Structured Psychotherapy for Adolescents Responding To Chronic Stress

Ruth DeRosa, Mandy Habib, David Pelcovitz, Jill Rathus, Jill Sonnenklar, Julian Ford, Suzanne Sunday, Christopher Layne, William Saltzman, Ayme Turnbull, Victor Labruna, & Sandra Kaplan
SPARCS stands for Structured Psychotherapy for Adolescents Responding to Chronic Stress. The SPARCS program includes a 16 session treatment guide that was specifically created for teens who have been traumatized, often repeatedly and who continue to live with high levels of stress. SPARCS aims to help chronically traumatized adolescents find that “sparc” of light within themselves and enhance their strengths and resilience. As a strength-based approach, SPARCS was designed to help adolescents find the wisdom in their responses, support skills they already possess, and foster new ways of coping. Through validation and connection, SPARCS therapists strive to provide group members with the freedom to address problems that are important to them and create opportunities for change.

SPARCS is based on three empirically-informed interventions that were adapted and integrated in an effort to address the topics specifically relevant to adolescents exposed to chronic trauma. The three interventions are:

- Dialectical Behavior Therapy for Adolescents
- Trauma Adaptive Recovery - Group Education and Therapy (TARGET)
- School-Based Trauma/Grief Group Psychotherapy Program
Traumatized teens living with chronic stress are often:

- Quick to get angry
- Feeling guilty, damaged
- Having problems with trust
- Self-destructive
- Living with headaches, stomach aches, chronic pain...
- In unstable relationships
- Ashamed
- Hopeless & pessimistic about the future
- Having trouble calming down

Therefore, SPARCS works with group members to examine and address problems with:

- Regulating Emotions & Impulses
- Somatization and Physical Health
- Attention and Information Processing
- Self-perception
- Relationships
- Sense of Meaning & Purpose in Life
In order to address common problem areas, SPARCS therapists work with adolescents to practice the “The Four C’s” in order to:

- Cultivate awareness
- Cope more effectively
- Connect more effectively
- Create Meaning & Purpose

**SPARCS Sessions**

- 16 one-hour group sessions
- For chronically traumatized adolescents, ages of 12-21
- Who are still living with ongoing stress
- PTSD Diagnosis not required
- 6-10 participants per group, single or mixed gender
- Includes treatment guide with built-in flexibility & colorful handouts for practice exercises
Sessions focus on enhancing coping strategies and teaching adolescents how to make choices mindfully even in the face of potential danger. Adolescents learn concrete steps to help them better manage the moment & make it more likely that they can get what they want and need when under stress and struggling with conflict in relationships. Group members are routinely encouraged to improve access to their innate strengths, or “wise mind,” through routine mindfulness exercises, role plays, and activities with movie clips and discussion. Sample topics include:

- Manage Your Emotions So They Don’t Manage You including anger, sadness, and worries
- Understand How Your Body Reacts to Stress
- How to Get What You Want: Improving Communication Skills
- Relationships: Building the Kind of Support You Want
- Create meaning for the past and purpose for the future
Prior to the first training, clinicians, supervisors & administrators together discuss and complete the SPARCS Planning Worksheet as a team.

Pre-Training planning conference calls are scheduled to review the Worksheet & discuss agency assets and potential challenges to implementing a new practice based on their unique setting, culture and client population.

Learning Collaborative Trainings may include clinicians from multiple sites who will have the opportunity to learn from each other.

First Learning Session – Two day training with at least one clinician and one administrator attending. Includes a balance of didactic presentations, demonstrations, role-plays, and mindfulness practice.

Second Learning Session – One day training 4-6 weeks after the start of group

Multi-site consultation calls with group leaders, supervisors and administrators