

Survey of Organizing Techniques Used by Professional Organizers with Chronically Disorganized Clients: A Preliminary Report

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INTRODUCTION

Judith Kolberg's understanding of the chronically disorganized client was groundbreaking in the organizing industry, and her techniques for working with these clients formed the basis for the formation of the NSGCD. Originally published in 1998, *What Every Professional Organizer Needs to Know About Chronic Disorganization* listed techniques that Kolberg had found useful in working with the chronically disorganized.

Subsequently, the NSGCD Clutter Hoarding Scale was created for use by professional organizers and related professionals.

PURPOSE

The purposes of this survey were to determine: which of the techniques originally described by Judith Kolberg for use with chronically disorganized clients are used most often by professional organizers when working with CD clients; whether any of these techniques correlate with greater success with the client as reported by the professional organizer; whether length of time as a professional organizer, length of time working with the client, or level of certificate/certification within the NSGCD correlates with greater success as reported by the professional organizer; what learning styles needing accommodation by the professional organizer are most often encountered; what neurological conditions, physical challenges or other special needs requiring accommodation by the professional organizer are most often encountered; and, whether professional organizers use the NSGCD Clutter Hoarding Scale, and if so, how.

Additional purposes of this survey included comparing the results between professional organizers who are subscribers to NSGCD with professional organizers who are not subscribers to NSGCD.

PRELIMINARY REPORT

This is a preliminary report. When analysis yields further information it will be published by NSGCD.

PROTOCOL

Protocol within NSGCD:

A letter was sent to the NSGCD Yahoo Group explaining the survey and requesting that each NSGCDer choose one CD client with whom s/he had worked or was working, then go to NSGCD's website and complete a short, anonymous survey about himself or herself and about this one client. The survey consisted of 18 questions and took an estimated 10-15 minutes to complete.

There were 126 responses from a total of about 350 NSGCD subscribers, for a response rate of 36%. (All percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.)

Protocol used with professional organizers who are not subscribers to NSGCD:

Sixteen non-NSGCD professional organizers, chosen randomly, mostly at the 2007 NAPO Conference, agreed to participate.

Each non-NSGCDer was interviewed separately, rather than taking the online survey, so that terms and techniques could be explained to them. Although they were promised anonymity, they were still in the presence of the interviewer and answered questions in a somewhat more intimidating atmosphere than the anonymous online survey takers. Therefore, it is likely that the answers were skewed by the desire to appear to be a good organizer.

Two of the 16 who agreed to participate said that they had never had a CD client; they were dismissed from further participation in the survey.

While there is not a large enough sample for statistically valid conclusions, the comparisons will be shared with you.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Here are some preliminary results:

- Fewer than half of the respondents (48%) reported using the NSGCD Clutter Hoarding Scale with the chosen client. Of those NSGCDers who used the Clutter Hoarding Scale with the chosen client, 84% used it to understand the level of the problem, 44% used it to judge the safety of the situation, 44% used it to discuss or explain the situation to the client, other professional organizers, a related professional or a government agency.

- Fifty-two percent of respondents reported that the chosen client had a strong learning style that the professional organizer had to accommodate. Of those who had a strong learning style, 82% were strong visual learners, 5% were strong auditory learners, and 18% were strong kinesthetic learners.

- In direct response to the question, 33% of respondents reported that the chosen client told the organizer that s/he had a neurological condition which had to be accommodated. However, this is misleading because when asked if there were any other special needs, several respondents listed neurological conditions.

- Thirty-seven percent of the chosen clients told the professional organizer that there was a physical challenge that the professional organizer had to accommodate.

- The participating professional organizers were asked whether or not they had read Judith Kolberg's books. Seventy-nine percent of the NSGCDers responding had read *Conquering Chronic Disorganization*; 75% had read *What Every Professional Organizer Needs to Know About Chronic Disorganization*; and 71% had read *ADD-Friendly Ways to Organize Your Life*.

