

Family Centered Therapy in Nutrition Counseling

Megan J. Beyer

Miami University

Professional Practices in Dietetics

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SCHMIDT

Literature Review

The family therapy approach has been used in the United States since the 1950's, which has shown to have many implications in nutrition. It is important to understand the overall idea of how family therapy is used, and different approaches it utilizes including: psychoanalytic family therapy, systems approach and structural approach. Also it is important to understand the type of client the family therapy approach would be used for, and the areas of dietetics that are important.

Family Therapy Approaches

The overall focus of family therapy is defined as "how people in family groups interact with each other" (Jones, 1993, p. 117). In this focus it is important to investigate the overall emotional problems, which exist between family members. The counseling should be centered on the interaction between family members, that may reflect a disturbance between the family members, or demonstrate dysfunctional behaviors. There are many specific characteristics that reflect a well functioning family which can include the areas of maintaining homeostasis through a stressful period, encouragement to promote personal growth, and children assuming responsibility.

To counsel a client using family therapy one of three approaches can be used. The first approach is psychoanalytic family therapy. This approach focuses on the importance of establishing and maintaining the relationship with the family (Jones, 1993, p. 117). When using this approach, it is very important to have a thorough understanding of the family dynamic which include their personalities, roles, and conflicts within the family. Another component of psychoanalytic family therapy is individual family therapy, which focuses on a corrective

emotional experience of one individual with the therapist, and not with the other family members.

The second approach that can be used in family centered therapy is the systems approach. In the systems approach, it is assumed that all families are homeostatic systems, and a change in one member of the family brings about change to the other members of the family (Jones, 1993, p. 118). Although this may not mean that the functional ability of the family will be changed, but instead the behavior of the individual will be changed. This process is not concerned about the intrapsychic process of the family members, but instead focuses on the process and interpersonal communication between the family members. It is necessary to understand the type of communication the family has, and how they can improve it based upon their lifestyle. As the counselor, it is necessary to understand that the whole family unit is greater than the sum of its parts.

The last type of approach that employs family centered therapy is the structural approach. In this approach the therapist understands the family structure to promote change. Through change in the family structure, the positions of the family members are altered (Jones, 1993, p. 119). An example of this idea is one family existing in two separate units which includes the parents and children. Removing these separate units would join them together, and result in a warm and supportive environment. There are outside influences on the family structure such as stress, which will indicate the strength and overall functioning of the family depending how they are able to adapt to stress.

Nutrition Counseling

There are many ways in which family centered therapy can be used in nutrition counseling especially in anorexia nervosa (AN) and eating disorders (ED). Anorexia nervosa is

defined as a “mental disorder characterized by weight loss leading to body weight persistently below 85% of the ideal body weight, intense fear of weight gain, self evaluation... and absence of at least three menstrual cycles” (Nenobia, 2002, p. 50). It has been found that AN patients may have a response to their cultural values, which creates conflicts and imbalance for the individual. A family centered therapy approach stresses the importance of the strength of a supportive family, and finding necessary resources with the help of the therapist. This is a team effort that is effectively able to disrupt the dysfunctional pattern that the AN patient is suffering from. One of the main focuses through family therapy is to study the root of food refusal within the family setting, which will help the therapist understand they family dynamic and target the specific triggers (Nenobia, 2002, p. 52). In one specific study in Hong Kong, a daughter refused food, and then punished her family for it. It was found from this case study that the daughter felt locked up, and therefore the meaning of her life had changed. Family therapy techniques were used to target the reason why the daughter was suffering, and how the family could support her and help change her eating patterns together (Nenobia, 2002, p. 54).

Another way in which family centered therapy can be used in nutrition counseling is in eating disorders (ED) in children. The family centered therapy, also known as the Maudsley approach, is an outpatient treatment plan divided into three portions (Bass, 2014, p. 27). The first stage is where the parents take responsibility to ensure their child is gaining weight. Second, the child is helped to take back control and responsibility of their eating and weight. Lastly, the final phase is focused upon maintaining a healthy weight of the individual for proper development. In this study the family centered therapy was based off the idea that the family is the main source to change a child’s behavior and causing psychiatric issues. The family is able to provide the essential nutrients for the child, and creating the behavioral change (Bass, 2014, p. 28). The

therapist may attend a family meal to observe the family dynamic during a meal period. It was found in family centered therapy that it is very important to never criticize the child, but instead to provide empathy to the child about their emotional problems that have contributed to their ED (Bass, 2014, p. 30). Overall, for successful family based therapy approach it is important to make attainable goals for the child, involve the parents in each visit, and be sure to make a back-up plan if the child is not accepting of what is recommended for them. Although this study focused on ED in children, it would be appropriate to use this technique for any individual with an ED and has a constant support system that would assist in their positive progress.

Limitations

Although the family centered therapy has been found to be useful there are some limitations to the approach (Pampage, 2014, p. 490). It was founded that family therapy is difficult to do well because of the logistical, and financial factors, to this model. Having a family therapist can be expensive, especially if it is not covered by insurance. Another difficulty that was often seen, is that family therapy is much more difficult than individual therapy, and involves an overall greater approach and effort, such as seeing the family in various settings to look at the root of the problem (Pampage, 2014, p. 495). Not only may the therapist need to see them in their home environment, but possibly in a community or school environment to have a better understanding of the overall picture.

Additionally, with change in technology and decrease in family time due to busy schedules, there has been a change in family dynamic. One of these changes that really affects nutrition counseling in the family setting is that most families only eat two to three meals together per week which results in less time spent together and decreased communication (Breunlin, 2014, p. 462). Decreased communication can be also be attributed to the fact that it is

estimated that most individuals spend five to seven hours a day in front of a screen, which decreases their overall communication (Breunlin, 2014, p. 468).

Family centered therapy is an effective approach to include the entire family in the counseling process, and to provide the therapist an in-depth understanding of the family dynamic. There are multiple approaches that can be used, but should be selected based upon the nutrition problem. As seen through research there is a wide population that may utilize family centered approach in nutrition.

References

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