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Creatively Training Wellness-Minded Counselors

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Although wellness seems to be a construct historically embedded in counselor training and philosophy, the literature specific to counselor education programs and wellness remains sparse. Myers, Sweeney, Witmer, and Melvin (2000) defined wellness as, "A way of life oriented towards optimal health and well-being in which body, mind, and spirit are integrated by the individual to live life more fully within the human and natural community. Ideally, it is the optimum state of health and well-being that each individual is capable of achieving" (p. 252).

Some of the literature describes wellness and counselor impairment along a continuum; all counselors are capable of either wellness or impairment. Wellness, like impairment, is a state rather than a trait—one can deliberately move towards either wellness or impairment. Lawson and Venart (2005) described counselor impairment as having a "significant negative impact on a counselor's professional functioning which compromises client care or poses the potential to harm the client" (p. 24). Possible sources of impairment might include substance abuse, personal crisis (including burnout), mental illness and physical illness. All members of the helping professions, given the right constellation of events, are vulnerable to impairment. As Rogers (1995) noted, "I have always been better at caring for and looking after others than I have in caring for myself" (p. 80). Enhancing counselor wellness is protective against impairment.

One assumption of the current pilot program is that wellness is a state that can be enhanced, and counselor educators can take deliberate steps to both infuse wellness into the curriculum and enhance wellness within the classroom. Literature that supports this assumption (e.g., Roach & Young, 2007; Witmer, 1985; Witmer & Granello, 2005; Witmer & Young, 1996; Yager & Tovar-Blank, 2007) points towards wellness as a construct requiring clear and deliberate inclusion in counselor education training.

Witmer (1985) advocated wellness as a learning outcome to be just as vital to counselor training as mastery of theory and technique. Later research suggested a “saturation approach” (Witmer & Granello, 2005, p. 268), whereby students would have training requirements specific to wellness throughout their education as a counselor—infused into each course. Yager and Tovar-Blank (2007) took this approach further, suggesting that students complete a wellness informed consent at orientation. The researchers also suggested encouraging wellness as part of the American Counseling Association’s code of ethics (again, viewing wellness as a polarity opposite of impairment) and challenging program faculty to model wellness in their lives.

The reality, however, is that wellness education remains a somewhat marginal activity among counselor educators. Roach and Young’s (2007) analysis of a cross-sectional group of counselor education students suggests that wellness remains stagnant over the course of study. In particular, students described limited growth related to the “essential self” on the Wheel of Wellness (Myers et al., 2000). The “essential self” referred to spiritual, gender, and cultural identity. Students did, however, describe social relationships (which were viewed as second order aspects of self in this model) as a strength. The enhancement of these relationships may prevent counselors from burn-out or the potentiality of deriving social support inappropriately from their clients. Still, counselor education programs may be both slow in adopting wellness as a requirement of future counselors and lack ways for assessing and promoting wellness of applicants. Witmer and Young (1996) noted that less than 11% of time in a practicum course was used to address the personal growth and well-being of students. This paper will describe how clinical class time was used to specifically promote wellness among counseling students.

Implementing Wellness in Internship Courses

The authors determined to incorporate wellness activities as a pilot program in the Internship 1 course for three reasons. First, they observed the need among students. Second, students gave informal feedback requesting it. Third, it provided an experiential way to implement expressive arts techniques, which students also requested.

Informal observations revealed that students knew about wellness, but often overlooked it personally. The program at the college where the authors taught was a small liberal arts college located in a rural Southern region. Courses were offered over three weekends in a 2-year program. Within the graduate program, 86% reported being first generation college students, and 34% met federal guidelines for poverty (School of Professional Counseling, 2010). The majority of students worked full-time while attending school and supported families (School of Professional Counseling, 2010). The authors observed that students ate poorly, neglected exercise and personal time, and struggled to balance work, family, and educational demands.

Those observations were confirmed by graduating students in a course discussion when asked what would have improved their experience. One thing mentioned was to include more wellness throughout the program. Students indicated that if it were required, they would do it, but if it was optional, it would be put off until a later time.

