

SUPPORTING STRUGGLING PARTICIPANTS

Managing Behavior and Mental Health Issues on Wilderness Programs

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Following is the list of tools for supporting struggling participants that we will cover during this workshop, listed in their ideal sequence. This list is certainly not exhaustive.

Pre-Program

Behavior Expectations

During the Program: PROACTIVE Support Structures

Positive Group Culture

Rapport

During the Program: RESPONSIVE Support Structures

Systems Thinking

Verbal Feedback

Behavior Logs and Documentation

Patient Assessment System

Performance Agreement

Evacuation/Expulsion

Post-Program

Debrief Incidents

Workshop Notes

SAMPLE Behavior Continua and Responses

Sample 1: Inappropriate Behavior

Behaviors

- Poor expedition behavior
- Isolated, unintentional
- Not severe
- Repeated
- Intentional
- Severe



Responses

Verbal feedback → Revisit expectations → Performance agreement → Evaluation consequences → Expulsion

Sample 2: Policy Violation - Smoking

Behaviors

- Smoking in the field
- Continues smoking in the field
- Blatant smoking



Responses

- Performance agreement
- Grade reduction
- Can't participate
- Expulsion

Evacuation Considerations for Mental Health Issues

Adapted from mental health chapter of NOLS Wilderness Medicine, by Tod Schimelpfenig (written with the assistance of Cynthia B. Stevens MD)

We don't need to fully understand the problem. These are not simple issues, but we can make a decision based on simple principles.

- Does the harm to the expedition or program outweigh the benefit to the individual?
- Is the condition beyond your ability to manage in the field?
- Is the individual requiring a level of attention or monitoring that is adversely affecting the cohesion, function or safety of the group?
- Is the individual a danger to self or others?
- Does the individual believe he/she is unsafe or unable to continue?

Answering any of these questions in the affirmative gives you reason to evacuate the patient and seek additional support from a mental health professional.

Behavior Descriptions

Effective behavior descriptions are **specific, accurate, observable, and professional**.

Whether delivering feedback to participants orally, documenting behavior in program paperwork, or writing a performance agreement, learning to describe behavior in objective (non-evaluative) language is a critical skill. Participants' success and your program's ability to understand behavior and make informed decisions about how to respond depend on field staff's ability to do this well.

Here are some examples of vague or evaluative statements made into specific, observable descriptions of behavior and/or specific expectations for behavior change.

| Vague / Evaluative | → | Specific / Observable |
|--|---|---|
| Behavior description: Kevin was being a jerk on the trail today. | → | Kevin called Paul fat, while hiking today, and then declined to share his snack mix at a break. |
| Behavior description: Anna is moody. | → | Anna's mood alternates between cheerful and engaged with the group, to angry and withdrawn, several times each day. She yelled at other group members for reasons unknown to the instructors four times today, and did not respond to her tent mates asking what was wrong. |
| Behavior description: Michelle is aggressive towards her peers. | → | When another student said she should not walk away from camp alone, Michelle yelled "You can't tell me what to do!" She called Carter "stupid" and "an idiot" while paddling today, and shoved Missy during an argument at dinner. |
| Expectation for change: Aaron needs to display a positive attitude. | → | Aaron will work to eliminate the following expressions of negativity: rolling eyes and sighing, reading her book during meetings, sitting apart from the group during meetings. |
| Expectation for change: Jordan will do his share around camp. | → | Jordan will cook one meal each day, will either set up or take down the tent each day, will clean group cooking utensils once every two days. |

SAMPLE Student Performance Agreement

This document is provided as a sample and should not be copied.

The student performance agreement is designed as a tool for field staff to use in supporting students whose performance is not meeting your organization's expectations. This document includes sample expectations, organized by curriculum area, that were written for NOLS' specific and unique programs. These examples may not apply to your organization. You will need to create a performance agreement for your program based on your curriculum, activities, mission, behavioral expectations, and policies.

Student Name: _____ Course: _____ Date: _____

Below are basic expectations for [program name] students. Indicate the following:

E – Exceeds expectations S – satisfactory I – improvement necessary U – unsatisfactory
NA – not applicable to this student's performance or experience

RISK MANAGEMENT

- _____ Demonstrates knowledge of the hazards in the environments encountered; applies this knowledge conservatively to new situations.
- _____ Displays sound judgment and decision-making based on knowledge of equipment, the wilderness environment, other expedition members, and own limits.
- _____ Consistently follows instructors' directions to reduce or avoid hazards.
- _____ Requires a reasonable amount of instructor supervision to meet expectations.

LEADERSHIP AND EXPEDITION BEHAVIOR

- _____ Accurately identifies strengths, skills, and areas for personal growth in developing outdoor leadership; accepts feedback and implements appropriate changes.
- _____ Contributes to a positive learning environment and inclusive course culture; shows others respect; supports others in their development.
- _____ Takes responsibility for learning; sets and attains personal goals.
- _____ Works effectively as a member of a team; displays a positive attitude despite hardship; demonstrates initiative.

OUTDOOR SKILLS

- _____ Demonstrates appropriate care for personal needs (clothing, food, water, etc.).
- _____ Participates in all camp chores.
- _____ Travels competently using maps and compass.
- _____ Takes responsibility for the care and organization of personal and group equipment.
- _____ Is punctual and organized.

ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES

- _____ Demonstrates sound minimum impact living and travel skills.
- _____ Shows an understanding, appreciation, and respect for the natural world.

SAMPLE Student Performance Agreement (continued)

Describe the behaviors that must change.

How will changes be measured?

When must the changes occur?

Additional comments (if any):

Instructor(s) signature:

STUDENT AGREEMENT

I have read and understand this agreement and will strive to change the behaviors described above. I understand that if I am unable to make these changes there will be disciplinary action, which will be reflected in my evaluation and may include a lower grade, incomplete college credit, parent notification, lack of diploma and/or expulsion. I also understand that any other behavior that is unsafe, disruptive, or distracting from the educational mission of my course may result in expulsion.

Student Signature (and comments if any):

Workshop Self Assessment Activity

Part One

From the list below (of tools and strategies we have covered here for supporting struggling participants), circle **two** that you or your organization are adept at using already.

- Behavior Expectations
- Positive Group Culture
- Rapport
- Systems Thinking
- Verbal Feedback
- Documentation
- Patient Assessment System
- Performance Agreements
- Expulsion
- Debrief Incidents

Part Two

- a. Jot down two from the list above that are not current strengths, that resonate with you, **AND that you have the ability to implement or improve from your position in the organization.**
- b. Finally, jot down one tool from the list that you think would help your organization (either as an addition to current practices or as something that could be used more effectively), **which you are NOT in a position to implement directly.** Write down the name of the person whose help you need to implement that tool.

Action Steps: Ideas for Workshop Follow-up

1. Define two zero tolerance and five case-by-case participant behaviors for your program. Check alignment between administrators and field staff on those definitions at the next opportunity, by soliciting examples of each and discussing.
2. Query field staff about challenging behavior or mental health incidents they have faced. Chose two or three as case studies for your next staff training or briefing. Talk through the case studies and identify what tools or management strategies might be appropriate and how staff could determine whether the situation is field manageable.
3. Make a list of five questions you'd like field staff to consider in assessing a challenging behavior or mental health issue. Aim for questions that will help your staff to either (a) think broadly about possible contributing factors, (b) frame the issue in terms of how to best support the individual, or (c) determine whether the participant should continue on your program.
4. Feel free to contact Katie or Emily if you have questions down the road!
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