

## **CREATING SPACE FOR CONNECTION: A COLUMN FOR CREATIVE PRACTICE**

*This column is designed to underscore relationally based creative interventions used by counselors and psychotherapists in their practices. Our intention is to provide examples of novel, innovative ways of working with clients in their efforts to deepen self-awareness and their connections with others. Although the interventions within this column will be presented in a linear “how-to” manner, an essential premise of this column is that interventions submitted for publication have a contextual and relational basis. Basic to this column is the therapeutic focus of working through latent hurts and impediments to our clients’ health and happiness. Client goals generally involve creating the requisite emotional space needed for genuine relational choice for connection to manifest. If you have created a useful therapy tool, or if you have adapted an existing creative tool that you would like to share with readers, please follow submission guidelines in the author information packet available at <http://www.creativecounselor.org/Journal.html>*

## **Creative Strategies for Treating Victims of Domestic Violence**

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*Domestic violence in the United States grows in prevalence each year; therefore, it is crucial that counselors are prepared to offer support services to victims. Due to the emotional and mental impact of domestic violence, many victims have difficulty discussing their trauma. Therefore, creative arts activities may be helpful when working with victims of domestic violence. In this article, three creative activities are described and discussed.*

*KEYWORDS* domestic violence, guided imagery, wellness, experiential, creativity

Domestic violence in the United States grows in prevalence each year. The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV) refers to domestic violence as “an epidemic affecting individuals in every community, regardless of age, economic status, race, religion, nationality or educational background” and defines it as “willful intimidation, physical assault, battery, sexual assault, and/or other abusive behavior” (NCADV, 2007, para. 1). Domestic violence is a systemic issue, and its effects can span entire lifetimes and generations.

According to NCADV (2007), 85% of reported domestic violence victims are women, and 25% of all women will experience domestic violence during their lifetime. However, it is estimated that only 25% of all domestic violence incidents are reported. Among incidents that are reported, many go uncharged and untreated due to laws held by most states that recognize only certain types of relationships (such as spouses or cohabitants) as classifiable for domestic violence (NCADV, 2007).

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Given the prevalence of domestic violence and the rate at which it goes unchanged (and often untreated), it is crucial that counselors are prepared to offer support services to victims. Breaking the cycle of domestic violence in relationships, families, and systems can help to ensure that future generations experience lower rates of incidents.

## RATIONALE

When examining strategies for treating victims of domestic violence, it is important to understand the unique characteristics of these clients. According to the National Center for Victims of Crime (NCVC), domestic violence stems from an abuser's need for power and control (NCVC, n.d.). Due to the presence of power and control in relationships where domestic violence exists, victims are often restricted from interacting with people other than their abusers. Many abusers restrict victims from holding jobs; victims are, therefore, often dependent on the abusers for financial support. Victims are shamed, belittled, humiliated, and criticized; eventually the messages they receive from their abusers become the beliefs they hold about themselves. They are afraid and oftentimes have no options for change due to limited or controlled resources (*Abuse victim characteristics*, n.d.). Because of the mental abuse that domestic violence victims sustain, many clients in these situations share some common characteristics: depression, anxiety, emotional dependence, low self-esteem, and isolation (Zlotnick, Johnson, & Kohn, 2006).

Due to the emotional and mental impact of domestic violence, many victims come to counseling unable to delineate exactly what type of help they are looking for. They are often afraid to discuss their situations (due, in part, to the abuse that may occur as a result of their divulging) and sometimes may feel lost during sessions. Talking with victims about their abusive experiences can prove detrimental, as retraumatization may occur. Counselors must instead find alternative methods of reaching these clients so that they may begin to heal from the abuse they have experienced.

Utilizing the creative arts in the counseling setting with victims of domestic violence can be a therapeutic, nonthreatening way to aid these clients in addressing and healing from the abuse they have experienced. Creative strategies and techniques may help clients access and experience their own emotions in a safe, nontraumatizing manner. Often, abuse victims spend a good deal of time concerned with pleasing their abusers; rarely do they take time to focus on themselves, their needs, or their feelings. A safe approach to helping clients shift the focus from their abusers and onto themselves may be through the use of creative strategies in session.

## ASSUMPTIONS

The strategies described in this article are based on the following assumptions:

1. Victims of abuse often need assistance in learning to focus on themselves.
2. Victims of abuse can experience retraumatization by remembering and recounting abusive incidents; therefore, counselors should work to help these clients focus on their present emotions rather than on the abusive events they experienced.
3. Creative counseling strategies, when used properly in session, can provide safe methods of emotional self-focus for victims of abuse without the risk for retraumatization.