In a practicum course, students provided feedback stating that they would like to learn more expressive arts or play therapy techniques to use with clients. Pulling together

the feedback from the graduating students and the students who would be enrolling in Internship 1, the authors decided to address wellness using expressive arts activities. The remainder of the article describes the pilot program for implementing this.

Methodology

On the first class, students completed two assessments to identify individual areas of need. Both assessments came from the American Counseling Association web site resources page. One expressive arts wellness exercise was completed on each of the eight class sessions, facilitated by the professor. These are described in detail below. In addition, students were asked to voluntarily complete the 100-Mile Challenge, which can be found in Appendix A. This chart marked students' progress walking, running or the equivalent for 100 miles, which was the average of about a mile a day over the course of the semester. The exercises comprised a portion of the students' grades, but the 100 Mile Challenge did not.

Self-Care Assessment Worksheet. The Self-Care Assessment Worksheet (Saakvitne, 1996) was a self-report evaluation using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "It never occurred to me" (1) to "Frequently" (5). It included six domains: Physical Self-Care, Psychological Self-Care, Emotional Self-Care, Spiritual Self-Care, Workplace or Professional Self-Care, and Balance. The assessment contained 70 items.

Stress Reaction Inventory. The Stress Reaction Inventory (American Counseling Association Taskforce, n.d.) was also a self-report evaluation. Students were asked to check items that they had experienced in the last 2 months. This assessment included six domains: Cognitive, Emotional, Behavioral, Spiritual, Interpersonal, and Physical. This assessment was selected to inform students of areas where they may be stressed and facing burnout.

Participants

The program included students from four Internship 1 courses. The course was offered at the beginning of the students' second year. Students signed informed consent forms at the beginning of the program.

Expressive Arts Wellness Exercises

Over a semester (eight classes), students completed and discussed the exercises with three purposes in mind. First, the exercises required students to think about their relationship with wellness. Second, using wellness as a presenting problem, students could experience the technique as a client would. Finally, the discussion prompted students to explore how they could use the technique with a variety of clients and presenting problems. The exercises were scheduled to move students sequentially from examining wellness as an external concept to an internal concept. Below is a brief description of each exercise. Appendix B contains the description plus the discussion questions that were utilized.

Exercise 1 – Letter to "Wellness". Students personified their concepts of wellness by writing a letter to him or her. They were required to write at least a page and begin with "Dear Wellness..." and include a salutation at the end. Questions for thought included: What is Wellness? How do you feel about Wellness? What is your reaction to Wellness?

Exercise 2 – Metaphor for Wellness. Students selected a metaphor for their concept of wellness. They were instructed to write it down and describe it. After the exercise, students shared with the group.

Exercise 3 – “Touching Wellness” Drawing. Using paper, markers, pencils or other drawing materials, students drew a picture of themselves interacting in some way with wellness. They were reminded that they would not be graded on artistic ability.

Exercise 4 – “My Wellness and Me” Sculpture. Using craft dough, students were instructed to create a sculpture that could be titled, “My Wellness and Me.”

Exercise 5 – Visualizing a Healthy, Well Self. Professor led students through a visualization exercise. (See script in Appendix B).

Exercise 6 – Inside/ Outside Sand Tray (or beans, rice or water). Trays of sand, beans, rice, or water were provided for pairs of students. Students were instructed to place a hand in the tray and bury it. Then, they took turns talking out loud to their groups as they used the sand tray to demonstrate their outside wellness and inside wellness. They were required to keep talking for 2 minutes, and the professor kept time.

Exercise 7 – In my heart. Students selected two pieces of construction paper. From one, they cut out a large heart. On the other piece of paper, they drew or wrote about their wellness, the real thing inside their heart, so that it could be covered up by the heart. They then attached the heart to the second piece of paper, so it could be opened.

Exercise 8 – Letter to My Wellness. Students wrote a letter to the Wellness within them. They were instructed to describe the semester-long journey together, what they had learned, and what would happen next.

Findings

Wellness activities spanned the course of the internship. Each class started with a formal check-in followed by time (10-20 minutes) for implementing the wellness activity in class. Anecdotal information was collected by both researchers. The following are a few of the findings in the students’ words:

“I loved the letter to wellness. I have rewritten it to myself several times since we did the activity.”

