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Transcendence, Suffering, and Psychotherapy

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Abstract

The question of theodicy, or how evil can exist given the assumption of a benevolent, omnipotent, transcendent other, has perplexed psychologists, philosophers, and theologians since each of these traditions first emerged. While this is often the topic of philosophers and theologians, it is frequently present in the content and suffering of many psychotherapy clients. Many psychotherapists struggle with how to effectively intervene or assist clients in dealing with this issue or the spiritual component of suffering as well. The current paper utilizes the psychological constructs of the God Image and God Concept to provide a basis for conceptualization and intervention with clients struggling with issues of theodicy and other forms of suffering and loss. The God Concept, defined as a person's cognitive beliefs about God or a transcendent other, is contrasted with the God Image, a person's emotional or relational experience of God. The first part of the paper examines how the God Concept and God Image can deepen the understanding of the spiritual and religious components of suffering. While the God Concept and God Image often develop through the same chronological timeframe, they develop through different, and often contradictory, processes. The God Concept develops primarily through education, thought, and reason. Conversely the God Image develops through a more complex process that involves how a person experiences their parents, significant others, and the world in addition to experiences of transcendence or peak experiences. During times of suffering and loss, problematic aspects of the God Concept and latent aspects of the God Image often surface to complicate the healing and transformation processes. The second part of the paper focuses on how to assess the God Concept and God Image in the process of psychotherapy. While the God Concept is much easier to assess, it is the God Image which often contributes more to the painful aspects of suffering. Several approaches are discussed which can

assist therapists in the assessment of these constructs. The paper will conclude by addressing clinical applications utilizing the God Image and God Concept. Two important considerations will be addressed here. First, how can the God Concept and God Image help sustain clients through suffering and assist in transforming suffering and loss into meaning and hope? Second, how can times of suffering provide opportunities to help clients heal painful aspect of their beliefs about God and experiences of God?

Transcendence, Suffering, and Psychotherapy

People have sought to make sense out of their existence since the beginning of recorded time. Existential thinkers have long argued the process of meaning-making or meaning-discovery is part of what makes people human. Our unique capacity for self-transcendence, or self-consciousness, allows for reflection on the nature and purpose of our being and on the reality of our eventual non-being. In the search for meaning through analysis of existence, most cultures throughout history have relied on some external god, gods, or ground of being to explain the existence and meaning of human life. While some, such as Feuerbach (1989) and Freud (1939, 1950, 1961) portrayed this phenomenon as nothing more than a social construction, a projection of thoroughly human desires and needs projected upon the blank screen of the cosmos, while others, such as Kierkegaard (1985) and Tillich (1951), maintained this same phenomenon was based on some transcendent reality. Regardless, the questioning of the meaning and purpose of our existence, particularly as it relates to some perception of a transcendent reality, has never been far from societal consciousness.

This search for meaning as it relates to a transcendent reality is inextricably tied to issues of death, suffering, and evil. In theological circles, the word *theodicy* refers to attempts to somehow justify God's righteousness and grace despite the evident presence of evil and extreme unwarranted suffering in the world (Davis, 1981a). The term "theodicy" is derived from two Greek words meaning "God" and "justice." In other words, theodicies are an attempt to "justify the ways of God" in light of the reality of such evil and suffering. This has been a source of much debate, particularly within Christian theology, because among the several assumptions about the nature of God are the qualities of omnipotence and benevolence. If God is truly all powerful and all good, how can such suffering exist?

The question of how to explain evil is not limited to the theistic religions. It can be equally challenging to explain evil in the context of evolutionary theory and other spiritual or faith-based traditions that do not believe in a theistic god. The sociologist, Max Weber, holds Hinduism, with its notions of samsara and karma, as one of the more satisfying and coherent theodicies within the world religions. Ernst Becker (1973) eloquently demonstrated in his book, *The Denial of Death*, that many people try to deny the reality of death and evil through various forms of suppression, repression, and denial. Many use this same denial process to avoid directly dealing with the existence of suffering and evil. However, no one is able to fully escape these issues.

