

Importance Of Psychotherapy Towards Promotion Of Mental Wellness In Africa

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Abstract

The issue of mental health affects everyone, particularly wellness of life such as emotional stability and stress free among others. Contextually, most African countries are beleaguered by poverty, wars, terrorism, insecurity and superstition leading to emotional distress, trauma, malnutrition, substance abuse, and other psychological problems. Therefore, provision of psychotherapy and its importance cannot be overemphasized, as it is essential for promoting mental wellness in the face of accumulated tension, which if not taken care of would lead to many illnesses. Example at hand is the aftermath of the just concluded political election in Nigeria, which have left many vulnerable that include loss of loved ones amidst myriad of other psychological problems. Accordingly, this paper wishes to survey the numerous contributions psychotherapy would make towards the development of mental wellness in African, using Nigeria as a case study, particularly in the form of providing advocacy for relaxation and stress management. Hence, data collected from 10 counsellors-in-training would be used as evidence-base narratives to support integration of psycho-therapeutic intervention to daily experiences of life aimed at achieving greater wellness of life.

Key words: *Psychotherapy, Mental health, Emotional stability, Wellness of life, Africa.*

Introduction

When most Africans hear the word 'psychotherapy' their minds are immediately drawn to either people who

have serious mental disorder in the psychiatric hospitals or those roaming in the streets in tattered clothes. Hence, this paper would explore what psychotherapy really

means and its numerous contributions towards mental wellness across the globe, and Africa inclusive. Psychotherapy is a psychological intervention designed to help people resolve emotional, behavioral and interpersonal problems aimed at improving quality of their lives (Legg, 2017). Therefore, it provides avenues for helping people overcome their emotional problems and challenges in order to attain wellness of life. McLeod (2007) opined that the aim of psychotherapy is to release repressed emotions and experiences, which involves making the unconscious conscious. Grohol (2019) proposes that psychotherapy is a viable tool used to challenge the individual's existing set of beliefs that could lead to malfunctioning of the self, therefore, it is a vital resources for managing everyday life experiences.

Prescriptively, psychotherapy is meant for every human person in the same perspective that 'counselling is for everyone'. Affirming such concept, Cristerna (2014) argues that everyone has a bag of 'crap' that is filled with unresolved issues, trauma and disappointments accumulated over time, therefore, psychotherapy is needed as a counter force for sustainable management of mental life. Correspondingly, this paper advocates that Africans (Nigerians) need psychotherapy in order to combat the varying experiences of poverty, wars, terrorism and tribal conflict among many others that they encounter. In this perspective, Abiodun (1995) contends that about 26% Nigerians consult traditional healers as avenues for managing their mental health, and what this points out, is that there is need for individuals to access psychotherapeutic assistance. Accounting for the significance of psychotherapy towards maintenance of wellness of life, this paper presents narratives drawn from 10 counselors-in-training. In this regard, the

paper propagates that psychotherapy be integrated as useful resources for grappling with daily life experiences, which if left unaddressed would lead to advanced if not chronic psycho-social maladjustment. Obviously, the prevalence of psychosocial maladjustment impacts on individual's well-being as well as national development, therefore, psychotherapy is a requirement that need to be achieved.

Explaining the Framework of Mental Wellness

Mental wellness involves everything an individual does including eating, drinking, reading, sleeping, relaxing and working among many others. Hence, mental wellness refers to one's ability to adapt to internal and external environmental stressors and it is not restricted to particular group of people (Steel *et al.*, 2014). Affirmatively, WHO (2009) emphasizes that mental wellness is everyone's concern, thus affects everyone irrespective of class or status. To this effect, WHO (2014) argues that indices of mental wellness reflect in the individual's ability to feel, think, and interact with others positively. Based on this premise, it is pertinent to promote, safeguard and restore mental health of everyone, of which Nigerians are not exempted.

