

UNDERSTANDING SYMBOLS WHEN WORKING WITH ANXIOUS RELIGIOUS CLIENTS IN POSITIVE PSYCHOTHERAPY



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Abstract

The article illustrates specifics of working with religious clients in the context of Positive and Transcultural Psychotherapy. The article touches upon important aspects of using metaphors which are close to the perception of a person's spiritual and ideological characteristics. The use of metaphors, parables, and references to scriptures helps to establish a good contact with the patient, assisting the therapist to achieve a greater therapeutic success. A particularly significant effect is achieved in working with religious people with anxiety disorders.

As noted below, it is extremely important to take into account clients' cultural background and choose metaphors and images that are close to his/her worldview. This case clearly illustrates how well-chosen references to religious symbols improved the therapeutic effect of working with a psychologist.

Keywords: positive psychotherapy, faith, religiosity, anxiety, anxiety disorder, mental health

Introduction

This article analyzes the impact of religious beliefs on a client with an anxiety disorder, the process of therapy and the effectiveness of religious metaphors and symbolism in working with her. It considers, based on a specific case, what an important role a person's existential experiences play in therapy using the PPT method.

Psychotherapy and religion have much in common: both deal with spiritual values and seek to help in overcoming suffering, and there is no conflict between them. The goal of religion is the salvation of the soul, the goal of psychotherapy is the healing of the soul. N. Peseschkian emphasized that faith is inherent in every person, and religion deals with the meaning of being and gives it to a person, defining the norms that regulate interpersonal relations and the position of a person in the general picture of the world, giving meaning to his existence. Psychology, in turn, performs the

tasks of scientific understanding of the conditions for the implementation of these norms, conflicts arising from differences in norms, and the ability of a person to find a way out of these conflicts (Peseschkian, 2016). Instead of ignoring or ridiculing religious values, it is more correct to support them and emphasize the importance of the basic universal postulates of faith. The stronger the faith of a person, the greater is the psychotherapeutic effect of the use of religious symbols and meanings.

Case

Client Anna (name was changed), 37 years old, a refugee from the war zone (Mariupol, Ukraine).

The client came in with a clinically diagnosed anxiety disorder. She had obvious symptoms: sudden mood swings, sudden panic anxiety, sometimes reaching panic attacks, difficulty concentrating, sleep disturbance, increased fatigue, and conflict. She had fled with her family from military operations, had come under fire, her

husband, who was traveling with her, was wounded, and she provided him with assistance. According to her, the first signs of her condition appeared after she heard the sounds of nearby explosions and gunfire and manifested itself in the form of panic attacks: panic fear, rapid heartbeat, difficulty breathing and swallowing.

According to the Balance Model, her thoughts and attention were for the most part concentrated in the fantasy zone, to a significant extent and to the detriment of other spheres. She paid a minimum of attention to herself, avoided contact even with people close to her, did not want to do anything, referring to constant painful fatigue and impotence. Nothing pleased her, for the most part she did not want anything. Relations with her husband became more complicated. According to her, he was tired of her constant complaints, irritability and low moods. Lack of sex was one of the important reasons that led to a critical state of family relations. Communication with her children had dropped off greatly. The children were also under great stress.

The reasons that led the client to an anxiety disorder date back to the period of the pandemic when she lost her main high-paying job. Military operations and the subsequent migration to Odessa sharply intensified and formalized the emerging pathology.

Of all the primary actual abilities, she retained only Faith in the form of rational religiosity. As she was a religious person, and her religiosity intensified with the outbreak of hostilities, the client's own behaviour was frustrating because she regarded it as sinful. At the same time, she could not find the strength in herself to do the right thing, from the point of view of religion because she did not realize the underlying reasons for her behaviour. In fact, she was escaping into illness, inactivity, and loneliness.

Being a developed and educated person, she tried to work on herself and to analyse what was happening to her and in the world around her. That is why she turned to a psychologist for help.

During the initial stages of counselling, the emotional reactions of the client were clarified, information was obtained about her relationship with the outside world and other people, lifestyle and interests. Manifestations of pathological anxiety and related disorders were identified.

In the process of counselling, recommendations were developed on how the family members could get out of their current state and improve their

lives. On the physical plane, several recommendations were given to improve the physical condition of the client. Treatment for anxiety disorders is possible only with a set of methods based on changing a person's lifestyle, psychotherapy and taking medications. Because it was impossible to obtain any psychoactive medications, such as antidepressants, treatment recommendations were for traditional medicine. The use of herbal preparations such as melissa, motherwort, hawthorn, valerian, and chamomile were found to be optimal in this case. These herbs, acting on the human body, have a relaxing effect, which temporarily relieve anxiety disorders and their causes.

In the areas of the body and activity, emphasis was placed on the correct lifestyle: daily routine, balanced nutrition, physical activity, other activity, simple meditation on the church music and auto training. She was recommended to diversify her life, increase the number and depth of emotional contacts.

In the stages of encouragement and verbalization, I used parables and sayings from the Holy Scriptures, integrating theology into psychotherapy. Emphasis was placed on religious dogma, the need to realize that the client "is under the continuous gaze of the Almighty and under His protection. Nothing can harm or benefit anyone without the will or against the will of the Almighty." The realization that the Almighty will manage and provide opportunities to resolve the current situation helped the client perk up and find hope for a better future.

Many parables and sayings of the Holy Scriptures that I used in my work carried a life-affirming message and strengthened the confidence that even in the most difficult and tragic situation, there is always a way out and a favourable solution. I reinforced this with the words of the Apostle Paul, where he wrote that when things are hard, we need to take care of our neighbours. I managed to switch the client's attention from self-pity and apathy to the fact that her loved ones also suffer and need her support and help.

