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Feature Articles

A New Vision for Counseling

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Counselors, to their own and their clients’ detriment, have been following the lead of psychiatrists, using the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders to diagnose what psychiatrists have decided to call mental illness (e.g., schizophrenia, clinical depression, and bipolar disease). But as of now, the psychiatrists have not provided evidence of brain pathology to support these diagnoses. Furthermore, psychiatrists, who completely disregard mental health, still claim to be members of the mental health establishment. This article suggests to the counseling profession that they publicize the fact that they are true mental health professionals who have been improving mental health for more than 50 years without drugs. The author, who has never prescribed a brain drug, suggests they take a close look at choice theory, the mental health concept he has now added to his reality therapy to help clients toward better mental health with no danger of doing any harm.

Keyword: mental health

When you are suffering from any psychological symptom, such as depression, panic, anxiety, phobia, bipolar swings, hallucinations, and delusions, you and/or your family may consult a psychiatrist, a clinical psychologist, a clinical social worker, or a professional counselor.

The psychiatrist is almost certain to explain that you are suffering from a mental illness caused by pathology in your brain. He or she will indicate that you are in need of brain drugs to deal with your symptoms, and that you can do nothing to help yourself. The psychiatrist will rarely offer counseling because he or she believes that brain drugs are much more effective.

Both the clinical psychologist and the clinical social worker will tend to concur with the psychiatrist’s diagnosis of mental illness and may suggest that you get some medication for your symptoms from a psychiatrist or other medical practitioner. But unlike the psychiatrist, both will offer you psychotherapy to help you cope with your symptoms. These professions are not nearly as convinced as the psychiatrist that you have pathology in your brain.

If, however, you consult an American Counseling Association counselor who is using the ideas explained in this presentation, you will get an entirely different story. The counselor, who understands a new psychology called choice theory, will explain to you or your family that there is no valid research to confirm the fact that there is pathology in your brain or brain chemistry. The symptoms you are suffering from, severe and dramatic as they may be, are not occurring because there is pathology in the brain. As I will shortly explain, you do not need pathology in your brain to suffer psychological symptoms. This also means you do not need the brain-altering, potentially harmful drugs that psychiatrists and medical practitioners are now prescribing for huge numbers of people of all ages.

What the counselor can then explain is a new idea: Unlike psychiatrists, psychologists, and social workers, he or she can both counsel and teach you to improve your own mental health to the point that you will no longer need counseling. But after you finish the counseling, you can continue to use what the counselor teaches you and can continue to maintain or improve your own mental health.

Right now in America there are more people diagnosed by psychiatrists, psychologists, and social workers as mentally ill than at any other time in psychiatric history. Almost all of these people are being treated with brain drugs for nonexistent mental illnesses that can often harm and sometimes lead to death, suicide, and murder. The people who prescribe these drugs or support this practice seem to have no concept of the existence of mental health.

Fortunately for you, the psychiatrists who see you will not offer you a lobotomy. As much as they believe there is something pathological in your brain, they will no longer go this far. The Portuguese psychiatrist, Munoz, was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1940 for his discovery of this horrendous practice. Before this procedure was finally eliminated around 1970, 1 million lives were destroyed based on this totally false
concept. But when some strong psychiatric drugs are prescribed for many years, the people who take them sometimes develop symptoms that are indistinguishable from those experienced by people who were lobotomized. These chemical lobotomies can be just as debilitating as the actual brain surgery.

Based on his or her belief in mental health, the counselor will also explain that the underlying problem of everyone who is seen by any professional counselor for help because of psychological symptoms is unhappiness. The cause of this unhappiness is clear and understandable. They are not getting along with the important people in their lives to the extent they want to, which means they are not as mentally healthy as they would like to be. What they will learn in counseling is how to change their behavior so they get along better with these people. This may take a while because they may not want to change.

