

Why assess the ward climate?

Practitioners in forensic as well as general psychiatric institutions and in correctional settings usually show a strong interest in the issue of 'institutional climate', 'ward atmosphere' or 'therapeutic atmosphere'. There is awareness that these emotional / social dimensions of the setting play an important role with regard to the wellbeing of staff and clients and treatment outcome.

But assessing the ward atmosphere with a rating instrument is not an end in itself. It does not improve the institutional climate to have it assessed every 12 or 6 or 2 months. There is even a risk that the people involved get bored with that kind of evaluation when it is conducted as a routine and does not show any effect.

One should also overcome the idea that it is merely staff and institution that are responsible for the social climate on a ward. The ward atmosphere is to some degree determined by the prevailing circumstances and the objective job assigned to a ward. Thus, climate profiles of different wards may be difficult to compare and are by no way a direct measure of staff performance. But in any kind of treatment setting, there are creative possibilities. Any social atmosphere can be affected in negative and positive ways. It is a constant challenge to the staff to explore ways to optimise the social atmosphere of a specific setting.

I do see two major aims in the assessment of ward climate and application of the questionnaire:

- 1) In treatment evaluation research, it appears reasonable to consider the ward climate as one in a range of variables relevant for treatment effects. The questionnaire is a very economic tool to have the construct included in a research plan.
- 2) In the institutional routine, it seems useful to put a focus on the ward climate once in a while. I favour the idea of 'climate days' or a 'climate week' when the current condition of a ward is examined and approaches to improvement are discussed with everybody involved. An economic scale may be useful to evaluate attempts to improve the climate (pre/post), and comparisons over time may provide an input to that kind of discussion.

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