It is a reality of human existence that evil and suffering are entities that will be encountered. For many, these conflicts never make it to the level of consciousness for very long. However, historical atrocities such as the Holocaust and the recent terrorist attacks of September 11 brought the issues of evil and suffering to the surface of many Americans who were ill prepared to deal with such terrors.

The current paper explores ways to deal with the issues of suffering, evil, and theodicy in psychotherapy. First, we will examine the conscious and unconscious elements of how people experience God or the transcendent. Next we will explore some of the traditional approaches to theodicy and evil. Last, approaches to how these issues can be approached in therapy are discussed.

Overview of God Concept and God Image

The theory that underlies the God Concept and God Image is built upon the work of Ana-Maria Rizzuto's (1979) use of psychoanalytic and object relations psychology to explain how humans form their internal representation of God. Rizzuto distinguishes between one's

concept of God, and one's images of God. The terms God Concept and God Image as used in this paper, reflect Rizzuto's profound acknowledgement that how one conceives of God and how one experiences God are often two distinct phenomena.

Philosophers throughout the ages, as they have grappled with questions of meaning, have naturally been led to contemplate the nature of God or the transcendent. Their answers to the questions of creation and the sustaining of the cosmos, the definition of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty, and the explanation of evil and suffering, have led to numerous conceptions of transcendence, as an ultimate answer or final cause to life's questions. The philosophers' rational approach to explaining the nature of God or transcendence is shared by theologians who have attempted to comprehend God based on their rational understanding and interpretation of Holy Scriptures, traditional teachings, and observations of nature. This is what is meant by the term God Concept. It is one's intellectual understanding of God or transcendence based upon religious teachings or spiritual traditions. However, rational thinking alone is only able to produce a cold, distant concept of God, void of any emotional connectivity. Someone can believe intellectually that there must be a God, but may feel no inclination to accept Him/Her unless, posits Rizzuto (1979, p. 48), "previous interpersonal experiences have flushed out the concept with multiple images that can now coalesce in a representation that [He/She] can accept emotionally."

The term, God Image is used to refer to one's internal, intrapsychic, emotional representation of God. The God Image develops during childhood as the child is confronted with their limitations, and recognizes powers beyond their own at work in their environment. Following object relations theory, the God Image is formed in a similar manner, and is most often analogous to, the child's images of their mother, father, or other primary caregivers. However, Lawrence (1997) notes that the God representation differs from other representation in

that it is not based directly on experiences of God. Instead, memories originally associated with primary caregivers are combined with other experiences and culminate in one's image of God.

The formation of the God Image is technically defined by Rizzuto (p. 44) as “an object-related representational process marked by the emotional configuration of the individual prevailing at the moment [he/she] forms the representation.” This definition notes the complexity and vulnerability involved in the formation of the God Image. A child's initial God Image is dependent upon relational and environmental influences over which the child has only minimal control. However, one's God Image is not static. While the formative years of childhood are critical in the development of one's God Image, the image is elaborated throughout life. The feelings, images, and memories connected to early childhood encounters with the notion of transcendence impact later representations of God, upon which future elaborations of one's God Image builds. Finally, according to Rizzuto everyone has a God Image. The nonbeliever who professes there is no such thing as God has chosen consciously or unconsciously not to believe in the God representation he/she has developed.

Overview of Theodicy and Suffering

Theodicy is most often approached from the Judeo-Christian faith traditions and is defined as the attempt to justify the goodness of God in spite of the presence of evil and suffering in the world. Other world religions must also explain the presence of evil in the world, but the problem is particularly complex for Judeo-Christian traditions because of the assertion that God is both all powerful and all loving. The problem simply stated is this: God either cannot or will not prevent evil. If God cannot prevent evil this suggests God is limited in power. If God will not prevent evil this suggests he is limited in benevolence. However, God by His/Her nature is not limited, so why then is their evil?

