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Integrating spirituality into the counseling session : facilitating positive changes

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This paper briefly examines some of the existing literature on this integration and also incorporates some personal view points. It is hoped that the reader will, at the very least, begin to get a sense of importance in regards to his/her own spirituality and religion and also get a sense of the importance it can play in the lives of those who seek counseling. Ultimately, this awareness will further motivate current and future counselors to further investigate and develop ways to integrate spirituality and religion into his/her own style of the counseling process.

INTEGRATING SPIRITUALITY INTO THE COUNSELING SESSION: FACILITATING POSITIVE CHANGES

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Integrating Spirituality into the Counseling Session: Facilitating Positive Changes

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This paper briefly examines some of the existing literature on this integration and also incorporates some personal view points. It is hoped that the reader will begin to get a sense of importance in regards to his/her own spirituality and religion and also get a sense of the importance it can play in the lives of those who seek counseling. Ultimately, this awareness will further motivate current and future counselors to further investigate and develop ways to integrate spirituality and religion into his/her own style of the counseling process.

This paper begins with a definition of the terms spirituality and religion to assist in the understanding of the proceeding pages. These definitions are based upon the Judeo-Christian belief system and therefore are not all inclusive to other faith systems. The paper will include barriers to inclusion as well as some ethical considerations that counselors need to be mindful of during this integration. This paper will also include some benefits and strategies for integrating spirituality and religion into the therapeutic process. Finally, the paper will address some

implications for therapy. The conclusion will address further research and study and will conclude with some general comments.

Definition of terms

Spirituality and religion could have many definitions depending upon the person defining them. These abstract ideas mean various things to different people and it seems that there is no right or wrong answer. Therefore, the following definitions may or may not be congruent with the reader's definitions but are merely meant to facilitate the understanding of this paper.

Spirituality

The term spirituality is consistently identified as being a multifaceted word. These different aspects of spirituality ranged from an organized set of beliefs (Ameling & Povilonis, 2001), to acknowledging a metaphysical, mystical, or transcendental element (Anderson & Worthen, 1997), and a personal relationship with a higher power (Linnenberg, 1997).

Perhaps the best definition, which will be the foundation for this paper, referred to spirituality as:

> A personal belief in and experience of a supreme being or an ultimate
> human condition, along with an internal set of values and active
> investment in those values, a sense of connection, a sense of meaning, and
> a sense of inner wholeness within or outside formal religious structures.
> (Wright, Watson & Bell, 1996, p. 31)

The term spirituality as used within the context of this paper will refer to the internal process that happens when individuals search for meaning and purpose in his/her lives. This term may or may not include formal Christian religious structures.

Religion

Since spirituality, as defined, involves the internal process for each individual, then religion consists of the external activities that express each person's spirituality (Linnenberg, 1997). Religion involves more than the individual but also incorporates part of the community. Perhaps the most common image of this definition is the concept of an organized church. Although each church has different standards by which it operates, and offers different experiences to each member, the church and all of its members are all included in the concept of religion. For the sake of this paper, the definition of religion will involve the following of beliefs, practices and rituals of an organized institution (Lukoff, Lu, & Turner, 1995).

It is clear to see that religion and spirituality are very similar, and to some, interrelated; one can be religious and not spiritual, spiritual but not religious, as well as spiritual and religious. This concept in itself can create further confusion and possible misunderstandings among people, specifically counselor and client.

Obstacles for Integrating Spirituality into the Counseling Session

Historical

The difference in definitions between spirituality and religion are not the only

obstacles for integrating spirituality into counseling. From its earliest conception,

psychology has attempted to associate itself within the scientific domain.

Emphasis has routinely been placed upon the empirical and observable (Richards

& Bergin, 1997). Therefore, since spirituality and religion do not fall on the

spectrum of observable and measurable, psychological researchers and people

associated with psychology dismiss or criticize this aspect of people's lives. This

historical exclusion continues to create current barriers to effectively practicing

from a religious or spiritual perspective because many counselors are not trained

to handle these issues when they surface (Frame, 1996). Several organizations

have evolved, however, in recent years to help bridge this gap. These

organizations believe that integrating spirituality is a unique form of counseling

which requires spiritual resources as well as psychological understanding for

healing and growth (L.J. Nebbe, 2005). Although there are few organizations

that understand the importance of melding these areas together, it is hopeful that

they will continue to emerge into mainstream counseling techniques. The

American Counseling Association noted the importance of spirituality in

counseling by creating a division; named the Association for Spiritual, Ethical,

and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC)in 1974 (American Counseling

Association, 2002).

Personal

Counselors may also encounter obstacles when his/her personal spirituality

and religious beliefs conflict with that of his/her client. How is the counselor able

to focus on the client's presenting issues when they are struggling with his/her

own internal issues? Perhaps this is partially the reason why many counselors

prefer not to explore his/her client's spiritual and religious issues. Furthermore,

some counselors may believe that they, themselves, are not spiritually or

religiously oriented. Consequently, they may assume that they cannot relate to

religious or spiritual clients (Thayne, 1997).