An average Nigerian experiences multiplicity of frustration arising from poverty, inter-tribal war, kidnapping, displacement, post-election violence to mention a few, which altogether lead to psychological problems that require psychotherapeutic intervention. These frustrations are part of everyday life experiences associated with physical, social, educational, political and economic growth and development. Although Nigeria is rated as giant of Africa yet poverty stricken, where in more than half of the country is walloping in abject poverty (Nigeria

Wikipedia). As a result, its teeming population needs` life sustaining skills in order to remain resilient in the face of many difficulties they might encounter (Bakare, 2014; Lund, 2017; Oyewunmi *et al.*, 2015). In this regard, psychotherapy is one of the essential tools needed to facilitate wellness of life, leading individuals to live self-fulfilling lives.

Psychotherapy: A Useful Tool Influencing the Development of Mental Wellness

Theoretically, psychotherapy refers to a range of treatments that facilitate the resolution of mental health problems, emotional challenges, and some psychiatric disorders among many others (Grohol, 2019). Hence, it is an interactive process between the therapist and client aimed at helping the client change some behavioural patterns. Some of the major objectives of psychotherapy reflect the desire to assist individual to improve his/her wellbeing and mental health, and to resolve troublesome behaviors, beliefs, compulsions, thoughts, or emotions, and to improve relationships and social skills (Campbell, Norcross, Vasquez & Kaslow, 2013). According to Madu (2016), psychotherapy helps an individual to regain emotional resilience and to deal effectively with trauma. In this regard, Okpalaenwe (2017) reporting the findings of a research study conducted to explore African psychotherapeutic methods stated that the mere act of story telling in the folktales is a viable therapeutic process that have enabled African resolve some psychological problems. To say it in another way, one of the constructive ways Africans resolve personal and communal problems is through story telling (narratives), which could be presented as varying forms of transmitting norms and values. Hence, cultural resources are viable means of psychotherapeutic processes leading to

everyday care and healing practices, therefore, should be integrated into daily life experiences.

However, there are over a thousand different psychotherapy techniques, some being minor variations, while others are based on more complex conceptions of psychology including ethics (codes of conduct) and techniques. Be that as may, psychotherapy involves one-to-one sessions, between client and therapist, though some are conducted with groups, including families, thus, it is admirable that everyone accesses psychotherapy as means of living well fulfilled mental life.

Psychotherapy as a means of Advocacy for relaxation and stress management

Psychotherapy is an effective means of advocacy, wherein is perceived as on-going creation of awareness. Advocacy, according to Breitrose (2018) is active promotion of a cause or principle, which involves actions that lead to the achievement of a selected goal. Correspondingly, this paper emphasizes that meaningful engagement with psychotherapy provides individual with the necessary skills needed to resolves small and big problems of life. The argument is that there is no borderline of problem/concern that psychotherapy would not be able to address. Psychotherapy focuses on helping people to attain wellness, which cannot happen in isolation since the human person is a social being. Hence, there is need to reach out to family members and friends of people who undergo psychotherapeutic sessions so as to help them through their interactions to attain total wellness. That is to say, people who need psychotherapy for one reason or the other need their families and friends assistance in order to live a fulfilled life. Through advocacy, psychotherapist help individuals to discover the vacuum in their lives in order

to get a relief from what has troubled or affected them, help them have more life satisfaction, and experience healthier relationships and choices.

Research Method

The research method adopted for this paper is qualitative design aimed at exploring in-depth experiences counsellors-in-training have regarding the importance of psychotherapy as means of promoting wellness of life in Africa (Creswell, 2011; Riessman, 2008).

Sample: The sample was drawn from 10 counsellors-in-training from a Nigerian university and based on confidentiality; the name of the university is withheld. Though the research sample of 10 participants might appear small but within the perspective of qualitative research one single case could suffice, therefore, 10 samples is acceptable provided in-depth narrative and analysis is achieved (Creswell, 2011; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data Collection: Interview data narratives were collected from the participants and analyzed thematically, exploring the meaning they attribute to the importance of psychotherapy towards wellness of life. The interview sessions were taped recorded with the permission of the participants and an interview guide was used to prompt the participants to tell their stories.

Data Analysis: The interview data was coded for themes based on the participants' point of view, using Braun and Clark (2006) steps. Thus, the findings were presented in three major themes as the participants present.

Ethical Consideration: All ethical consideration was duly respected, particularly that of informed consent and confidentiality (Creswell, 2011). Participation was voluntary and the

participants were assured that the data collected would be used solely for academic purposes, thus their personal identity such as name and school were withheld. Participation does not in any way expose them to harm.

