

HOLISTIC INTERVENTIONS TO TRAUMA MANAGEMENT FOR TEACHERS FOLLOWING DISASTER: EXPRESSIVE ARTS AND INTEGRATED BODY-MIND-SPIRIT APPROACHES

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Abstract

Schools are often an entry point for offering psycho-social interventions to communities following disasters. However, teachers often lack skills to facilitate classroom activities that can address post-traumatic symptoms. Further they are not trained in mental health and they themselves have been traumatized. A solution is to provide teachers with an intervention protocol to be used in the typical classroom. As an alternative to traditional counseling, holistic interventions can alleviate traumatic symptoms, while promoting personal wellness and community development. A method for offering both expressive arts and integrated body-mind-spirit approaches is offered with reference to the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake in China.

Keywords: disaster management; teachers; holistic intervention; expressive arts; body-mind-spirit

Introduction

Natural disasters, such as those in Haiti, Japan, New Zealand and China in 2011 and 2012, cause immeasurable pain and psychological devastation that will have long-lasting effects. Most often previously existing social and community support services have broken down, communication is impaired and response personnel themselves are coping with loss. Schools are an important and normalizing environment that bring together administrators, teachers, students, parents and members of the community as they serve as centers to resume routines, organize communities, promote activities and distribute information and aid. Despite this tendency, teachers are not always capable or emotionally ready to handle the challenging circumstances and changing nature of their roles as they offer emotional support in addition to their educational duties. In this article, we discuss rationales and recommendations for supporting teachers based in holistic health approaches as embodied in expressive arts therapy and integrated body-mind-spirit interventions.

Choosing to Work with Teachers in Mass Disaster

Teachers are expected to help students communicate about the disaster while enhancing compassion and mutual support (Gaffney, 2008). The value of teacher-mediated interventions is undeniable. Three years after the 1999 earthquake in Turkey, it was found that the posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) rates were notably lower among students receiving school-based interventions compared to those who did not (Wolmer, Laor, Dedeoglu, Siev, & Yazgan, 2005). The success rate was due to the fact that school-based interventions reach large populations of children in addition to being able to offer mental health support in a non-stigmatizing and natural environment.

Many teachers feel inadequate in both knowledge and skills to provide mental health support to a degree beyond their typical role as educators (Wolmer, Laor, & Lazgan, 2003). Also, there is a tendency to neglect the fact that teachers are also victims of the trauma who need to put aside their own grief to conduct supportive trauma-related classroom activities. Specifically addressing these issues, Kalmanowitz and Lloyd (2000) provided art therapy training and interventions in war-torn areas to reinforce teachers' skills, while offering them support. In the context of Confucian and authoritative cultures, such as China, expanding the teachers' role may be difficult, since the traditional Chinese classroom has large numbers of students and rigid curriculum. Furthermore, teachers may have to forsake a top-down teaching approach to one that is more experiential-based, as is conventionally adopted in mental wellness activities.

To support the implementation of such activities in the classroom, training is necessary to enhance the efficacy of teachers and to assist them in learning to care for their own mental health needs. While post-trauma school-based interventions are highly popular, documentations of systematic interventions for teachers are surprisingly rare. Essential components in training teachers and principals include processing traumatic emotions, redefining roles to enhance motivation and providing ongoing supervision (Wolmer, Laor, and Lazgan, 2003). Basing these components in culturally pertinent values and pedagogy, we designed a series of holistic health interventions for teachers affected by the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake.

When the Wenchuan earthquake struck Beichuan County during a school day, the devastation took the lives of approximately 9,000 teachers and students when 3,000 schools collapsed, accounting for about 12% of the total death toll (McCartney, 2009). The tragedy not only left many students physically impaired; but also psychologically

wounded. PTSD was reported in nearly a quarter of the 3,324 secondary school students surveyed in Chengdu (approximately 90 kilometers from the epicenter) a month after the earthquake (Lau, et al., 2010). Depression was just as prevalent and about one in ten students reported suicidal ideation. Approximately 14% requested psychological counseling. One year after the earthquake, PTSD was found in about 13% of the surveyed primary school students and approximately one in five of these youngsters had symptoms of anxiety and depression (Liu, et al., 2011). The number of child professionals trained in disaster relief in Sichuan after the earthquake was insufficient to meet the demand. The burden of psychological care consequently fell upon the shoulders of parents and teachers (Wang, et al., 2012).