In addition, the repeated references in the Bible that man was created for the joy and glorification of the Creator and His creation, the emphasis on the value of human life and its physical shell, as a "vessel of the Spirit", led the client to realize the importance of taking care of herself and her health.

Discussion

This article draws on one of many examples of working with a religious client with an anxiety disorder and emphasizes the significant importance of considering the client's religious world view in counselling and therapy. This reveals the great potential of using a transcultural approach to work with religious symbolism - parables, symbols, and metaphors. A correct and accurate approach to religious values in therapy helps to establish a more deep and persistent trust on the part of the client and, accordingly, more successful work with him or her.

Anxiety is present in every person, even a conditionally healthy one, and performs its natural functions as a psychological mechanism for adapting to stressful situations and environmental conditions. In these cases, we can rationally relate our anxiety to the specific factors of what is happening. Manifestations of non-pathological forms of anxiety caused by the natural preoccupation of specific situations of reality do not last long and pass after the resolution of the situations that caused them. Moreover, these states encourage a person to more intense activity, both physical and mental, to find a way out of the situations created by the anxiety and to further rethink them. Usually, these anxiety states do not leave any negative consequences.

An anxiety disorder is a type of neurotic condition in which a person is in a state of constant expectation of some unpleasant event, as opposed to experiencing fear of a real or imagined threat. Then, as soon as anxiety shifts to the area of the irrational, it can develop into a pathological state, acquiring the character of a neurotic disease, characterized by a permanent feeling of anxiety in relation to everything that surrounds it. If a person stays in this state long enough, it closes him/herself off from the outside world, neglecting contact even with people close to her, and failing to take care of him/herself in all the areas of life. In the context of hostilities, pandemics, forced migration of the population and deteriorating living conditions, anxiety besets a large part of the population, if not everyone.

The main rational factors that cause anxiety are: a real threat to life, body, property and loved ones. Pathological anxiety is characterized by prolonged total irrational fears, which exhausts a person physically, plunging him into a state of helplessness without alternatives. The fear of waiting for a possible death, injury, loss of loved ones or

something material, paralyzes a person and seriously worsens the quality and depth of his/her life and manifests itself in the form of specific psychopathological symptoms. At the same time, the mechanism of displacement at the conscious level often works.

The concepts of psychotherapy, based on the ideas of Positive and Transcultural Psychotherapy by Nossrat Peseschkian, involve considering any difficult situation in a person's life not only from the viewpoint of its traumatic aspects and getting out of them but rather in the search for resources in the person's corresponding experiences in order to overcome them. A striking feature of the method of Positive and Transcultural Psychotherapy is precisely the transcultural approach and the use of various mythologies. The most important thing in this is the religious beliefs of a person. Without taking them into account, it can be difficult and sometimes impossible to help the suffering person find ways to heal the spiritual trauma. The founder of the PTP, who grew up in a Baha'i religious family, studied at a Catholic school, and later, lived in exile in a multicultural environment in which there were representatives of various religious denominations. Thus, he had the opportunity to perceive the importance of the religious world view of people and its influence on their lives. In today's understanding of this most complex topic, despite significant differences, there is a common understanding among both psychologists and theologians that it is impossible to ignore the influence of religiosity on therapeutic processes. Of course, as R. Skynner notes, "the differences immeasurably exceed the similarities," but the place "where both of these dimension's meet is at the crossroads inside each person, where the line of time intersects with the line of eternity, with its level and scale." (Skynner Robin, 1998).

Nossrat Peseschkian noted that religion (faith) belongs to the sphere of primary abilities - to love, because religion and worldview correspond to emotionality. Religion claims to give meaning and presupposes an obligation for this (Peseschkian, 2016).

Many different studies have been conducted to determine the impact of religion on a person's mental health. In one of these studies, the results of which are presented in the book "Religion and Mental Health" (Schumaker, 1992), the authors come to the conclusion that faith, giving meaning to existence, reduces existential anxiety, and inwardly oriented religiosity correlates with a high level of health, as well as positive self-worth and a

low level of neurotic guilt. The results clearly indicated that the synchronism of religious beliefs with their corresponding behaviour contributes to a better prediction of resolution of extra- and intra-personal conflicts.

Another confirmation of the positive influence of religion on factors of personal well-being was found in Ellison's study. It showed that individuals with a strong religious faith are characterized by a high degree of life satisfaction, personal happiness, and low levels of consequences of traumatic life events (Ellison, 1983).

Individual elements of moral psychology are extremely important in the therapeutic field and should not be neglected. An example of this is the article by R. Walters "Forgiveness: an essential element of an effective life." (Walters, 1984). It shows how the symptoms of anxiety disappear by the reduction of anger and subsequent forgiveness. The author convinces his patients to start from where they are and do what is in their power, and that God will do the rest. The author identifies the following stages of the process of forgiveness: 1) preparation; 2) decision making; 3) action; 4) confirmation; 5) healing one's own body.

Conclusions

Anxiety disorders are among the most common mental health problems in the world. In addition, anxiety also occupies a leading position in terms of prevalence among all medical problems. For believers, and even indirectly religious people, the tendency to turn to religion in stressful life situations is a natural, unconscious desire to find support in a world where foundations are crumbling and, it would seem, there is no hope and confidence. For people for whom religion plays an important role, metaphors from the Holy Books give strength and meaning to life, returning suffering people to a full existence and joy.

N. Peseschkian emphasized the importance of religious faith in the processes of human mental health, while noting that religion will not replace psychotherapy, nor will psychotherapy replace religion. Thus, within the framework of Positive and Transcultural Psychotherapy, it is not only impossible to ignore the world view of a client,

especially an anxious one, but it is also important to fully use this in therapeutic work, using the entire possible spectrum of cultural and religious consciousness, as the most valuable tool of therapy.

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