Other Negative Implications

In addition to obstacles involved with integrating religious and spiritual

issues into the counseling session, there are also potentially negative implications

to this integration. A counselor may inhibit a client's independence, growth or

well being if they were to advocate certain religious beliefs such as negativity

toward pre-marital sex or divorce. This advocacy could create incongruence

within the client's thoughts and behaviors which could result in guilt, self-

condemnation and perhaps even damaging his/her level of self esteem (Sperry &

Giblin, 1996).

Ethical Considerations of Integration

Counselors must always be aware of the ethical code by which they guide his/her practice. In addition to the standard ethics they practice under, there are a few possible unique ethical challenges that arise when integrating spirituality into the therapeutic relationship.

Dual Relationships

One ethical challenge revolves around the dual relationship guideline. The counselor should avoid the counselor-religious leader dual relationship and the counselor-religious associate dual relationship. A counselor-religious leader dual relationship occurs when the counselor is in the position of leadership in a religious denomination (e.g., pastor or nun) and provides counseling in an environment such as a mental health center or at a monetary cost to members of that denomination (Richards & Bergin, 1997). In the counselor-religious associate dual relationship, the counselor is not a leader but rather an active member of the religious denomination. The counselor and client may have contact within the religious setting, making it difficult to continue either relationship. Obviously, this is more problematic in rural communities where religious settings and/or counseling clinics are limited or the choices greatly reduced.

Displacing Authority

Another ethical challenge for the counselor is to avoid displacing or undervaluing religious authority (Richards & Bergin, 1997). One example of this is when the counselor fails to consult with or refer the client to a religious leader. An overt example of undervaluing the client's religious background would be when the counselor disregards the advice given by the client's religious leader or makes demeaning comments about the client's religious values.

Boundaries of Competence

The counselor should also avoid practicing outside the boundaries of his/her competence. The counselor should have adequate training in the area of religion and spirituality prior to integrating it into his/her sessions. Since there is a lack of training in religious and spiritual issues in most graduate counseling programs, it would be necessary to receive additional education and training through outside resources, such as literature and workshops (Richards & Bergin, 1997).

Governing Laws

According to Richards and Bergin (1997), it is also important to abide by the laws governing the separation of church and state, especially in state funded facilities. However, this doesn't imply that religious issues or discussions should be banned from secular settings. Instead of dismissing this topic completely, the counselor should respect the client's religion and spirituality. In this way, values

are not imposed upon the client, but the client remains free to discuss these issues

if he or she chooses (Stander, Piercy, Mackinnon & Helmeke, 1994).

<div align="center">Benefits of Integrating Spirituality</div>

There are many fundamental benefits to the counseling process when

counselors address his/her client's spiritual and religious issues (Koenig &

Pritchett, 1998). One benefit of this integration is that religious and spiritual

practices may actually have a positive effect on human physical and

psychological health. This includes areas such as depression, anxiety, adjustment

as well as marital and sexual functioning (Thayne, 1997). Religion and

spirituality can also provide extra support to the client. For example, a client may

benefit from perceived support from God or a higher power, as well as from the

social setting in which it is provided, such as a congregation. The client can also

benefit when they participate in the ceremonies and traditions associated with

his/her spirituality or religion, during holidays or holy days (Sperry & Giblin,

1996). These designated holidays or holy days may help to bring the client's

family together and assist in facilitating cohesion within the family members.

Hall and Hall (1997) identified three additional reasons why integrating

spirituality and religion into the therapy session was beneficial. The first was that

many people prefer religiously sensitive psychotherapy, stating that this type of

counseling may actually be more effective for religious and spiritual clients. The

second reason was that taking the vast number of people in the United States who

are religious and spiritual into consideration, these types of issues might be virtually unavoidable. Finally, Hall and Hall (1997) argue that it would be unethical for the counselor to ignore the religious and spiritual variable of human diversity during a counseling session. Because cultural background and values were often intertwined with religious or spiritual aspects of a person would be to neglect an integral part of a client's culture (Stander, Piercy, Mackirmon, & Helmeke, 1994).

Strategies for Integration

Assessment

There are a wide variety of techniques and strategies for integrating religion and spirituality into the counseling process. Tan (1996) highlights the importance of integrating spirituality and religion from the onset of therapy. This may entail taking a religious or spiritual history during the intake process. If the client shows an interest, more information can be gathered regarding the client's religious or spiritual background, including experiences, values and beliefs.

After determining the importance of religion and spirituality in the client's life, the counselor may choose to implement some spiritual assessments. Several assessments are available to further assess the client's level of spirituality and religiousness. These assessments include The Spiritual Well-Being Scale (Paloutzian & Ellison, 1991), The Spiritual Experience Index (Genia, 1991), and Hall and Edward's (1996) Spiritual Assessment Inventory. By completing a

spiritual assessment, the counselor may discern whether religion and spirituality have had a positive or negative influence on the client (Sperry & Giblin, 1996). These assessments can also give the counselor insight into the clients' perception of self and others. Additionally, the spiritual assessment may clarify connections, if any, between the clients' presenting issues and his/her religious and spiritual beliefs, values, and experiences (Hall & Hall, 1997).