Holistic Approach to Trauma Management

Individuals who experience a natural disaster are helpless to intervene in the forces of nature. For some that sense of helplessness may be internalized into seeing oneself as a victim, rather than as a survivor. The recovery from trauma lies partly in regaining a sense of self through identifying personal resources and strengths, re-organizing worldview and mobilizing coping as a foundation for future growth (Chan, Chan, & Ng, 2006). To counter the simultaneous threats that disasters pose, we adopted a holistic approach to engage the full spectrum of an individual's physical sensations, emotional understandings, and spiritual questions.

Limits to Verbal-based Trauma Approaches

The majority of post-earthquake interventions in Sichuan involved standard talk therapy approaches (Higgins, Xiang & Song, 2010). Debriefings, individual counseling and group therapy dominated. While they do provide benefit, trauma can

be difficult to discuss and its resolution may involve more than words. Describing and discussing feelings and reactions may also be frustrating, if not impossible. Current research confirms what many practitioners have suspected for many years; the body remembers the traumatic event on a level separate from cognitive understanding. Gantt and Tinnin (2009) brought together evolutionary findings, neuroscience research, and clinical observations as proof that trauma cannot be retrieved or resolved by verbal means alone. The cognitive processing abilities of the brain are temporarily disabled during a traumatic event, leaving only a sensory memory of the experience. The only way to truly aid recovery is to engage non-verbal methods that access the body's memory.

In addition to these findings on the limits of verbally processing trauma, expressing emotions may violate cultural values. As an example, in a Chinese context where direct expression of feeling is often prohibited, relying on verbal expression for trauma recovery may be inappropriate (So, 2005). Survivors may experience conflict between having intense emotions and feeling obliged to withhold them, stemming from respect for cultural norms. Additionally, in the political climate of China where individual expression is muted and banners with inspiring messages are everywhere, emotional expression that runs counter to the expected messages can be seen as subversive or traitorous (Hooker, 2008). In order for culture and community to be grounds for support (Courtois & Gold, 2009), it is necessary to reconsider standard verbal-based therapeutic activities that may be counterproductive or dangerous.

Holistic Approach Framework with Trauma

Ng and colleagues (et. al, 2006) described the holistic approach as addressing the multiple levels of trauma by providing opportunities for engaging the body through

physical exercises and breathing, the mind through mindfulness and psychoeducation and the spirit through spiritual and existential reflection on the meaning of life. This type of approach can reinforce cultural values while reducing stigma for survivors (Kohrt & Hruschka, 2010). It is strength-based as the goal is “not to ‘get rid of’ the symptoms, or to simply ‘substitute’ adaptive ways of coping, but to find and rebuild adaptive skills that the survivor possesses and values within her/himself” (Ford & Russo, 2006, p. 343). These strategies promote reconnection to the individual’s core self, but also “changing its [community’s] non-essential attributes and rebuilding itself” long after disaster aid workers have left (Manyena, 2006, p. 446).

The intervention described in this article integrated two particular holistic methods for addressing trauma, expressive arts and integrated body-mind-spirit (I-BMS) approach. Both approaches entail engaging the body in order to effect psychological and spiritual healing. Creating art invokes kinesthetic and cathartic release (Hinz, 2009) while I-BMS utilizes mindful breathing for intrusive thought awareness and reduction (Coffey, Hartman & Fredrickson, 2010). These two types of interventions are complementary, but also have distinct advantages.

Expressive arts involve the creation of art, music, dance, drama, and poetry within a supportive environment for emotional expression and wellness promotion (Knill, Levine & Levine, 2005). Use of the arts gradually replaces the painful memory with a pleasurable activity (Hass-Cohen & Carr, 2008), while also allowing for reflection and contemplation (Franklin, 2001). The arts can be adapted to many Asian people given its nonverbal nature coupled with the presence of many arts based wellness practices such as meditative brush work and movement exercises (Kalmanowitz, Potash & Chan, 2012). Additionally, creativity serves as a metaphor for post-trauma regeneration and growth that promotes the acceptance of suffering

and using it as a platform for transformation (Levine, 2009). Lastly, while expressive arts therapy can only be conducted by qualified practitioners, expressive arts can be facilitated by teachers, artists and other members of the community.

