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Experiential Gratitude Group for Clients in Substance Abuse Treatment

Patricia Hussey, C.G.S in Advanced Counseling

Description of the Intervention

- There is a wealth of research showing the many benefits of practicing gratitude in one's life, affecting us on a physical, emotional and spiritual level (spiritual in this sense meaning a perceived connectedness one feels towards others and the natural world). Current studies suggest its use in mental health counseling as it reduces depression and anxiety, has an undoing effect on negative emotions, decreases social isolation and, among other things, nurtures a sense of meaning and purpose (Kerr, 2014, Emmons & McCullough, 2003).
- Gratitude has a two-fold meaning: in one sense it is a feeling one gets when we notice or acknowledge something that someone has done for us out of their own good intentions; not earned or deserved (Emmons & Stern, 2013). In another sense, as recognized by all of the major world religions, it is beyond the individual. Gratitude enables us to see beyond ourselves, that we are somehow connected to others in the world and the natural world around us.
- The goal of utilizing Gratitude Practice as a clinical intervention is multi-faceted: to increase trust in others, to increase perceived support system, to reduce symptoms of depression, anxiety and lifetime risk of substance use disorders, to increase self-esteem and optimism, to increase acceptance of life circumstances (Emmons & Stern, 2013).

Brief Review of the Research

- Research shows that gratitude can be cultivated regardless of whether or not someone has a dispositional bent towards it or not. Studies show that even when given a short time period of 2 weeks or 1 month, people with self-reported symptoms of depression, anxiety, relational problems, post traumatic stress, substance abuse disorders and eating disorders were able to significantly increase their degree of gratitude experienced, and thus receiving gratitude benefits on their mental health, by simply keeping a daily gratitude journal. Control group comparisons did not show any increased gratitude by keeping a daily record of kind acts they had done each day (Kerr, 2014).
- Lovingkindness Meditation and Mindfulness Meditation proved to be more effective than Progressive Muscle Relaxation in cultivating sense of connectedness to others; PMR actually shown to decrease sense of connectedness and increase self attunement. Both MM and LKM shown to increase gratitude and decrease negative affect, but only LKM --a specific gratitude meditation-- was shown to increase positive affect (Aspy et al., 2017).
- When monitoring the brain during gratitude exercise, "increased oxygenated hemoglobin was detected, especially in the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex" (Balconi, et. al., 2020). This is the area responsible for cognitive functioning, working memory. With the increase of oxygenated hemoglobin vital organs including the brain able to function at an improved level.

Clinical Problem Addressed

- Group comprised of men and women with majority age range between 25-35 years old, in outpatient substance abuse treatment program, all have trauma history, many have co-occurring mental health diagnosis.
- Clients report symptoms of urges to use drug of choice, depression, anxiety, regret, shame, loss, trauma.

Conceptualization of the Intervention

- Clients' lives have been impacted in significant ways by their addictions including children being removed from them, incarceration, overdose, loss of job, loss of friends, loss of family, loss of homes.
- Many of the client come from families where substance abuse was prevalent, many clients were removed from their own parents care for a time, many report having been sexually abused in childhood, effects of trauma, parent with mental health and substance use disorder, ongoing effects of legal issues, incarceration, shame cycle
- All have supportive family who is helping them and supporting them on a daily basis to attend appointments, to bring them food, clean their homes, etc.
- Gratitude Intervention was chosen specifically for this group due to known benefits of gratitude practice and reported symptoms of group. Much of the research is based around independent work or homework after session, I wanted to make this the platform for group experience, discussion and support.

Implementation

Each group was conducted with format of :

- Psycho education: what gratitude is, what it is not (yet another thing to numb or distract). It is rather a means to bring balance and stabilize balance in a person's life.
- Gratitude exercise:
 - 3 good things: One person in your life you are grateful for from either past or present, something you are proud of yourself for, etc.
 - Mindfulness and self-acceptance and self-compassion
 - Loving kindness meditation
- Processing:
 - How that was for you
 - what gets in the way of gratitude practice?
- Gratitude Exercise: The little things
 - Spontaneous contribution to overall list of good things that can be observed in everyday life

Evaluation and Outcome

- The Gratitude Questionnaire-Six (GQ-6) was used to measure gratitude levels at initial and second session. Subsequent sessions were unable to be measured due to participants ending session early.
- There are 6 questions with a 6 point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree
- I modified this 6 point rating scale into a 4 point rating scale (strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree) due to limitations of zoom meeting, not having access to chat feature in zoom and not having access to screen share feature in zoom. To simplify this for group members I read each of the 6 questions out loud and had each member hold a finger of 1,2, 3, or 4 depending on individual answer. Each member was agreeable with this method despite answers not being kept private to other group members.
- Week 1 at Onset of group, clients reported an average of **37** out of a possible 72 points on GQ-6
- Week 2 survey conducted at end of group, with average score being **42**.
- It can be expected based on the research that this number would slowly increase each week. All research considered for this project were in a time frame of 2-6 weeks with steady increase in Gratitude levels following each intervention.

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