

Spiritual Counseling with Emotionally Disturbed Children  
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The authors examined the need for addressing the spiritual needs of emotionally disturbed children and the benefits of including this dimension in the counseling treatment plan. The use of petherapy, nature, and the therapeutic relationship are discussed as techniques for increasing a sense of "connectedness" for the child. This sense of connectedness has the potential for decreasing problematic behaviors often displayed by emotionally disturbed children.

## **Spiritual Counseling: The Use of Pets in Working with Emotionally Disturbed Children**

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Emotionally disturbed children feel disconnected from peers, family, school, society, and themselves. Feeling different and being different makes it difficult to fit into games on the playground, conversations at the dinner table, classroom structure, a stroll in the local mall, or a congruent self-image. Being lost or ungrounded emotionally is as frightening and miserable as literally being geographically lost and unable to find their way home—especially when home is not a welcoming and safe place due to the havoc created by their disturbed behavior. Even when home is a safe and welcoming place, the chaos in a child’s head can disallow a feeling of connectedness and comfort significant others are trying to create for them. This paper examines the need for addressing the spiritual needs of emotionally disturbed children and the benefits of including this dimension in the counseling treatment plan. The use of pet therapy, nature, and the therapeutic relationship are discussed as techniques for increasing a sense of “connectedness” for the child. This sense of connectedness has the potential for decreasing problematic behaviors often displayed by emotionally disturbed children.

When working with emotionally disturbed students, it is this disconnectedness that counselors attempt to mend. Teaching emotionally disturbed students the skills, and even the desire, to bridge the disjointed parts of themselves and the chasm they’ve created between themselves and others with their disturbed behavior, thoughts, and feelings, is a tremendous challenge for these children as well as their care-givers. We typically address their problematic thoughts, feelings and behavior in their counseling sessions using social skills training, cognitive behavioral techniques, stress management skills, relaxation training, insight, desensitization and behavior modification, to name a few. The desired outcome of these approaches does much to provide the tools needed to steady an unstable or shaky mind, body, and relatedness. In essence, we are helping these students build a three-legged stool on which to sit and rest rather than the stumbling two legs on which they walk or even the one-legged hobbling they often have to do to move along the bumpy roads of their daily lives.

What if counselors could provide emotionally disturbed children with a fourth leg? That fourth leg would serve to add support, balance and connectedness to stabilize that strong therapeutic armchair for resting, renewal and resurgence to try again in that difficult world outside the counseling office. That fourth leg is spirituality. By addressing the fourth leg of spirituality, added to the other three legs of behavior, thoughts, and feelings, the counselor can greatly increase the tools of stability we teach our emotionally disturbed children. When counselors teach children to find the lesson in their problems they give them the tools necessary for releasing feelings of sadness, anger, or frustration. Spiritual awareness provides a rock-solid foundation to hold on to during times of crises or even when chronic stress feels overwhelming. According to Koontz (2002),

“Spiritually aware kids are more likely than others to have solid footing in the world, possibly because they feel connected to the divine within themselves. And such children are less inclined to see themselves as victims of circumstance—even when they are unhappy about something. They are far more inclined than children without a spiritual upbringing to trust that there is some meaning in the universe. And spiritual kids can be more giving, often because they feel less threatened by loss and more connected to all forms of life.”

Doe (2002) echoes the benefits of spiritually aware children when she states that “their self-esteem increases, they feel empowered, they have a belief system to count on, they have hope, they articulate their dreams and follow them and they begin to ask ‘What is it I might give?’ rather than ‘What is it I might get?’ When people focus on what they can get from a situation, they feel empty. Encouraging kids to operate instead from a giving perspective helps them think outside of themselves and connect with others.”

