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Finding Their Way Home: Utilizing Spiritual Practices to Bolster Resiliency in Youth at Risk

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Abstract

Spiritual practices, distinct from religious practices or affiliation, are increasingly being incorporated into programs serving at-risk adolescents. There is also an increasing focus within the field of social work to understand the role that spirituality plays in helping cope with adversity. This article reviews how results from an earlier study on the impact of spirituality on runaway and/or homeless youth may inform practice with this group and other at-risk adolescents. We discuss three major themes related to spirituality that emerged in our earlier work: 1) Having a Personal Relationship with God or a Higher Power; 2) Finding Meaning and Purpose in Life and 3) Embracing Personally Meaningful Spiritual Practices. Implications for social work practice and research are addressed.

Keywords spirituality; runaway and homeless youth; at-risk adolescents; resiliency; spiritual practices in treatment; non-traditional

Introduction

Spirituality, once a taboo subject in social work theory and practice, has been a growing focus of interest among scholars as well as practitioners who work with diverse populations, particularly adolescents. Interestingly, spiritual practices in the form of rituals and attention to values have emerged as core to many treatment approaches in both in and out-patient settings as well as in activity programs that target youth.

Spirituality has been defined by a leading social work researcher as a "human quest for personal meaning, mutually fulfilling relationships among people, the nonhuman environment, and, for some, God" (Canda, 1988, p. 243). While spirituality and religiosity are often intertwined, there are also substantive differences. The former can be considered any beliefs or practices that facilitate wholeness and connection beyond the individual, with the latter being a specific set of beliefs and/ or practices that promotes an adherence to an established faith. Canda, Nakashima,

Burgess, & Russell (1999) suggested that spirituality can be expressed "through participation in religious institutions or traditions…or through philosophical views…" (p. iv). For the purposes of this article, spirituality will be considered distinct from any specific religious affiliation. This article will describe the results of a study focused on the role of spirituality in the lives of runaway and homeless youth, with special attention to implications of findings for intervention with these and other at-risk adolescents.

Literature Review

Spirituality in Practice Settings
Spiritual practices that are independent of a religious affiliation have been incorporated into a number of treatment approaches. The addictions field is an example of a treatment community that has integrated spirituality as a pivotal healing tool through the 12-step recovery process. This model emphasizes a connection to a higher power, forgiveness, and unconditional acceptance blended with personal accountability. It continues to be the treatment mainstay for a wide array of addictive disorders. According to Dyer (2006),

> In the AA philosophy, the definition of a higher power is left to the individual. This higher power can range from a Judeo-Christian view of God to nature or even to the collective wisdom of the AA group. From this context, spirituality becomes a bridge to something beyond oneself. It is a way of connecting to and achieving a sense of association with a universe larger than one's personal existence (p. 1).

In recent years, some in-patient treatment programs include spiritual content to reinforce cultural identity, deepen communication processes, and cultivate community connection through the use of rituals that draw from nature, art, music, and poetry. These practices have also been implemented in social service programs that serve youth. Incorporating spiritual rituals can foster" cultural sensitivity and awareness of alternative viewpoints. Researchers have confirmed what the practice community has observed—that the presence of spiritual beliefs and associated religious practices is a source of potential healing that can provide a sense of connectedness to self, others, and/or a larger meaning or purpose (Shuler, Gelberg, & Brown, 1994). Spirituality is also a way of providing protection and coping with the trials of everyday life (Feinstein, 1997; Haight, 1998). It is a tool in the clinical setting for healing

emotional wounds (DiBlasio & Benda, 1991). Wolin & Wolin (1993) have observed that attention to spirituality can provide a perspective for reframing adversity into opportunity and may play a role in the development of resiliency. Additionally, several recent studies exploring the relationship between spirituality, religious affiliation, and good mental health in adolescents corroborated similar earlier findings (Davis, Kerr, & Kurpius, 2003; Dew et al., 2007; Knight et al., 2007).

Spirituality and Adolescents
Fowler (1981) noted that the developmental changes occurring in adolescence allow youth to begin to think about spirituality differently from when they were children. Adolescents tend to comprehend the notion of God as a powerful force that is "located externally to the self" (Fowler, 1981, p.154). Thus, the construct of God or a higher power may act as an important mitigating force for an adolescent who is lacking an authority figure to inculcate values and societally-endorsed behaviors. It may also function as a source of identification.

