HEALING AND SPIRITUALITY: PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC CASE

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Abstract

This article is an invitation to reflect on how we can handle the spiritual, existential aspects described by Nossrat Peseschkian in his method of Positive and Transcultural Psychotherapy. The existential aspect was analyzed during the process of therapy and used as a strong resource. According to the Role model, and related with Basic Conflict, author looks at the patient’s relationship with God. The resources offered by religion in psychotherapy can be: hope, acceptance, the meaning of life (useful in depression, death), prayer (which reduces anxiety), meditation exercises and rituals. It is determined that where the patient is facing existential problems, the resources offered by religion are indisputable.

Keywords: Positive Psychotherapy, spirituality, religion, mental health.

Introduction

Concerning religion, parents can become a model/anti-model for their children. So, children will take over or reject the religious norms of parents and/or adhere to other norms (primary we). Man, from the point of view of positive psychotherapy is good by nature and composed of 4 areas: physical, mental, social and spiritual. To preserve health is necessary for a harmonious development of all these areas. We have to give, time and energy equally to each side.

Where there is faith, religious values can become resources in the therapeutic process.

Depending on how the divine is interiorized: as good, loving, supportive or, on the contrary, bad, authoritarian, judgmental; the patient will be oriented to use, to gain access to resources or to put religious perceptions in perspective. How is the relationship with God, based on love or fear?

The resources offered by religion in psychotherapy can be: hope, acceptance, meaning of life, prayer, meditations, and rituals. Where the patient is facing existential problems (illness/death, lack of sense/emptiness) the resources offered by religion are undeniable.

“In God we trust” is printed on the American money. It looks like Americans felt the need to put this on their money in order to keep in mind what gives them a stronghold.

Methodology

According to Nossrat Peseschkian (Peseschkian, 1977), “trust” is a capacity which is developed in early childhood in the symbiotic relationship “I-Thou”. Spiritual trust, and trust in the future and culture is developed by the model of the parents relation to the world, the “Origin We”. An infant will learn to accept oneself by being accepted and loved in the relationship with the parents first. When the “I” and “Thou” differentiation occurs, trust and faith can be developed in a wider relation with other people to form the “We”, a representation of the I in relation to others. The “capacity to love” (Peseschkian, 1977) represents the capacity to accept oneself and others. Through development of the capacity to love, connections to other capacities are made. The basic “capacity to know” means differentiation concerning social norms. The two basic capacities are the foundation upon which the capacity for faith develops. The balance between religion and science in many ways expresses the two basic capacities of to know and to love. Science stands for the
capacity to know and religion for the capacity to love. Belief is developed from the capacity to love and becomes understandable in its contents through the capacity to know. Nossrat Peseschkian looks at religion as giving meaning, and faith as searching meaning (Peseschkian, 1985).

As positive psychotherapists I come in contact with the existential topics such as religion, spirituality, philosophy of life. In my work experience, I have found that for some patients these are important resources while for others they can become obstacles or complicate their lives. The principle of balance helps me to understand and work with this aspect.

Thus, the question was born: with what and how religion, culture, philosophy of life can help in healing, or, on the contrary, can accentuate disorders. How can religion help with in healing, how exactly does it support healing? Or, what aspect of religion can lead to disorders?

Many sayings and proverbs referring to God exist in every country and culture. Some examples: God helps those who help themselves; God gives everyone a song; God moves in mysterious ways; help yourself to help God help you; God works through us, God sees you; God be with you, God is everywhere; God help us; Trust in God and tie your camel; he has caught God by the leg. What do these countless proverbs actually mean, also in therapy?

God still for most of our clients is a part of our culture, of our tradition, of our daily life. In other words, faith is part of our collective unconscious that nourishes our conscious life. In any culture, religious beliefs have inspired the educational system, art, literature, the existence of humanity itself. Religion gives us rules that govern the way we live together and define the human being’s position and the perspective he has on life. Nossrat Peseschkian distinguishes in his book “In Search of Meaning” (Peseschkian, 2016) the terms “faith”, “religion”, and “church”. This helps in therapy to clarify and understand the specific meaning for the clients. In the word “religion”, he said, grows a lot of misunderstanding. He refers to the human capacity to find meaning while religion can give meaning, science supports to find this meaning.