Historically, this fourth leg of spirituality has not only been ignored by the counseling profession, but it has actually been shunned until recently. Freud had a point when he asserted that religion could be neurotic, but other equally respectable contributors to our field, such as William James, Gordon Allport, Viktor Frankl, Erich Fromm, Abraham Maslow, Rollo May, and Carl Jung have focused on spirituality in their research and practice. Currently practitioners are also divided on their attitudes toward the use of spirituality in counseling; however, the research indicates that spirituality does play a major role in the mental health of those counseled. The American Psychological Association’s Division 36 (Psychologists Interested in Religious Issues) and the Association for Spiritual, Ethical and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC) division of the American Counseling Association work to research and teach that an important component of mental health is spirituality. The inclusion of spirituality in the treatment process makes counseling more effective. Religious and spiritual values are a major part of life and can be included with other therapeutic tools to make the therapeutic process more effective.

## **ASSESSMENT**

When considering attaching this fourth leg of spirituality to the usual treatment plan of thoughts, feelings and behavior, assessment is the first step. The developmental level and intellectual level of the child is to be assessed, as well as the client’s and the family’s openness to spirituality and their religious background. Another important early task is ~~the~~ defining for the parents, as well as for the counselor, the difference between spirituality and religion. For the purposes of this paper, two definitions which differentiate between spirituality and religion are presented:

“Spirituality from my perspective is larger than religion, although one’s religious practices may be an expression of one’s spirituality. For me, spirituality refers to a way of being in the world that acknowledges the existence of a transcendent dimension. It includes an awareness of the connectedness of all that is, and accepts that all of life has meaning and purpose and is thus sacred” (Becvar, 1994, p. 13).

“Spirituality is also described as a capacity and tendency that is innate and unique to all persons. This spiritual tendency moves the individual toward knowledge, love, meaning, hope, transcendence, connectedness, and compassion. Spirituality includes one’s capacity for creativity, growth, and the development of a values system. Spirituality encompasses the religious, spiritual, and transpersonal” (Summit on Spirituality, 1995,p.30).

## **TREATMENT GOALS**

When including spirituality in the counseling process, treatment goals should include teaching our children how to tap into the benefits of spirituality without the labels of religion. Counselors should teach principles rather than rules, connection rather than exclusion, joy rather than fear, gratefulness rather than resentfulness. If this is successfully accomplished, clients can develop attitudes and feelings of compassion, gratefulness, security, acceptance of self and others, stewardship of nature and service to others. These healing and stabilizing feelings are generated through the actual experience in the counseling sessions of connection with animals, nature and the therapist.

## **TECHNIQUES**

Techniques providing opportunities to experience spiritual connectedness are easily incorporated into the traditional counseling session. Taking clients on nature walks around the playground or outside the office can produce the discovery of items rich with therapeutic opportunity such as rocks, leaves and branches or flowers to be displayed in water or pressed. Bird feeders just outside the office window provide stimulus for awe and conversation. A grasshopper on a window ledge prompts laughter, which, in itself, produces spiritual and emotional healing. Sitting outside on the porch, feeling a cool breeze or warm sunshine, prompts discussion of the cold of empty sadness or the warmth of compassion and love. Being responsible for the feeding and care of a pet helps a child feel important and needed, a feeling often sorely lacking in the lives of emotionally disturbed children.

Pet therapy is rich with therapeutic opportunity. The counselor can provide the pet or the child can bring in pictures of their own pets or even the actual furry, feathered, or scaly creatures themselves. Hopefully, the usual dog or occasional gerbil will accompany the client at the appointed hour, but counselors should be prepared for the duck with a broken

wing who rides a pre-adolescent girl's shoulder or the acting-out 13 year old who brings in a prickly hedge hog. Also, counselors should be observant of the symbolism presented by the match of pet to client.

Pets can provide the unconditional love that our acting-out emotionally disturbed kids often makes difficult for us to display to them. For example, it might not be unusual for a client to walk into the office saying, "This is a Sarah day! I need Sarah!" This client is asking for the big shaggy black therapy dog, Sarah, which accompanies this therapist to work. Then, there is the child who has not spoken all day until she come into the counselor's office, lies down on the floor next to Sarah and pours out her troubles to the listening and accepting tail-wagging dog. There are also the days when the hyperactive twins learn about respecting others' boundaries when Sarah hides under the counselor's chair and the twins learn to talk more quietly and move more slowly or, unbelievably, not move at all, in order to get Sarah to creep out from underneath the chair. All are lessons in connecting and that spiritual component called connection.