Spirituality places an emphasis on belonging to a greater whole, creating a sense of meaning and purpose as well as generating a feeling of acceptance of self and others that often involves the act of forgiveness. For example, Knight et al. (2007) linked the act of forgiveness with effective substance use prevention and treatment approaches, particularly with adolescents. They suggest that spiritual practices encourage individuals to make more purposeful and respectful choices because of the strong emphasis on community in juxtaposition with the identity of the individual, which is particularly important when working with adolescents. Additionally, spiritual practices can reinforce community values by providing a structure for ritual, creating an atmosphere of compassion, and a sense of group belonging which may fill a void for disenfranchised adolescents (DiBlasio & Benda, 1991).

Programs that serve at-risk adolescent populations have increasingly incorporated a focus on spirituality and associated practices. For example, a study conducted by the New England Network for Youth and Family Services (Wilson, 2005) described the incorporation of spiritual exploration and growth as a core component of treatment in several agencies that serve homeless youth. Some of the common spiritual elements that were identified included: utilization of music, art, and dance to promote experiential expression; varied use of ritual grounded in nature-based metaphors to reinforce congruent community values; an emphasis on cultural identity relevant to the client population being served; and incorporation of diverse spiritual practices that are distinct from traditional religious observation including sacred storytelling. Such

programs typically emphasize themes of forgiveness and 'giving back' through service to the community to build self-esteem as well connection. Dyer (2006) noted that incorporating spirituality into treatment is a highly experiential process and that the content cannot be taught didactically. He described two primary elements that undergird spirituality content in treatment programming with substance abusing adolescents:

> (1) That we realize our own humanity and (2) that we realize our dependence upon others. The former condition leads to the latter. Typically, adolescents feel omnipotent and invincible. Therefore, if spirituality emphasizes giving up oneself and surrendering, it may clash with the adolescent's view that he/she is self-sufficient and unaccountable to others (p. 1).

Closely linked to spirituality content is an emphasis on the incorporation of cultural teachings" that are geared to reach traditionally under-represented groups such as Native American youth in the US and First Nations youth in Canada (Heavy Runner & Morris, 1997; Strand & Peacock, 2003). Facilities such as the Leading Thunderbird Lodge in Qu'Appelle Valley in Canada promote First Nations cultures and spirituality as playing significant roles in their treatment of their youthful clients.

Wilderness programs for at-risk adolescents also often" integrate spiritual themes. For example, Alldredge Wilderness Journey in West Virginia incorporates spiritual concepts into its daily student curriculum with an emphasis on values development and spiritual recovery for their adolescent participants. There is also a focus on connecting to a greater purpose, discovering a higher power within a natural outdoor setting, and learning healthy and resourceful behaviors not just for themselves but for the larger community as well (Alldredge Wilderness Journey, n.d.). Ungar, Dumond, & McDonald (2005) report findings based on qualitative data that revealed positive outcomes from relationship building and developing a sense of *spirituality* and purpose after participation in their wilderness program.

Runaway and Homeless Youth
An especially vulnerable group of adolescents who have long been a focus of concern are runaway and/or homeless youth, sometimes referred to as unaccompanied youth. According to a National Coalition for the Homeless 2007 fact sheet there are approximately 1,700,000 homeless and runaway youth in the United States, defined as "individuals under the age of 18 who lack parental, foster, or institutional care" (Molino, 2007,

p.1). Unaccompanied youth account for 3% of the urban homeless population (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2005), about 6% of whom have been identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered (Molino, 2007) and 10 % of whom have been recorded as pregnant (Greene, Ringwalt, Kelly, Iachan, & Cohen, 1995).