God is differently perceived in cultures, countries, families and individuals, according to N. Peseschkian. “Religion is like a medicine that works appropriately for the essence of man. When a falsely-understood religion leads to disturbance, fixation, inhibition in development, and rigidity in intellectual defenses, it must be nonsense. Feuerbach labeled it pathology instead of theology; Marx and Engels spoke of religion as the opiate of the masses, and Freud caricatured it as an insurance company” (Peseschkian, 2016).

Theory and spiritual background. Nossrat Peseschkian describes science and religion as two wings that man can use to progress. One cannot fly with only one wing. If people try to fly with the wing of religion only, they will end up in dogmatism, superstition. If one uses the wing of science only, one will fly in the despair of materialism.

To be useful, religion and psychotherapy must be in balance. Peseschkian said: Psychotherapy helps us live; spirituality opens the ability to understand life. “The purpose of an ideology of a conception of the world as a religion is to consciously acknowledge the human values, aim and meaning of life, while the exact sciences seek and find explanations for the legalities. If religion and science really are intended to be of use for human beings, they should be complete and form a unit. Religion does not replace psychotherapy and psychotherapy is not a substitute for religion.”

Thus, we return to our question: with what and how can religions, spirituality help us in our activity as therapists, in healing or on the contrary, confuse us, keeping the disturbances, the imbalance.

What we certainly know as psychotherapists is that religious concepts or religious norms become internal beliefs. As we know from positive psychotherapy, through their relationship with religion, parents can become role models or anti-role models for their children. Thus, children will take over or reject the religious norms of their parents by keeping them, or adhering to others by rejection (Primary We).

The human being, from the point of view of positive psychotherapy (according to the principle of balance) is good by nature and consists of 4 areas: body, mental, social and spiritual. In order to preserve health and promote the harmonious development of all areas, we must give equal time, attention and energy to each part. Here it is good to see if the area of religion, philosophy of life is over or under represented. If the area of religion, philosophy of life is over represented or too developed, then an imbalance occurs and the other areas are not covered. If I pray all day and stop working, I will have nothing to support myself with, I will have nothing to help me live. If I don’t invest time and energy in relationships, the contact area, I can wake up alone one day, without support from those around me. If I just look at God and don’t take care of my body, I can get sick. The over representation can become more flexible in counseling and therapy.
Results

Therapeutic application. According to role model, and related with basic conflict, I can look at the patient’s relationship with God. What is the relationship with God based on? Fear or love? How did the patient develop a relationship with God? Here we can investigate what the patient’s representation of God is, is he seen as a friend or foe, do I love him or not? How do I feel about him? And I am trying to find out which of the parents had the same relationship with God. And, what they asked, waited for the patient in order to give him acceptance, love.

Where there is faith, religion can become a resource in the psychotherapeutic process. The resources offered by religion in psychotherapy can be: hope, acceptance, the meaning of life (useful in depression, death), prayer (which reduces anxiety), meditation exercises and rituals. Obviously, where the patient is facing existential problems, the resources offered by religion are indisputable.

Case presentation

Ovidiu (name was changed), shows up at the office visibly tense and tormented. The problem he faces is about his marital relationship. He has been married for 17 years. The relationship began with respect and appreciation, without love or affection from the patient.

