additionally, it has brought cohesion to the two groups.

Third meeting March 14th, 2016

In this meeting, we were focused on the aspect of how having well-rounded activities can help with mental health. In this endeavor, I used a couple of different references such as Samuel Certo's book, "Supervision, Concepts and Skill Building" (Certo 2006, 349.) This explains that having a well-rounded activity outside of work can bring some sort of reward to a person. This is important especially because work cannot always bring you satisfaction. (Certo 2006, 349.)

The other reference that I have discovered is from the book "The Elements of Mentoring" (Johnson, Ridley 2004.) The authors of this book explain that as a mentor, you should always embrace creativity. They state that every person has something to offer, and mentors should exude creativity.

I have based this weeks project from the idea of Kristina Harju who is an Advanced Certified Corporate Coach. She has introduced us to a creative way to be able to see what our hopes and our dreams for our futures are through a dream map. In this dream map you can make a collage of pictures or words, and use our imaginations to explain what we want personally for our future. This can help us to understand and achieve our dreams, create futuristic goals,

help our growth process, and it aids in focusing our time and energies. (Harju 2000.)

This philosophy is based off of the theory that when we are aware of our goals, we can see a reality. This can prepare us mentally to make necessary changes in and around our environment; it can help us understand that our choices can, and will, affect our goals. Through pictures, words, and the creative mind, we can understand exactly what we desire to achieve in our personal lives. Through this, we can describe our personal hobbies, lives, and work. You can choose to complete each subject individually, or combine it all into one picture. This is a very personal project and each picture is very valuable to that individual. No one in the group is allowed to judge another persons' collage. However, positive feedback and encouragement is always welcome. (Harju 2000.)

In order to complete this, we made a collage of what we would like to accomplish in the future. This could mean with work, with personal lives, or both. In this case, we used magazines to cut out pictures. We supplied a number of various magazines in which they could cut any picture or word they wished to, paste them on a paper and make a futuristic dream. This idea is based off of the theory of Kristiina Harju (Harju 2000).

Each dream was very interesting and each person in the group put a lot of thought into what they really wanted in the future. Some of the dreams were actually very close to being accomplished, and some of the dreams had to do with after leaving Icehearts. It was interesting to see the different kinds of dreams that the group had. The collage that they made they will keep, and they will put it somewhere safe, and in a couple of months they can go back and look at that collage and remind themselves what they are working towards. They will be able to see and track their progress.

After we made the collages, and explanations were given as to what we had made and what our thought processes were during the making of these collages, we talked about setting goals for the week. This is important because since there is a lot to do during the week, goal setting can make you feel like

you have accomplished something when you have undertaken and completed a task.

Through the feedback, they had stated that they were very excited about having a collage of their dream. One person in the group said that they were very happy and impressed with the ideas that had been brought into these group sessions. The rest of the group was very satisfied and they had a lot of fun doing this project. They felt a little more relaxed and determined to work toward these dreams.

Fourth meeting March 24th, 2016

This was our conclusion of the support group sessions. For this session we went hiking on a forest trail and grilled sausage. We had an open discussion on stress. This is based off of Maggie Spilner's article about walking (Spilner 2015.) Although Spilner is not a professional, she brings valid points about how walking can reduce stress levels.

Another aspect that this meeting has been based from was "Speaking Your Heart Out". (Saylor 2014.) This is relevant to the employees of Icehearts because of the varied and difficult situations that they face each day.

The last aspect of this meeting was to observe nature (Saylor 2014.) This is also beneficial because nature can bring peace to a person, and it can make you feel like you are away from your problems.

The first thing we did was walk around the forest for fifteen minutes. In those fifteen minutes we observed the surroundings. Though the plants have not grown back from the winter, there was some sort of peace around us. We then built, and sat around a fire to warm up a little bit. As we started to relax, we spoke about what stresses us out. There were many different answers. A positive feature that was revealed was the fact that just this week, something had happened between the school and a coach, and the coach was able to reach out to his co-workers to receive the help and support that he needed at that point. They said that this was important because he was feeling a little bit

upset about the situation, and this person was able to call someone and talk about it. After a while, he felt better and in the end, the situation was resolved in a positive way.