## OBJECTIVES

Using creative strategies in counseling sessions may help victims of abuse begin to heal from their abusive experiences. The objectives of using the strategies discussed here are:

- to provide support for victims of abuse throughout the counseling process;
- to help these clients heal from their abusive experiences by assisting them in the process of learning to focus on themselves and their needs using safe approaches; and
- to help victims of abuse learn skills to prevent future abuse in their lives.

## PROCESS

In this article, I will describe three creative strategies that may be used during different stages of the counseling process: the wellness wheel may be used for assessment, guided imagery may be used to empower clients and build self-esteem, and a roles activity may be used to help clients learn to establish healthy boundaries in their lives. The strategies are explained in the following paragraphs, as are directions for how to implement them in session.

### Wheel of Wellness

The wheel of wellness is a model of wellness and prevention created by Myers and Sweeney (2005) that provides a means for clients to assess themselves as holistic beings. Although there are many versions, the simplest way

to use the wheel in session is to draw a circle on a piece of paper and divide it into eight “pie slices.” Label the slices with terms that describe different areas of daily life, such as spiritual, emotional, physical, financial, social, intellectual, occupational, environmental, or sexual. The labels you choose may be tailored for each individual client.

Next, explain to clients that each person is the sum of his or her different parts and that holism involves focusing on all of these parts together. Give clients the labeled circle and some crayons or markers. Ask them to color in each slice to represent how “full” each area is in their lives, starting in the middle. When the task has been completed, counselor and client together can examine how “round” the colored area of the circle is. Explain to clients that the areas with less shading may be areas on which to focus work in counseling; however, the purpose is not to “fill” each area, but rather to find balance among all areas, creating a “circular” shape.

This activity is used best as an assessment near the beginning of the counseling process and may be repeated throughout as a collaborative means of viewing progress and revisiting goals. The benefit of using it with victims of abuse is that it helps them to examine their lives outside of their abuse and abusers. They are able to see which aspects of their lives may or may not have been affected by the abuse they have endured, and they are able to begin focusing on themselves as whole beings.

## Guided Imagery

Guided imagery activities are open-ended stories that can be read to clients in a relaxed state, enabling them to imagine themselves in a story as it is read by the counselor. The practice of guided imagery is Jungian in nature; frequently, elements of the stories are archetypal and can elicit emotional experiences in clients (Crampton, 2005). Guided imagery is widely used as a means of relaxation, meditation, and self-focus. There are many guided imagery scripts available on the Internet for free; the counselor may choose a script that relates to the client’s situation or may use a general script focused on relaxation.

Begin with clients by explaining the activity and letting them know that they will be asked to close their eyes. If the client does not feel safe with closed eyes, they may be kept open. It is important that clients are situated in a way that they will not be making eye contact with the counselor, and they should be given the choice to lie down or find a more comfortable position. Check to make sure they are comfortable. Make available a piece of paper and a writing utensil, placed to the side. Explain that these will be used at the close of the activity to record the experience. Once clients are situated in a comfortable position, tell them that you will begin the relaxation process and then will read the guided imagery script. Let them know that you will inform them when the activity is over.

It is important when using guided imagery that clients be as relaxed as possible. To guide clients into relaxation, you may use a relaxation script, which typically involves having the client breathe deeply while focusing on different parts of the body. It is imperative that clients be given ample time to relax; this portion of the activity should take 15 min to 20 min and should not be rushed.

Once the client is in a relaxed state, begin reading the guided imagery script you have chosen. Again, be sure to read slowly and pause between sentences; clients should have time to process the story, imagine themselves as a part of it, and experience the resulting emotions. The entire activity may take 30 min to 40 min. When the story is over, tell clients that you will momentarily be asking them to wake up and write down everything they can remember. Inform them that you will count to 10, and when you reach 10, they may open their eyes and begin writing. Count slowly to 10 to give the client time to adjust to being back in the present moment. Give clients a few minutes to write down thoughts and feelings. Process the experience by talking with them about what they saw, how they felt about it, whether they would like to change any of it, and what meaning they will take from it.

This activity may be particularly helpful for victims of abuse because it allows them to imagine worlds, places, and scenarios that do not include their abusers. Oftentimes, these clients will find internal strength through guided imagery experiences, which acts as a foundation for building self-esteem. The imagined worlds become “safe places” to which they can escape during times of abuse or abuse-related stress. These worlds may also become metaphors for life goals, which can be referenced throughout their remaining work in counseling.