Currently, the relationship with his wife is very deteriorated. In this context, he falls in love with a colleague at work. He develops a romantic relationship with her, but they remain at a platonic level, because he considers it a sin to have sex outside of marriage. Feelings of guilt are very high and developed also due to his catholicism. He also shows an emphasis on the representation of secondary capacities. Secondary abilities and strong adherence to the norms of the Catholic Church lead to the presence of a strongly represented superego. He is a great representation in the religious area at the same time with a strong desire, due to the fear of respecting the rules imposed by the church, of obeying them, as he did in his relationship with his father. Obedience is represented to the maximum. This is where the basic conflict appears, I obey my father, I am afraid of him, I only do what I am allowed to do. What is currently being transposed into the actual conflict, I submit to the church and do only what the church and its norms allow me to. Otherwise, I will be punished and burn in hell forever. God (father in the past) will not forgive me and I will be forever punished.

He explained to me that in the Catholic religion divorce is not accepted and if you divorce you go to hell.

The relationship with his wife is very dysfunctional, often leading to physical violence from both sides, which has ended only with police intervention. “Hell on earth”, from my point of view. He is dominated by his wife, obeying her too, he feels guilty about her because in the past he was helped by his wife’s father to complete his higher education. Due to these studies he currently has a good job. He prays to God day and night for his wife to leave him, this being seen as the only way for him to be free and exonerated from guilt before God.

This is what his life looked like when he came for therapy.

The predominant emotion is fear, embodied in the present in the fear of God (in the past the fear of the father). Psychodynamically, at the basic conflict, we see a buzzing and violent relationship with the father and with many requirements oriented towards secondary capacities’ (obedience, punctuality, seriousness). The relationship with the mother was also characterized by requirements oriented towards secondary capacities, but without aggressively (obedience, seriousness).

Totally devoid of love, support, acceptance, he goes to the Catholic Church where he feels a divine love, an acceptance to which he reacts unconsciously by offering the blind obedience required by his father in the past.

In therapy, we worked a lot on this differentiation between father and God and on the way the two relationships overlapped (submission to father / submission to God, religion; fear of father / fear of God). And we worked out the distinctions between God an church Institutions.

In the absence of positive representations, the relationship with religion with the religious norms that have been internalized, the relationship with God has greatly developed. He, accepts himself, only when is following religious norms.

His actual conflict was: “I do not divorce, because I will be punished forever and burn in hell”. In this point, being aware that near the spiritual problem also lay his ability to make decisions, procrastination, I told him that he could also consult a Catholic priest to take the route of annulment of the marriage.

We worked also at the key conflict, in order to be less polite with his wife and be more honest with her; and he was able to verbalize this in the process of therapy. In therapy, he was able to verbalize the actual conflict: if I do not submit to God, he will no longer love and save me. And, also, the basic conflict, if I don’t obey my father, he will punish me and hit me.

I worked with the transcultural model of other religions where husbands can have multiple wives, as in Islam. He verbalized that thinks could be different if he had had a different religion. Sometimes I used humor, with reflection such as: “you are more Catholic than the pope “and he was able to make fun of it.

Finally, he got the strength to move out of the house where he lived with his wife, but without an official divorce.
He was living on his own and continuing the relationship with his girlfriend.

His final solution was still to avoid confrontation with his wife (avoidance being one of the frequently used defense mechanisms), and to go on a mission abroad for one year.

Until then, he will leave the decision in God’s hands, and maybe, who knows, before he returns, his wife will find someone else.

**Conclusion**

As human beings, we need a spiritual orientation, values, a philosophy of life for a harmonious experience and a balanced mental health and need to be conscious about our own spiritual model as therapists. In positive psychotherapy, this existential aspect is analyzed during the process of therapy and also used as a strong resource.

The case presented was one in which there was not enough time to find a final solution. The patient “had to” discontinue therapy because he would start a service mission outside the country.

We can heal only in interaction with our clients and with their readiness and courage to work with their potential. Sometimes, we could refer patients also to the priest when this kind of approach is needed.

As N. Peseschkian said: “Religion does not replace psychotherapy and psychotherapy is not a substitute for religion.” As psychotherapists, we can collaborate with doctors, social workers and at other times with priests, considering that the human being consists of 4 areas: body, mental, social, and spiritual.

**References**

