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Strategies for practice in helping fathers step up to the plate and stay engaged

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Introduction

A strength-based approach is characterized by a focus on the client's or family's worldview, capacities, competencies and resources. The practitioner seeks to identify the strengths that exist within and around the individual, family or community.

The purpose of this article is to familiarize practitioners with the family strengths perspective and encourage them to incorporate family strengths into working with fathers. Clinical impressions will be discussed, including introducing Holistic Integration Techniques (HIT), along with other intervention strategies for practitioners to implement. The concept of family strengths has been studied for several decades and describes a family that functions optimally in support of the individual members, including fathers. Practitioners with a family strengths clinical framework address deficits or blockages of family functioning, and pay attention to strengthening families and fathers with the tools to achieve a quality walk of life.

The Strength-based Perspective

A focus on family strengths accompanied by empathy over what a family is facing brings a more reasonable balance to our understanding of how families succeed in the face of life's difficulties. By focusing solely on the family's problems, we overshadow what we have achieved and accomplished (Saleebey, 1992). The family strengths perspective is a worldview or orientation toward life and families, grounded in research conducted around the world (Roose, Roets & Schiettecat, 2014; Saleebey, 1992; Walsh, 2014). It is basically a positive, optimistic orientation highlighting internal strengths and a positive sense of self-worth from the inside-out (Kirven, 2014; Myers & Speight, 1994). It does not ignore family problems but restores them to their proper place in life: as vehicles for testing our capacities as families and reaffirming our vital human connections with each other.

Within the last decade, researchers and practitioners in the fields of education, mental health, psychology, social work, and child welfare have begun to question the deficit-based approach and move toward a more holistic model of development (Gray & Anderson, 2010; Epstein, 2004; Tither & Ellis, 2008; Trout et al., 2003; Waller, 2012). Rather than focusing on individual and family weaknesses or deficits, strength-based practitioners who practice an optimal worldview collaborate with families and children to discover individual and family functioning and strengths (Heckman, 2011; Kirven, 2014; Laursen, 2000). Fathers need to be a part of this agenda, where possible. At the foundation of the strength-based approach is the belief that families have unique talents, skills, and life events, in addition to specific unmet needs (Epstein, 2004). This paper provides an overview of HIT and its application to a strength-based approach to fathers.

Strength-Based Assessment in Practice

While there are a wide variety of ways to implement a strength-based approach to working with families, many programs that follow a strength-based approach often emphasize wraparound services, multi-level approaches, and comprehensive mental health models. One measure that has shown effectiveness with a strength-based approach is the Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scale (Epstein, 2004).

Though many programs serving families across a wide array of settings use a strength-based approach, the lack of one consistent intervention strategy limits researchers' ability to accurately assess the effectiveness of this model. For example, it is common for programs employing a strength-based approach to engage in additional practices that may positively influence youth and family outcomes but result in overlooking the role of the father.

The Dynamics of Fathering

Fatherhood is both a privilege and a responsibility. Most fathers are unaware of the crucial role they play in the lives of their children from the day the child is born (Harrell, Smith, & Mineau, 2008). Over the years, the role of father has been defined in many different ways and is often viewed as a fluid concept that is continuously being redefined by society (Olmstead, Futris, & Pasley, 2009).

According to popular societal constructs of "father," this role is often viewed in terms of being the financial breadwinner for one's family (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2004; White, 2005). However, due to the diverse nontraditional family structures ever present in society in addition to the many fathers dealing with economic instability, the concept of "father as provider" is beginning to dilute and lose its cultural relevancy and importance in the modern family paradigm. Moreover the birth of a child is the birth of a father and of a father's possible direct care contributions (Gray & Anderson, 2010).

Many individuals associate fatherlessness with the physical absence of the male parent from the child's home. This indeed is one type of fatherlessness because it often involves a change in the relationship between the father and his son or daughter (Krampe, 2003; Tither & Ellis, 2008). However, the absence of the father figure does not only impact children, but can be felt by the community as well. But this can be overcome. Father figures and mentors who reflect internal gratification by serving and lead by example can empower young people to be active, collective agents of their community. This supports an optimal worldview.

