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UNDERSTANDING THE EMOTIONAL IMPACT OF COMMUNICATION DISORDERS AS A WAY TO DEVELOP COUNSELING SKILLS



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Synopsis:

The emotional impact of communication disorders (e.g., hearing loss, autism, stuttering, aphasia-loss of language, etc.) on individuals and their families are evident; however, most speech-language clinicians do not feel comfortable providing counseling services due to lack of training. To increase clinicians' ability to help clientele and their families cope with their disorders and boost treatment outcomes, understanding the stress of the clients and families is critical for developing needed counseling skills such as empathy and active listening.

Understanding the Emotional Impact of Communication Disorders as a Way to Develop Counseling Skills

Individuals with communication disorders (CD) usually end up with different degrees of limitation to communicate and socialize with others. Holland (2007) stated that CD can result in reactive depression for family members and the client, regardless of age or population. Within aphasic populations (loss of language), it was reported that nonfluent patients are the most depressed group (Robinson & Benson, 1981) and such depression increased 11-33% one year post stroke (Kauhanen, et al., 2000). Adolescents with severe traumatic brain Injuries (TBI) typically experienced significant reductions in social competence (Tlustos, 2016). The experience of individuals with cleft palate or stuttering may vary with their severity and ages, and include experiencing frustration, embarrassment, bullying, fear of public speaking, social isolation, low self-esteem and suicidal thoughts/attempts. The impact of CD also extends to families. Many reported a sense of loss or guilt, confusion, stress or exhaustion for not being able to communicate with their loved one, and constant advocacy for their services. Having constant concerns over children with CD may lead to neglect of other children and strain on marriage. In addition, financial burden is often a huge concern if the breadwinner has CD and no long can work. Overall, the emotional impact that comes with CD will most likely be complicated by daily stress, which is a major health concern in the United States.

Nearly three-quarters of American adults report experiencing stress at levels that are beyond healthy (American Psychological Association, 2016). An understanding of the daily stress process, including stressor exposure, or the likelihood that an individual will experience a daily stressor (Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995), and reactivity, the likelihood that an individual will react emotionally to daily stressors (Almeida, 2005), is critical to assisting individuals with coping and management of stress. In the context of providing therapy and support to individuals with communicative disorders, a consideration of how daily stressors may both exacerbate and/or cause speech and language challenges is critical.

Overall, the impact of CD on individuals and/or their families cannot be overstated; the emotional aspects that come with CD should be acknowledged and validated by practitioners while working on improving their communication abilities. Indeed, positive interactions with clinicians do affect recovery (Fourie, 2008); as a client once shared, “a smile is worth ten shots of morphine.” Empathizing with clients and their daily stress will allow for greater support provision and recovery.

The role and responsibilities of SLP/A in counseling

According to American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA, 2004; 2008), counseling is within the scope of practice for speech-language pathologists and audiologists (SLPs/As). It is the responsibility of SLPs to ensure that their clients and their families or caregivers receive counseling in regards to the communication and/or swallowing issues. To maximize treatment outcomes, it is essential that SLPs/As consider counseling clients and families as an integral part of their responsibilities (Bradshaw & Gregory, 2014). Indeed, Holland (2007) emphasized that counseling maybe the most important way SLP/A have to help their clients achieve lifelong goals. The importance of counseling was re-stated in recent 2016 ASHA Code of Ethics to ensure that high quality services are provided.

Ironically, although SLPs/As have long recognized that counseling is critical to effective clinical practice (Luterman, 2008; Vargo & McFarlane, 1994), it receives little attention and is a neglected area of instruction for most of graduate programs in the United States. Most of SLPs have never taken a counseling class, nor have received instructions on how to address emotional aspects of the clients and their families. This may explain why most speech-language clinicians do not feel comfortable providing counseling services (Flasher & Fogle, 2004).

Counseling within the scope of practice is a concern that many SLPs/As have; even the need for counseling was recognized. Gregory (1995) provided nice arguments for why SLP/A should do the counseling. He clearly stated that because we are the specialists in CDs we are also in position to counsel individuals. Kendall (2000) indicates that the importance of having counseling knowledge and skills is not to “make counselors out of speech-language pathologists and audiologists” (SLP/A), but rather provide knowledge to SLP/A’s who will ultimately increase their insight and effectiveness when communicating with patients and families. Luterman (2008) pointed out that the majority of our clients are ordinary people experiencing a normal reaction (e.g., stress and anxiety) to a communication disorder. Counseling can serve to build client & clinician relationships, increase authentic communication and enhance problem solving (Isaki, Brown, Alemán, & Hackstaff, 2015); it is our ethical responsibility to seek further education to ensure that we are providing services corresponding with our scope of practice (DiLollo & Neimeyer, 2014).

In brief, the presentation will discuss the link between daily stress experiences and health, as well as counseling-related strategies for better understanding the daily lives of those with communication challenges in order to improve treatment and quality of life among clients and their families.

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