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Lay Counseling

Fernando L. Garzon

Liberty University, fgarzon@liberty.edu

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LAY COUNSELING

DESCRIPTION. Lay helpers are caring individuals without professional credentials who seek to aid spiritually and emotionally distressed people in church or ministry environments. Although they typically have limited training in mental health or pastoral care, most have received instruction in a specific model of how to care for hurting people. They may minister in a clear organizational structure, such as a lay help center in a church, or in more informal venues, such as a person's house, a park, a coffee shop, and the like. This article addresses the utility of lay helpers, guidelines for lay helper ministry, the variety of lay help approaches, and how experiences with lay helpers may shape the people's expectations for professional treatment.

WHY HAVE LAY HELPERS? Lay helpers provide an important complementary ministry to traditional mental-health services. Many people do not have insurance to cover professional counseling services, managed care often limits access to care, and state mental-health systems are overburdened. Some pastors have limited training or feel too busy to minister effectively to hurting people. In these situations, lay helpers can fill an important need as long as proper guidelines are implemented. Preliminary research supports the efficacy of lay help approaches, but true experimental studies are needed to confirm these initial results (Garzon & Tilley, 2009).

LAY-HELPER GUIDELINES. Lay helpers should work within the limits of their

competency, and ideally, they should be supervised by a licensed mental-health professional (Tan, 1991). High-risk situations that include the possibility of suicide or homicide, psychotic thinking, personality disorders, and complex trauma (such as dissociative identity disorder) should be referred to licensed therapists. In these situations, lay helpers can complement mental-health services by being supportive friends of hurting people rather than seeking to resolve the distress.

LAY-HELPER APPROACHES. Numerous lay-helper models exist. Garzon, Worthington, Tan, and Worthington (2009) offer four categories:

- **Stephen Ministry** (www.stephenministries.org) provides an example of an *active listening* lay helper approach. Such models combine Rogerian principles, such as unconditional positive regard, empathy, and basic listening skills, with prayer and Scripture.
- *Cognitive and solution-focused* lay approaches stress the role of automatic thoughts, problem-solving skills, and client strengths in working with people. Backus (1985) and Holland (2007) provide examples of these models.
- *Inner healing* approaches consist of a range of 'journey back' methodologies that seek, under the Holy Spirit's leading, to uncover personal, familial, and

ancestral experiences that are thought to contribute to the troubled present" (Hurding, 1995, p. 297). These have similarities to psychodynamic and experiential therapies, but they emphasize prayer-focused encounters with Christ as the mechanisms of change. The Sandford's model (www.elijahhouse.org) is one type of this strategy.

- Light University from the American Association of Christian Counselors (www.aacc.net/courses/biblical-counseling) exemplifies a *mixed approach*, including a broad range of psychological and spiritual formation perspectives. Light University utilizes a variety of highly qualified Christian mental-health professionals in the development of its training resources. Online training with this approach is also available.

LAY HELPER IMPACT ON CLINICAL THERAPY. People who have experienced lay help may come to professional therapy with specific expectations. For example, they sometimes believe the clinician should be an expert in prayer or Scripture who uses similar but more advanced strategies. Given this possibility, clinicians should assess for previous lay help experiences as part of the intake process and clarify how they actually do therapy as part of informed consent (Garzon et al., 2009).

Therapists also may have training in lay help models and incorporate these into their practice. Competency issues and expanded informed-consent procedures should be considered in such cases. These include noting the empirical status of the approach, describing any potential for increased emotional distress, and indicating alternative treatment options (Huner & Yathouse, 2009).

CONCLUSION. Lay helpers provide an important resource for the Christian

community that complements traditional mental-health services. Appropriate guidelines for lay help ministry have been developed, and a wide variety of lay help models are present. Lay help experiences can impact client expectations for what occurs in therapy, so assessment of this area should be included in treatment.

FERNANDO GARZON

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SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

DESCRIPTION. Spiritual disciplines can include any activity for the purpose of gaining a closer relationship with God. Through the ages, various Christian traditions have adopted an array of acts of commission and omission in an attempt to encourage these efforts. Various approaches have emerged that range from simple categories of behavior to expansive lists. The common thread among them is the process by which one decreases his "worldly" mindedness and becomes more like Christ. These approaches are integral to one's perception of spiritual formation as a whole and deserve some attention in the counseling room. Although