Incorporate into the Therapeutic Process

After the initial intake and assessment of the level of spirituality and religion the client's life, there are various ways to incorporate these areas into the therapeutic process. Not only are there unique approaches to this integration, but counselors can also use his/her existing basic counseling techniques and theories to address religious and spiritual issues (Stander et al., 1994). Tan (1996) discussed two types of integration; implicit and explicit. The first type of integration, *implicit*, does not introduce religion or spiritual issues into the counseling sessions. Additionally, it does not incorporate religious practices or resources, such as prayer, into the sessions. The second type of integration, *explicit*, openly addresses the client's religious and spiritual issues. This type of integration does utilize spiritual and religious resources, such as prayer, sacred texts and referrals to religious institutions.

Practicing implicit integration often involves the counselor's own spirituality throughout the counseling process. One method that the counselor can use to

integrate his/her own spirituality involves the way that they listen during the session. For example, spirituality may influence the way that the counselor hears and further assesses the client's presenting issue. When listening to a client from a spiritual perspective, the counselor might utilize a meditative stance. This type of stance will help to focus the counselor on his or her own breathing, as well as emotions, cognitions, and images that may arise during the session. This can create several positive results. The first result is that the counselor may become more able to notice subtle details in the clients' body language. The second result this meditative stance may create is new and creative intuitive responses to the client. Listening to the client from a spiritual perspective or in a meditative way may also help enable the counselor to be more compassionate and respond with unconditional acceptance and help to foster unconditional positive regard. Third, the meditative environment may allow the client to let go of fixed ideas of self and view his/her issues in a different manner (Anderson & Worthen, 1997).

Explicit integration, as identified by Watson (1997), is bringing the client's religion or spirituality into the counseling session. He described three broad ways of including religion and spirituality into the counseling process, which include resources, culture and context.

Religion as Resources. The first method is to use religion as a resource. The religious traditions of the client can be used as a means of promoting healing or personal growth. In this manner, the counselor does not need to have the same

level of spirituality nor does the counselor need to possess the same religious background or values. Instead, the counselor must simply be open to the values and beliefs of the client. Simplistically, a prerequisite for any integration is respect for the clients' experiences and ideals (Thayne, 1997). Including religion as a resource into the counseling process, may include strategies such as prayer, contemplation or assigning homework that involves religious practices.

Religion as a Culture. According to Watson (1997), another way to incorporate spirituality and religion into the counseling process is to use the client's religion as a culture. This means using religion as a means to join with the client. For example, a client may prefer a counselor with the same religious views and belief systems. In addition, a counselor who is familiar with the client's religious traditions may be better able to understand the client's story or perspective. One illustration of this may be a Catholic marrying a non-Catholic and the issues that manifest as the two people and religions merge into one family unit.

Religion as a Context. Finally, the counselor may use religion as a context (Watson, 1997), integrating his or her own spirituality and religious beliefs into the therapy session. Although this was mention previously in this manuscript as an implicit integration, it can be turned into explicit integration by using self-disclosure as a method to creating an environment of safety and trust (Watson, 1997).

Implications for Therapy

Because the majority of people in the United States are religious or spiritual at some level (Gallup & Jones, 2000), it appears inevitable that counselors will work with clients who want to share, examine, or at least draw upon his/her beliefs during the therapeutic process. Religion and spirituality may also be more covertly intertwined with a plethora of issues, including marital, sexual, death and personal growth (Lovinger, 1990).

Therefore, counselors must be aware of both positive and negative implications, as well as ethical standards of integrating religion and spirituality with mental health counseling. Given the likelihood of encountering spiritual and religious issues in the counseling process, it is imperative that professional counselors seek training in this area. In addition to seeking knowledge on how to implement spirituality and religion into therapy, it would be very beneficial for the counselor to gain general knowledge about the core concepts and beliefs of world religions to help understand a client's subjective frame of reference (Genia, 1994).

Further Research and Study

Although there is more information available on the positive effects of integrating spirituality into the therapeutic process, there are still seemingly vast deficits that need to be studied further. Currently, most theory and research in this area primarily focuses on Judeo-Christian traditions and Western culture

(Richards & Bergin, 1997). It would be beneficial for further research to be completed on other spiritual and religious traditions, including Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. Furthermore, additional empirical research is needed on the effectiveness of using various techniques and strategies to integrate spirituality and religion into the therapeutic process. Perhaps with more empirical research available, the gap between psychology and science would be eliminated.

Conclusion

Mental health counselors need to have an understanding of what spirituality and religion is, as well as spiritual issues that may arise during the therapeutic counseling process, because many clients may have spiritual concerns that they want to address during his/her counseling journey. This is beneficial for clients in many ways and can also enhance the therapeutic process.

Successful counselors must establish therapeutic relationships with his/her clientele and attempt to understand the worlds they come from, with unbiased attitudes. They will consider the barriers to including spirituality into the sessions, remaining aware of ethical issues and boundaries. They will also be aware of different strategies to incorporate spirituality and ultimately see the benefits that spirituality has on the therapy sessions they facilitate.

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