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2013 Evolution of Psychotherapy Conference

Therapy: No improvement for 40 years

By John Thomas, Associate Editor

Anaheim – The good news is that psychotherapy continues to help around 80 percent of the people who seek the assistance of therapists to deal with their problems.

The bad news is that psychotherapy has not shown any improvement during the last 40 years in how well therapists deliver their services.

The good news/bad news scenario was delivered by Scott Miller, Ph.D., to several hundred therapists attending his workshop at the quadrennial Evolution of Psychotherapy conference, which attracted nearly 8,000 psychologists, psychiatrists and other therapists in December. It is sponsored by the Milton H. Erickson Foundation, California State University Fullerton and California Southern University.

Those attending Miller's entertaining three-hour lecture were seeking ways to avoid becoming average therapists and enhance their performance and join the group of so-called top performers who achieve about 50 percent better outcomes than their equally trained and credentialed peers.

Over the last decade, Miller and his colleagues at the International Center for Clinical Excellence in Chicago have been tracking the outcomes of thousands of clinicians around the world to identify the practices that make them well above average.

Miller said practice for most clinicians is "like riding an exercise bike. We work up a sweat, but we don't get anywhere." While psychology as a profession seems stuck in the 1970s in terms of its effectiveness, athletic performances have increased by more than 50 percent during the same period of time.

Available evidence, he added,

demonstrates that attending a typical continuing education workshop, specializing in the treatment of a particular problem or learning a new treatment model does little to improve therapeutic effectiveness. And despite what many psychologists and other therapists think, there isn't any evidence that they get better over their careers.

Client dropout from therapy continues at around 47 percent, Miller said, and every tenth person in therapy leaves worse off than when they started. There is little difference in outcomes, whether therapy is provided by experienced professionals, students, early career practitioners or paraprofessionals.

When he asked for suggestions from the audience as to why psychology is stuck in the 1970s in terms of its effectiveness, responses generally challenged the findings that Miller presented, including polling error and misinterpretation of data.

"And I thought it was only your clients who are in denial," he responded, to a roomful of laughter.

Generally, the top performers in psychotherapy know more, see more and do more than psychologists and other therapists who never leave the ranks of average, Miller said. But, how they do that involves time and effort many therapists aren't willing to undertake, despite their desires to do better than average.

Miller used two examples to impress upon his audience the single most important element in becoming a top performer.

First he asked for a show of hands on a short series of questions concerning championship chess players. Two of the answer choices dealt with the amount of time a chess player devotes to playing the game, while the third involved reading books about various proven chess strategies.

Almost everyone chose the answers dealing with the amount of time champions spent playing chess. It appeared only one person chose the third choice that involved reading about chess, which was the correct response.

"You can't do better therapy by attending workshops and you can't improve your therapy skills while doing therapy," Miller said.

His second example was an 8-year-old girl who played a piano so well some of her listeners thought it was a recording. Miller learned from the girl that her skills were developed over a few years by practicing the piano four hours a day every day.

"The only two days she didn't practice was on Christmas and her birthday," Miller explained. The girl also told Miller that if she was having trouble getting through a tough spot on the piece she was playing, she would concentrate solely on that piece until she got it right.

"This is what top performers in therapy do. They spend a great amount of time constantly going over their mistakes until they get it right," Miller said. Top performers spend a lot of time getting ready for therapy sessions and a lot of time afterward critiquing their performances. Many rely on being observed by highly regarded colleagues to see if they are doing well.

Average therapists can also improve their performance by adopting Feedback Informed Treatment (FIT), which allows clients to tell clinicians what they like or

dislike about their treatment.

He noted that the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration has deemed FIT an evidence-based treatment practice. Research conducted at multiple sites across a wide range of clients and presenting complaints indicates that clinicians can improve the outcome of those cases most at risk for failure by as much as 65 percent without changing their preferred treatment approach or learning any new treatment techniques.

While many sessions dealt with the past, one dealt with facilitating the RNA/DNA epigenetics on creating new consciousness as the next step in the evolution of psychotherapy.

Led by Ernest Rossi, Ph.D., and Kathryn Rossi, Ph.D., the workshop on RNA/DNA epigenetics looked more like a course on biology than psychology and experiential treatment sessions looked a lot like Transcendental Meditation.

The goal of Epigenetics Psychology is the practical application of knowledge gained from epigenetic research. The field helps to explain how nurture shapes nature, where nature refers to biological heredity and nurture refers to virtually everything that occurs during the lifespan.

Other sessions featured many of the "big names" of psychotherapy, such as Aaron Beck, M.D.; Martin Seligman, Ph.D.; Salvador Minuchin, M.D.; Steven Frankel, Ph.D., J.D., and Irving Yalom, M.D. Showcasing leaders and pioneers in the field has been the hallmark of the Evolution conferences since the first was held in 1985 in Phoenix, Ariz.

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