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SOME POTENTIALLY DEMEANING ACTS

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We have made tremendous strides in the last few years in recognizing people with mental retardation as real people with wants and needs, talents and abilities, and deserving to be treated with dignity and respect just like anyone else. We have been sensitized to see that our well meaning attempts to help have sometimes been overprotecting and overcontrolling. We now try to focus on peoples' capabilities rather than weaknesses. We attempt to promote people's autonomy and opportunity to have influence and control of their own lives. We now talk about support, inclusion and person-centered approaches.

But even under the shroud of these more positive and less restrictive approaches, is there still a potential for being demeaning and disrespectful to people? Have we just created a nicer way of protecting and controlling? Have we now just become more benevolent dictators?

Here's my up-to-date list of 12 ways we are potentially demeaning and disrespectful to people with mental retardation:

1. **Redirecting:** We talk about redirection as a less restrictive way of intervening to help people calm down and avert crisis escalation. But there are two ways to redirect: 1) to a totally different subject, 2) to a better way. The first way is the one that can be demeaning. It's like saying "Who cares what's bothering you. Do this now." The second type of redirection is more difficult, but definitely, more respectful.
2. **Ignoring:** This is another one of those "less restrictive" options. The rule is to ignore the behavior, not the person. But again, it's like saying who cares. Instead of saying your behavior has power and influence (for better or worse), it's saying it does not matter.
3. **Least Restricting:** We are so worried nowadays about not requiring anyone to do anything they would not otherwise do of their own choice. I'm not sure I could deal with so much freedom in my life! I'd wonder if anyone cares anymore. If we really have a "Belief in Competence", then we should also believe people can deal with having a few requirements in their lives too!
4. **Rescuing:** We are all for allowing people to have choices, but then if they get in any trouble we rush to help them out of it. All of a sudden we start thinking they aren't responsible for themselves after all. Part of making a choice is experiencing the consequence of the choice. Allowing behavior to have consequences, is what really allows behavior to have power!!!

5. **Not Telling:** When we think people can't handle something (good or bad), we tend to avoid telling them about it until the very last minute. What about the right to know? When you go to the doctor you expect him to tell it to you straight → the good and the bad! When we shelter people from information, they are denied a chance to learn, to cope, to develop competencies.
6. **Reviewing Committees:** We have Committees to protect the rights of people with mental retardation. In protecting their rights, however, these Committees can also violate them. It's Big Brother watching over them. They are not free to negotiate their own deals. They need this Committee to oversee their decisions. The choices are not theirs after all.
7. **Gifting:** People can be smothered with kindness. Gifts can be so obligating. When someone gives you something as a gift, you lose the opportunity to choose it for yourself. It's a kind of psychological restraint. It's not always so easy to take it back and get what you really wanted!
8. **Doing For:** When we do things for people we take away their opportunity to do and choose for themselves. The message is that you don't think they can do it without you. Maybe they'd rather do it themselves!
9. **Rewarding:** Rewards can be like bribes. They are seemingly nice ways of controlling people. There are two parts to any reward contingency: 1) if you do such and such, you'll get the reward, and also 2) but if you don't do such and such, you'll get nothing!!
10. **Punishing:** If we allow people responsibility for their own behavior, then why should we feel the need to inflict additional consequences on them? It's when we are always rescuing people (#4) that we usually feel the need to inflict other punishments. Two artificials do not make a natural!!
11. **Speaking For:** Advocates need to be careful that they are truly advocating for the person. In many cases we talk about being "person-centered" when we really are "cause centered". We hear what we want to hear. Of course they want what we think is best for them!
12. **Stereotyping:** Whether it is a positive or negative stereotype, we are still lumping everybody together. We still need to look at the person, not the group. A person should also have the right to not be included, to not be part of a class action suit, etc.

Truly person-centered planning means providing supports to help people obtain their own dreams and desires. It allows for success and failure. It provides opportunities and not outcomes. It focuses on abilities, but also needs to recognize limitations. It balances the dignity of risk with the need to also provide responsible care.

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