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An introduction to adventure based counseling connected to couples and families

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Abstract

This paper demonstrates the value of Adventure Based Counseling (ABC) combined with couples and family counseling. The growth of ABC has gone through powerful changes from starting out with patients in a hospital to now being utilized in individual, group, couples, and family therapy. Looking at some main theoretical methods in the counseling field the totality of ABC is identified and combined with couple and family therapeutic goals. The importance of couple and family interaction has been diminished in our culture and the evolvement of ABC within those structures leads to a more productive family system.

An Introduction to Adventure Based Counseling Connected to Couples and Families

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Amanda L. Schara

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This paper demonstrates the value of Adventure Based Counseling (ABC) combined with couples and family counseling. The growth of ABC has gone through powerful changes from starting out with patients in a hospital to now being utilized in individual, group, couples, and family therapy. Looking at some main theoretical methods in the counseling field the totality of ABC is identified and combined with couple and family therapeutic goals. The importance of couple and family interaction has been diminished in our culture and the involvement of ABC within those structures leads to a more productive family system.

Experiential education and therapeutic wilderness programs first began in the United States in state hospitals (Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002). As a result of overcrowding, the children in the hospital had to live in tents on hospital grounds (Fletcher & Hinkle). The patients receiving “tent treatment” showed improved mental and physical health compared to those in beds (Fletcher & Hinkle). The helping profession became aware of this phenomenon in 1930 (Fletcher & Hinkle). They discovered the psychological needs of children and how therapeutic camping could facilitate those needs (Fletcher & Hinkle).

Outward Bound was then created, which was a more organized experiential education (Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002). Outward Bound was found by German educator Kurt Hahn who was a pioneer of experiential education (Fletcher & Hinkle). Hahn was a firm believer in learning by doing and he applied his ideas of experiential learning to Salem School where he taught (Fletcher & Hinkle). Hahn’s philosophy was to look for the total development of the person, which would extend beyond the classroom (Fletcher & Hinkle).

Through Hahn’s facilitation, he found that the experiences of wilderness and rescue training provided opportunities for developing character and maturity (Schoel & Maizell, 2004). The objectives are mostly obtained by teaching wilderness skills that are necessary in the wilderness as well as encouraging positive traits such as compassion and self reliance (Gillis & Gass, 1993). At the present time Outward Bound operates 41 centers in 24 countries and has

expanded to not only to the youth population where it originated, but to a population expanding to business executives and substance abusers (Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002).

As Hahn was introducing Outward Bound the concept of Project Adventure was being introduced (Moote & Wodarski, 1997). Project Adventure offered activities with ropes courses as well as other activities that were not tailored to be completed in the wilderness as in Outward Bound (Gillis & Gass, 1993). Project Adventure, created by Jerry Pieh was intended to bring Hahn's ideas to traditional schooling (Moote & Wodarski, 1997).

In 1971 with the help of grant money, Pieh found Outward Bound experienced staff members to work together with teachers and administrators to begin to write a curriculum to apply Outward Bound experiences to the classroom to create Project Adventure (Schoel & Maizell, 2002). Project Adventure's goals included learning to increase participants' sense of self-confidence, increase mutual support within a group, develop a higher level of agility and physical coordination, increase pleasure in one's physical self and in being with others, and increase familiarity and identification with the natural world (Moote & Wodarski, 1997).

After 1971 and the expansion of Project Adventure, professionals such as teachers, social workers, youth workers, therapists, psychologists, and counselors have been able to combine counseling and outdoors on many different levels

(Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002). This led to the evolution of Adventure Based Counseling also known as ABC (Schoel & Maizell, 2002). The first ABC workshop was offered in May 1979 and the response was reported to be strong (Schoel & Maizell). People from residential clinics, hospitals, therapeutic camps, and drug treatment centers attended the adventure based programs regularly (Schoel & Maizell). The positive response allowed ABC as well as other Project Adventure outreach programs to begin to grow (Schoel & Maizell).