Reflectivity: The two researchers who conducted this research were counselors at different levels including a counselor-in-training and the lecturer. Hence, they were passionate conducting the research and their insider perspective of the importance of psychotherapy towards promotion of wellness of life served as an advantage facilitating the research process (Pillow, 2003; Riessman, 2008). On the other hand, being researchers with insider perspective could be sources of biases, which they handle by keeping field record journal to keep track of personal reflections, which they shared with each other as means to minimize personal prejudices (Heron, 2005).

The Findings: Narratives of Ten Counsellors-In-Training

The findings of the interview data revealed that psychotherapy offers varying opportunities to the participants to resolve personal issues ranging from behavioural modification to stances of gaining self-awareness (advocacy), including dealing with anger, addiction, fears and pain. The findings are presented in three board themes as follows: Resolution of maladjusted behaviour, dealing with fear/anger and advocacy.

Resolution of maladjusted behaviour

The findings revealed that some of the participants have been helped through psychotherapy to resolve personal problems such as overeating. In this regard, one participant indicated that it was the assistance she received from the lecturer, who also served as her one-to-one training

therapist that has enabled her explore her sleeping tendency during lecture. In this perspective, she said:

I used to eat so much in the morning and when I sit in class I always fall asleep until my lecturer engaged me on one-to-one interaction, which made me monitor what I do daily. Based on the monitoring process I discovered that I eat so heavily ...and that probably led to my sleeping tendency. I resolved to start taking small portions and eventually I stop sleeping in class...

The participant's narrative indicated how the lecturer using the space of their one-to-one interaction assisted her to explore the root cause of her sleeping tendency. As a result of that interaction she was able to identify aspects of overeating as the main factor influencing her sleeping tendency. Based on this identification process, she moves on to the next stage of initiating an action; reflected in the decision to taking small portions. Accordingly, she was able to resolve the tendency to sleep in class and so it can be argued that she has constructively solved the nuisance of sleeping in class. Another participant, who narrated how psychotherapy has helped him, told story regarding substance abuse. Thus, he said:

I was addicted to wine, particularly Amarula. I could finish a big bottle... Each time I felt worried or upset, I would go get one or even two bottles. After taking it, I would sleep and forget my sorrows. This continued until my mother took me to our school counsellor who helped me through one-to-

one interactive sessions to work on my addiction...

Again, this narrative data portrayed that the participant has been helped to overcome an addictive behaviour of indulgence to alcohol. Obviously, he might not have been able to resolve this addiction by myself and with himself alone; he needed an expertise assistance, which the school counselor provided. It was the help he received that has helped him grapple with his disturbing behaviour of indulgence.

Dealing with Fear/Anger

A number of the participants expressed that psychotherapy has helped them resolve their inclination to fear and anger. The findings indicated that some of them have deep-seated fear that led some of their friends describe them as mentally disturbed. For instance, one participant who claimed that she has been helped said:

When I was in secondary school, it was very difficult for me to walk or sleep alone in the dark. I used to imagine some creatures coming close to me. Some of my classmates even thought I was mad or possessed by a demon. But one of my friends summoned courage and reported the issue to our school counselor, who started sessions with me and gradually I overcome the fear. I appreciate the systematic dissenzitation process the counsellor exposed me to, and as a student counselor I sometimes use the same systematic dissenzitation with my clients who exhibit fear syndromes. During my last practicum experience I used

systematic desensitization to help two clients who exhibited crowd phobia syndromes. It worked out well for them.

Clearly, this participant expressed that she has been helped through psychotherapy to overcome her deep seated fear of darkness and now she in turn is employing the same technique used in helping her resolve her behavioural problem with others. In essence, it means that psychotherapy is useful tool for maintaining wellness of life. Yet, another participant narrated how psychotherapy has aided her to overcome fear emerging from the trauma of armed robbers attack. Her narrative goes as follows:

I had terrible experience of armed robbers' attacks between the ages of 13 and 16. Armed robbers visited our home twice; the trauma was overwhelming and any time I heard big noise around me I start shivering... When my mum could not bear it any longer, she took me to various prayer houses but nothing happened. Finally, she took me to a Rev. Sr. who is a guidance counsellor in a nearby catholic school. I went through several behavioural modification processes, which helped me, start changing my thinking process and eventually I slowly but steadily regained my peace of mind even if disturbing sounds are made around me.