Adopting an Optimal Worldview

An optimal worldview is defined as sense of well-being that is devoted to gaining insight and life understanding through spirituality and internal validation that is self-sustaining (Kirven, 2014; Myers, 1988, 2009). It builds on a holistic way of thinking based on interpersonal relationships with family and community. Internal strengths such as prayer and meditation are valued as sources of motivation when confronted with stress, detachment, and discrimination. The optimal worldview signifies an orientation that is more holistic and integrative than that found dominant in most modern social and psychological theory. It is relevant to note that adherence to a conceptual system based on dominant western values or the optimal worldview is not inherently tied to a race or sociocultural context (Myers, 2009; Kirven, 2014). An individualistic self-centered/sub-optimal conceptual system validates individuals based upon appearance versus substance, causing one to look externally for satisfaction. Males have the tendency to favor such external markers. In contrast, an optimal/integrative conceptual system asserts that power is an internal construct and is a perspective typically favored by mature adults. However, when power is placed outside of oneself, as in the sub-optimal

conceptual system, one can consider oneself as oppressed or deprived even if one is of a member of a privileged race or gender.

Helping Fathers H.I.T. the Mark in Practice through an Optimal Lens

The optimal framework brings to the attention of fathers the tools and capacities built within to be successful. To help clinically operationalize the framework, five steps titled Holistic Integration Techniques (H.I.T.) are proposed. The purpose of these techniques is to help the father find meaning and to build a spiritual affiliation with a Higher Power by helping the father confront hardships and turn them into positive outcomes despite difficult current circumstances.

The H.I.T. helps the father accept strengths and limitations within him and the environment, and it helps him work towards a holistic method of functioning and coping. In the process, fathers are encouraged by the practitioner to tell their stories about coping with obstacles, such as being away from their children, not being able to provide for them and missing them on a daily basis. Lastly, the H.I.T. seeks to motivate fathers to change their thinking towards responsibility and active engagement that is more strength-based and holistically-centered, focusing on the betterment of the entire community, along with their child(ren).

Five Steps of H.I.T. into Action

1. Using Hardships as Measures to Build Positive Outcomes

Normally, the father comes into a session with a problem such as feeling detached or being treated as a “visitor” to their child. It is the goal of practitioner to help the father assess the difficulty and severity of the problem. Storytelling can offer a safe outlet to express personal feelings. The practitioner facilitates the bringing forth of the father’s pathology-based story in order to build on resiliency and strengths in being an active parent (Kirven, 2014; Waller, 2012). The father is asked to look at the problem as being a step and/or a temporary obstacle in generating a positive outcome. The practitioner helps the father acknowledge previous faults and begins to help him correct the current condition through assessing the presenting problem. The focus is on visualizing or formulating and setting obtainable, positive goals to create small victories. As part of this process, the father is asked to envision making a positive difference.

2. Accepting Limitations and Capabilities

Fathers are asked to write all the things they are good at (strengths) and all the things that they feel they can improve on (growth areas) as a benchmark of assessing their sense of self-worth as a parent. This exercise requires that fathers generate twice as many positive characteristics as negative characteristics (e.g., 20 capabilities and 10 limitations) to focus on strengths. This list is generated based on the individual’s perceptions and experiences from early childhood up to their present age and role as a father. Presenting these characteristics through stories and life experiences can make the father more comfortable in the setting and talking about self. Listing twice as many strength characteristics fosters the opportunity to build confidence in addressing problems, dreams and aspirations (Kirven, 2014; White & Epston, 1990). If extra time is needed, this exercise can serve as a homework assignment. At the same time as

fathers are generating their lists, practitioners also develop their own lists, which they disclose in order to help the fathers build on a holistic, therapeutic process and develop a sense of how others perceive them.