I-BMS is based on Chinese philosophy and Traditional Chinese Medicine and integrated with Western clinical approaches (Lee, Ng, Leung, & Chan, 2009). The conceptual framework is that life entails changes, which means bitterness and suffering are natural to life experiences. To cope with the distress, one has to learn to experience the full spectrum from pain to joy instead of pushing away unpleasant feelings. As such, I-BMS provides a holistic approach to problem-solving and meaning-making by instilling trust in the innate human potential for healing. This way of working necessitates the belief that working on any level –body, mind, or spirit – can affect the other ones and promote change in the whole person. Using exercises rooted in qigong, acupuncture, breathing practice and meditation have beneficial effects for general wellness, but also have specific effects in alleviating stress, anxiety and depression (Blake & Batson, 2009; Tsang, Chan & Cheung, 2010). Langmuir, Kirsh and Classen (2012) demonstrated that mindfulness based interventions fostered clients bodily awareness, which in turn allowed for more attention to traumatic thoughts as a means of coping. The exercises utilized in I-BMS are derived from traditional Chinese health practices that can be regularly used by anyone for prevention and wellness.

Holistic Approach Applied to Intervention Goals

The training was grounded in findings from the literature that emphasize teacher self-care and the care of their students, as well as, the benefits of taking a holistic approach to trauma management in China. The training revolved around four themes:

grief work, cohesion, teacher-student relationships, and long-term self-care. These themes were informed by findings that disaster survivors identified their needs as including: shared experiences, emotional release and community formation (Dyregrov, 1997; Şahin, Batigün & Yilmaz, 2009).

The training consisted of intensive modules that either focused on expressive arts or I-BMS. Each module lasted between 1 and 3 days with continuous supervision over a period of 2 years. There were 157 teachers from primary and secondary schools across the affected area who attended. Experiential learning served many purposes. First, they allowed for ice-breaking and building a trusting atmosphere for the group process. Second, experiential activity allowed for the expression of distress, fragility and painful experiences, which could be normalized in the established mutually supportive environment. Third, the experiential activities also served the purpose of helping teachers to recognize the tension and pain in the body which reflected the emotional strain ignored during the disaster. As such, the trainings were intended for self-care, but also as opportunities to learn new skills to bring into the classroom for student well-being.

The training was offered a year after the earthquake as a secondary response to the mass trauma. Immediately after the earthquake, survivors had to undergo a period of adjustment to their new lives, acknowledge the irreversible loss of property and life, take care of their own needs and make pragmatic plans in establishing safety, promoting calmness, enhancing self and community efficacy, fostering social connections and instilling hope (Hobfoll, et. al, 2007). While there are pressing immediate needs following any disaster, Chan (2008) noted her concern that on-going needs would be neglected as the media dissipated and the earthquake was replaced with more current events. The training was intended to meet the survivors' continued

adaptation and adjustment.

A team composed of social workers, art therapists, dance/movement therapists and behavioral health specialists led the training over a period of two years. Although the majority of the team were based in Hong Kong and Beijing, one member of the team remained in the post-disaster area for continuous support, coordination and supervision. Both the trainers and participants communicated in Putonghua, the most common Chinese dialect, because the trainers did not speak the local dialect and participants came from different districts of the affected area.

Allowing for Immediate Grief Work

Many teachers shared the distress of feeling trapped in the struggle between the expectations and priorities given by government officials, school management and the parents; the frustration of not knowing how to manage the school routine given the extreme emotional responses from the students after disaster; and the tension of failing to balance their professional role with their personal feelings of grief and loss. To reduce the stress, we began by encouraging the teachers to acknowledge their own grief, through experiential workshops designed to allow and facilitate this expression. Through becoming more aware of their own grief, teachers would be in a better position to recognize grief in others and to respond meaningfully (Chan, Sha, Leung & Gilbert, 2011). In the group, participants were asked to use flower petals to create small group artwork to express their grief and love to the deceased. By observing the transition of life through the fresh cut flowers to the emotional expression about death, some participants instinctively came up with strong emotional responses. They discussed how after the disaster they were immediately focused on their responsibilities and did not have a chance to attend to their personal grief and loss.

