Amanda Aster

During my internship at Daytop Village in Mendham, New Jersey, I learned about addiction and the dynamics of a therapeutic community designed for adolescents. As an intern, I participated in clinical groups, intakes, orientations as well as became familiar with clinical documentation, and developed a close rapport with the residents and staff. I was entrusted with the awesome responsibility of working with vulnerable young people who come to Daytop for help to reshape their fragmented lives. The staff at Daytop is part of a very special family whose criteria are honesty, openness, and concern for others. It was essential that my personal conduct not only set examples for clients, but also to the rest of the staff at Daytop as well.

One specific take home message that I learned at my experience at Daytop was that self-esteem plays a large role in life, especially in the decision making processes of an adolescent. Many of the residents at Daytop struggle with low self-esteem. Adolescents with poor self-esteem are unable to be objective, tend to judge themselves harshly, and view poor skill levels such as in academics or athletics to mean that they have less value as a person. Self-esteem is based, in part, on how an individual is viewed by those around them; those with nurturing, accepting parents and teachers are more likely to have healthy self-esteem. Parents who set rules, provide structure and discipline, and reward compliance tend to have children with higher self esteem. Since many of the residents at Daytop come from broken homes, abusive parents, or DFYS, this may be the reason why many of them have such low self-esteem and thus turned to drugs to make them feel better about themselves and feel happier. Many residents have reported in group therapy and AA meetings that the main reason why they became so addicted to drugs is because of the way that it makes them feel. Drugs were a way for these adolescents to escape the pain of their everyday life and an outlet for them to experience joy (Bunt & Muehlbach, 2008).
During my internship at Daytop, I learned what it is like to be in a helping relationship, which can be defined as a relationship in which at least one of the parties has the intent of promoting the growth, development, maturity, improved functioning, and improved coping with the life of the other (Bunt & Muehlbach, 2008). During my interactions with the residents, I practiced empathetic listening and showed unconditional positive regard for the other person. For example, whenever I interacted with a member of the Daytop community, whether it was in a group or an individual activity, I let them know that I was fully present in the conversation demonstrating that I was empathetically listening to them. I was focusing on what they had to say and I did my best to respond back in a positive, constructive manner. By doing so, I was able to build trust and respect with those whom I interacted with. I demonstrated unconditional positive regard in the sense that I accepted, supported, and did not pass judgment on anyone of whom I interacted with, regardless of what the person said or did (Anderson, 2009).

At the end of my internship, I wanted to leave the residents and staff of Daytop with something to remember me by. I had found a quote online that I thought to be very inspiring and thought that it would be something good and positive for the residents to look at and read each day. The quote reads as follows: “Promise yourself to be so strong that nothing can disturb your peace of mind. Look at the sunny side of everything and make your optimism come true. Think only of the best, work only for the best, and expect only the best. Forget the mistakes of the past and press on to the greater achievements of the future. Give so much time to the improvement of yourself that you have no time to criticize others. Live in the faith that the whole world is on your side as long as you are true to the best that is in you!” I feel that if the residents and staff read this quote each morning as they woke up, it will give them a sense of hope and
encouragement to get them through the day and through their treatment. I truly believe that understanding, genuineness, and respect are necessary characteristics of a helping relationship.

The hardest part for me during my time at Daytop was to not become lost in the world of the people with whom I interacted with. I found myself to be very emotional and very involved when the residents would talk to me and tell me their stories and the origins behind their drug use. In the beginning, I found myself to over-identify with the residents, becoming so involved in their feelings and reactions that I actually needed to have the person improve. However, over time, I was able to view the world from the perspective of the resident without feeling like I had to accept their world view. I was able to gain this skill by consulting with my supervisor as he shared his experiences in working with the clients at Daytop with me. He made me aware that although these kids’ stories can break your heart, it is our responsibility to leave our emotions at the workplace and to not take them home with us. Once we begin thinking about our client’s at night or in our dreams, this is when we know that we have lost objectivity and that we need to step back from the relationship a bit and not get ourselves so involved.

If anything, my experience has only furthered my decision on pursuing a career in psychology. I have always been interested in adolescents and drug use, and the factors behind it. This internship gave me hands-on knowledge about this population that I could have never learned through a textbook or a classroom setting. You can only learn so much through a textbook and through lectures. However, it is when what you are learning in a classroom is applied to everyday life that you really achieve a full grasp on everything.

Daytop is a community of people helping people. I know that one day I want to be part of a helping community. What I also liked about this internship was that by listening to the issues and problems of these adolescents’ lives and hardships, my own life was put more into
perspective. The things that I dramatized about my life became so miniscule once I started getting to know the residents at Daytop and their backgrounds. I have learned so much during my short time at Daytop and I am thankful to have acquired such knowledge that I could not have received anywhere else. I am grateful that the residents were so open to talking about their lives because it really helped me realize that this just may be the population in which I want to focus my career.

I feel that this experience as an intern at Daytop is one in which I demonstrated that I was servant leader. In my particular definition of service, I believe that service is when your ultimate goal is to reach out to others without any ulterior motive. Your intent and action is done so within the kindness of your heart and with the intention of benefitting others. The experience altogether changed my life and made me think from a different perspective about the problems in my life that I thought were grandiose but were in fact miniscule compared to the problems that this troubled population is going through. The experience changed who I was as a person, for the better, and only further amplified my desire to become a counselor and to one day be able to help a population of individuals like this, as well as many others.

Another area in my life in which I demonstrate servant leadership is when I tutor psychology students through being a member of the Psi Chi National Honor’s Society. I have been tutoring other psychology students for the past year. Every week, I devote at least three to four hours to helping out a particular individual in the courses of Biology I and II, and well as Research Methods. Although my student feels that she cannot keep up with the course material, I believe that she has what it takes in order to excel in her classes. I see her vigorous worth ethic and I can see how dedicated she is to being a good student and that she really wants to soak in all of she is learning. My job really is to teach her better study skills and different ways to test her
knowledge of the material. I do not tutor for money or for credit. Rather, I tutor others that are reaching out for help out of the kindness of my heart. I genuinely want to see others do well in their classes and have good GPA’s for I know how important it is to do so, and also of how difficult it can be. The only motivation that I have for tutoring other psychology students is out of my own internal motivation. I want to see these students excel and be the best person they can be. When they contact me after they have received an awesome final grade for their research papers or for their exams, I feel a sense of happiness and joy deep within me. It is this feeling that keeps me going and makes me want to reach out to those who are reaching out to me for help. This correlates nicely to the career path that I one day hope to achieve. I want to one day be able to help others who are reaching out in need by providing them with effective coping strategies and treatment plans to get these individual’s that are in need of help to come into their own autonomous person as well as enhance their well-being. I feel that I have so far experienced a helping relationship and leadership service not only through tutoring others, but also in my experience as an intern at Daytop Village. It is only a matter of time until I am able to involve myself with more servant leadership opportunities and relationship skill enhancing techniques through internships and other life experiences that will occur as I work towards my Masters degree at Seton Hall University in Professional Counseling.
References