There have been a wide variety of programs developed that use the principles of experiential education combined with therapeutic methods (Walsh-Burke, 2002). This combination was intended to help individuals and groups achieve self esteem, enhance self-efficacy, and improve communication and group problem solving skills (Walsh-Burke). The programs range from outdoor experiences to adventure programs, which have all become respected in the mental health community (Walsh-Burke). Experiential Education, Project Adventure, Outward Bound, and Adventure Based Counseling are the names that appear to be intertwined when describing adventure activities (Walsh-Burke). A significant amount of literature now supports the methodology of adventure activities with a variety of groups that include, but are not limited to at risk youth, clients with addiction, distressed couples, families, and clients with psychiatric disorders (Walsh-Burke).

Application of ABC

Methodology

Adventure based counseling interventions provide “a series of physical and social tasks, where the need for problem solving and communication provide situational analogies for problematic areas in the participant’s daily life” (Walsh-Burke, 2002, p. 52). The adventure experience differs from the more traditional therapies which are conducted in a typical office setting. “While many traditional therapies focus on introspective and analytical thinking through ‘talk it out,’ experiential therapies focus on direct and concrete experiences followed by reflection” (Walsh-Burke, 2002, p. 52).

Facilitator

In experiential programs, the facilitator creates an activity in which group members are required to work directly together to effectively solve the problem at hand (Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002). For example the group may have to find their way blindfolded out of a maze (Fletcher & Hinkle).

Careful facilitation is required to gain the full benefit of the experience in order for group participants to transfer their learning from the activities to life situations (Walsh-Burke, 2002). Metaphor is the key and of vital importance in adventure based interventions (Gillis & Simpson, 1994; Schoel & Maizell, 2002; Walsh-Burke, 2002). The impact of metaphors can be enhanced by the facilitator in several ways including careful selection of activities, framing of activities that

take place, briefing the group on the activities, and guiding the processing of the experience during the debriefing period (Schoel & Maizell, 2002).

In the debriefing period the group members are asked: to describe what they experienced during the activity given, what other experiences in their lives evoke similar feelings or observations in them, and how they can apply what they learned in the activity to other situations in their daily lives (Walsh-Burke, 2002). The concrete nature and shared experience of the activity is followed by a discussion of the meaning of the activity (Schoel & Maizell, 2002). After discussing the meaning of the activity, the participant can apply the experience increasing the probability of understanding what they learned (Schoel & Maizell).

Environment

The outdoor environment is often used in adventure therapy programs because of the belief that the unfamiliar environment can create healthy disequilibrium (Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002). “Putting clients in a state of dissonance is crucial for client change” (Fletcher & Hinkle, p. 285). When all of the participants are in an unfamiliar environment, they all begin on an even playing field (Fletcher & Hinkle). This sense of unbalance requires the group members to use different approaches to problem solving than they may use in an environment with which they are familiar (Fletcher & Hinkle).

Another benefit to outdoors and nature is that the atmosphere has been described as a healing environment on its own (Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002).

Benefits have been found at the beginning of an adventure experience in the form of increased awareness of a relationship with the physical environment with effortless attention to the environment (Fletcher & Hinkle). An additional benefit of being in nature is that it seems to have an increase in self-confidence and leads to a feeling of calmness (Fletcher & Hinkle). A third benefit of activities in nature is that there seems to be a new intensity to discover one's self when combined with ABC (Fletcher & Hinkle).

“Experiential learning programs are founded on the belief that learning or behavior change must focus on including direct experience in the process of growth” (Walsh-Burke, 2002, p. 53). The processing of the direct experience in the appropriate environment enables the participant to transfer learning that has occurred within the experience to other situations in life that they may face (Gillis & Simpson, 1994). The learning may be transferred when the participants need to use problem solving skills they have learned or when they need to cope with a challenge (Gillis & Simpson). Individual learning occurs as one is participating in the group activity (Gillis & Simpson).

Combining Counseling Theories with ABC

There are several theoretical perspectives that represent the foundation for the intervention methods with ABC (Moote & Wodarski, 1997). The primary therapies that are combined with adventure based counseling are cognitive behavioral, rational emotive behavioral, behavioral, gestalt, narrative, and

Adlerian (Burg, 2001; Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002; Gillis, 1985; Gillis & Dagley, 1985; Moote & Wodarski, 1997).