3. Building a Spiritual Consciousness

Many men and male minority adolescents show reluctance in attending treatment that is not mandated or required (Vogel, Wester & Larson, 2007). Men and male adolescents who are concerned with their autonomy and role identity need a clinical alternative that appears nonthreatening. To address this critical dimension, the practitioner's attempt to build on the strength of fathers by endorsing inner-peace techniques can foster fathers to use their own helping networks such as praying, meditating, and building a connection with a Higher Power or God. "God is going to make sure my child knows that I love them" can serve as a daily affirmation of strength. In this step, the practitioner explains the importance of happiness not only externally but internally as well. The practitioner helps the father connect with self by teaching meditation and exercise techniques that use self-reflection to alter ways of negative thinking and frustration. One example that works well with male fathers in helping secure their "emotional maleness" is to participate in Dad Speak Out Sessions (SOS) for advice, accountability and support from peers in similar detached parenting situations. Applying interventions that are not in conflict with a father's sense of masculinity can help him stay involved with working on goals of being more engaged in their child(ren)'s lives. Also this intervention can confront behavior that is embedded in stereotypical notions of being male. Techniques or strategies that foster self-reflection provide fathers with opportunities to assess their lives and their mistakes, and help to put focus on moments, memories and milestones in striving to be better individuals and parents.

4. Using the Environment as a Classroom to Teach Self and Others

In this step practitioners encourage fathers to learn from their mistakes and their environment. Being able to construct their realities into narrative themes can serve as a therapeutic outlet (Worden, 2002). The H.I.T. focuses on identifying positive events and interactions with mother and child(ren), helping remove feelings of guilt and shame. Fathers in treatment are expected to take an active role in their community, and accept their role as a contributing partner and role model. Emphasis is on recognizing previous errors in thinking and behaviors, with a view toward building coalitions and support systems that offer fathers a forum to generate ideas, and build workable goals for themselves and their relationships with their children. Fathers are challenged to understand that assistance cannot be received if the difficulties they face are not known and understood by others. Fathers are encouraged to recognize that it is acceptable and appropriate to ask for help.

5. Establishing a Collective Empowerment Way of Thinking

Fathers are also expected to go beyond their personal wants and desires. They are expected to build and strengthen their own resources and credibility in bridging communal support systems that foster fatherhood, leadership and community responsibility for others to see, especially their child's mother and the courts.

Speak Out Session (SOS) forums that promote fathers to narrate their realities about being a “visitor dad” are encouraged. Community support that helps alleviate stress and confusion are also valued. Building supportive networks that are collaborative and altruistic fosters opportunities for growth and progress for the entire community. The goal here is to embark on a “we are all in this together” way of thinking, in which every member counts and serves for the betterment of the community for example through neighborhood block clubs, youth engagement programs and a citizen police academy. The acceptance of this holistic approach is not only sought in families but also in churches, schools and neighborhood centers.

Supplemental Pragmatic Life Strategies:

Practitioners can support men by reminding them of their many contributions and strengths they possess and exhibit as fathers, family men and assets to the community through the use of “3 Vs.” These “3 Vs” are defined as:

Value: Making every person feel that they have value and a contribution to make to their community and country.

Validate: Despite one's current status or appearance, validate them and their experience from their perspective. Be non-judgmental and attentive in promoting an optimal worldview and hope for the future.

Visible: Never disregard or ignore anyone. Acknowledge every person with dignity regardless of their current status or appearance (eye contact, small talk kind words, friendly gestures, positive hand movements, etc.). It only takes a few seconds out of your day to validate one's existence.

Future Considerations and Recommendations

Clinical considerations for practitioners is to acknowledge fathers experiencing distress and hostility ranging from detachment from their child, and bitter disagreement with the mother and her family, to struggles with employment and the feeling of disenfranchisement by the court system. All of these factors cause deep stress and detachment in fathers. Listening and being sensitive to concerns voiced can also assist greatly to reduce frustration, detachment and feelings of alienation.

Of course, fathers are not all the same, and being an effective father takes many different forms. It is important for any practitioner who is going to be working with fathers to understand what effective fathering is through each father's lens. Understanding what makes for an effective father and identifying their strengths can foster a solid foundation for the practitioner in setting goals and objectives that can be reached and sustained. When this occurs it benefits the child(ren), empowers the dad, strengthens the family and builds up the community.

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