The problem of evil can be solved by denying any of the three propositions: (a) Evil exists, (b) God is all powerful, or (c) God is completely benevolent. One can also of course get around the problem of evil through denying the existence of God. While evil, both natural and moral, is a problem for all of humankind, it does not pose the theological or intellectual problem for the atheist that it poses for the person of faith. The atheist may be relieved of theodicy by viewing evil as a fact of life, not a problem to be solved. The existence of evil is considered a given in most Judeo-Christian religious traditions. Typically the presence of evil is explained as a result of humans' free will and willful rebellion against God, as depicted in the Biblical account of the fall of Adam and Eve (Genesis 3, New International Version).

Stewart (1998) suggests the traditional Christian explanation for evil and suffering is best represented in the theology of Augustine. Augustine proposes, based upon his study and interpretation of scripture, that the original situation of humanity was a state of perfection, from which Adam and Eve willfully departed with dire consequences for the rest of the human race. Humanity therefore brings evil and suffering upon their self through continual rebellion against God's perfect will. As Davis (1981b) states, evil is a necessary potential of freedom. Although this is the popular explanation for evil and suffering within Christianity, it is not the only answer to the question of theodicy¹.

Twentieth century philosopher, John Hick (1985), agrees that humans have free will, and that evil is the result of humans rebelling against God and making wrong choices with painful consequences. However, Hick rejects the notion that humans are doomed with a *sin nature*, and instead suggests an interpretation of the Genesis story in which humans' task is achieving the purposes that God wills for them. Similar to a loving parent who allows their

children to face natural consequences, God allows his creations to experience pain and evil as a method of growth.

While the above explanations of evil and suffering focus on the presence of evil in light of a benevolent God, others have focused on explaining evil in light of an all powerful God. Perhaps the most succinct approach to this dilemma is found in C. S. Lewis' (1962) *The Problem of Pain*. Lewis, a lay theologian, and English professor by trade, has a beautiful way of making the very complex very understandable. Lewis makes a distinction between conditional impossibilities and intrinsic impossibilities. Conditional impossibilities are those things which presently are impossible, but given different conditions, may be possible. Lewis gives the example that while it may be impossible for the reader to see the street from where he/she is sitting, if the reader was to move toward the window the street would be in view. Given a change in conditions, the possibilities also change. Intrinsic impossibilities are those things, (or as we shall soon see, non-things) which are impossible under all conditions. For example it is impossible to draw a square circle or a four-sided triangle. His premise is while God is all powerful, He/She cannot do that which is intrinsically impossible, because as Lewis reasons, intrinsically impossibilities are not things, but nonentities.

According to Lewis (1962), not even God can create a square circle; to even suggest such a thing is nonsense. Likewise, God cannot create a free being who has no power of choice. Further, according to Lewis, a free being must have options to choose from, and further still they must exist in a world of predictable consequences. Otherwise the freedom of choice is negated by the unpredictability and becomes instead a freedom of chance. If every choice leads to a positive

¹ The authors are aware of the theological and philosophical critiques of the different theodicies. The purpose of this paper is not to enter into further critique, but to acknowledge the different approaches answering the questions raised by evil and suffering.

outcome, why choose, just pick one. Therefore evil must exist in the presence of an all powerful God who has created free beings capable of genuine choice.

Another popular, though controversial, approach to theodicy is that God is not all-powerful. Harold Kushner (1981) was largely responsible for popularizing this approach in his book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Hartshorne (1984), one of the founders of process thought and theology, similarly argues for this position in his book *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes*. This position has remained very controversial because of its divergence from the traditional monotheistic view of God as omnipotent (all-powerful). However, many thoughtful scholars and theologians have put forth positions which call this premise into question. While it may not be a popular position within mainline theistic traditions, it is important for therapists to be aware that this is an answer which an increasing number of religious people are considering.