Cognitive Behavioral Theory

Looking at the cognitive behavioral approach that “thinking shapes behavior” and applying it to adventure based counseling is the goal of adventure based activities (Moote & Wodarski, 1997). The goal is to “change automatic thoughts of I can’t to I can” (Moote & Wodarski, p. 149). Cognitive theory is used to help clients understand the association between their experiences and their cognitive process (Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002). Participants can see how their thought processes affect their relationships with others as well as themselves (Moote & Wordarski, 1997).

Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy

Rational emotive behavioral therapy can be mostly effective while working with risk or perceived risk of an individual (Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002). This is when a person is in a low risk situation, but may perceive them selves as being in a high risk situation (Fletcher & Hinkle). “An individual’s emotional and behavioral responses to a stimulus (internal or external) are mediated by his or her perception and interpretation of the stimulus...” (Epstien, p. 5, 1982). With rational emotive therapy the participant can look at their irrational thoughts and can assess the reality of their perception of the risk (Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002). Such fears as taking risks, surpassing previous limits, and accepting personal

responsibility are confronted while participating in the activities (Fletcher & Hinkle).

Gestalt

Gestalt theory and adventure based counseling share a common emphasis on being in the here and now (Moote & Wodarski, 1997). Individuals process events while they are occurring (Moote & Wodarski, 1997). Gestalt theory points out that “the organism cannot be separated from the environment, and that behavior does not consist of several responses to several stimuli” (Moote & Wodarski, p. 149). This theory views behavior as a whole response to a whole behavior, which is referred to as wholeness (Moote & Wodarski). Relating while the activity is happening or being in the “here and now” orientation is a focal point of Gestalt (Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002; Moote & Wodarski, 1997)

Narrative Theory

Narrative theory’s technique focuses on rewriting a person’s “story” in their lives to look at the situation differently (Moote & Wodarski, 1997). The adventure based experience can often be used as a metaphor for a person to rewrite their past or their story in a therapeutic way (Moote & Wodarski). The power of using their experiences as a metaphor helps the person define their own realities (Burg, 2001).

Adlerian

Gillis & Dagley (1985) discussed that ABC is also reflective of the principles used in Adlerian psychology. The Adlerian preference for outside behavior change rather than just insight is preferred in individual or group settings (Gillis & Dagley). Participants learning by doing, can lead to an "I can do it" attitude which empowers the individual(s) (Gillis & Dagley). The empowerment creates a "natural high" experience when one has mastered a challenge which has tested him or her (Gillis, 1985). The "natural high" may lead an individual to a different insight which will encourage behavior change (Gillis).

ABC's Purpose

Goal

The overall goal of adventure based activities and programming for individuals is to strengthen a person's self esteem and self concept (Moote & Wordarski, 1997). The activities are used to enhance learning, growing, and developing while building skills such as trust, communication, and positive self-concepts (Torretta, 2004). ABC can be used with individuals, but most of the ABC programs emphasize group activities (Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002). The application of group counseling is essential to understand the group dynamics and each individual's roles (Fletcher & Hinkle).

The Sequence

The activities for the groups are presented in a sequence that allows the participants to easily progress from one challenge to the next to maintain involvement and for learning to continue through out the process (Glass & Shoffner, 2001). Proper sequence allows for a successful group experience with limited frustration, so participants can get the most out of the activities (Torretta, 2004).

The sequence in which the activities are presented is called elements (Glass & Shoffner, 2001). Elements may focus on leadership abilities, communication skills, and most importantly group cohesion (Glass & Shoffner). The elements are seen as being tailored to the group as a whole instead of the individual (Glass & Shoffner).

