In their own voices:
Ex-offenders speak out about Tackling the Tough Skills
Excerpts of an ex-offender group evaluation discussion
about Tackling the Tough Skills curriculum, 3/3/04

Situation: In Spring 2004, a group of 10 ex-offenders in St. Louis participated in a 12-week “Tackling the Tough Skills” program, 2 hours per week, conducted by Rosilee Trotta of University of Missouri Extension, author of the curriculum. Content of the 12-week session covered Attitude, Responsibility, Communication, Problem Solving/Decision Making, and Preparing for the Workplace. The following includes excerpts of a transcript of a group discussion held at the beginning of the fifth session—after participants had received instruction for two weeks on Chapter 1 (Attitude) and two weeks on Chapter 2 (Responsibility).

Interviewer/facilitator: Roxanne Miller, University of Missouri Extension

[Code: R=Roxanne, F=Female participant, M=Male participant]

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R: “What I’d like to have you think about: What do you think of the Tough Skills program so far? You’ve been here 4 weeks now. What comes to mind?”

1. “It opens up your mind.”
   F1: “It’s a very important responsibility, choosing between right and wrong. As you listen to her (Rosilee), as she teaches the classes, you get a lot out of it because it opens up your mind. Instead of thinking negative, you open up to positive, you know, thinking about steps you can take to make better decisions.”

2. “(Interacting) helps us . . . see what it is we need to do to better ourselves.”
   F2: “The program is excellent, and the way Rosilee presents it, it’s even much more better than that because the way she breaks things down, she just go right at it, just lookin’ at life, just the way it is. She don’t complicate it. She explains things simple, and then she lets the people interact, you know what I’m saying. And then that helps us because we can pull out of it and see what it is we need to do to better ourselves.”

3. “The responsibilities lie with self. And you look at yourself, and you deal with that.”
   M1: “What I get out of it, it gives me the opportunity to look at myself and understand where I’m at and what are some things I need to do to get to where I’m going, you know. I believe this is what all of us are gettin’ out of it. You know, the responsibilities lie with self. And you look at yourself, and you deal with that, which will enable you to deal with what’s going on in your life.”

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4. “I found out that I wasn’t by myself.”

F2: “To go along with what (he) said, I agree 100 percent. But also, not just to look at ourselves, but also let us see that, like there’s certain things that we’re not by ourselves, that there are others like us. Even the ones that are not like us, that they can still relate to this program. You know what I’m saying? Like when she lets us reenact, or look at the different scenarios of different things, you know. ‘Well, how would you react?’ You know, there is no wrong or right answer, you know, and that kind of help.

What really got me into really, really, really appreciating this program was the one program (session) where—I had had a problem for some years, from a child up ’til maybe three years ago. And I was seeking help for this. You know, my family was payin’ big bucks for this. Things came out at this particular session that I had been struggling years with. You know what I’m saying? And I found out that I wasn’t by myself, that there was another person here who was goin’ through the same thing. It’s just things like that, you know what I’m saying, that makes you open up and wantta share. You don’t mind sharing. No one is here to judge you, you know, it’s help. And for her (Rosilee) not to really, actually be where within, but she can relate and understand and she breaks it down and helps us to understand where we’ve been. So that’s what I got out of it.

5. “It kind of strengthened my value system.”

M2: “For me, uh, the time that I have been here, it kind of strengthened my value system and made me appreciate people more. It made me look at the bigger picture instead of just lookin’ at one side—my side—and other people’s opinions and values in life.”

6. “It made me realize what role did I play.”

M2: “It made me realize what role did I play, in every given situation that I do play a role. And I’m the most important character in that role.”

7. “Without commitment . . . there won’t be no success.”

F1: “And without commitment, you know, really, there won’t be no success. You have to say within your own self that, you know, you have been through some things. And, like you said, not just look at the picture, you know, on your side, like ‘Dang, I’ll never do this’ or ‘I’ll never amount.’ We have people comin’ in to help us . . . and to give us some hope. And if you stay committed, and put our minds to it, we can do anything we set our minds to.”

8. “You know where you’re goin,’ and you take the steps to get there.”

M1: “You control your own destiny. It’s something you decide on where you’re going to go. How to have strength and faith in yourself and how to go about doing that. That’s what I really understand. It’s something you have to know where you’re goin’ and make these goals and set these goals. They may not be big, small . . . but you got an idea where you’re goin.’ You know where you’re goin,’ and you take the steps to get there. And this is the way life is.”
9. “It’s not a black or white issue. It’s an issue, period.”
   F2: “With me, also, it’s not a black or white issue. It’s an issue, period. You know, there’s no color with it. It’s an issue. Whether you’re black, white, green, purple or orange, it’s still an issue. In other words, you know, it’s not (M1’s) issue because he’s black. It’s not my issue because I’m a female. You know what I’m sayin’? That it’s all about us. Everybody.”

10. “I’ve been doin’ wrong for so long, now I’m tryin’ to do it right.”
    M2: “Also, um (cough), me, I’ve been doin’ wrong for so long, now I’m tryin’ to do it right. In the course of this, I know I’m going to make some mistakes along the way. And most importantly, learn to take accountability for the mistakes that I might make along the way.”

11. “It’s up to us to keep the right attitude.”
    F3: “To keep the right attitude, but sometimes we can be of the attitude that people owe us something, and nobody owe us anything. But it’s up to us to keep the right attitude and the right frame of mind and just press on.”

R: Thinking back to that first day, when you knew about this class. I know that a lot of you have been involved with various sessions here that (the program director) has given you. What were your expectations that first day? Do you remember?

12. “I didn’t think it was going to be as powerful as it is.”
    F2: “I can speak for myself, I thought it was going to be boring. I thought it was just uh, uh, uh—what’s the word I’m lookin’ for—just something to say, ‘Well, we did this just to let,’ you know what I’m saying? I just thought it was just going to be a formality. I didn’t think it was going to be as powerful as it is.”

13. “I just want to learn . . . and not just stay in one place.”
    F1: “My answer is: I was excited. You know, ’cause I’m like—I just want to learn, you know what I’m sayin’? And not just stay in one place, you know, where there’s just nothin really goin’ on as far as altering my mind and you all comin’ in to teach the class. So I was very excited about it. . . . Sometimes I get frustrated when I can’t understand things, but today, I’m gettin’ better at it. I know to go ask for help, you know what I’m sayin’? So I just was really excited about it.”

14. “When you expect somethin’, you get somethin’.”
    F3: “When you expect somethin’, you get somethin’. I was expectin’, and I’m like (F1), I was excited about it too ’cause I knew something was going to spring forth out of it. And it has, and it still does.”

R: “Well, I appreciate your time. . . . Thank you all very much.”

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