In concluding this section, a very relevant question should be asked: What is the relevance of theodicy to the clinician? First and foremost, these are issues which create a tension, anxiety, and suffering for many clients. If it is worthy of a client's suffering, it should be worthy of therapists concern. This is especially true given that clients often do not feel safe or have a forum to explore these questions genuinely. Second, though this section of the paper provides an entirely insufficient overview of the approaches to theodicy, it is important for therapists to be aware of some of the different approaches clients may take to resolving this issue². An unfortunate consequence of the lack of knowledge about a topic is that an overly narrow approach often becomes the path of choice. While it is unrealistic for therapists to gain

² For a more complete overview of the different approaches to the issue of theodicy, readers may wish to consult *Encountering Evil* by Stephen Davis (1981c.) or *Evil and a God of Love* by John Hick (1977).

knowledge of all the issues clients may struggle with, if a therapist desires to work with religious or spiritual clients, theodicy is an important issue of which they should gain some awareness.

The God Image, God Concept, and Crisis

Religion continues to be one of the primary resources people turn to during times of crisis. There are many common place examples of this. Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, there were dramatic increases in church attendance and people talking about God, although attendance waned to previous levels in a relatively brief period of time. Some preliminary research suggested religious or spiritual coping was one of the more effective means of coping with and growing through the tragedy of the terrorist attacks (Hoffman & Whitmire, 2002). Many of the important rituals, such as funerals, more often than not have religious ties. People are likely to turn to the minister or church support group before trying therapy. This leads to some important questions. Why do people so frequently turn to religion in times of crisis? How does religion and spirituality sustain people in times of crisis? How does crisis impact an individual's religious and spiritual beliefs?

Limitations of the God Concept and God Image in Times of Suffering

The constructs of the God Concept and God Image can be both helpful and counterproductive in dealing with suffering. Suffering will often bring previously unconscious differences between the God Concept and God Image to the surface. As previously noted, people are more aware of the cognitive aspects of their relationship with God (God Concept) than they are of their relational or experiential (God Image). If their God Image is negative, most people can continue to function with minimal recognition of this. However, during times of crisis the differences between the God Concept and the God Image are not so easy to ignore. This is when many people begin to question the existence or goodness of God, human nature, and the world.

When there is such a discrepancy, the God Concept is often used to deny and suppress the anger and feelings of abandonment which flow from the God Image. This repression, as with all things which are repressed, will need to find another expression.

This process is often reinforced by good intentioned religious groups. Common phrases such as “It was God’s will,” “S/he is in a better place now,” and “All things work for the good of those who love God” encourage suppression of any questioning of the goodness of God.

However, this questioning is often necessary for genuine healing to occur. If this questioning, anger, and feelings of being abandoned are not dealt with they will lead to feelings of depression, anger displaced on other people, and feeling distant from God. This protects the *idea of God*³ in much same way children often feel the need to protect their parents. If the child’s parents are perfect and all-powerful, then the child feels safe. When this idealization is broken, the child feels vulnerable. Similarly, when the God Concept (the idea of God) is unquestioning of God’s power, goodness, and willingness to intervene to protect the individual, then the person feels safe. However, when a person begins to question their ideas of God, they feel vulnerable.

Maintaining this ideal God Concept through the denial and suppression of questions may help people survive through times of crisis and suffering, however; it does not help them to live and grow.

God Image and God Concept Helping Sustainance During Suffering and Crisis

When an individual has a positive God Concept and God Image, particularly ones which are primarily consistent with each other, they can provide extremely valuable sources of comfort in times of crisis and suffering. One way people work through a grieving process is reconnecting in other relationships. This can also be true of spiritual relationships. Crisis, for the

³ It is important to note that the idea of God is not necessarily connected to the reality of God. This is an entirely different question which is beyond the scope of this paper.

person with a healthy conception and experience of God, can provide opportunities for healing through deepening their relationship. In order for this to occur, the relationship must be strong enough to endure the anger and hurt which must be experienced in order to heal.

When a person has a positive, healthy God Image, they have a faith or trust in God. The more mature this faith is, the less dependent it is upon specific outcomes. While less mature forms of faith are dependent upon particular outcomes which are consistent with the God Concept, the person with a more mature faith is not dependent upon content or outcome. Rather it is based on the goodness of God. Kierkegaard (1985) likens this to a “leap of faith” in which the believer trusts despite not knowing the outcomes. This is a much deeper faith than a faith in something in which the outcome is believed to be known. In this distinction, faith is more experiential (God Image), while belief, knowledge, or the idea of God is more cognitive (God Concept).

