

Slow Counseling: Promoting Wellness in a Fast World

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Recent technological advances have spurred a fast-paced style of living that has become increasingly commonplace around the world. Professional counselors are therefore recognizing that many clients are seeking ways to reduce stress and cultivate a more balanced approach to life. Rooted in the Slow Movement, Slow Counseling offers counselors a wellness-focused foundation for addressing the time urgency and stress often reported by today's clients.

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Technological progress in the 21st century has accelerated interconnectivity and has helped contribute to a quicker pace in life around the globe. Instant accessibility to others through e-mail, cell phones, social media and the internet has become the norm in both work and home settings. Although these advances have significantly improved the ease of communication, many individuals today are reporting increased time urgency or a sense of not having enough time to keep up with the demands of persistent, around the clock communication (Honoré, 2005). The evolution to a faster-paced, technology-connected, global society has directly paralleled increased levels of stress and stress-related disorders.

For decades, researchers have documented the significant impact that stress plays in the development of physical and mental illnesses (e.g. Sapolsky, 2004). In addition, the World Health Organization (WHO) has found that stress-related mental and physical problems are increasing in the workforce (Leka, Griffiths & Cox, 2004). Griffin and Clarke (2011) indicated that stress significantly contributes to workplace absences in the United Kingdom and that one in six Americans reported high stress levels in their lives. Similarly, Mathews and Casey (2011) reported in an Australian study that excessive stress may lead to impaired functioning and consequently may impact physical and mental health. In a follow-up assessment, Australians' stress levels were found to be similar to those living in other Western countries (Casey, Stitzel, & Pui-Tak Liang, 2012). Furthermore, in

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developing countries, stress related to poverty and rapid sociopolitical changes have contributed to high levels of mental illness including anxiety, depression, and bipolar disorders (Patel & Kleinman, 2003).

Professional counselors must be prepared to work with clients who are struggling to cope with the demands of living in today's fast-paced world. However, many Western counseling approaches were developed during the early and middle 20th century—prior to the advances in technology and communications which significantly impact our lives today. In addition, a current trend in the helping professions of utilizing brief interventions only serves to reinforce the “quick fix”, time-urgent expectations of many clients and managed-care organizations. Such brief approaches may only superficially address client concerns and may fail to help clients recognize that a frenetic pace in life could be contributing to their problems. Instead, today's professional counselors may need to move to a slower counseling approach, one that fosters wellness by helping clients learn to decelerate and reduce stress. The Slow Movement (Honoré, 2005) may offer the counseling profession a foundation for helping people struggling to live in today's fast-paced world.

The Slow Movement & Slow Counseling

The Slow Movement is generally believed to have originated from the Slow Food philosophy first advocated by Carlo Petrini (2007) in Italy during the late 1980s. Since then, Slow ideas have been adopted by many different disciplines. For example, Slow Science promotes a sustainable culture of thinking among researchers that values the space and time needed for scientific ideas to grow and be nurtured (Slow Science Academy, 2010). Honoré (2005) identified several philosophical components of the Slow Movement. These include a focus on living mindfully in the present and fostering a slower, more balanced pace in life.

Applying Slow Concepts in Counseling

Slow Movement concepts naturally lend themselves to a mindful, present-focused, and decelerated approach to counseling. The following components are essential to Slow Counseling:

1. Slow Counseling is philosophically aligned with Humanistic and Transpersonal counseling approaches and focuses on enhancing client wellness and optimal functioning in all areas of living. Optimal human development is viewed holistically as occurring within the multiple cultural and sociopolitical systems in which people live.
2. Slow Counseling views interpersonal struggles and mental health issues as rooted in the complex interactions between biological and environmental stressors. Of particular importance are the client's views of time and time urgency as these are considered to be major contributors to stress-induced physical and mental illnesses.

3. Slow Counseling emphasizes the nurturing and development of a strong therapeutic alliance between the counselor and client as a critical component of a successful counseling process. The development of such a relationship requires ample time and cannot be accelerated. The therapeutic space created in counseling allows clients to decelerate and learn to focus on the present moment, where insight and clarity can foster growth.
4. Slow Counseling helps clients assess and strengthen their ability to manage the demands of living in a fast-paced world. For many clients, time urgency or “not having enough time” has become a way of being. As a result, they may report experiencing anxiety, depression, and other significant mental, physical, and interpersonal concerns. Slow counselors help clients address time urgency by encouraging them to slow down and focus on living mindfully. Clients who frequently dwell on past events or who worry and excessively plan for the future may be unable to function optimally in the present.
5. Slow Counseling recognizes the influence of today’s technology as a potential contributor to time urgency and stress. Therefore the Slow counselor helps clients assess how technology may be utilized in a balanced and healthy manner.
6. Slow Counseling encourages clients to focus on the quality of activities and relationships in their lives, rather than the quantity. Clients may need to evaluate and prioritize how they use their time and learn to take on fewer obligations and responsibilities.
7. Slow Counseling values the use of techniques that support a slow lifestyle, many of which may be found in traditional practices from diverse cultures. For example, mindfulness, meditation, and yoga may help clients to slow-down their pace and create more balance in their lives.

Future Possibilities

In recent years the profession of counseling has been called upon to adopt wellness as a core philosophy for practice in all counseling specialties (Kaplan and Gladding, 2011). Given the increased reports of stress-related illness and mental health issues around the world, today’s professional counselors and counselor educators have the opportunity to help shape a new wellness vision for counseling that addresses the unique concerns of our modern global society. The counseling literature is now more commonly recognizing the need to help clients slow down and is recommending traditional healing methods such as mindfulness training and yoga to help clients more holistically manage stress and enhance their wellbeing (Brown, Marquis, & Guiffrida, 2013; Schure, Christopher, & Christopher, 2007). Ultimately, as the profession of counseling evolves, the Slow Movement and a Slow Counseling approach may have much to offer in helping to promote wellness and balance in our fast-paced world.

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