Another way that many of them handle stress is through exercise. They emphasized how this relieves much of their stress. Even though they are able to speak out about their problems, they do need to have a physical outlet as well. These were the two biggest ways for them to relieve pressure.

After we talked about different ways to handle worry and stress, we ate sausage, waited for the fire to burn out and the meeting came to an end. The feedback was very minimal due to phone calls and work problems that arose towards the end of the meeting.

I personally could have been better prepared with the questions. I believe I ran out of questions quickly, but it worked out in the end because the mentors said that it was fun to come into the nature.

The weather was cold. We stood outside for a little over an hour and we were quite chilled. Though they said it was fun, it was just a little bit too cold for this. I would maybe do an activity like this in the summer time when it is a little bit warmer.

8. PUTTING THEORY INTO PRACTICE

Finding a way to put what I have learned through my research regarding the matters of stress relief was in a way difficult. At first I sat down with one of Icehearts' leader and we discussed about what methods we can possibly use. The first method that I came up with was somehow having a sports day where we would try different kinds of sports. It was a good idea, but the problem was being able to get feed back from the participants of that day.

Then we came up with the meetings. I did a little more research on how this can benefit the Icehearts company, and what I would need to do to make this happen. After a month I called the leader of Icehearts and proposed another meeting with him, and we sat down and went over a logistics of these meetings. It came down to we needed four people in one group, we would meet four times, and then I would ask for feedback at the end of each meeting.

I made the meeting plans and each meeting plan had a different kind of theme. Each theme was based off of a theory mentioned in this thesis. During the meeting, I asked certain questions that revolved around these themes, and got a response. I would take notes during the sessions regarding what the mentors would say, and how they reacted to the activity that we had partaken.

At the end of each meeting, I would leave ten to fifteen minutes for feedback. The feedback is very important because now that I have the feedback through notes that I had taken during the feedback part of our meeting, I can adjust the program to make it a better experience in the future for Icehearts. The feedback was given to me verbally by the mentors themselves, and I would repeat the feedback that they had given me in order to get the general idea correctly, then I would write the feedback down in detail.

9 PERSONAL GROWTH

The process of writing a thesis has helped me grow as a professional. There are many factors as to why I have stated this notion. The first point I will discuss about my personal growth is my growth as a student. The second point is my growth as a professional, then I will address my growth with the success I have had working with Icehearts.

Through writing this thesis, I have noticed a significant change in the way I have done research. When I first began to do my thesis, I did not have an idea of what research truly was. Throughout my schooling career, I did do research but not on the level that I have accomplished now. I feel that I am capable of doing research and that I am capable of doing it throughout my professional career.

When I first wrote my thesis, I never thought that I could write academically. While doing research, I saw many different writing styles and I recognized how each style was unique in their own way. Of course I did not copy any one style, as I had to come up with my own style. After I did that, I saw that I had grown academically.

As a professional, I had never held social support meetings. I did not have any idea what to do, nor how to run an organized meeting such as these with Icehearts. While preparing for the meetings, I learned how a good meeting should be organized and run, and how solid preparation makes the flow of the meeting smooth. This is an important aspect because I am writing a thesis about a company who is very well known, and if these meetings did not go well, or had I failed to have meetings at all, then this thesis would be useless and not advantageous to Icehearts.

Another way that I have grown as a professional is in the way that I have planned these meetings. Without the theory behind these meetings, it would be very difficult to completely know the goals, or have the knowledge on how to accomplish the goals of the members in the group. The whole point was the

well-being of the members, and there was a very big need for theories to be able to help them.

Another way that I have grown as a professional is the fact that I had formed a type of structure. The structure was organized through research, and it does tie in with theory. I have successfully laid down the rules of the group, and we followed those rules as such. There was order in the group, the foundation of the group was very strong, and we did not break these rules at all.

Working with Icehearts made me realize what direction in social work I would like to take. Working with children that have needs is something that I have always executed, but I have never really thought about doing this for a living. When I was young I would work with the children around my neighborhood to help them have some sort of direction. With this thesis, it showed me what my heart really wants to do. This has made me grow so much because the passion behind my work has made it that much easier to get my degree in social work.

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