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Writing for Healing: Writing One's Family History as a Therapeutic Process

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Mental health professionals are trained to provide a variety of services to clients. The profession is continually searching for interventions that will reduce stress and enhance a client's overall well-being. The adult population in the United States is growing exponentially due in part to the baby boom era of the 40s and 50s as well as to medical advances that directly impact longevity. The counseling profession must keep pace with this cohort group's psychological needs in an ever-changing societal context. The challenge for mental health professionals is to design effective intervention strategies that will promote psychological health that embraces cultural diversity.

Baby boomers are now reaching late adulthood – having attained more education and wealth than any generation before them. They have been successful young adults, characterized by a commitment to career and family. Approaching middle adulthood brings a new challenge – psycho/socio/emotional integration. Gould (1978) envisions middle adulthood as an opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of the self that is essential for psychological growth and building greater ego strength. This ego strength helps the adult cope with life's stressors. Late adulthood is a time when individuals seek opportunities to guide the next generation (Erikson, 1963) and develop wisdom or as Vaillant (1993) describes it – being “keeper of the meaning” – that is becoming the caretaker or steward of one's history and traditions. Guiding the next generation involves contributing to community-building by serving as consultant, guide, mentor, or coach to

those who are younger. Being keeper of the meaning is evidenced by embracing tradition and learning ways to assist others with incorporating tradition in a contemporary context. Both are important, providing guidance and the sharing of history and tradition.

Developmental theorists suggest that healthy ego development occurs when individuals can meet the developmental tasks associated with each anticipated stage of psychological development (Erikson, 1963; Vaillant, 1993; White, 1975). Vaillant (1993) refers to the ego as the master of stress. Empirical evidence purports that adults who exhibit healthy ego development demonstrate the ability to endure and even grow from life's challenges (LaBouvie-Vief, Hakim-Larson, & Hobart, 1987; Pearlin & Schooler, 1978; Pipher, 1996). It is imperative that we equip adults to "meet the demands of a highly complex, rapidly changing, 21st century society (Lewis, Lewis, Daniels, & D'Andrea, 2003).

There is little argument amongst mental health professionals about what is needed to help foster psychological health during adulthood. The problem we face in the American culture is making available experiential opportunities for adults to participate in that would serve to facilitate this growth. An individual could invest in weekly psychotherapy to work on developmental issues or possibly travel to some remote place to spend time reflecting in solace. Although these options are useful strategies that have been shown to promote psychological growth, they both require an investment of time and money. It is of critical importance that health care professionals provide community-based opportunities for adults that are readily accessible, low in cost, effective, enjoyable, and fit the hectic American lifestyle. The field of community counseling provides practitioners with a framework for developing intervention strategies to promote

psychological growth for individuals within the context of community (Lewis, Lewis, Daniels, & D'Andrea, 2003). Of great importance is how community counseling embraces diversity and context where intervention strategies are tailored to fit the needs of a specific clientele.

Americans have been creative in their quest to meet the developmental challenges of middle to late adulthood. Adults have sought to gain a sense of personal history through Genealogy, discovering one's roots. Genealogical research by individuals in the United States grew tremendously between 1920 and 1940 with Americans flocking to Genealogy Centers, Census Bureau's, and other institutions maintaining historical and family records (Allen, Embry & Mehr, 1995). Searching for one's roots took another surge in the 1960s when computer technology was implemented advancing our ability to store, process, and retrieve data. And of course today, the World Wide Web has made genealogical research more easily accessible than ever before. Statistics shows this cohort group engaging in the search for their ancestors with great zeal, oftentimes becoming obsessed with the need to know (Allen, Embry & Mehr, 1995). Being keeper of meaning implies that one has knowledge of their family history, traditions, and the contexts with which they came from. Conducting genealogy helps one to discover their cultural context, get in touch with their heritage and gain a sense of connection beyond the present. The next developmental task is to make sense of all of this information – that is, to derive meaning.

There are several fields of study that provide guidance as we seek to understand how to design opportunities for adults aimed at promoting healthy ego development. The focus of constructivist psychotherapies is to facilitate meaning-making and creative

aging. Life is seen as a journey and a story needing to be told. Baird Carlsen (1995) defines meaning-making as: “meanings evolve and broaden from individual words and ideas into clusterings, elaborations, constructions, and reconstructions – systems that gain constructive power as they develop, intertwine, and transform in evolutions of personal meaning” (p. 127). This type of therapy involves the process of making meaning and re-creating one’s life story.

Another contribution from the field of psychotherapy is the Genogram - a multi-generational diagram containing family information that is used for assessment and intervention purposes in individual and family therapy (McGoldrick, Gerson, & Shellenberger, 1999). The Genogram has also been found to be a valuable tool for depicting information and understanding patterns in nonclinical applications (e.g. genealogy research, formulating medical histories, and career assessment). Genograms can be constructed using words, symbols, or pictures and by individuals of any age.

And lastly, the healing benefit of the written word as a vehicle for connection, self-reflection, creativity, truth seeking and emotional expression. Writing in journals, diaries, and letters have been used for centuries to gain psychological insight and a greater awareness of the self or connection with another. Writing can take various forms: a personal memoir, creating a family record, an essay, or poetry. Writing classes for personal growth by adults continue to be very popular (DeSalvo, 1999; Kanin, 1981). Sachs (2003) contends that “we must never underestimate the strength of the curative power that we lay claim to when we take time to chart our innermost realms with words” (p. 21).

Resources

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