The authors became interested in how spirituality might play a role in resiliency and successful transitions among at-risk youth as a result of themes that emerged from an earlier study they and other colleagues conducted with runaway and homeless youth (Kurtz, Jarvis, Lindsey, & Nackerud l, 1999; Lindsey, Kurtz, Jarvis, Williams, & Nackerud, 2000). The research question for the original study was: "How do formerly runaway and homeless adolescents navigate the troubled waters of leaving home, living in high-risk environments, and engaging in dangerous behaviors, to make successful developmental transitions into young adulthood?" The theme of spirituality emerged from this study as a finding related to the personal strengths and resources that young people believed contributed significantly to their successful transitions. In a comparative case study of factors associated with resiliency among five of these same research participants (Williams, Lindsey, Kurtz, & Jarvis, 2001), spirituality again emerged as important. A follow up study later examined the role of spirituality in more depth (Williams & Lindsey, 2005).

The purposes of this article are to provide a brief description and discussion of the findings of our own studies related to spirituality in the lives of runaway and homeless youth, describe some of the conclusions we drew related to their experiences, and review the current application and benefits of" spiritual concepts in practice settings with homeless and other at-risk youth. Given the increasing use of spiritual concepts in programs that serve at-risk adolescents, the authors are building on their earlier findings to describe how spirituality can be incorporated into treatment practices as a powerful tool.

Methodology

This qualitative study involved secondary analysis of data that had been collected during an earlier study on runaway and homeless youth (Kurtz et al., 1999; Lindsey et al., 2000) as well as analysis of data that were collected later specifically to inquire about the role of spirituality in helping youth transition out of homelessness. The research questions for this study were: "What is the experience of spirituality in the lives of runaway and homeless youth?" and "What impact does spirituality have on their ability to survive and transcend their personal circumstances?"

Data Collection

After receiving approval from the university Institutional Review Board for Research with Human Subjects, the data were collected in two waves. During the first wave, 12 young adults who had either run away or otherwise been homeless prior to the age of 18 were interviewed. One to two years later, researchers initiated a second wave of interviews with an additional seven respondents and also re-interviewed four of the original 12 respondents who could be located.

All four members of the research team conducted semi-structured interviews that lasted from 50 to 90 minutes each. Using the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), the interview guide was modified as data analysis proceeded during the first wave of data collection. The interview guide included the following major subject areas: demographic information; difficult times the young people had experienced; how they had made it through those times; turning points in their lives; current situation; definition of success; and future hopes and plans. The interview guide for the second wave of data collection included both questions from the original study and additional questions related to specific areas researchers wanted to explore further, including the role of spirituality in the respondents' transition out of homelessness. Interviews were conducted in places convenient to research participants, including their homes, youth shelters, or group homes. All interviews were tape- recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participants were paid $30.00 each for their time.

Sampling Methods and Sample

This study utilized a purposive nominated sample based on the recommendation of staff at shelters and group homes in two North Carolina cities and three Georgia towns. Krefting (1991) recommends use of a nominated sample to enhance the applicability/transferability of qualitative research findings across contexts. Criteria for inclusion were that participants be between the ages of 18-25 and that they had stayed in a youth shelter, group home, or other alternative living arrangement as an adolescent, but not within the past two years. Shelter staff facilitated contact with the persons they nominated for participation.

The total sample for the study related to the role of spirituality in the lives of these young people was 19: 12 from the first wave and 7 from the second wave. Follow-up data from four of the original participants was also included. The number of research participants in each wave of data collection was determined by the principle of theoretical saturation or

redundancy (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Sampling was terminated when no new or relevant data was emerging from additional interviews.

Eight participants were male, and 11 were female; 6 were African American, one Cuban American, and 12 were Caucasian. Participants ranged in age from 18-25. At the time of the interview, 10 of the respondents were working and not in school, three were enrolled in a postsecondary education program, one was enrolled in high school, and five were neither working nor in school. Twelve participants had earned either a high school diploma or a general education degree (GED), and seven had completed some postsecondary school. The age at which respondents left home for the first time ranged from 12 to 17 years. The length of time they reported being homeless ranged from two weeks to several years, and the number of times they left home ranged from one to four.