Discussion of previously inaccessible feelings can miraculously be unleashed during the feeding of a baby bird or puppy. Issues of adoption, abandonment, loss, adjustment to a new family or home, abuse or neglect are easier to project onto the vulnerable baby animal, than to access in the child's own feeling bank. Once this sadness, anger or fear has been expressed aloud, in reference to the animal, then it can be labeled and claimed by the child, rather than acted-out or turned inward.

Social skills, which make it easier for our emotionally disturbed children to connect with peers and family, are effectively taught with animals. Skills often taken for granted, about which many of our children do not have a clue, are made more concrete---or perhaps, more flesh and blood, in the laboratory of pet therapy. Respecting others' need for space, whether the other is human or animal, is vital to positive interactions. Watching for social cues, whether human smiles and frowns or wagging tails and laid back ears, gives valuable information about whether to approach or stay back from a tired mother or a tired dog. Assertiveness skills are learned as the emotionally disturbed child watches the older dog, Sarah, first ignore, then growl at, and then bark at the young golden retriever, Chester, therapy-dog-in-training, who keeps pestering Sarah by nipping at her beard. Time-worn phrases that once were used to teach our kids social skills can once again be employed as the children benefit from the wisdom of the animals through phrases such as:

Let it roll off you, like water off a duck's back.  
The early bird gets the worm.  
Don't rub him the wrong way.  
Don't get your feathers ruffled.

The connectedness emotionally disturbed children feel with the fuzzy black dog with its pink tongue and wagging tail or the pleasure of a cool breeze on their cheeks is a direct link to the spirituality that can help them feel connected to that "something greater" than themselves, regardless of how they define that "something greater."

Being grounded to mother-earth, whether through a nature walk or the simple smelling of flowers in the counselor's office connects the students to the beauty of the world and an appreciation for gifts that are always available for enjoyment, even on the worst of days. The unconditional love provided by pets, the children's or the counselor's, help them feel loved when they feel unlovable and their acting-out makes it difficult for others to show their love for them. Students can talk to their animals without fear of ridicule, criticism or rejection. The pet at home can be an effective crises-intervention confidant until their next appointment with the counselor.

Pet therapy can teach empathy, awareness and interaction skills. Research indicates that animals alter human behavior as evidenced by the increasing academic interest in human-animal interaction at Purdue University, University of Pennsylvania, Tufts University, and University of California-Davis. Animal Assisted Therapy is being used by thousands of Psychologists, social workers and counselors. Studies show that spending time with animals reduces blood pressure, which lowers the risk of stress and depression and increases empathy, social interaction and self-esteem. The body of research reports psychiatric patients and autistic children are more interactive with the use of pet therapy.

Loneliness is decreased and children with attention deficit hyperactive disorders are helped. Talking to, touching, and providing for animals helps to relax children and help them feel connected. The unconditional love animals give back helps these children feel accepted. Communicating and working with animals gives our children a spiritual connection that grounds them. Being alone with their feelings and thoughts can be lonely and scary. With their pets, they are not alone; therefore, the feelings and thoughts are more manageable so that there is less need to act them out. With less acting out, comes increased capacity for positive interaction with others—whether peers, family or teachers. There! We've come full circle to that all –important connectedness. That connectedness then increases a sense of belonging and well-being.

## **CONCLUSION**

Spirituality is feeling connected. That feeling of connectedness provides that stabilizing fourth leg that our emotionally disturbed children need in order to navigate through their daily lives at school, at home, and socially. Through the use of nature, pet therapy, and the therapeutic relationship, we can teach our emotionally disturbed children the tools they need to manage their feelings, thoughts, and behavior. As we address the counseling needs of these very special children, perhaps the counselor should consider adding that fourth leg of spirituality to the already helpful three legs of thoughts, feelings and behavior.

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