The God Concept, which is cognitively based, helps people sustain primarily through helping them cope or survive through some distortion of reality or by keeping difficult portions of experience out of conscious awareness. Comparisons can be made to the defense mechanisms of psychodynamic theory. It is impossible for people to survive without some use of defense mechanisms. However, there are always limitations for defenses. Excessive reliance upon them, particularly in times of less severe crisis, is counterproductive and leads to either a neurotic or psychotic process. Similarly, coping, and particularly religious coping (see Pargament, 1997), has received an increase of attention in the clinical literature. However, a distinction can be made between coping mechanisms or defenses which help a person survive (coping mechanism) and coping mechanisms which help a person growth (a growth mechanism). The God Concept, being a cognitive event, is more effective in the realm of coping than growth.

The God Image is based more in experience than in cognitions or belief. Faith, an experiential reality, is more closely associated with the God Image than the God Concept. Faith, being experiential, is also relational. These factors make it possible for the God Image to be more than just a coping mechanism through its ability to help people to grow through times of crisis (growth mechanism). This is consistent with research which suggests that religious forms of coping may be more closely associated with stress-related growth than other forms of coping (Hoffman & Whitmire, 2004).

The separation of the God Concept and God Image as orthogonal constructs or psychic process is an oversimplification of a complex, interrelated phenomenon. These constructs are treated separately for the purpose of theory development and understanding, but it is not intended to reflect a belief that these constructs are entirely distinct. Rather, it is believed that there is a good deal of overlap. Some preliminary research supports this hypothesis of a relationship as related, but distinct constructs (Hoffman, Jones, Williams, & Dillard, 2004).

In summary, the God Concept and God Image can be powerful sources of sustenance and healing when they are internally consistent and healthy. However, when there are unresolved discrepancies between them, or when they entail negative experiences of God, these psychological processes often further complicate the healing and growth processes.

Working with Issues of Theodicy in the Therapy Context

Creating Space for Anger and Questioning

A critical and foundational issue in dealing with theodicy, evil, and suffering in therapy is the ability to be able to tolerate the client's anger. Religious groups and institutions for too long have encouraged the suppression of anger directed toward God or other people. Often, this type of anger is incorrectly associated with sin. However, even within the scriptures of

Christianity it is abundantly clear that anger is not the problem. Anger is experienced by God; Jesus displays not only anger but the acting out in response to anger; and many prophets of God report periods of anger directed toward God.

Stephen Diamond's (1996) book *Anger, Madness, and the Daimonic* provides one of the most penetrating analyses of anger and its relations to evil, mental illness, and violence. In the tradition of Rollo May, Diamond discusses our cultural fear of anger and how this has led not to a reduction of anger, but rather its expansion. Anger is finding its cultural expressions in many other forms of mental illness including alcohol and drug abuse, depression, and psychotic disorders. As long as our cultural continues to support this repression of anger, it is likely there will continue to be an increase in violence and other by-products.

Many people presenting in therapy have deeply struggled with issues of anger, questions about evil and theodicy, and suffering. These issues often become disavowed problems because they have been socially constructed as inappropriate topics and questions. Initially, they may have difficulty even acknowledging their presence. It may be easier to acknowledge depression or mental illness than religious or spiritual questions. The spiritual questions furthermore may serve more in a role of exacerbating or contributing to the psychological problems, but not be a sole or exclusive cause. When the other problems are resolved, the detrimental aspects of the spiritual issues no longer serve in the exacerbating role and fade back to the unconscious, only to re-emerge in later times of crisis and conflict.

Typically, it is necessary for therapy be long-term (at least 6-months or more for most people) in order for these hidden spiritual issues to emerge. When they do, it is critical that the therapist recognize them as spiritual issues and finds ways to communicate to the client that it is safe to discuss them. If therapists are to truly accept that much or some of communication occurs

on an unconscious level, then it must be taken seriously that lack of awareness of spiritual issues when they are present can send a message to the client that these issues are not appropriate for therapy. This not only pushes them back to the unconscious, but it reinforces to the client that they are inappropriate content for consideration or discussion.