To help them understand the concept of being less than mentally healthy, think of a couch potato. Couch potatoes are less than physically healthy. They are overweight and get tired if they attempt to exercise. If couch potatoes go to a physician, they will be told they are out of shape. They can regain their physical health by eating less and exercising more.

The less than mentally healthy, unhappy, symptomatic people are mentally out of shape, which they experience as their symptoms. The difference between them and couch potatoes is they do not know what to do to become happier and get rid of their symptoms. To regain their mental health and happiness, they need counseling.

As the counseling proceeds very quickly, clients will find out that by putting choice theory to work in their lives, they can regain their mental health and happiness and get along much better than they do now with the important people in their lives. The easiest way to do this is to consult a counselor who focuses on mental health.

A vital part of what the counselor will teach that few people know and people with psychological symptoms never know, is that there is a destructive, world psychology called external control that is guiding how they deal with the people they cannot seem to get along with in their lives. Everyone in the world uses this psychology, and it is used most frequently in marriage, the least successful of all our relationships. The more husbands and wives use it, the more likely they are to destroy their marriage. Whenever external control is employed, its use harms what everyone needs to be mentally healthy: good relationships with the important people in their lives.

**EXTERNAL CONTROL**

External control is used by almost all the people in the world when they cannot get along and therefore, must be very simple, and it is. Essentially it teaches that we do not answer a phone because it rings or stop at a red light because it turns red. The ring or red light does not make us do anything. We do not have to answer or stop. We answer or stop for the same reason we do everything we do from soon after birth to death: We choose what we do or what we do not do. If we are willing to suffer and even die, no one can make us do anything we do not want to do.

But the people who use external control do not believe this. They live their lives by common sense, and common sense tells them they can make other people do what they want them to do if they apply enough coercion. So the world is filled with people coercing other people and destroying the relationships we all need to be mentally healthy.

Coercion destroys half or more of our marriages. Coercive low grades such as Cs, Ds, and Fs lead more than half the students in our schools to choose to do very little schoolwork. Coercive management reduces both productivity and quality in the workplace. Coercion is the source of much crime, and coercive prisons are failing to reform criminals. External control is a plague on all humanity. If we want to become mentally healthier or mentally healthy, we can learn to replace it with choice theory. How to replace external control with choice theory is the essence of effective counseling.

**THE SOURCE OF EXTERNAL CONTROL IS OUR GENETIC NEED FOR POWER**

Choice theory explains that all living creatures are genetically driven to behave by what I call basic needs. Except for human beings, mammals who nurse their children are driven by four basic needs: survival, love and belonging, freedom, and fun. They may fight for a territory so they can get the food they need to survive or fight for a mate to pass along the strong genes so that the species has a better chance of survival, but otherwise, they rarely fight. They also love their children long enough so they can survive and get started on their own. They need freedom to move around or they cannot survive, and most of them have fun playing when they are young and through that play, learn a lot of what they need to know to survive.

But unlike all other creatures, only human beings are also driven by a fifth need: power. This means they will fight and even kill to get their own way. During the course of thousands of years, powerful people survived in larger numbers than the weaker ones, more of their children survived, and power became a genetic need. It is to satisfy this need that we have almost all learned to use the psychology I call external control.

This coercive need for power flies in the face of the other needs, especially our cooperative need to love and belong. We kill, imprison, and enslave other human beings and have a great deal of trouble getting along with each other in every aspect of our lives. Our only chance for mental health and happiness is to learn to replace external control with choice theory, and this effort is the core of teaching and achieving mental health through counseling.
HAPPINESS IS MENTAL HEALTH IS CHOICE THEORY

All the millions of symptomatic people who seek help for their psychological symptoms will find their symptoms described accurately in a big book called the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (4th ed.) (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). What is not accurate in this book is the claim that these symptoms individually, or in combination, make up a series of feeling, acting, and thinking disorders wrongly labeled as, for example, clinical depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and schizophrenia.

