

Research Highlights

Topic: Positive Perceptions of Disability

Vohs, J. (1993). On belonging: A place to stand, a gift to give. In A.P. Turnbull, J.A. Patterson, S.K. Behr, D.L. Murphy, J.G. Marquis, & M.J. Blue-Banning (Eds.), *Cognitive coping, families, and disability* (pp. 151-163). Baltimore: Brookes.

BOTTOM LINE

When sailors thought the world was flat, that knowledge structured everything about how they thought and behaved. The news that the world was round caused a shift in behavior and in people's perceptions of what was possible. The world did not change, but what was thought to be true about it changed; and people went about sailing their boats very differently based on the fact that the world was round. The author of this chapter uses metaphors such as this as well as her own experiences as the parent of a child with significant disabilities to discuss the inherited worldview of disability as a tragedy. She encourages readers to invent or choose new meanings and interpretations of disability, ones that may be more personally empowering, thereby changing our behavior and the way "we sail our boats."

TIPS

- Realize that you have some power to choose the meaning you attach to a particular situation.
- Identify what is in a situation that needs to be coped with. What really is the source of stress? It may be the meaning attached to the situation rather than the situation itself that is stressful.
- Try on a variety of interpretations for a situation.
- Always be on the lookout for ideas, thoughts, stories, and poems that are empowering in designing a new view of disability.
- Help families create a vision that empowers them.

TIPS

- Review the manual entitled *Coping with the Challenges of Disability* for a workshop guide for families related to enhancing the four positive perceptions.

KEY FINDINGS

- What the author, Janet Vohs, has appreciated most as the parent of a child with a disability are the thoughts that have had the power to alter her—thoughts that have enabled her to generate her own principles to see the world from a new vantage point.
- Janet Vohs’ early years of questioning and rejecting the common-sense, worldview assumption of disability as a tragedy encompassed two major shifts in her perspective:
 - ◆ *Shift I: The Private World:* When her daughter, Jessica, was diagnosed with cerebral palsy, Janet assumed the world view of disability, that is, disability equals tragedy, a life of sadness and coping as best one can with a terrible reality. Over time, she realized that it was the meaning assigned to disability, not the disability itself, that caused her sadness. She began to cultivate the view that disability was a natural part of life, and that there was nothing inherently wrong with having a disability. Identifying imposed assumptions allowed her to separate the world or whatever was happening from the interpretation or meaning ascribed to it.
 - ◆ *Shift II: Us and the World:* Personal experiences in childhood led Janet to believe that there was something wrong with her that made her not “belongable.” Prior to Jessica’s birth, this caused Janet to live in isolation as a young adult rather than face rejection. After Jessica’s birth, she recognized that she was Jessica’s primary ambassador to the world—to Jessica’s acceptance by others. This led to the realization that her perception of herself had to change. She had to deal with her own issues of belonging. Creating a place for herself to stand called “I belong” caused a major shift in her belief about who she was and *that* altered the way she saw the world.
- The author provides an excellent metaphor for the inherited meaning imposed on disability. In Europe, years ago, castles were built with enclosed rooms for making bread. After generations of making bread in these rooms, it is now unnecessary to add yeast to the bread dough. The yeast culture simply lives in the air and leavens any dough placed there.
 - ◆ Our assumptions and presuppositions about disability are invisible—like the yeast, part of the air we breathe. We do not consciously choose these assumptions or invent them, rather they are inherited. Our “culture” is made up of millions of sentences and stories about disability that we have learned to call true.

KEY FINDINGS

cont.

- ◆ While it is easy to grasp the pervasiveness and inescapability of the “culture,” there is a hint of an exciting possibility: Regardless of how much they are presented as true, the assumptions and presuppositions about disability are only sentences. We can choose a different view of disability.
- ◆ A fundamental belief about the tragic nature of disability informs one worldview. Acceptance of disability as a legitimate part of life informs another. The accuracy or truthfulness of the view is not as fruitful a question to pursue as the question of whether the interpretation is useful or empowering.

RELATED PUBLICATIONS

- Behr, S.K., & Murphy, D.L. (1993). Research progress and promise: The role of perceptions in cognitive adaptation to disability. In A.P. Turnbull, J.A. Patterson, S.K. Behr, D.L. Murphy, J.G. Marquis, & M.J. Blue-Banning (Eds.), *Cognitive coping, families, and disability* (pp. 151-163). Baltimore: Brookes.
- Blue-Banning, M. J., Santelli, B., Guy, B., & Wallace, J. (1994). *Coping with the challenges of disability*. Lawrence: University of Kansas, Beach Center on Families and Disability.
- Summers, J.A., Behr, S.K., & Turnbull, A.P. (1988). Positive adaptation and coping strengths of families who have children with disabilities. In G.H.S. Singer & L.K. Irvin (Eds.), *Support for caregiving families: Enabling positive adaptation to disability* (pp. 27-40). Baltimore: Brookes.

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