

Review: The Reflective Journey: A Practitioner's Guide to the Low Arousal Approach.

Author: Andrew McDonnell.

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Reflecting on a lengthy career with individuals with intellectual disabilities, McDonnell's initial instruction to practice archaic, ineffective and deeply traumatic restraint techniques reflected the power embedded in institutional settings (Lawrence, 2008). Consequently, he has developed his "Low Arousal" approach to address and respond to what was termed aggressive or violent behaviours, which he calls "behaviours of concern."

That McDonnell is penning this text suggests that practice has not improved significantly. Evidence comes from the isolation of autistic individuals in Assessment and Treatment Units (Walawalkar, 2019; LDT, 2019) and abuse cases such as Winterbourne View scandal (Samuel, 2012; DoH, 2012). McDonnell details the origins and contexts of restraint techniques, which guides reflection on what he terms "arousal regulation," or the reduction of arousal. This can involve stressed care-setting staff or family members, and distressed individuals with intellectual disabilities (Cudre-Mauroux, 2010).

From the start, it is clear that the Low Arousal Approach requires us to understand our own behaviours and their impact in order to make sense of that of others. The activities throughout the text ground readers in an understanding of our own behaviour and its origins, our tolerance levels and triggers, before we endeavour to understand others. These activities can also be used across settings, and fall in line with autism legislation (HMSO, 2009; DoH, 2015) and the Equality Act 2010 (HMSO, 2010). This runs counter to medical-model work dominating institutions, blaming individuals, and failing to see individuals as having deep-seated trauma that they may not be able to voice (Larue *et al.*, 2013).

Understanding behaviours and triggers described is essential to readers, so McDonnell draws on everyday home or work environments and "behaviours of concern" experienced in these. This facilitates awareness of the inextricable link between understanding and context, which is important so as not to expose experiences to distortion (Ridout, 2016).

McDonnell's book addresses different emotions underpinning stress and distressed behaviour in the family member, carer or the individual concerned. In the rush to restrain or isolate someone who is manifesting "behaviours of concern," emotions such as embarrassment, trauma, fear, anger or a need

for control are often overlooked (Gelkopf *et al.*, 2009), and his approach advocates avoiding this practice.

Managing behaviours

McDonnell asserts physical and mental/spiritual activities that assist in low arousal, and these are supported by many practitioners in the field (Hammond, 2014; Mind, 2013). They concern the parasympathetic and sympathetic nervous system triggering responses to slow the body down, fight or flee (Hansen, 2018). Another way to reduce arousal is through engagement in flow states, or absorbing oneself in an activity by being “in the zone.”

McDonnell highlights these as key ways for carers or individuals with behaviours of concern to de-stress, and that choice of approach is individually focused. This compliments other work recognising that voicing wellbeing according to communication preferences is essential to others’ understanding (Ridout, 2016; Luttrell, 2003).

Important to the Low Arousal Approach is its preventative element, which seeks to reduce the occurrence of distressing situations, and focusses on de-escalation where arousal has occurred. Physical management is only considered in extreme cases, as the avoidance of power and punishment and psycho-emotional disablement (Reeve, 2012) are core to the Low Arousal Approach. This is a far cry from the starting point of McDonnell’s career. He now advocates a person-centered, non-confrontational, empathetic and humanistic approach to working with people, which does not view atypicality as wrong (Milton, 2012; Murray *et al.*, 2005). In addition, McDonnell’s approach recognises the contagious nature of emotions, such that if someone is angry or scared, this can trigger the same emotion in others. Working with someone who is distressed can be assisted by understanding and changing your own responses first, for example, relaxing tensed muscles (NHS, 2017).

Underlying factors contributing to behaviours are reflected on in the Low Arousal Approach, so as to avoid labelling an individual as aggressive or violent. Carers are encouraged to look to possible behavioural origins and their impact, for example trauma and related emotions. This provides a more empathic route into working with individuals, and avoids former triggers that lead to distress (Milton, 2012). Utilising the three central elements of trauma-informed behaviour management (National Centre on Domestic Violence, Trauma and Mental Health, 2014), emotional contagion (Flora, 2019) and reflective practice (Ridout and Edmondson, 2017) enables carers to establish a framework within which to locate the identification of a pre-crisis phase and the evaluation of risk. This is essential, as aroused individuals are less able to process information and benefit from carers remaining calm. McDonnell details a useful ten-step list of ways in which non-verbal behaviours can be utilised positively by support workers to reduce arousal and establish a harmonious environment (Research Autism, 2018). The role of emotional support following a crisis and the compilation of an emotional support plan to include, staff, family, friends, the individual and relevant others in the organisation is of paramount importance to the Low Arousal Approach as it encourages support workers to reflect on their own behaviour surrounding incidents.

Continuing the journey

Moving forwards, McDonnell describes the essential Low Arousal Approach ingredients to include a focus on the present moment and positive interaction, with a willingness to address your own stress first. This is important in reducing burnout and building resilience, which will facilitate positive risk-taking with people and will challenge of your own, sometimes conflicting, biases. In turn, this should result in a more accepting, slow and logical approach towards others, which can lead to improved solutions due to more time and an enabling environment within which to process information.

McDonnell's book proved to be a refreshing read, as it enabled readers to see how a practitioner of many years in the field has taken damaging practices, reflected on them and rather than just talking about different ideas, has also demonstrated locally, regionally, nationally and globally how to walk the walk, and then become more effective role models in the field of behaviour management.

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