

Culture : From the lens of counselling

Introduction

Culture is a way of life that is passed from one generation to the next. It is what people make, think, value, and do to ensure their existence. It not only determines what is appropriate to eat, drink, wear but our identity in larger context. Each generation acts upon it, causing modifications, even though the basic components such as language, religious practices, and system of government usually resist significant change.

There are various components that contribute in building a particular culture like geographical location of a particular community, the weather conditions, the availability of resources, the history of civilization and religion etc.

Why culture an important aspect for counsellors?

Earlier as a social science student and now as a counsellor it's always been fascinating to understand different cultures and how they are interwoven in this field of "counselling". While studying different theories and different research based articles by the experts in the field I came across many good facts. With my own observations while travelling to different countries and understanding cultures it further enhanced my interest in this field.

As a counsellor, it's important to study cultural perspective from three angles: Multicultural society, cross cultural society and intercultural society. As no country or society is untouched and cultural exchange happens in different forms in each society.

To get a holistic view of challenges it's necessary for a counsellor to understand

1. the culture of the client
2. the culture of the host country/ current stay
3. The culture of the counsellor (herself/himself)
4. The willingness of the client for therapy or sessions

It would definitely help in establishing a very healthy and strong relationship with the client.

Indian perspective of counselling and culture: few points

- If we look back into the history we could find that:
 1. There is a strong base of joint family system. Wherein different generations are living together. So at different life phases there are people to guide and support.
 2. Sharing and caring automatically happens as a part of division of labour in the same system.
 3. Ayurveda and yoga were primarily a part of life and emotional and mental well being is very well taken care of
 4. Religious gurus, teachers and elders were considered as emotional, psychological and mental support and their teachings were never questioned.
- In modern history or in the second half of the 20th century Indian education system was introduced with the study of psychology and mental health. So the profession of counselling is young in India (even e.g.50 min session is also a new concept)
- (Cultural) attitudes towards mental health problems – social stigma. Also sharing your problems with strangers is considered as a negative trait.
- Expecting advice-oriented counselling not process-oriented counselling. –
- Individual is not ready. –(a) It takes too much time. (b) expectation of quick solutions.
- More studies that should focus on differentiating - psychologist, psychiatrist and counsellor
- Currently the attitude is changing and modern concepts are welcome in the field of counselling. But still long way to go

While we do comparative study of western and Indian society:

Western	Indian/Asian
Individual	Family
Individual goal/personal goal	Goal of a person as a part of a family and community
Self-achievement and personal responsibility	Collective responsibility for the family name
Family – horizontal level	Family – hierarchical level Individual is treated as a part/ subordinate entity
Nuclear family	Extended family
Identity- one grows through developmental stages	Identity as ascribed
Work and activity centered society	Relationship centered society
Rationality, logic and control- private and public life separated	Very much based on emotions and values Private and public life – very thin or no line
public display of emotions- very limited “emotional constipation”	Free Emotional expressions “Emotional loose motion”
Free will	Determinism
Materialism	Spiritualism- karma siddhanta

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Presentation details : Counselling – My work- My Passion : A cultural perspective

27/03/2017

1. In Indian society, family is the basic unit and identity is ascribed so its hierarchical in nature.
2. In western world the individual is basic unit and so family is horizontal in nature. All persons are considered equal in nature.
3. As a part of hierarchical society all close relatives (though not staying together) are involved in the decision making process. So in a way there is little privacy
4. As there is no line or very thin line between public and private life in Indian society one needs to understand that though it sounds disadvantageous at times still provides a strong support in crucial period as all emotional and mental problems are discussed openly.
5. Gender roles are strictly divided in Indian society as hardly seen in western society.
6. Person is largely influenced by caste, family name, rituals, religion and family values in Indian society.

While concluding :

After we take into consideration the above points, it would be helpful for :

1. Understanding the basic difference between cultures
2. Understand why particular client behaves, thinks and acts in certain ways
3. “ Normal behavior” is subject to culture as well
4. It enhances to establish more positive and supportive relationship with the client.
5. Same words and actions have different meanings across cultures.
6. It helps us respect the contributions from different cultures in the form of theories, techniques and methods for counselling.

Finally it would be appropriate to say that it helps people to acquire the attitudes, knowledge and skills that are necessary for functioning efficiently in a democratic, pluralistic society and for inter-acting, negotiating and communicating with people from different backgrounds.