ABC with Couples and Families

Counseling Perspectives

Like clinical counseling, adventure counseling started with individual focus, then inspired groups, and gradually moved to couples and families (Smith, Carlson, Stevens-Smith, & Dennison, 1995). Counseling has grown from the individual to looking at the larger system in which we all live (Smith, et al.). Larger systems by which people are affected are relationships within their families (Smith, et al.). Combining ABC with families is also known as Adventure Family Therapy (Burg, 2001), Family Adventure Therapy (Neill,

2004), or Experiential Family Counseling (Gerstein, 1994). These programs evolved because the goals of adventure activities relate closely with most therapeutic goals for families in therapy (Neill, 2004).

The ABC model addresses the improvement of self-concept through adventure activities that stress trust building, goal setting, peak experiences, humor, and problem solving (Moote & Wodarski, 1997). Trust building would be a large benefit from ABC and could add humor back into the family or couple (Bandoroff). The activities require problem solving and cooperation which help to provoke such concepts as trust, fear, problem solving, and intimacy among others (Gillis, 1985).

Adventure activities have largely helped in identifying behavior patterns and structure within the family (Bandoroff, 1997). As families and couples evolve in their developmental cycle, they may often experience instability (Bandoroff). This lack of stability may create fear and confusion and the family may revert to past familiar ways of functioning that may or may not be healthy (Bandoroff). Families may find themselves in conflict while working out a problem in their adventure and as demands change, the family roles and the underlying family dynamic become apparent to the facilitator (Bandoroff, 1997; Neill, 2004). As a result family members are encouraged to experiment with obtaining different roles within the family structure (Neill, 2004).

Kugath (1997) reported that parents are spending billions of dollars each year trying to provide things in their children's lives to promote learning. Toys, piano lessons, dance classes, and private education are all implemented with the hope of enriching their child's life as well as providing an opportunity for the future (Kugath). Despite the family's attention to individual involvement, families are not taking the time and the energy needed to maintain the enrichment of the family unit (Kugath). Kugath (1997) reported the average father spends eight minutes per week with each of his children in purposeful conversation or activity. He also reported that mothers average eleven minutes, not showing much of a difference between the two (Kugath, 1997). Kugath questioned if families would be more resilient to breakdown if their ability to effectively communicate, problem solve, and maintain family cohesiveness were enhanced.

Adventure activities with families have been praised for how fully they engage all participants into the family dynamic helping to create therapeutic movement (Gillis & Booney, 1986). Observing how a couple or a family can or cannot work together on a common problem provides useful data for the counselor about the relationships within the family (Gillis & Booney). Another large benefit of working with couples and families in a group setting is that children can observe other children, and parents and/or couples can observe other parents and/or couples in how they problem solve (Gillis & Booney).

The Multi-Family Approach to ABC

ABC mostly uses a multi-family group format, meaning that multiple families, approximately 3-4 families are together in a session or an experience (Gerstein, 1994). When there is another family present, family members find that they are not unique in having problems in the family (Gerstein). Another great aspect of the multi-family approach is that families who have been in a dysfunctional pattern may have started to socially isolate themselves (Gerstein). Having them in a larger group can help them bring the family out of isolation and also helps the family to observe other family's behaviors which can bring a positive outcome and growth (Gerstein).

Emerging Fields

There are four emerging fields combining ABC with families. The first emerging field with families is recreation (Bandoroff, 1997; Burg, 2001; Gillis, Bandoroff, Clapp, Gass, Rudolph, & Nadler, 1990). Recreation is known as being short-term (Burg, 2001) and the goal is for the members to have fun, allowing the family members to participate together and have a good time regardless of the outcome of the activity (Bandoroff, 1997).

The second, enrichment, is characterized by structured sessions over multiple days that purposefully address common family or relationship problems within the group (Bandoroff, 1997). The focus would be learning new methods of communication for couples and family members while working on conflict

resolution as well as problem solving (Burg, 2001). The activities would be specifically related to skill building rather than tailored to a particular family (Gillis et al., 1990).

The next field is adjunctive therapy, which strives to address the family issues within the family system (Bandoroff, 1997). This is usually used when one family member is in treatment and the other family members are included to help make change in the family system (Burg, 2002). Adjunctive therapy helps take focus off the identified patient and looks at the whole family (Bandoroff, 1997). The format includes one to four day adventure experiences in conjunction with one or more treatment approaches (Bandoroff).