### Roles Activity

This is a simple activity designed to help clients examine and gain awareness of the roles they play in their own lives. Start by giving clients eight small pieces of paper; if you don't have scissors, obtaining small pieces can be achieved by folding a standard sheet of paper in half three times and tearing along the folds. Ask clients to write on each piece of paper a role they play in life. Give some suggestions to get started. Roles may be concrete, such as “mother,” “partner,” “cook,” or “employee”; roles may also be abstract and imaginative, such as “adventurer,” “dreamer,” or “traveler.” Then give time for clients to come up with eight roles, writing one on each piece of paper.

When eight roles are written down, have clients spread the pieces of paper out on a table so that they can all be viewed together. Talk with clients about the roles they have chosen and why they were chosen. Next, ask clients to remove four roles, keeping the four most important on the

table. Clients may wish to discuss their process of deciding which roles to remove while making the decision. Once four roles are removed, talk about why those four were removed and how those four were chosen. Once you have processed the removal of four roles, ask clients to remove two more, leaving the most important two on the table. Process through the decision in the same manner as with the first four. Finally, ask clients to remove one more role and leave one final role as the “most important.” Discuss the process of choosing that role to be the final, most important role they play in life.

The process of eliminating roles can be difficult for clients. Pay attention to process. Are clients prioritizing themselves above other people, or putting others first, prioritizing roles such as “friend” or “son” above roles such as “learner” or “leisureite”? Oftentimes, victims of abuse will discuss feeling guilty about removing the partner role. Many abuse victims struggle with codependent tendencies, making it difficult for them to remove roles that involve themselves in the service of others. Look for patterns of strength that may emerge for clients during the activity. If clients identify strongly with any roles that involve them being strong, this can be an excellent starting point for a discussion about boundaries.

Many clients have one area of life that they refuse to compromise. For example, many clients with children will prioritize the parent role above all others, and this choice of priority may help them to begin to understand that staying with an abusive partner will be detrimental to their children. Spend some time discussing boundaries and boundary setting with clients. Do clients feel positively about the roles they have prioritized, or do they wish to work toward a different priority? This is a discussion that can and should be revisited throughout the counseling process. This activity helps clients to examine the boundaries they keep (or do not keep), and the activity may be repeated multiple times to examine progress and reexamine client boundaries.

### ADAPTATIONS OF THE PROCESS

Any of these activities may be used with most clients. When using the wellness wheel with younger clients, the categories chosen should be age-appropriate. Content of a guided imagery script should also be considered for age appropriateness. If clients are unable to read or write, they will need assistance reading the categories on the wellness wheel and writing down roles in the roles activity. With the guided imagery activity, clients who cannot write should not be asked to write down key memories after the activity; rather, the activity can be adapted so that they can discuss memories and experiences as the counselor writes them down. Alternatively, clients may draw memories from the activity rather than writing them.

## REQUIREMENTS AND LIMITATIONS

The three activities presented require a small amount of counselor preparation. The wellness wheel must be prepared ahead of time by the counselor. The relaxation and guided imagery scripts must be prepared ahead of time as well. All three activities require paper and writing or drawing utensils for clients.

As a general rule, using the creative arts in counseling helps clients to think more abstractly, and creative arts can be helpful in session for clients who are less verbal or who have difficulty discussing their situations (as may be the case for many victims of abuse). However, interpreting the learning that can emerge from use of a creative strategy in session may require some amount of insight on the client's part. If clients have difficulty thinking abstractly, the counselor may need to help them make connections between each activity and their personal experience. Typically, these types of activities can be facilitative for helping clients to learn to think more abstractly and experience emotion more fully; by using these activities, any pressure clients may feel to "have to talk about it" can be removed. Rather, clients are able to focus on the experience of taking part in the activity, which may in turn help them to feel less vulnerable in session.

## CONCLUSION

Using the creative arts in counseling may prove to be helpful when working with victims of abuse. Many times, these clients have difficulty discussing their abuse stories; counselors should not push clients to discuss these stories, as retraumatization may occur for clients. Use of the creative arts in session can give clients alternate means of exploring their situations in a safe manner. Here, three creative strategies were discussed; the wellness wheel for assessment, guided relaxation and imagery for client empowerment and self-esteem building, and a roles activity for establishment of boundaries.

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