“The Wellness Project benefited me since I have cerebral palsy and the project gave me more motivation to do my required physical therapy. The letter we wrote to wellness was very therapeutic for me because I got to speak to the issue of cerebral palsy in it and express my emotions. It was an exciting project and I would even recommend it for future interns, especially for self-care purposes.”

“I think the Wellness activities are very helpful in becoming more ‘centered’ at hectic times. I would recommend their continuation, but I have no empirical evidence to support my beliefs (except that I had my annual lab work done a couple of weeks ago—despite abysmal nutrition over the last year and seriously reduced exercise and increased stress, my

labs had not changed at all). I truly anticipated worse numbers! While improvement certainly would have been good, I was surprised to find no regression. While I did not meet even a ten-mile challenge, I was more aware of the times I was able to exercise and more appreciative of them. I also concentrated on sending health, healing and hope on my exhales.”

“I do believe that the wellness activities were helpful, and did make me more aware of my health. I began working out, watching more closely what I ate, and started preparing meals that were more healthy. I think the concentration on taking better care of myself and the ‘formality’ of completing paperwork and discussing it, did certainly help. Down 45 (pounds) so far!”

Implications for Counselor Educators and Supervisors

It is widely accepted that human services and counseling is emotionally taxing work requiring service-providers to expend considerable energy in the assistance of others. Counselor education students may frequently hear encouragement to maintain wellness; however, providing concrete information on how to go about doing so is not standard practice. Among the myriad of challenges counselors face, inconsistencies between counselor and client readiness for change and the unilateral structure of the counseling relationship is among them (Skovholt, Grier, & Hanson, 2001). Research promoting wellness for counselors endorses commitment to self care, regular collegial interaction and the necessity of a supportive professional climate (Cummins, Massey, & Jones, 2007). Promoting such behaviors during internship may encourage students to adopt these behaviors as they transition into professionals.

Areas for Future Research

During this pilot project, students were not bound to a specific definition of wellness. Their conceptualizations of “being well” spanned all elements of the traditional definition. Many students focused specifically on physical well-being and used the project as a spring-board to better eating and exercise habits. Roach and Young (2007) noted that, “Nutrition and exercise do not seem to be a primary focus during counseling course work that may concentrate more on the social, psychological and emotional aspects of well-being” (p. 39).

Future researchers may consider examining the impact on specific lifestyle choices on counselor education student wellness. Additional research might also examine the implementation of the career-sustaining activities frequently cited by highly-satisfied counselors as described by Lawson (2007). Some of these activities included maintaining one’s sense of humor, spending time with one’s partner or family, maintaining balance between personal and professional life, turning to spiritual beliefs, and engaging in quiet leisure activities.

The authors advocate viewing student challenges through the lens of opportunities for growth rather than punitive actions. While this statement is steeped in commitment to appropriate professional gate-keeping, it is suggested that counselor educators promote student wellness by, as Roach and Young (2007) described, providing environments that

would facilitate opportunities for growth as well as more traditional stress management techniques.

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Note: This paper is part of the annual VISTAS project sponsored by the American Counseling Association. Find more information on the project at: http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/VISTAS_Home.htm

Appendix A 100 Mile Challenge

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Appendix B

Internship Wellness Assignments

Exercise 1 – Letter to “Wellness”

Personify your concept of wellness, and write a letter to him or her. What is Wellness? How do you feel about Wellness? What is your reaction to Wellness? Write at least a page. Begin, “Dear Wellness...” and include a salutation at the end.

1. *What was it like writing a letter to something abstract like that?*
2. *What did you learn about how you view wellness?*
3. *How could it be beneficial for clients to externalize the concept of wellness? What other issues/problems would it be helpful to start work by externalizing them?*

Exercise 2 – Metaphor for Wellness

Select a metaphor for your concept of wellness. Write it down and describe it. Remember, no metaphor is right or wrong. After everyone has had time, we will share these with the group.