Through this exercise the group members were supported by acknowledging the authentic experiences shared by the teachers behind their professional images of being strong, calm, caring and considerate.

The artworks were reviewed in a group to bring up the theme of loving-kindness. Referring to nature, a central component of Chinese philosophy, the life of a flower and the teaching, “life cannot be fully controlled, but the fragrance and beauty of life can be shared in every moment” served as a metaphor. Following the holistic experiential activity, emphasis was placed on the importance of living out the legacy of the deceased, normalized their emotional responses and supported them in looking for a direction to sustain an internal sense of hope and the will to live.

Psychoeducation and recommendations on how to rebuild after disaster were integrated into discussion. This step was deemed necessary as the participants were in great need of information and practical advice. Rather than impose plans, indigenous strategies were recommended to retain their locus of control.

Building Cohesion Among Teachers

Although tending to individual grief was important, it was necessary to highlight and foster mutual support to remind them that they were still a community despite the devastation. This aspect was particularly helpful given the balance between supporting the individual and the community that is a basis of collectivist cultures. Singing local songs with positive and encouraging lyrics helped to reassure participants that the hard times will pass aided by their mutual support. In another example, the teachers participated in a collaborative project to reinforce interdependent relationships that were involved in the earthquake recovery. The group was divided into small groups of 10 participants. Each group was given a large piece

of paper that was pre-cut from a large circle. They used drawing materials to express images of what they learned from the training. The entire group surrounded the re-assembled art, joined hands and rhythmically moved around it. The activity was designed to allow the participants to both document their strengths and enhance their community connections.

The creation of individual or small group artwork before piecing them together as a large group holds important implications. Disasters, particularly in the Chinese collectivist culture, raises patriotism and support within the nation as people try to reconnect on their shared characteristics. In the classroom, it is often pragmatic for teachers to capitalize on such national cohesion and gratitude for national support as a means for group activities. The large group activities sometimes suppress students' individuality and formulation of their own self-concept and views of the traumatic event. This phenomenon can lead students to adopt the concept formed within the large group – often associated with nationalism. It is important therefore, to foster opportunities for individual expression while enhancing mutual support. An activity such as the one described allows for the individual to reflect prior to rejoining the larger community.

Strengthening Teacher-Student Relationships

By offering the training according to experiential learning, the teachers could internalize the exercises in order to lead them with their students as either an extra-curricular activity or within the regular class routine. During the training, teachers were expected to use their experience to design their own lesson plans focused on classroom cohesion, wellness, relaxation, hope and enjoyment that incorporated expressive arts or I-BMS activities. The trainers provided immediate

feedback and continued to supervise the teachers in subsequent visits.

Even though the teachers had to focus on non-educational aspects, such as their students' emotions, there were still distinct limits to how much they should try to facilitate their student expression. Although they were taught to listen with compassion, lead experiential activities, and allow for emotional expression, they were trained to remain in their roles as teachers and not substitute therapists. Even though the teachers had to temporarily abandon their habitual, authoritative mode of interaction with their students, the activities served as a platform to strengthen their relationships with their students.

Research on the effectiveness of the expressive arts portion of the training found a connection between student-teacher relationship and improvements in the teachers' professional and personal lives (Ho et al., 2012). Teaching-efficacy (student engagement, instructional strategies and classroom management) increased by giving them more skills to interact with their students. The gains in teaching-efficacy were even greater for those with secure teacher-student relationships. The study also demonstrated gains in teacher self-efficacy (confidence, problem-solving and psychological health). An implication of these findings justifies holistic attention to personal well-being, professional role and student-relationships as factors in disaster recovery.

