Counseling and Psychotherapy with Native Americans

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Traditional Healing

Throughout human history, healers and shamans have done the best they could to help people cope with illness and distress. Some of their methods, such as the use of herbs, can have direct and powerful effects, and many of today's pharmaceutical medications are derived from plants used by indigenous healers. Other ancient healing methods appear to work by mobilizing the patient's hope and expectations for improvement in the context of a socially-sanctioned ritual. These methods most likely operate by changing the patient's beliefs, sense of subjective distress, and the meaning they place on the illness.

Native Americans and Counseling

Native Americans utilize counseling services at a lower rate than other cultural groups, and there is a high drop-out rate for those who do seek counseling. It is important for counselors to understand how to provide effective and culturally appropriate services for Native American clients.

Why Native Americans Seek Counseling

Native Americans seek counseling for many of the same reasons as other people. The most common concerns are anxiety, depression, family problems, and alcohol problems. It is important to recognize that some Native Americans live on tribal homelands and are quite traditional in terms of their language, beliefs, and values. These people are more likely to seek assistance from tribal healers than counselors. However, today over half of all Native Americans live in urban areas, and many are bicultural or are highly acculturated to mainstream American society. These people may suffer from a wide range of practical problems and psychological disorders and can be receptive to
counseling. Counselors should informally assess new clients for acculturation type and acculturation stress. Also, counselors should be aware that clients with culture-bound or tribe-specific syndromes can present with symptoms that mimic depressive, anxiety, and dissociative disorders.

How to Build Rapport with Native American Clients

It is important for counselors to familiarize themselves with the history and culture of tribes in their area. Counselors should understand that due to the negative historical experience of Native American tribes, counselors may have to work hard to establish their trustworthiness with new clients. This can be facilitated by letting the client know that you realize it is difficult to talk with a stranger, and that you do not expect the client to automatically trust you immediately. Say that you will work to earn their trust, and ask the client to let you know if there is anything you need to know about their culture to help them. Avoid direct questions about tribal traditions and beliefs.

Avoid requiring a lot of intake paperwork ("white tape") and spend as much time as is needed to establish rapport. Avoid asking many direct personal questions. Sometimes self-disclosure can be used effectively to elicit information needed from clients. Match your verbal and nonverbal behavior to that of the client to build rapport. Be comfortable with silence and give clients plenty of time to think and process what is said. A relaxed and informal approach is often better than a formal professional approach. Avoid taking notes in front of the client. Let the client control the depth of the session. Try to be flexible in scheduling the length and frequency of counseling sessions.

Barriers to Effective Counseling
Native American clients may be particularly sensitive to counselors who act arrogant or overly "professional." Many such clients appreciate counselors who are more receptive than directive. Traditional advice about nonverbal behaviors to build rapport with clients, such as direct eye contact, may not be appropriate.

It is difficult to generalize about how various counseling models work with Native American clients, since little research has been done on this topic. However, some traditional Euro-American theories of counseling and psychotherapy should probably be avoided, including psychoanalytic and Gestalt approaches. Some counselors who work with many Native American clients recommend a Jungian approach or a Client-centered approach. However, Client-centered counseling works best with clients who are highly verbal and psychologically minded, which may or may not describe a particular Native American client. As always, the approach taken in counseling should be tailored to the needs and personality of the client. Some counselors have reported success in using a practical, problem-solving approach with Native American clients, while others prefer solution-oriented counseling. Behavioral and cognitive-behavioral interventions may also be appropriate. The general counseling skills, relationship skills, and attitudes of the counselor are probably much more important than the specific interventions used.

Culturally Appropriate Interventions

Clients should be encouraged to get their friends, family, and extended family involved in the counseling, and in assisting the client outside counseling. Many Native American clients benefit from family counseling and group counseling. Support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous can also be helpful for clients with alcohol problems. In some areas it may be possible to have groups specifically for Native American clients,
and to use tribe members as co-leaders. Some groups effectively use traditional techniques such as the medicine wheel, talking circles, and art therapy.

Bibliography


Recommended Resources on Counseling Native Americans

Books

Counseling with Native American Indians and Alaska Natives, R. D. Herring, 1999

Integrating Traditional Healing Practices into Counseling and Psychotherapy, R. Moodley & W. West, 2005

Coyote Medicine, L. Mehl-Madrona, 1997

The Dancing Healers, C. A. Hammerschlag, 1988

Honoring the Medicine, K. Cohen, 2003

Navajo Symbols of Healing, D. Sandner, 1991

Native American Post-Colonial Psychology, E. Duran & B. Duran, 1995

Healing the Soul Wound, E. Duran, 2006

Shamanic Healing and Ritual Drama, A. Hulkrantz, 1992

Shamans, Healers, and Medicine Men, H. Kalweit, 1992

Articles


Videotapes and DVDs

Counseling the Native American Client, California State University, Fullerton

Innovative Approaches to Counseling Native American Indian People, 2000

(Part 4 of Culturally Competent Counseling and Psychotherapy)

Counseling American Indians, Teresa LaFromboise, 1994

American Indian Concepts of Health and Unwellness, Native American Research and Training Center, University of Arizona, 1990

Podcast

Counseling with Native Americans with Dr. John J. Peregoy, available at

www.podcastdirectory.com/podshows/219620

Professional Association

Society of Indian Psychologists: www.geocities.com-indianpsych