Traditional Healing and Mental Health Counseling

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INTRODUCTION

Indigenous people of the world have used the services of medicine men and traditional healers from time immemorial. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), 80% of the world’s population consults traditional healers. With an emerging globalization of health services in the world, there is a need for western mental health practitioners to learn and understand the practices of indigenous healers across the globe [1].

“As a reflexive process, counseling and psychotherapy has been accommodating change since its earliest beginnings” [2]. So [3] contends that each culture has its own conceptual or explanatory model for illness and health and as Moodley & Sutherland argues, there is no single universal worldview regarding causation of illness or appropriateness of treatment. So since traditional healing is commonly used in most parts of Africa, Asia and Latin America and for millions of people living in the rural areas of this part of the world [4], and among Native Americans and First Nation Canadians [1,5,6], mental health counselors have a daunting task and are faced with an urgency to learn the ways of traditional healers, so as to accommodate the counseling services needed by clients who come from diverse areas of the world.

Traditional healers comprise mostly of herbalists, diviners, birth attendants and traditional surgeons and other helpers who counsel and listen to their clients by utilizing unique practices, approaches and techniques. Traditional healers make a lot of contributions when it comes to counseling individuals that inform contemporary counseling practice. They use holistic counseling techniques and practices that emphasize and focus on the whole person. Mind, body and spirit of an individual are intricately assessed and clients are evaluated so as to maintain a comprehensive inquiry of an individual’s needs necessary for effective practice.

Traditional healers are also able to relate culturally to their clients because they come from the same culture. Effective counseling and healing occur because traditional healers and their clients share the same culture, experiences, understanding, worldview, and views of illness, disease and what a problem entails with their clients [6]. In the same vein, mental health counselors can learn a lot about their clients’ culture when they are not from the same culture as their clients, to empower and empathize with them. Saleh’s [7] point of view that there is a triadic or three-pronged counseling relationship between the counselor (traditional healer or mental health counselor), the client, and a third party: culture is of paramount importance as we look at how we can work with clients as mental health counselors borrowing some techniques and practices from traditional healers’ success with clients.

As mental health counselors, we can learn a lot from traditional healers’ techniques and practices. We can incorporate culture, holistic methods and techniques and involve the family and community. This we can do, by delving into issues related to physical, mental, social, emotional, and family, community and spiritual aspects of life vis-a-vis the problems clients bring to counseling. Traditional healers have therefore been able to teach us over the years that helpers’ main function is to help restore the balance and harmony to mind, body, spirit and community.

Counselors must join with traditional healers to make the world a healthy place for clients. Counselors can do this by acknowledging the wisdom that healers bring to the table by interning, going for practicums and observing their indigenous practices and techniques in their natural environment. As Hartmann & Gone [8] suggests through their case study, incorporating traditional healers into modern mental health treatment centers might be the twenty first century best practices that leads to better outcome for all our culturally diverse clients.

The days when traditional healing was regarded as “primitive,” unrefined, and as practice confined only to rural communities are gone. Provided that counselors are ready to lay aside their inherent biases and prejudices that are presently depriving individuals access to holistic health, they can acquire much knowledge from the techniques used by traditional healers. Counselors must position themselves to become receptive and objective in observing and studying the practices, methods and actions of traditional healers and “be willing to provide interdisciplinary care to citizens of the world” [5,6].

REFERENCES

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