Data Analysis
The data analysis process was somewhat different for data from each of the two waves. Data from the first (original) wave of interviews were analyzed using the constant comparative method, which involves analyzing data as it is collected and using preliminary findings to shape future interviews (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Open coding methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) were initially used to discover factors, ideas and experiences that the young people perceived to have been important in their lives. Strategies recommended by Krepting (1991) and Miles and Huberman (1994) were used to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. Triangulation through use of two coders per transcript and code-recode procedures was used to enhance the consistency (inter-coder reliability) and the dependability of the findings. All four coders initially coded the same transcript to establish initial conceptual categories. All of the remaining 11 transcripts were coded twice by two team members using the initial categories. Additional categories were added, and existing categories were modified as analysis proceeded. The team members worked closely together to continue the process of clarification of categories and maintenance of inter-coder reliability. Once the transcripts had been coded and analyzed, the NUDIST qualitative data analysis program (Qualitative Solutions & Research, 1997) was used to sort specific transcribed segments into the conceptual categories that had emerged from the coding process. An additional measure to enhance the consistency and dependability of the findings was use of an audit trail to document the data analysis process (Krepting, 1991). It was from this data analysis process that the theme of spirituality emerged as important to the young people's successful transition out of homelessness.

Categories of findings from the first wave of data that were relevant to spirituality were used to analyze the second wave data. However, researchers remained open to the possibility that new information would emerge that might require modification of the original categories. Indeed, that did occur (see Williams & Lindsey, 2005, for additional information about how the categories changed slightly). Therefore, researchers recoded all 19 transcripts using the final set of categories. Researchers went through an iterative process similar to that of the first wave data analysis to code and recode the second wave data, maintaining strategies to enhance the trustworthiness of findings related to the new data.

Findings

Participants described various religious and/or spiritual experiences they deemed quite important in helping them deal with crises and move forward with their lives. Some participants reported adherence to traditional religious practices such as prayer and church attendance. Others noted they did not subscribe to a particular religion or traditional

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Table 1. Spiritual Themes in the Lives of Runaway or Homeless Youth

Having a Personal Relationship with God or a Higher Power
- ➢ Perceiving absence of judgment
- ➢ Developing external vs. internal conception of God
- ➢ Communicating though prayer
- ➢ Experiencing direct intervention

Finding Meaning and Purpose in Life
- ➢ Discerning God's purpose for them
- ➢ Recognizing own strengths
- ➢ Helping others

Embracing Personally Meaningful Spiritual Practices
- ➢ Focusing on personal observances more than church
- ➢ Looking for something different, including traditions other than Christian

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religious practice, but found strength in their belief in a higher power or participation in non-traditional rituals. The major themes that emerged were: 1) Having a Personal Relationship with God or a Higher Power; 2) Finding Meaning and Purpose in Life and 3) Embracing Personally Meaningful Spiritual Practices. Each of these major themes had sub-themes, as illustrated in Table 1. Data in the form of direct quotations from transcripts of interviews are included as recommended by Krefting

(1991), to provide "rich, thick description" which supports the validity of findings and goodness of fit (applicability) to contexts other than the one directly studied in the research project. Additional data that support these categories can be found in an earlier report (Williams & Lindsey, 2005).

Having a Personal Relationship with God or a Higher Power
All 19 participants spoke either directly or indirectly about their relationship with a higher power. For the most part God was perceived to be outside or external to self and had a range of attributes such as being a savior, a guide, and one who bestows love, hope, strength, forgiveness, and punishment. About half the interviewees believed that God or a Higher Power enabled them to emerge out of the depths of their traumatic circumstances to see that life is worth living. For instance, Chase (all names are pseudonyms), who spoke of being on the "wrong path" and trying to kill himself, said, "I see that now, and I can see a new path through the help of our Father. I guess He opened my eyes."

A personal relationship with God seemed to be related to feelings of closeness and support, as distinct from the concrete ways that constituted direct divine intervention in their lives. Again, Chase said that the single thing that was most helpful to him was:

> …the knowledge that I have a savior, a Lord and Savior, and that He died for me on the cross for my sins....He's my grace and salvation....I can see a new path that I'm making on my own through the help, of course, of our Father.

One important element of some participants' relationship with a Higher Power is that they did not experience a sense of judgment from that power. Several participants had experienced judgmental religious attitudes as children and sought a God who is loving and accepting rather than judgmental and punitive. For instance, Kameka said:

> I didn't necessarily believe in God that everybody else believes in, but I always believed in a higher power. And for me, just being able to say that I know I'm [here] because of something greater than myself. What it is, I have no idea, but just being able to pray to something, you know, just to say "Help me" to somebody....And they ain't going to judge you, come down and slap you...

