

A Refugee/Asylee Client in Therapy: Challenges and Rewards

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In May 2015, an attorney at HIAS Pennsylvania, a nonprofit organization providing legal assistance to newcomers to the United States, requested therapy for a female client.

The woman from Congo sought asylum due to persecution resulting from her political activism. The client arrived in the United States in January 2015 and, according to the attorney, her medical and psychological conditions were worsening. I agreed to see her in therapy pro bono.

Prior to our first meeting, I learned that Grace¹, the client, had been a deputy leader of the opposition party in her country, having spoken out forcefully against the president. Her activism resulted in her business being demolished and her home being invaded by government soldiers. During a night attack in her home, Grace and her 15-year-old daughter were raped. She fled to safety in the United States, forced to leave her children behind with friends in neighboring Guinea.

What to Expect When Seeing Immigrant/Refugee Clients

As therapists, we know that seeking professional support requires a belief in the efficacy of the process. For an immigrant, still unfamiliar with her adopted country, Grace's seeking out therapy was a display of serious determination to reduce her suffering. Most often, though, for those who arrive without documentation, legalizing immigration status is their initial priority.

Even when a client's legal immigration status is obtained, the medical and psychological challenges do not abate. Indeed, the mental health challenges/struggles become more manifest after

the legal battle is won. It is at this time that the immigrant has the opportunity to attend to health problems and/or psychological distress lingering from the violence, persecution, or trauma experienced in the country of origin and from the immigration process itself.

What could I expect from Grace, the outspoken activist raped by a group of men sent to silence her? A woman desperately missing her children, who remained in Africa. In this time of need, displacement, depression and isolation, what could I offer? These questions plagued me as the first session approached. Within minutes, it was clear that what I offered was what worked with clients throughout my career. Providing a safe, caring environment enabled Grace to express what was necessary to heal. My role was to listen attentively and respectfully, allowing her to share, for the first time, out loud, what she had kept secret since the traumatic events occurred. From the time of the trauma to the present, she experienced tremendous guilt and shame for what happened to her and to her children. While in this country, she suffered in isolation. Over months, Grace explored all that had happened to her and its lingering psychological impact on her. During this time, Grace processed the PTSD symptoms, learning to utilize healthy coping strategies, as needed. She emerged from her suffering to re-experience herself as the capable and competent woman she was prior to the trauma of 2014.

What Are the Risk Factors that Clients Are Likely to Present?

When immigrants arrive in this country as a result of persecution, they are experiencing the aftermath of this inhumane treatment, along with the separation from their home, family, and culture. Following their arrival, they are confronted with the tasks of establishing a sense of safety and community; providing a residence for themselves, and, often, family members; learning a new language; and establishing a means

to earn income. They often face discrimination and the stigma of being different. They must learn new skills to succeed in the United States. They need to struggle against a sense of isolation and loss, disillusionment, and challenges to self-esteem (Snell, 2006).

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Newcomers arrive desiring a better life for themselves and their families. During the early days of being an immigrant, there can be significant hardship. Within therapy, a client can learn what is realistic to expect of herself and her new life. Within the safety of each session, a client experiences the attentive presence of another, someone who listens actively, offers positive feedback, and praise. Once rapport is established, trust builds and hope renews. Through this work, my client, Grace, reconnected with her competence, determination, and courage. Critical was her ability to revise an image of herself as the capable person who is strong and has the tenacity necessary to seek a better life in the United States.

Learning to trust others is essential in the immigrant journey and in therapy. Early screening for psychological issues followed by therapeutic intervention has been found to lower emotional distress, improve postmigration adjustment, and prevent further psychological crisis. (Johnson-Agbakwu, Allen, Nizigiyimana, Ramirez, & Hollifield, 2014). The therapist becomes the catalyst enabling the client to heal and achieve life-enhancing objectives.

What Challenges Does a Therapist Encounter?

The desire to help, to alleviate the suffering of the immigrant, is palpable when

¹The client's name and identifying information have been changed to protect confidentiality.

clients have experienced such hardship in their countries of origin and/or after displacement. The challenge and opportunity that presents itself is to appreciate and respect the differences between the client and clinician, while at the same time, celebrating and embracing the commonalities. An immediate need that emerges is to maintain clear boundaries, to recognize what the limits are to being an effective therapist. One needs to resist becoming overly involved in problem solving and/or intervening beyond what allows an individual to develop self-sufficiency. A client complains of being hungry, that her family has abandoned her, refusing to send money to support her. How does a therapist listen compassionately without offering food and/or money? When a client has to cancel sessions because she has no tokens to public transportation, does a therapist assist her compliance with her weekly appointment by offering to buy bus tokens?

A client's experiences in his or her country of origin are often incomprehensible to us living in the United States.

The tragic circumstances of the lives of our clients are difficult to hear and challenging to process. It is our therapeutic responsibility to provide a safe venue, be a caring listener for their narrative, and respectfully accept what they bring and share with us. This can become burdensome and affect us beyond the therapy session. Learning how to care for ourselves, as we care for our clients, is essential to this work. Finding means to accomplish this is fundamental to maintaining our involvement with these clients. Avoiding compassion fatigue allows us to maintain the therapeutic presence necessary for the client's well-being, as well as our own.

What Are the Rewards of This Work?

Listening as my client shared the narrative of hardship experienced before immigration was difficult. What occurred after the initial sharing, though, was the opportunity to work with her. Grace was able to learn to accept this horrific personal history without being defined

by it. Therapy enabled her to reconnect with her own strength, courage, and hope. Participating in this process brought rewards that were, at moments, profound and inspiring. Bearing witness as she examined her tragic past and then eventually climbed out of the pit of despair, depression, and hopelessness was a daunting task. If, at the end, a client is able to renew a view of herself as the person capable of being successful in this country, the benefits of the work are palpable and heart filling. ▮

References

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