The experiential learning method, while ultimately useful, did open at least two challenges for the teachers. First, it was especially difficult for teachers to forsake the top-down and directive ways of teaching to offer more freedom and creativity. It became necessary to counter the misperception that making use of the holistic approaches is tantamount to a lack of leadership. Although expressive arts offer a freedom to express and be creative, children work better under specific themes or

directions. This enables sharing to be more coherent and activities more focused and meaningful. In the I-BMS activities, teachers were encouraged to loosen their absolute self-perception of being strong and tough. They were encouraged to acknowledge and accept the sense of emotional pain and frustration just as their students experienced. This process served as a humanistic foundation to see the common direction that both the students and the teachers had to grow out of the trauma.

Second, it was equally difficult for teachers not to see all student behavior through a pathological or negative lens. For example, when children produced earthquake related themes of art work, teachers often assumed that these drawings reflected emotional problems. A reoccurring lesson entailed encouraging them to help their students embrace the range of emotional reactions rather than making students feel embarrassed when they expressed the painful ones. One example was helping them broaden their perspective in interpreting art. When one teacher shared a boy's drawing of a scene of the military saving trapped children, the teacher was prompted to consider that perhaps the child was not only focused on grief, but possibly also on appreciation to those who helped him. This type of approach encouraged engaging the students, rather than allow oversensitivity or assumptions to cause a disruption in the relationship. In the I-BMS activities, the teachers shared the experiences of some students who became very agitated and aggressive towards other people after the earthquake. Instead of blaming them for not behaving better in the difficult times and simply punishing them, the teachers were encouraged to understand the emotions and spiritual concerns behind the presenting behaviors. These might include grief, anger, frustration and losing the sense of trust to the world and to other people, which reflected the basic needs of the students for love, attention and understanding about

what happened and for which that they were unable to find the right words. The various activities supported the full range of concerns while providing outlets to reflect on and understand them.

Promoting Long-term Self-care

One of the benefits to both expressive arts and I-BMS approaches is that they are not limited to the duration of the actual intervention. In Chinese contexts, it is common to see groups of adults practicing tai chi, singing for recreation or involved in brushwork, embroidery or craftwork. The various activities involved in the arts and mindful practices are normal, life-enhancing practices that are engaged as a form of wellness. While the holistic interventions do match cultural values and sensitivities, survivors can continue them without concern for the stigma that therapy or counseling may bring. Additionally, once learned, the holistic interventions can be used continuously and in the absence of the trainer for self-care. In addition, when mastered, the activities can be shared with and taught to others.

As an example, participants were taught a series of one-second techniques, activities based on traditional Chinese practices, which can be easily remembered and practiced on one's own time (Chan, 2001). Clapping qi-gong stimulates the energy flow of the body, while at the same time serving as a grounding and cathartic practice. Participants appreciated the ease of learning, the connection to culture and the ability to maintain the practice when the training concluded.

To further this sustainable practice, the teachers were encouraged to design expressive arts-based activities to conduct in their classrooms. In this sense, the experiential activity was not limited to the training, but used to promote activity with the students. Although some teachers designed activities that mirrored the experiential

activity facilitated by the trainers, many adapted them or created unique ones to offer their students. In both cases, the activities aided the teachers in their personal self-care, but also promoted wellness practices for their students.

Conclusion

Although most want to immediately ignore or forget the psycho-social pain that follows being a survivor of a disaster, the processes of the expressive arts and I-BMS demonstrate how suffering can be transformed through regular wellness practices. Throughout this training, the teachers gained practical knowledge on the role that holistic experiential activities can play in both their lives and those of their students. Through intensive training and continuous supervision, they developed valuable skills for immediate use in their classrooms. At the same time, they became more aware of the importance of tending to their own wellbeing in order to be better teachers and models for their students. In this way, they adopted an enhanced role that is as concerned for student academic performance as for student wellbeing. While it cannot be said with absolute certainty, the success of this project leads to promising directions for its further implementation and research in other areas of China. By engaging holistic interventions, teachers were able to engage in the necessary grief work while re-establishing professional and student relationships for long-term well-being. Through this approach, we are all reminded of the importance of balancing the mind and the heart as a key component to disaster response.

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