Anger, Theodicy, and Questioning in Therapy

When the spiritual questions of suffering and evil are recognized and invited into the therapy room, then it becomes important for therapists to have an awareness of the implications of theodicy. One of the most important reasons for therapists to have training in religious and spiritual issues is to avoid unintentionally imposing their values on their clients through misunderstanding or not being familiar with the client's belief system. This can be particularly dangerous for therapists who know their own belief system well, but are unfamiliar with other approaches to faith. In regards to the spiritual issues discussed in this paper, this is particularly important.

For example, when working with fundamentalist Christian clients, it may be very important to approach these issues in a manner that does not question the sovereignty of God. This is particularly true given that many fundamentalists are leery of therapy to begin with. If they perceive the therapist as challenging God's sovereignty, it is likely that the therapist may not even have the possibility to work through this mistake (i.e., the client may drop out of therapy prematurely). Conversely, for a client who comes from a more progressive theological tradition, to acknowledge or focus too much on God's sovereignty may be the concern. This may be associated with 'Bible beating' or narrow perspectives of faith in their experience. If they perceive their therapist taking this position, it is likely they will be hesitant to discuss their spiritual questions. While it seems evident that the therapist should not, in most cases, be voicing

a theological statement or position, there can be various subtle ways therapists may be perceived by the client as doing this. Take the example of the progressive Christian above. If the therapist, when reflecting the client's content, reflects more of the statements struggling with God's sovereignty, this may lead the client to think this is what the therapist believes. It is important to keep in mind that clients who are cautious about discussing spiritual issues are likely to over-interpret the therapist's interactions.

It is unrealistic for therapists to be aware of all the ways in which they may unintentionally communicate with their clients. However, the therapist is responsible to increase their awareness of how this may occur and their ability to recognize these subtle messages. A common example comes when a client retreats from spiritual issues. When one of issues is brought up toward the end of a session and then the client goes several weeks without talking about the issue again, it may be prudent to explore this dynamic. The client discussing the issue at the end of session may signify this was a difficult issue to talk about. Knowing this, the client may have an increased potential to over-interpret the therapist's reaction to the topic. Not returning to this issue for several weeks suggests the possibility that the client may have negatively interpreted the therapist's reaction. The therapist's awareness of this potential dynamic can lead them to being more aware should this process emerge.

To summarize, it is the therapists responsibility to recognize anger along with other spiritual questions such as theodicy and then to help create a safe space to explore these questions and issues. However, it is not the therapist's responsibility to find or create the answers. It is becoming increasingly common for therapists embracing ideas such as mystery, questioning, and spiritual journeying as healthy spirituality (Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993; Moore, 2002; Schneider, 2004). This seems consistent with research suggesting that

therapists are not less religious; they just tend to be religious in different ways (Shafranske & Malony, 1991). This difference, in part, is signified by them being more open, less traditional, and less dogmatic. It is important to note that this is a theological statement. While it is representative of the values of many, maybe most, psychotherapists, it may not be the values of their clients. A therapist does not have the right to impose this value upon their client as tempting as it may be.

Even if it is true that seeing spirituality as being more mysterious promotes better psychological health than a more dogmatic, static view of religion, it is still the responsibility of the therapist to honor the client's decision to choose a spiritual perspective which may be less psychologically healthy. At the same time, creating a safe space for clients to explore their spiritual questions and anger increases the likelihood of the client accepting a less rigid spiritual stance. In this situation, the therapist is limited to much the same role as a parent, being aware that there are healthier choices available, but allowing the client to not choose them.

God Concept and God Image in Therapy

Differences between the God Concept and God Image are often expressed as guilt (Moriarty & Hoffman, 2004). The likelihood of guilt increases during the times of suffering or spiritual questioning. The increase of neurotic guilt, though also common in many occasions of suffering and loss, can be a sign of a spiritual conflict. The unaware therapist may not see the guilt or assume it is only byproduct of the other suffering.