Carson and Frani were the only participants who specifically described God or religion as being within himself or herself rather than as an external entity. For instance, Frani expressed a belief in an inner sense

of religion when she said, "Religion is what you feel." Similarly, Carson said, "I believe in God...I believe God is all in your heart."

All the young people who spoke of their higher power as God believed that prayer was the vehicle for direct communication. Some prayed daily and others on a sporadic basis when in need of help. Ricardo describes how "I got down on my hands and knees to pray for the Lord to come into my life." The feeling of adoration at times seemed intertwined with opening one's heart to God and letting God into one's life. Ricardo calls this "giving your heart to the Lord." In doing so, he seemed to be saying that, through his devotion, he was following a more righteous path, which was very different from his previous troubled path. When in desperate straits, they often turned to God with specific requests. After his father died, Jeremy remembers, "I just went totally down hill. I was living like a maggot smoking crack and snorting heroin." Finally after one such episode, he said, "I ended up having to drive home...I was praying to God that I'd get back home safely. And, God answered my prayer." He contacted a minister friend who enrolled him in a rehabilitation treatment program the very next day.

About half of the participants reported that a higher power had directly intervened in their lives in varied but significant ways. Most of these participants strongly believed that a higher power, which they called God, had helped them in crises such as being near death, deciding whether to have an abortion, getting clean from drugs and alcohol, and reconciling with their families. For example, Sally who experienced a life-threatening illness, stated:

> I believe that Jesus is the one who saved me, and He brought me back [from death], and He brought me back for a reason, because of the way [I was] living before then. It wasn't cutting it.

Finding Meaning and Purpose in Life
An integral part of this new found sense of self in relation to a higher power was participants gaining a fresh understanding of the meaning and purpose of their lives. About half of the interviewees believed that God or a higher power provided them with a sense of purpose or an explanation for life. Carson illustrated this as he claimed, "You need God in your life. You need some type of explanation for what's going on with the world." He described that finding Jesus provided him with this knowledge, as he said, "I have meaning in my life. I didn't have a meaning before." Through her many bouts with drug abuse, Tracey was grounded in the belief that, "It is by the grace of God that I am not dead. He has a purpose for me…He has some kind of useful task for me down here…." She went

on to say, "You are put on this earth to serve a mission for God."

Through their discovered connections with spirituality, some young people began to see their own strengths and the role they could play in contributing to the well-being of others, as well as themselves. Trisha found meaning in the opportunity to be of service to others, saying,

> I can also help others. It gives me a purpose and it's like when you're helping yourself, you're helping the other person and then you're giving the other person also the opportunity to help others. So it's like you're seeing this goodness multiply that's just so cool.

Chase linked his newly discovered meaning to his Christian identity when he said,

> I look forward to waking up every morning. I have meaning in my life. I didn't have meaning before…Meaning is to live for God, to live a productive life in a Christian environment, to help others, and to help myself be a positive influence on others."

Embracing Personally Meaningful Spiritual Practices
A majority of the participants were raised in a Christian denomination, and most attended church as children. Although some still thought that going to church was important, they distinguished between personal faith and prayer and active participation or attendance at church. For instance, Annie, who prays on a daily basis, did not go to church either. She claimed, "I don't think that to have a close relationship with God you have to go to church."

For some participants, learning about nontraditional spiritual practices was important. For example, Trisha had been raised in a very strict Christian church and was not interested in any type of traditional religious practice. However, Trisha told of how being exposed to Native American spiritual practices in her treatment program enabled her to "see how I was connected so I wasn't as isolated as I thought I was." She describes this process:

> The treatment center… was based around Native American spirituality and more like getting in touch with nature, in touch with earth. And the concept of spirituality instead of religion, that's what really made me open my eyes and see different things and got me kind of interested in life again.

