

The „Denkzeit“-Method

Structure and Scientific Basis of the Manual and Approach of Denkzeit Trainers

The Denkzeit training programmes are psychodynamically orientated, social cognitive one-to-one trainings for deviant children, juvenile delinquents, adolescents, and adults (currently being developed).

The various Denkzeit methods have almost all been manualised and have a modular structure. They require the trainer to follow a transparent, sympathetic approach, establish clear boundaries, and allow themselves to become involved in the training so that they can use this experience to promote development.

Specific intervention strategies should enable the client to deal more effectively with interpersonal situations as well as solve conflicts in a socially acceptable manner. Situations that contain aspects of group-focused hostility or violent extremism are taken into account. The working relationship plays a crucial role in the training programme's great success.

Denkzeit training has been scientifically evaluated and reduces delinquency in a sustainable and effective manner.

The Cognitive Training Phase – Module 1

In the first module exercises the client learns to recognise and think through situations of social conflict. A problem-solving process has been developed (e.g. Körner and Friedmann 2008) similar to Crick and Dodge's social-information model (1994).

This model depicts unconscious processes one is not aware of that take place within moments in a social situation, which are cues of how to respond and behave accordingly.

As we are aware that people who are prone to dissocial behaviour are particularly limited at every step in the process (e.g. Dodge et al. 2003), the first module in the Denkzeit training individually addresses each step. This approach is what helps make the Denkzeit programme unique.

Most programmes for juvenile offenders aim most of all to create alternative possibilities for selecting a response and action which is socially based. However, this does not include selective perception or the tendency towards hostile interpretation.

For some perpetrators this approach may be adequate, but for those who become violent due to incorrect attribution (or negative projection) this is not enough. Most young people who continually behave in a dissocial manner tend towards such negative projections that they use to justify their aggressive attacks. Usually this is the result of damaging early relationship experience (in more detail e.g. with Streeck-Fischer 2004); these people tend towards externalising their own unforgiving inner dialogue (“I am rubbish”) and recognising it in others (“He's staring at me like he thinks I am rubbish”). The goal of this module is to allow such negative attributions to become conscious or at least to make the client less sure of their certainty that other people have bad intentions.

This happens explicitly in exercises given in the manual and implicitly through the working relationship in which the trainer engages in the interpersonal situation and shows how they would feel, which interpretations they would have, and which alternative actions they would consider (see below). The client has to come face to face with their trainer. However, this “confrontation” is one without aggression that does not end in shaming. It deals more with the initial uncertainty of their own generally accepted perception and judgment.

In the first module sessions as well as in all exercises, the relationship with the trainer is used to encourage the competence of seeing things from other people’s points of view and to understand that different people have different intentions, positions, and reasons for action than they do. This competency is not one that all clients have already developed. If the competency does not develop sufficiently, the client can perhaps practice speaking in a socially acceptable way. However, in this case it should not be expected that they learn to empathise with other people.

The Denkzeit approach is psychodynamically based; the suspension of the ability to empathise is understood as a (initially useful) coping mechanism that has been developed and continued over the years as a defence mechanism against damaging relationship experiences. To rub in the suffering that these youths have already caused, as suggested by Weidner (e.g. 2004) would have no place in the Denkzeit training. Juvenile delinquents must learn to respect others and for this it is often necessary that they first learn the ability to identify by being offered an encouraging, shame-free, supportive relationship with clear boundaries (see below).

Managing Emotions - Module 2

Many clients who come to Denkzeit have noticeable lack of impulse control, have emotional outbursts as well as a low frustration tolerance. Often they also have emotional patterns of group-focused hostility as well as recognisable tensions in their understanding of gender roles, which can lead to sexist or homophobic tendencies. The clients act in a way that is particularly reactive or intrinsically motivated (see Friedmann 2012). They are a highly charged group of perpetrators who cannot be reached only through punishment and applying sanctions. The delinquents rarely come across as sincere when stating they do not wish to commit further violent acts and admitting their guilt. However, in their lives they often find themselves in conflict-filled situation that lead to aggressive confrontation that they often feel they are at the mercy of.