The therapeutic challenge of getting to this neurotic spiritual guilt is the difficulty of moving beyond the God Concept to the God Image. When a therapist asks a client of how they are experiencing God at the time of suffering, they are likely to give the answer consistent with their God Concept. The therapist must be aware this is only one aspect of the client's broader

experience of God, but may be the only one the client is aware of, or is willing to acknowledge. Several techniques have been developed which can be useful helping therapists uncover the client's God Image (see Moriarty, in press; Rizzuto, 1979).

One example drawing upon techniques discussed by Moriarty (in press) involves using imagery. The therapist begins by having the client close their eyes and relax. It may be beneficial to have the client focus their eyes downward, as this helps some people to get better in touch with their emotions. Next, have the client image God and describe God aloud. It is important for the therapists to allow the client to describe God in the way most consistent with their experience of God. For some, God may not be in human form or not even in the form of a being. Many clients describe God as a bright ball of light or as a breeze. Encourage the client to use as much detail as possible in their description of God. After they have completed their description, the therapist asks the client to pay attention to any changes in God as you describe some scenarios. The therapist then may describe the event which initiated the suffering or current crisis or a similar event. It is important for the therapist to pay close attention to the client's nonverbal reactions during this time including facial expressions, body language, and voice tone. Try to notice if the client is appearing to 'force' their imagination to see God consistent with their God Concept or if they are allowing themselves to experience more naturally. It can be helpful to encourage clients to describe what they feel in their body after you share the scenario.

The intention of this technique is to move beyond the cognitive conceptualizations of God to the unconscious or preconscious experience of God. However, it is important to note that this doesn't always work. Oftentimes client's defenses are too strong or well rehearsed. When this approach does work, it is important for the therapist to allow sufficient time to process the event. For clients who are acknowledging their questions about God or their spirituality for the

first time, this can be a traumatic experience. Because of this, therapists should not utilize this approach with clients who are actively suicidal or lacking sufficient coping skills or support resources. Therapists must further be prepared to help clients reconstruct their ‘God,’ theological system, faith system, or worldview. If the therapist does not feel sufficiently trained to assist the client in this process, they should not attempt using this approach.

While this particular therapeutic approach would be most appropriate for clients with a theistic orientation to their religious or spiritual beliefs, it is the contention of the authors that it could be adapted to work with clients from different spiritual backgrounds. The idea behind this technique is to get to the client’s spiritual experience in the world. Just as therapist must maintain sufficient flexibility to allow the client to describe God in the way most comfortable for the client, they can allow the client to construct a ‘picture’ of their spiritual experience in the world which is consistent with their own belief system. Therapists often have a more difficult time allowing the client to construct this experience if they are not familiar with the client’s spiritual background. A general knowledge base is often necessary for creativity and flexibility. For example, if a client’s spiritual experience is seeing the transcendent other in nature, they may be able to incorporate a nature scene into the imagery exercise above.

In summary, the primary intention of working with the God Concept and God Image in therapy is to assist the client in resolving discrepancies between the God Concept and God Image or change the way they experience God. Again, it is important to note that it is not the therapist’s job to construct or direct the new experience of God, but rather to walk with and assist the client in doing so. When working with the God Image in therapy there is a very fine line in avoiding imposing your own beliefs upon the client. Without proper training, knowledge, and experience, it is likely that therapist will not be able to successfully walk this line.

Conclusion

This paper has explored many of the challenges in working with spiritual issues in psychotherapy. These issues are particularly important during times of crisis and suffering in the client's life. It is vitally important that therapists who attempt to work with these issues in psychotherapy have proper training and awareness of the complex spiritual issues involved. The current articles explored two of these, the different levels of how clients experience God and issues of theodicy and suffering. It is clear that much more work needs to be done in understanding the complex relationship between spirituality and suffering. It is our hopes that this paper is one of many which will explore this issue.

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