For this participant, psychotherapy is the means through which the trauma of armed robbers attacked leading to something close to chronic fear was arrested. Had she

not received the psychotherapeutic help she may still be living with the trauma and probably it could lead to higher form of fear such as depression to say the least. Furthermore, some participants expressed that psychotherapy has helped them overcome anger. In their narratives they claimed that it was through psychotherapeutic that they became fully aware of how much anger was becoming part of identity. Hence, they expressed that it was through the interaction with the therapist, and particularly the anger inventory scale that was administered to them, that made them begin to see clearly the extent anger has become partly part of their self-presentation. Hence, they began to develop not only the desire but also the passion to resolve the impact of anger in their lives. In that regard, this participant said:

I was very hot tempered. I used to hit my siblings at the slightest provocation. My anger seemed uncontrollable. My parents hated me as a result of that, and I realized that I could not help myself even as a counsellor-in-training. But I found help through one of my lecturers who noticed that aspect of me a few times in class. She engaged me in therapeutic sessions, which is still on-going but quite helpful as my parents and siblings have mentioned to me a few times that I have greatly improved in managing my anger outburst ...

In addition, another participant who used the discourse of anger to portray the importance of psychotherapy maintained that during her just concluded practicum

exercise, she employed psychotherapeutic processes in helping secondary school students to manage their anger:

During practicum last summer I encountered a school client who when the class teacher does not respond to his greetings would be become angry and not greet any other person and sometimes would refuse to eat his lunch. When we started the session he said that he hate himself whenever that happens but gradually he came to understand that what others do is not enough to determine his state of happiness (using his own words)...

Advocacy

A fair number of the participants employed the discourse of advocacy to present the importance of psychotherapy towards maintenance of wellness of life. In this regard, the participants claim that psychotherapy provides the space for educational, career and personal-social advocacy, thus it facilitates orientation processes wherein the individual is equipped with necessary skills needed to make meaningful adjustment to life. Accordingly, one of the participants told the story of how he was helped:

I came from a family where everyone is science inclined. My parents are medical doctors and being their only son, my dad insisted that I must read medicine. He threatened to stop paying my school fees because I had told him that I wanted be a social worker... this conflict was tough but was resolved with the help of the school counsellor who had to

meet with my parents severally...and I am more than delighted that I have been permitted to study what makes me happy...

Another participant narrated how she, a counsellor-in-training had used her emerging skills as a therapist to assist an adolescence resolve peer group conflict:

There is this student I encountered last year during practicum exercise...she feels not accepted by her classmates because she seems to know the answer to every problem. This feeling of non-acceptance really disturbs her... as she started dreading coming to school. So after we met to share this problem I discovered that one of the way out was to have a group session with the classmates to explore the ethics of respecting individual difference...diversity and based on the discussions she felt consoled, as the discussions opened up new ways of understanding for her and her classmates...

Going by the above narratives, it is not an over exaggeration to argue that psychotherapy is necessary tool for facilitating wellness of life. Based on the narratives, there is ample evidence indicating that psychotherapy could be engaged in solving multiplicity of daily problems/issues, therefore, could be accessed by anyone whenever the need arises. Consequently, no one is exempted from psychotherapy usefulness.

Conclusion/Recommendation

The central argument of this paper has been that psychotherapy is a useful tool towards maintenance of wellness of life in African and Nigeria inclusive. The narratives provide evidence based themes portraying the significance of psychotherapy as means of managing behavioural modification including advocacy, therefore, greater effort should be made to integrate its therapeutic processes in schools, family and social organizations including faith-based communities. In this way, indices of wellness of life for average Nigeria would rise above average in spite of daunting experiences of poverty, tribal conflict/violence, kidnapping to mention a few. To sum it up, more research is needed to explore the vitality of life that psychotherapy promotes, thereby make it a more attractive exercise for all to embrace.

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