The main focus of the survey was the use of specific organizing techniques. Here is the rate of usage among NSGCDers who responded:

- Among the techniques listed, all taken from *What Every Professional Organizer Needs to Know About Chronic Disorganization*, Body Doubling was by far the most used technique by NSGCDers, with 71% of respondents using that technique with the chosen client. The next most used technique, Avoiding Tactile Sympathy, was a somewhat distant second with a 52% usage rate among those NSGCDers responding.

- Fewer than half of those responding used:

- Maintenance sessions (45%)

- Recommending support services (42%).

- Usage rate dropped off to less than a third of responding NSGCDers with:

- Friends-Acquaintances-Strangers (32%)

- Does this need you? (29%)

- Identifying a very personal charity (29%)

- Treasure Hunting (27%)

- Sampling/Playing Favorites (27%).

- The rest came in as follows:

- Coaching, 25%

- Muttering Game, 22%

- Photographing, 20%

- Teleconsulting, 15%.

- Creating a Shrine, 13%.

- Past/Present/Future Timeline as a Method of Holistic Organizing, 10%.

- Grieving to Over-personalize, 10%

- Organizing in Absentia, 9%

- The Crew, 6%

- The Threesome, 4%,

- Themes as a Method of Holistic Organizing, 4%,

- Training a Body Double Stand-in, 2%,

- Events as a Method of Holistic Organizing, less than 1%.

RESULTS FROM NON-NSGCD PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZERS

Remember that these results are not reliable, due to the small number of interviewees and the fact that the conditions under which they were obtained strongly bias the results.

- When the definition of chronic disorganization was given to them, 14 of the 16 non-NSGCD professional organizers said that they had encountered at least one CD client. That is a large percentage of non-NSGCDers to claim CD clients, given the number of times we seem to hear that other professional organizers have not had CD clients, nor do they intend to work with this population, nor do they think they need our education.

- Non-NSGCDers appear to have a much lower rate of knowledge of Kolberg's books than NSGCDers. Among non-NSGCDers, 25% reported reading *Conquering Chronic Disorganization*, 19% reported reading *What Every Professional Organizer Needs to Know About Chronic Disorganization*; and 19% reported reading *ADD-Friendly Ways to Organize Your Life*.

When the techniques were explained to them:

- Body Doubling was the most used technique among non-NSGCDers, with a usage rate of 78%.

- The next most used was Identifying a Very Personal Charity, with 71%, and Avoiding Tactile Sympathy, Past/Present/Future Timeline, Organizing in Absentia and Coaching, all at 64%.

- About half used Maintenance Sessions, Recommending Support Services, Treasure Hunting, Sampling/Playing Favorites, and Creating a Shrine, and just under half of non-NSGCDers used the Muttering Game.

- Other usage rates were lower, and probably not easily compared.

There were some interesting comments from non-NSGCDers:

- Non-NSGCDers made specific note of things NSGCDers expect: clients' inability to focus; clients' difficulty with decision-making; clients' control issues; clients who were creative, highly intelligent, or perfectionistic and who have wide-ranging interests.

- One non-NSGCDer reported obtaining the client because the client had been reported to authorities by EMT's called to the home to assist in an emergency.

- Two reported having learned from books, including Kolberg's, and from experience. One said, "I have my own philosophies."

- One reported the experience with the CD client had been “very frustrating work,” and s/he “had tried to extricate [her]self.”

One said that learning about CD clients was an “eye-opener,” and said, “This field is incredible.”

CONCLUSION

This is a preliminary report only. Further mining of the data is expected to answer such questions as:

- Does the length of time in business, NSGCD certificates or certification correlate with increased success, as judged by either the professional organizer or the client?
- Which, if any techniques are correlated with increased success, as judged by either the professional organizer or the client?
- What neurological differences are professional organizers most likely to see?
- What physical limitations or challenges are professional organizers most likely to see?
- Do professional organizers who have read Kolberg’s books have greater success with clients? If so, knowledge of which books correlates with greater success?
- Do NSGCDers report higher success rates than other professional organizers?

This is simply a short list of possible questions to be answered by further analyses of the survey findings.

Any study leads to more questions than answers, and this survey is no exception. Additional studies will further expand our knowledge.

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