The Role of Psychotherapy and Spirituality in Dementia Care

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Is psychotherapy an effective intervention for people living with dementia?
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“She is not going to get better anyways”

“It is a waste of time and resources”

“She can’t express herself coherently”
Guiding Questions

• How does our understanding of dementia limit the kinds of interventions we think will be effective?

• What research has been done in the field of dementia, psychotherapy and spiritual care?

• What are some promising directions?
Facts about Dementia

- Dementia is a broad term that describes cognitive impairment from a variety of causes.
- The most common cause of dementia is Alzheimer’s disease.
- Other common forms are frontal-temporal dementia, Lewy-Body disease, vascular dementia.
Facts about Dementia

- Very high anxiety and fear around dementia in our society

- Dementia has been described as:
  - a living death
  - the long goodbye
  - a loss of self
  - becoming an empty shell
  - all or nothing
I THINK THEREFORE...

WHAT WAS I JUST THINKING ABOUT?

DESCARTES: THE LATER YEARS...
Person-Centred Dementia Care

Tom Kitwood’s person-centred dementia care

- Critical of the biomedical model
- Importance of maintaining personhood
- Malignant social psychology / positioning
- Behaviours come from unmet needs
- Looking beyond pharmacological interventions in dementia care

Kitwood (1997)
A New Way of Looking at Dementia

“Dementia is a shift in the way a person experiences the world around him/her.”

Powers, A. (2014)
A New Way of Looking at Dementia

“Dementia is a shift in the way a person experiences the world around him/her.”

Powers, A. (2014)

- Experiential definition
- Connects rather than separates us
- Preserves personhood
- Strength-based
- Holistic definition rather than focusing on the loss of one aspect of the disease
A New Way of Looking at Dementia

“Seeing dementia as a disability (or changing ability) rather than a fatal disease creates a host of insights to which the biomedical view has blinded us.

We see that people with dementia continue to learn new information, incorporate data, and use problem-solving skills to adapt to their changing perceptions.”

Powers, A. (2014) p. 20
A New Way of Looking at Dementia
Abilities Retained in Dementia

- Recognizing and expressing emotions
- Emotional and long-term memory
- Problem solving
- Non-verbal awareness and communication
- Awareness of self (might be a past self)
- Thinking less on the level of memories and facts and more on the level of emotions and symbolism.
- Spirituality
Spirituality and Dementia

Growing amount of research in the area of spirituality, meaning, personhood and dementia

Some major themes:

- Experience of faith
- Searching for meaning in dementia
- Changes and losses in experience of the self
- Staying intact
- Strategies for coping
- Keeping hopeful

Dalby, Sperlinger & Boddington. (2011) “Lived experience of spirituality and dementia in older people living with mild to moderate dementia” Dementia 11(1) 75-94.
Why Psychotherapy?

People with dementia have …

- emotional, social and spiritual needs.
- may have grief and loss issues
- issues around society’s stigma of dementia
- challenges to identity and personhood
- to learn how to cope with shifting cognitive abilities
- People with dementia may be dealing with past trauma.
Research in Psychotherapy and Dementia

- Person-centred psychotherapies
  - Carl Rogers is the father of person-centred psychotherapy
  - Empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard
  - Lipinska (2007) uses relational depth therapy as a conceptual framework in which to understand her counseling work with people with dementia.
Research in Psychotherapy and Dementia

- Naomi Feil and Validation Therapy
  - Basic Principles (Feil, 2013)
    - Painful feelings that are expressed, acknowledged and validated by a trusted listener will diminish
    - Painful feelings that are ignored or suppressed with gain strength and can become ‘toxic’
    - When the present reality is void of purpose and too painful to cope with, a person will retreat to the past to explore stimulating memories
    - Emotions felt in the present time can trigger similar emotions felt in the past.
Research in Psychotherapy and Dementia

Cognitive Therapy

- Can be effective in early to mid stages of dementia
- Used to address issues of depression, anxiety, adapting to changing abilities and loss.
- Modifying therapy sessions to take into account the strengths and weaknesses of each client.

One study of 7 individuals with mild to moderate dementia who received 8 sessions of cognitive therapy for depression found there was a significant improvement on Geriatric Depression Scale.

Research in Psychotherapy and Dementia

Reminiscence and Narrative Therapies

- Narrative Gerontology
- Mackinlay (2012) Spiritual Reminiscence
  - Group Spiritual Reminiscence Program
    - Week One – Life-meaning
    - Week Two – Relationships, isolation and connecting
    - Week Three – Hopes, fears and worries
    - Week Four – Growing older and transcendence
    - Week Five – Spiritual and religious beliefs
    - Week Six – Spiritual and religious practices
Research in Psychotherapy and Dementia

• Humanist therapy

• Group therapy
  • Dementia Voice Project in UK

• Expressive arts therapies
  • Art therapy
  • Music therapy
  • Dance/movement therapy
  • Drama therapy
Adapting Psychotherapy for People living with Dementia

- How do we adjust psychotherapy to meet the needs of this population?
- Building cognitive ramps
- Being psychotherapeutic vs. doing psychotherapy
Adapting Psychotherapy for People living with Dementia

Communication with cognitively intact people is a shared responsibility.

Communication when one person has dementia is no longer a shared responsibility.
Adaptations

- Therapist as “memory bank” for clients
- Helping with language and expression
  i.e. reflecting
- Less formal context
- Structured sessions
- Need for therapist to be reliably present on a long-term basis
- Building on strengths – emotional memory
Dementia and Emotions

“As we become more emotional and less cognitive, it’s the way you talk to us, not what you say, that we will remember. We know the feeling, but don’t know the plot. Your smile, your laugh and your touch are what we will connect with. Empathy heals. Just love us as we are. We’re still here, in emotion and spirit, if only you could find us.”

Christine Bryden, Dancing with Dementia, 2005 p138)
What those living with dementia can teach us.

- Congruence
- How to form deep therapeutic relationships
- Non-verbal communication
- Empathy and working on emotional level.
- Humility, patience and the limits of our control
Thank you
References


- Dalby, Sperlinger & Boddington. (2011) “Lived experience of spirituality and dementia in older people living with mild to moderate dementia” *Dementia* 11(1) 75-94.


References


References