1. *How does using a metaphor challenge the way you look at this concept?*
2. *How could the metaphor that you selected be carried over into future wellness work?*
3. *Selecting metaphors uses both logic and creativity, left and right brain. How can this lead to insights that a client might not have otherwise?*

Exercise 3 – “Touching Wellness” Drawing

Use paper, markers, pencils and other drawing materials to draw a picture of you interacting in some way with wellness. You will not be graded on your artistic ability.

1. *Why might I ask you to draw yourself interacting with this concept?*
2. *How is interacting with wellness different than externalizing it, like previous journals?*
3. *How could you use a drawing to help your client move from externalizing a problem/issue to beginning to integrate the problem/issue into their identity?*

Exercise 4 – “My Wellness and Me” Sculpture

Using play dough, make a sculpture that could be titled, “My Wellness and Me.”

1. *How did having a title for your work make the experience differ from having directions about what to create?*
2. *This is the 4th of 8 journals using expressive arts. How do you think this exercise would be different if you had done it earlier or later in the semester?*
3. *What is different about using a medium that requires a client to mold it, instead of a 2-D drawing?*

Exercise 5 – Visualizing a Healthy, Well Self

Professor reads slowly: Sit up straight and rest your hands on your thighs. Close your eyes. Take a deep breath... hold... slowly exhale. Again, take a deep breath. As you exhale, release the stress that is tightening your muscles. Take a few more slow breaths. As you inhale, visualize pure, energizing air coming into your body and bringing relaxation to your lungs, down to your fingertips, and pushing down to your toes. Now use your imagination to see yourself in a perfectly healthy world. Use your senses to experience health and wellness... See what you look like... Listen for what you would say and what others would say to you... Smell the scent of being at your best... Identify the emotions that you feel... [long pause]. Take another deep breath and consider what it would take for the healthy you that you imagined to be the real you sitting in this room. What obstacle is in your way? Imagine yourself removing that obstacle. What other obstacle is in your way? Again, imagine you physically removing that obstacle out of your way. Come back to this room and see yourself

sitting in your desk. Imagine you telling yourself something encouraging to help you become a healthier you. When you are ready, open your eyes.

1. *What was it like to compare the ideal with the reality? Did it feel empowering or defeating?*
2. *How did relaxation set up the imagery for you?*
3. *In counseling, we often try to help clients move closer to better self. How could you use a visualization technique to do that?*

Exercise 6 – Inside/ Outside Sand Tray (or beans, rice or water) *You may also include small objects if you choose.

Put your hand in the Tray and bury it. We all have an outside that others can see and an inside that others can't. In this exercise, you will take turns and talk out loud to your group as you use the sand (or rice, bean or water) tray to show them your outside wellness and your inside wellness. You must keep talking for two minutes. First person, ready? Go!

1. *This exercise explored the dichotomy of wellness, visible and invisible. What made it challenging?*
2. *Some of you began to use free association when you ran out of things to say. How is talking at times more challenging than silence, and how could that be therapeutic?*
3. *Often in sand trays, small objects like people, monsters, bridges, etc. may be used. How could use that with a client dealing with abuse?*

Exercise 7 – In my heart

(materials needed: 2 pieces of construction paper per person, scissors, glue/tape/stapler, and drawing materials)

[Read all the directions out loud first, then repeat.] Take two pieces of construction paper. Cut a large heart out of one paper. On the other piece of paper, draw or write your wellness, the real thing inside your heart. Draw it so that it can be covered up by the heart. Then attach the heart to the second piece of paper, but do so in a way that it can be opened.

1. *A heart can be opened many ways: ripped, hinged, lovingly, etc. What does your choice about how to open your heart reflect about your internal wellness? How does how you attached it show your willingness to reveal it?*
2. *We used this with our common problem of wellness. What other problems might this type of expressive arts exercise be useful with?*
3. *Looking into someone's heart is very intimate. What safeguards should be in place before you use this exercise with clients?*

Exercise 8 – Letter to My Wellness

Write a letter to the Wellness within you. Describe this semester-long journey together and what you have learned. What happens next?

1. *We began with a letter and ended with a letter. How were they different? How were you different?*
2. *What benefit might there be to pause and look back over a journey? What dangers?*
3. *How could you adapt letter writing for different clients?*