“Counseling the Unemployed”: Reflections on a Pilot Clinical Program

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Unemployment and economic hardships are issues in the lives of clients serviced by marriage and family therapists (MFTs). “Counseling the Unemployed” program was created within a university-based clinical setting to help meet such needs. Student MFTs were educated on effects of unemployment, coping strategies, and then shared what was helpful in addressing such issues via an online qualitative survey. Anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and relational problems were reported to be common symptoms of clients who presented with unemployment issues. A degree of hopelessness and helplessness in the clients when compared to clients who did not present with issues related to unemployment was noted. Certain techniques were also found to be most helpful in working with clients who are unemployed.

The unemployment rate in the United States is currently at 9% (Bureau of Labor Statistics; BLS, 2011). Unemployment in Nevada is at a shocking rate of 14.5% (BLS, 2011). The economic downturn has resulted in lost jobs, foreclosures, and one of the steepest unemployment rates ever seen in this nation. Previous researchers have reported that individuals experiencing unemployment tend to display symptoms such as depression, anxiety, loss of self-esteem, increased irritability, social isolation, and increased suicide attempts (Ayton, Rasool, & Cottrell, 2003; Repetti & Wang, 2010).

In addition, couples affected by unemployment tend to be prone to domestic violence, increased marital hostility, increased couple conflict, and decreased marital support (Ayton et al., 2003; Repetti & Wang, 2010).

Families experiencing unemployment tend to display greater levels of conflict between fathers and children, more parental emotional distress, decreased involvement with children, family instability, and increased child abuse (Ayton et al., 2003; Repetti & Wang, 2010). Despite the consequences that can come with experiencing unemployment for individuals, couples and families, as a problem of focus unemployment has received little attention by the MFT field (Peterson, Blumer, Fife, Nemecek, Hertlein, & Weeks, 2011).

In relation to the psychological and relational effects that unemployment can have on families, MFTs need to be cognizant when clients present with such symptoms and be assessing for how they may be related to a client’s current job or joblessness state, as well as their current economic state.

The researchers in the current study explored the effects of unemployment and economic hardship in hopes of providing better mental health care for individuals, couples, and families.

In response to recent economic and unemployment issues and a lack of relevant literature, a pilot clinical program specifically aimed at helping clients experiencing such issues was created.

This targeted intervention entitled, “Counseling the Unemployed,” was created within a university-based clinical training setting and lasted approximately one year (Feb. 2010-Dec. 2010). Program developers included MFT supervisors, university faculty, LMFTs, and MFT students. A research based resource packet was created and given to all student therapists to better educate them on working with clients experiencing unemployment.

Clients recruited via advertising through pamphlets to local unemployment and counseling agencies, and public presentation via Internet venues, news programs, and local newspapers.

The clinic serviced a total of 339 clients during the program. 22% presented with issues related to economic hardship and 15% with issues related to joblessness.

Upon completion of programming, an online qualitative survey was made available for MFT student therapists to complete.

The survey consisted of 14 open ended questions pertaining to symptoms, diagnosis, and treatment in working with clients suffering from unemployment.

The study was made available to a total of 47 student therapists, and 16 of those (34.04% response rate) completed the survey.

The surveys were independently analyzed and common emergent themes were found and reviewed using a constant-comparison methodology.

Anxiety, Depression, Low Self-Esteem, & Relational Problems

Solution-Focused, Cognitive-Behavioral, Motivational Interviewing, & Emotion-Focused

Offering Potential Resources, Miracle Questions, Validation, Challenging Cognitive Distortions, & Psychoeducation

Hopelessness, Helplessness, & Self Blame

Re-Establishing Intimacy

MFTs need to pay greater attention to unemployment issues

Shared dialogue among MFTs and other mental health professionals needs to take place in order to foster better solutions and address the helplessness that both clients and therapists feel when working through unemployment related issues.