The *DSM-IV* is basically the big red book of unhappiness. John Forbes Nash Jr., the hero of the movie *A Beautiful Mind*, was unhappy, symptomatic, and insane from 1959 to 1993. As he explained so eloquently when he was on “Sixty Minutes” in 1999, “I willed myself back to sanity in 1993,” and he has been sane since 1994. If pathology in the brain was the cause of his schizophrenia, he never could have willed himself back to sanity.

There are brain diseases caused by brain pathology, and some of them have also been included in the *DSM-IV*. Examples are Parkinson’s disease and epilepsy, which are both diagnosed and treated with brain drugs or surgery by neurologists and neurosurgeons. But to be so diagnosed and treated, they have to fulfill the neurological criteria that none of the psychiatric disorders in the *DSM-IV* can satisfy: They have tangible pathology in the brain that can be demonstrated by specific medical tests such as a CAT scan or magnetic resonance imaging (MRI). They are diagnosed by science, not by common sense.

The mental disorders that psychiatrists diagnose and describe in the *DSM-IV* cannot satisfy these criteria. They are diagnosed not by science but by common sense. The psychiatrists who diagnose these people cannot conceive that they can think, behave, and feel like they do without pathology in their brains, even though, so far, no reputable scientist can find any. If there is no pathology, there is no brain disease. If there is no brain disease, there is no medical reason to use brain drugs (see Whitaker, 2002, for more references to the harm drugs can do than are in my book, *Warning: Psychiatry Can Be Hazardous to Your Mental Health*, Glasser, 2003).

Brain drugs may seem to help some psychological symptoms, but there is no evidence that any brain drug has ever cured a symptom. If they help it, this is because of their strong placebo effects or in some instances, their strong sedative action makes the patient easier to manage. But there is no evidence that any brain drug can give an unhappy person what he or she needs—happiness and better mental health. Besides the placebo effect, some of these drugs give a pleasurable amphetamine-like lift that can be addictive.

What the counselor will teach is there are two kinds of pleasure. Because we are social creatures, we get pleasure when we get along with people. The better we get along, the more pleasure. It is accurate to call happiness a mentally healthy pleasure. We can also get intense pleasure without people. We call that pleasure an addiction. Drugs and gambling are the most common, but no addiction is mentally healthy. In fact it stands in the way of mental health.

COUNSELING WITH CHOICE THEORY

By now it should be apparent that a counselor who knows what I have started to explain here can counsel anyone. But to succeed, the counselor must develop the skill to form a good relationship with all the people he or she counsels. The counseling and teaching that are essential to helping another person to mental health are explained in detail in the three books that are listed in the author’s note.

As I explained in the brief time I had in the Kansas City Depot meeting, I believe that counselors need an identity if they are to successfully pursue their goal of being a recognized force in the world. The identity that I offer is mental health through choice theory. Most psychiatrists have abandoned the concept of mental health. Their identity is almost completely associated with mental illness and brain drugs. The focus of clinical psychologists and clinical social workers is much closer to psychiatrists than to counselors.

If the American Counseling Association would adopt the mental health mantle, which is up for the taking, I believe they could have an easy to understand, unique identity that could serve them well. The danger of psychiatric drugs is now coming out of the closet. The mantra of counselors could be *Effective Mental Health Without Drugs*, and at a cost far less than the billions of dollars being spent on drug treatment now. If a group as large and as prestigious as the American Counseling Association would formally accept and promote these ideas, I believe the world would listen carefully.

REFERENCES


William Glasser, M.D., is a renowned psychiatrist, lecturer, and author of more than 20 books. He is board certified in psychiatry and received the honorary degree of Doctor of Humane Letters, Honoris Causa, in 1990. On April 3, 2004, the American Counseling Association presented Dr. Glasser with a Legend in Counseling Award for the development of reality therapy. He has worked in the fields of mental health and corrections and extensively in public schools. He is the president and founder of The William Glasser Institute, which provides training in his ideas all over the world.