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Model of counseling for family doctors

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Define counseling as the process of assisting people to overcome obstacles in their personal growth and in their interpersonal relationships.¹ It helps clear away such obstacles so that one's personal potential can be developed and realistic life goals achieved. Since the efficacy of counseling has been proven, it has become an important aspect of family doctors' work.² Doctors must assist patients and family members as they suffer from illnesses, as well as help them handle their emotions during various life crises. Furthermore, a family physician will often intentionally guide patients to move forward in their maturation process and personal development. While some physicians are trained psychotherapists, many would appreciate learning a counseling model to use in practice. In this essay, I offer a generic counseling model—with which family doctors can understand human personal growth and offer effective guidance to patients.

Indications and contraindications

Because this is a generic model, it can be adapted to other specific counseling schools. The indications are similar to those of most psychotherapies: it applies to almost everyone, except those with acute psychosis who cannot process thoughts.

Model

I created this model by adapting concepts from life-stage development theories³; Augsburger's concept of dependence, independence, and interdependence⁴; and the whole-person approach to health, which includes counseling and treating the physical, psychological, social, cultural, and spiritual aspects.⁵ The basic assumption is that each individual goes through 3 life stages in physical, psychological, social, and spiritual development. The stages are dependent, independent, and interdependent.

Dependent stage. This stage begins after birth. The individual relies on the primary caregivers to provide nourishment and to nurture for physical and biological growth; therefore, the family environment and the sociocultural setting play a crucial role in shaping emotional, psychological, social, cultural, and spiritual perspectives.

Independent stage. Later on in life, the individual learns to be independent. Apart from physical independence, this stage involves the development of identity, self-esteem and confidence, and a belief and value system from which

Table 1. A tool for family doctors interviewing individuals

1. Dependent phase

- What was your experience growing up like? Overall, was it positive (eg, a nurturing environment), neutral, or negative (including trauma, abuse, and neglect)?
- Are family members enmeshed, detached, or connected?
- Do power imbalances exist in the family in which you grew up? Indicate any unusual family structures, events, or patterns (eg, deaths, illnesses, absent family members, migrations).

2. Independent phase

- When did you see yourself as autonomous, having a good sense of self, individuality, a belief system, and freedom to make life decisions? Was this process easy or hard, and how did it come about?
- As a result of such independence, what sort of life path and goals have you chosen so far for yourself (eg, in career or vocational choice; in friends, life partners, and other relationships with relatives; in ministry or service for your faith, if you have a religious or spiritual orientation)?
- How did your culture or environment affect the development of this phase?
- If you feel that you have not achieved an independent state, what do you think are the contributing factors or obstacles? Do you have some ideas about how these could be overcome?

3. Interdependent phase

- At this point in your life, do you feel that you have achieved a healthy interdependent state as you relate to others? What do you think are some of the key ingredients of healthy relationships with others?
- What kind of difficulties, if any, have you encountered in moving toward this life phase?
- Would you like to maintain this balance between isolated individualism and total collectivism (interdependent state) in the future? If so, how will you do it?

Based on your responses to the above, are there areas in your life you would like us to work on?

free decisions and life choices are made. The value system is derived from learning and processing observations and lessons from family and culture, education (including spiritual teaching), and society (including peers). The individual's values form the filter system through which all life decisions are screened. When faced with a life choice, the individual collects the available data, processes them, and, based on the learned value system, arrives at a decision. If the outcome of the decision is positive, the sense of self will be reinforced, and the individual will feel content

and satisfied. If the outcome is negative, the individual will have to reexamine the value system and make necessary adjustments. During this growth stage, which involves all aspects of the whole person, one will normally enter adulthood, and be engaged in establishing a career, developing new and existing relationships, selecting a life partner, and having a family.

Interdependent stage. In this stage, the individual has a healthy sense of self, while at the same time being connected with and relating to others (Augsburger calls it responsible dependence).⁴ This state represents a good balance between 2 extremes: total isolated individualism (private life) and total group-, community-, and culture-centred collectivism (social life).

How interview questions correspond to life stages

Table 1 shows the type of questions we should use in interviewing individuals. The first line of questioning deals with the dependent phase. The questions help us to understand the nature of the individual's upbringing and the relational dynamics of family members, and to identify some important events (including rites of passage) in that family. We will explore how these factors have affected the person's present life state.

The questions dealing with the independent phase are aimed at determining the manner in which individuals seek to attain maturity and a healthy sense of self in relation to both themselves and a wider community. We will understand how well individuals adapt and adjust to the environment and culture, and whether they have successfully completed tasks associated with the independent stage. If there are unachievable tasks in the independent stage, individuals are given the opportunity to identify and discuss potential obstacles and how they can be overcome.

The final set of questions deals with current relationships with significant others, be they in the family, in the workplace, or in the community. Again, both the strength

and the growth areas are discussed with the individual.

After going through this set of questions in the interview, we will have a good understanding of the individual's state, of the challenges and problems facing the individual, and of the individual's desires for personal growth in the future. Our task is to reinforce positive life experiences, and to work on the growth areas and difficulties. If we and the individual agree that there are areas needing improvement, a counseling contract can then be arranged by mutual agreement.

My experience with this model

I have found this model very useful in my practice, particularly for those individuals who are searching for identity, "selfhood," and life direction. The process takes roughly 30 minutes to complete. In the end, the patient feels understood, and a good therapeutic relationship has been established. I hope this will benefit those physicians interested in doing effective counseling.

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