The last emerging field is primary therapy which is best recognized by using an adventure activity or sequence of activities as the primary change agent (Bandoroff, 1997; Gillis, et al., 1990). This means that the sequence of activities not just activities alone would be tailored to each family as a whole system (Bandoroff; Gillis, et al.). Primary therapy's format could be part of a single session, but is best used with multiple treatments (Bandoroff, 1997; Gillis, et al.) and is usually customized to meet the family's needs (Burg, 2001).

The desired outcome of these programs ranges from pure recreation to primary therapy, with several goals in between (Kugath, 1997). The piece in common with all of the activities for families and couples is the great potential for an individual to grow alone as well as collectively with others in a setting that

may be more comfortable and less intimidating than a traditional counseling setting (Kugath). Lack of action during a session in a traditional counseling setting can limit the potential outcome for a family or couple (Kugath).

Some activities may involve non-verbal exercises, which can be a powerful learning tool (Morris & Cinnamon, 1975). To take away the tool of words can be frightening and overwhelming for some participants (Morris & Cinnamon). Not being able to speak can lead to a positive and educational experience (Morris & Cinnamon). In order for a positive experience to be obtained the facilitator needs to be able to assess the member's readiness for a non-verbal exercise and again showing the importance of the role of the facilitator (Morris & Cinnamon).

When action within the therapy employs a nonverbal style of communication within the relationship, conflicts are resolved through intellectual and emotional energies (Gillis & Booney, 1986). "The active use of one's body in order to confront a physical problem will generalize to the use of one's psyche to master psychosocial challenges within and beyond the therapeutic environment" (Gillis & Booney, p. 213). Talk therapies do not work as fast or as well as being involved with the body in the therapeutic process (Gillis & Booney).

Lazarus (2000), reported that within the initial session when he does couples therapy he "examines presenting dissatisfactions, determines if one or both partners may require individual therapy, and inquires about the basic feelings

and assesses the viability of the relationship, determining the main strengths and weaknesses...”(p. 226). Lazarus reported that he will assess all of the aspects of the couple through their verbal communication as well as their body language within a traditional setting. Looking at adventure activities with the couple compared to the session with Lazarus, the adventure counseling could determine the couple’s dynamics by not only their verbal communication and body language, but the counselor would be able to look at the couple’s problem solving skills (Lazarus). The adventure based counselor could see how the couple interacts outside of the office, how the couple deals with conflict, how the couple depends or does not depend on one another, and how the couple gets past the problem (Lazarus). What can be seen in a relationship with ABC cannot be seen in a typical therapeutic session such as Lazarus described (Sibthorp, 2003).

Conclusion

Adventure based counseling and its activities are seen as being critical for learning new skills. “The most important learning coming from social interaction and the efficacy developed in dealing with the necessary living tasks inherent in adventure settings” (Sibthorp, 2003, p. 85). As counselors working with individuals, groups, couples, or families, we are searching for ways on how to help our clients learn new skills in order for them to deal with their problems more effectively (Sibthorp). ABC is an approach of active counseling that helps

to promote growth in our clients as well as being a learning tool for some of the life lessons needing to be learned (Sibthorp).

The field of ABC has developed on many levels creating yet another therapeutic approach to clients and their families (Moote & Wodarski, 1997). Leading theories have validated the effect that ABC can have using a variety of different approaches (Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002; Moote & Wodarski, 1997). Looking at the importance of activities and reaching the goals of ABC, one is able to understand how the “learning by doing” notion can have an impact on finding insight into our behaviors, our actions, and our family system (Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002).

Being a fairly new approach to therapy it is promising that there are emerging fields within ABC (Moote & Wodarski, 1997). This proves that there is an importance to the quality of outcome that facilitators are seeing within ABC with couples and families (Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002; Moote & Wodarski, 1997). Gerstein, 1994, states with ABC, “more information is gathered in a few hours of observing the family’s interactions... than can be gathered during session in the office” (p. 4-5). Gerstein helps to illustrate the importance that people are putting on ABC therapy today.

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