Discussion

The initial focus of our study on the role of spirituality in the lives of formerly runaway or homeless youth was to understand how their experiences with spirituality may have helped them make successful transitions out of homelessness. Virtually all 19 participants reported spiritual beliefs, and they seemed eager to discuss their beliefs when asked. These young people, who had lived their adolescences as rebels and outsiders, demonstrated that beneath their often guarded surfaces, their spiritual beliefs gave them a strong sense of purpose and connection to something outside of themselves. The spiritual dimension of life provided them with a framework for hope, self-acceptance, and community as they began the important process of recreating lives that had led them, for a variety of reasons, into homelessness. Our findings were consistent with earlier work that noted links between spirituality and a deepening and expanding of personal values and perspectives, including being able to reframe adversity into an opportunity for personal growth and learning, a notion that is integral to many spiritual traditions.

A process of meaning-making seemed to be especially present for our subjects, some of whom evidenced signs of being particularly resilient (Williams et al., 2001). The more highly resilient young people in our study were able to hold on to a sense of hope despite huge obstacles and to find reassurance and nurturance in their spiritual beliefs. The majority of our participants were also able to relate to the concept of a higher power as a healing, nurturing presence in their lives that appeared to nourish them in a way that their relationships with peers, family, and helping professionals failed to do. Additionally, faith seemed to play a key role for some of these highly resilient young people as they reflected on experiencing a sense of divine intervention and of being rescued from the negative trajectory of their lives. They developed the capacity to reframe the negative events they had experienced as positive turning points that involved God's hand in their lives.

Since the interviews were conducted, the world has changed in significant ways. While the problems that many of our research participants confronted such as drug abuse and/or substance-addicted parents, sexual abuse, severe neglect, and family poverty still exist, the societal challenges and changes for youth and their families have continued to mushroom. Currently, many youth have no memory of a pre 9-11 world or of schools where security protocol was far less important than the quality of the educational and social environment. Through the impact of the internet, social networking, cell phones, and access to virtually unlimited information, youth are more connected but they also

live in a more fearful world environment. From living through a long war played out on television, to watching the unfolding horrors of Hurricane Katrina and, most recently, the earthquake in Haiti, young people are inundated with information about life's uncertainties and the notion that bad things really can and do happen. However, paralleling some of these societal shifts is also a movement towards civic engagement, environmental awareness, and ecological sensitivity—in short, an emphasis on community values and improving the world. The youth in our studies evidenced these qualities in their focus on giving back to their communities and finding meaning in their experiences of adversity. These youth validated the belief that improving community involvement helps both the community and the individual and that the linkage to a belief in something larger than the individual, such as the community, is the very essence of spiritual meaning and practice.

Implications

Our study provides evidence of the significance of spirituality in the lives of the formerly homeless or runaway youth who participated. As described in the literature review, the practice community has already recognized that addressing spiritual beliefs can be an important therapeutic resource, especially with troubled adolescents who are struggling to make sense of themselves in a very complex world. At its best, addressing spirituality can provide a framework for humans to find forgiveness for their foibles. It can lay a foundation for acceptance of self and tolerance of others. Additionally, spiritual practices facilitate connectedness and community, which are core values within social work. When a higher power is viewed as forgiving, compassionate, and loving, the believer can internalize those messages in a beneficial way for self and others. Incorporating spirituality into rituals linked with ethnic identity, diversity, nature and/or community" can expand adolescents' sense of belonging and, in the process, link them to a sense of connection and purpose. Utilizing the inherent power and strengths that reside within connection to a community can stimulate the building of a solid sense of self and facilitate the development of empathy, self-acceptance, and compassion. Within such a relationship, the individual is given a potentially reparative model to fashion new beliefs and behaviors.
    While attention to spirituality can be a powerful tool for practitioners to work with at-risk youth, research in this area lags far behind practice. Although there has been some evaluation of the impact of programs that incorporate aspects of spirituality, much remains to be learned. Our study, while subject to the usual limitations of qualitative research with a small

sample, provides strong evidence that interventions that incorporate a focus on spirituality may be well-received by youth who have experienced great adversity in their lives. More research is needed to explore the processes by which addressing spiritual aspects of life can effectively be incorporated into programs for at-risk adolescents, including those who are homeless. As additional evidence becomes available, it will be important to integrate appropriate use of spiritual themes into social work education so that students and future social workers are prepared to effectively use such potentially powerful therapeutic tools with clients.

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