The delinquent tendencies, which usually started early on and continued over a long period of time, are mostly rooted in traumatic childhood experiences (neglect, violence, abuse). Process elements of gender specific socialisation and experience with trauma also play a part. The important functions of self and relationship regulation were not able to properly develop due to damaging relationship experiences. Intense social relationships have therefore either been avoided, already broken off at the first sign of stress, or set up in a way that not possible for them to successfully progress. These young people often tend to be mistrustful and withdrawn. Others behave openly aggressive, provoke and continually receive negative reactions from other people.

In the second Denkzeit training module the clients learn to be more aware of their feelings, to identify a build-up of aggression, interpret body signals and tell the difference between how strong the anger is in order to develop individual strategies that can be applied to various situations in daily life.

A pure behavioural training falls short because, in theory, nearly all young people know that they should walk away, that they should talk instead of hit, that they could ignore an aggressor and so on – in the secure environment of the pedagogical training they can also do this. However, when they are in real life situations this does not help (also due to projection as described above).

Thinking and Acting Morally - Module 3

In the third module, the client explores the question of “right and wrong”. However, it is important that these principles are not given to them by the trainer but, rather, that the issue of moral standards is explored and a strategy for thinking things through is developed.

In the training, dilemmas are often used which encourage the client to sensitively observe the moral content in social situations. When working through these dilemmas the young people shouldn't find out which solution the trainer prefers and then choose the supposed best solution, but rather should think through different ways of acting in a social situation in order to explain their decision. The goal is to work out an autonomous moral standard that is deeply rooted within the young person and can be adapted depending on the context. However, it should not be corruptible; moral rules cannot simply be thrown overboard when it serves one's interests.

The trainer should also openly share their attitudes and opinions with the client so that they can compare these attitudes, values, and positions. However, this should mainly be done to make the differences and similarities clear, not to convince the client or simply train them to socially adapt (which, anyway, would remain ineffective for dealing with conflict in real life situations).

The Framework and Pedagogic Approach

A clear, supportive framework and pedagogic approach is especially important as a place from which the relationship is offered. All agreements reached will be discussed with the client. If they are not willing to engage, no training will take place. One might argue that in most cases the client is forced to participate and, therefore, there is no free choice involved. However, even a choice between two less-than-comfortable alternatives is still a choice, and of course the choice is not without consequence. A pre-requisite for participation is that the client has agreed to the content and procedure.

The interventions are goal orientated and serve to foster the development of the client. Their tolerance limit must always be gauged and respected. The goal is to adopt a supportive attitude with clear boundaries. The client will be valued as an expert of their own world and recognised for who they are. It should not be expected that the client changes their behaviour immediately or without problems just because they are aware that it causes them into trouble.

The Denkzeit methods are prospective-oriented. The work focusses on changing future action, especially in social conflict situations. The clients' limitations, which have been made clear, are the focus and functional coping mechanisms are supported.

One of the strongest predictors of delinquent development are negative early relationship experiences. They have been imprinted as a working model and constantly influence perception and experience. These working models are based on procedural memory and cannot be reached by words. They serve as an individual blueprint that is particularly activated in interactions: the client causes other people to react in a way that meets their expectations. If they do so successfully, then they feel that their blueprint has been confirmed. As the other person, it is difficult to escape these working models being used on you (for more detail, see Streeck and Leichsenring, 2009). Therefore, the approach as well as an ability for reflection and interpersonal relating is very important for Denkzeit trainers. During the training, interpersonal ability will be worked on with the help of psychodynamic concepts.

For our future programme development, the Denkzeit-Gesellschaft has begun to develop a concept for a training module to work with violent young women; there are also plans to more explicitly integrate the current existing gender role aspects into the training programme.

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