How to Move Forward with Feedback: Tips for Psychiatry Trainees

Meghan Musselman, MD
AAPL Forensic Training of Psychiatric Residents Committee

As a forensic psychiatry educator and director of a forensics track in a general psychiatry residency program, I often focus on exposing psychiatry residents to forensic topics and opportunities during their residency training. While this has been effective in garnering residents' interest in the field of forensic psychiatry, these experiences are inadequate to fully prepare them for a forensic psychiatry fellowship. Forensic psychiatry fellowship is much more than learning about forensic psychiatric topics. It is about learning to interact with attorneys and judges, conducting forensic evaluations, learning how to write effective forensic reports and developing a mastery of the art of expert witness testimony. Feedback is inevitably an essential part of learning to be a forensic psychiatrist, and feedback in fellowship is and should be abundant. How effective that feedback is depends not only on the feedback giver but also the feedback receiver.

In academia, the topic of giving effective feedback is frequently taught, but we less often focus on how to effectively receive feedback. A 2017 scoping review on feedback in medical education found that over 97% of the articles reviewed focused on methods of feedback given to learners. (1) Yet, feedback can only be effective if it is internalized by the receiver. Why is there such a lack of focus on receiving feedback in academia? Maybe we erroneously believe that trainees take our feedback and run with it. The limited body of evidence on feedback reception however indicates that feedback is not always accepted by the recipient, and the integration of feedback is influenced by a variety of factors. (2, 3, 4) In this article, I will review three common barriers for integrating feedback and provide strategies for overcoming these barriers.

In their 2014 book, "Thanks for the Feedback: the Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well," authors Douglas Stone and Sheela Heen identify three triggers that typically prevent individuals from internalizing feedback. The first trigger is the "truth trigger," which occurs when the feedback receiver believes that the content of the feedback is wrong or unfair. The second trigger is the "relationship trigger," which stems from the feedback recipient's perception of the feedback giver. The third trigger is the "identity trigger," which occurs when the feedback makes the feedback recipient question their identity and can lead to shame and defensiveness. (5)

Once a trigger has been identified, the natural next step is managing it. Many forensic trainees receive feedback on a forensic report such as, "Next time, I'd like to see more confidence in your opinion." Trainee A may view this feedback as helpful in accelerating her learning, whereas Trainee B internalizes, "This doesn't sound right. This is the first time I'm hearing that my reports are not good." Trainee B has experienced a truth trigger. The feedback seems to contradict what he has heard about his work in the past. What strategies can Trainee B use to work through the truth trigger?

A. **Ask for clarity on the type of the feedback**. Was the purpose of the feedback for coaching, to accelerate learning, or was it an evaluation, telling Trainee B that he is behind his peers?

B. **Attempt to understand the feedback giver's perspective**. Trainee B could ask the feedback giver to see examples of confident writing and where his writing is falling short.

C. **Learn about blind spots.** Trainee B should assess whether there is a gap between his perception of his writing and others' perception of his writing. Rather than dismissing his attending's feedback, he should consider whether the feedback is revealing a blind spot to him. He could ask a trusted colleague or mentor about the feedback he received.

Now imagine a scenario in which Trainee C has been told by her attending that she needs to improve her interviewing skills. Trainee C dismisses the feedback because the attending has a reputation of being overly critical. This is an example of a relationship trigger. The trainee has rejected the feedback because of her perception of the feedback giver. Trainee C ignoring the feedback and focusing on her perception of the feedback giver is called "switchtracking." We can impart Trainee C with strategies to help prevent switchtracking, in order for her to gain from the feedback from her attending:

A. **Spot the two topics.** Trainee C can recognize that the attending never showing appreciation for the trainee is an issue and also that the trainee's interview skills are a separate issue.

B. **Give each topic its own "track."** Trainee C can address her interview skills. Separately, she can express to her attending that would benefit from appreciative feedback as well.

In a third scenario, Trainee D meets with her program director for her semi-annual evaluation. She hears many positive comments but is struck by one comment that she appears nervous during her mock trial testimony. She immediately thinks she will

never be a good forensic psychiatrist. Trainee D has experienced an identity trigger, in which feedback led her to question her sense of identity and feel shame. We can impart Trainee D with several strategies to manage the identity trigger and gain utility from her program director's feedback:

A. **Be prepared.** Trainee D knows she has a semi-annual evaluation coming up, so preparing can be helpful. She should consider how she typically responds to feedback. Does she typically get down on herself when given constructive feedback? If so, she can anticipate this in her program director meeting. Trainee D could also consider worst-case scenario feedback when preparing for her evaluation and what steps she would take to respond to it. The feedback she receives may then not feel so identity shattering.

B. **Change the vantage point.** "Negative" feedback typically seems most devastating to the feedback receiver. Trainee D can take the feedback to a friend to get an alternative vantage point.

C. **Shift from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset.** Instead of seeing her traits as fixed or set in stone, Trainee D should attempt to adopt a growth mindset, allowing her to view feedback as an opportunity for professional development.

The above examples illustrate how we as educators can help trainees gain from even imperfect feedback. By helping trainees identify feedback triggers and subsequently strategies for managing them, not only can we help trainees gain more from feedback, but we can help the feedback process feel more approachable and less daunting. This work should start long before fellowship, but is also critical to making the most of the forensic fellowship. ⊛

References:
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