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Inside Out and Counseling: Creative Interventions to Facilitate Emotional Intelligence

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ABSTRACT

Emotional intelligence is an essential component of mental health and functioning. When traditional talk therapy is intimidating for young clients, creative approaches can supplement practice to foster a nonthreatening and supportive environment. The present article introduces innovative interventions inspired by the popular film *Inside Out* as helpful mechanisms to facilitate emotional intelligence in clients.

KEYWORDS

Counseling; creativity; emotional intelligence; *Inside Out*; mental health

Empathy, or the ability to understand and respond to a client's emotions, is an integral aspect of being an effective helper (Young, 2013). Although the universality of basic human emotions has been recognized (Ekman, 2003), a client's personality, development, history, background, and culture may influence both the client and counselor in counseling (Gugliandolo, Costa, Cuzzocrea, Larcán, & Petrides, 2015; Matsumoto, Olide, Schug, Willingham, & Callan, 2009; Tsai, Levenson, & McCoy, 2006). Creativity is a natural and prominent force in human life. Expressive modalities have the potential to serve as an outlet for teaching and therapy (Bradley, Whiting, Hendricks, Parr, & Jones, 2008; Gladding, 2008). Furthermore, creative methods can be used to improve the counseling relationship and facilitate discussion of emotions (Maynard, Monk, & Booker, 2011). Moreover, movies may be a vessel for a variety of interventions in counseling (Lampropoulos, Kazantzis, & Deane, 2004). In a seemingly straightforward story, Pixar's animated film, *Inside Out* (Rivera & Doctor, 2015), details the complexity of emotions of Riley, an 11-year-old girl moving from Minnesota to California. The movie directly discusses the feelings joy, anger, sadness, disgust, and worry, and it provides a foundation for emotional discussion that can be applicable in counseling practice. This article discusses the use of *Inside Out* (Rivera & Doctor, 2015) in counseling and artistic methods in which the movie may assist in facilitating emotional intelligence.

Emotional intelligence

There are multiple models of emotional intelligence; however, the most common model used for the ability of emotional intelligence is Mayer, Caruso, and Salovey's (1999) four branch model. In this model, emotional intelligence is divided into the ability to (a) recognize or perceive emotions, (b) utilize emotions to inform thought, (c) regulate emotions, and (d) manage emotions. Therefore, the emotionally intelligent individual is able to perceive, comprehend, regulate, and reflect on emotions effectively. Thus, high levels of emotional intelligence may assist individuals in solving problems, having positive social interactions, and avoiding self-destructive behaviors (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2004).

Emotional intelligence has been found to be related to a wealth of benefits such as academic scores (Billings, Downey, Lomas, Lloyd, & Stough, 2014; Nasir & Munaf, 2011), coping (Davis & Humphrey, 2012), psychological well-being (Salami, 2011), physical activity (Bhochhibhoya, Branscum, Taylor, & Hofford, 2014), wellness maintenance, enhancement behaviors, and accident control behaviors (Fernández-Abascal & Martín-Díaz, 2015). Contrastingly, negative relationships have been found between emotional intelligence and conduct problems and hyperactivity (Mavroveli, Petrides, Shove, & Whitehead, 2008), and risk taking (i.e., traffic, substance) (Abdollahi, Talib, Yaacob, & Ismail, 2016; Fernández-Abascal & Martín-Díaz, 2015). Moreover, a study by Lando-King and colleagues (2015) displayed findings that suggest that emotional intelligence may serve as a buffer against sexual risk behaviors. Thus, emotional intelligence is essential as higher levels may assist individuals in overall functioning and protect against maladaptive and risky behaviors. In addition to intrapersonal benefits, associations have been found between emotional intelligence and interpersonal gains. Lopes, Salovey, and Straus (2003) found that emotional intelligence was associated with satisfaction in social relationships. Similarly, Austin, Saklofske and Egan's (2005) study of Canadian and Scottish students found that emotional intelligence was associated with social network size, social network quality, and overall life satisfaction. Therefore, fostering emotional intelligence in counseling may benefit not only the client, but may also influence individuals in their lives as well.

Beyond correlation, scholars have conveyed the ability to foster emotional intelligence in children and adolescents. Tiabashvili, Mirtskhulava, and Japaridze (2015) found that mythodrama group psychotherapy helped to change adolescents' emotional intelligence in treatment group participants, whereas control group participants' scores remained the same. Furthermore, Jarczewska-Gerc and Gorgolewska (2015) found that children between the ages of 3 and 5 were able to change the ability to recognize, understand, and control emotions after receiving training on primary emotions and being prompted to consider situations in which those emotions would arise. Ruiz and colleagues examined whether training could impact emotional intelligence and subsequent symptoms. Treatment group participants had fewer

clinical symptoms such as atypicality, depression, social stress, and sense of incapacity. Furthermore, the difference between groups persisted at the 6-month follow up assessment point. This study provides efficacy for the ability to use Mayer, Caruso, and Salovey's model (1999) as a tool to facilitate emotional intelligence and provides evidence that the use of the model may foster long term changes. Hence, the use of creative methods based on the four branch model could facilitate emotional intelligence.

Creative interventions

Prior to using *Inside Out* (Rivera & Doctor, 2015) as a channel for counseling, the movie must be viewed conscientiously by the client. To maximize on availability for counseling, the counselor may assign the task as homework. Depending on the age of the client, the counselor may recommend the film be watched with a guardian who may assist in processing. If developmentally appropriate, the counselor may provide a card of prompts that include questions that are linked to the planned intervention. In addition to viewing the movie prior, the counselor may benefit from having video clips handy to refresh the client's memory on vital aspects of the film. The creative counselor may find it appropriate to have visual aids of important characters, scenes, and concepts. For younger children, puppets, plush toys, or figurines may be helpful visual aids, whereas pictures or prompting the client to draw the characters may be more appropriate for adolescents. The following creative interventions can be used singularly or in conjunction. The interventions are built on the four branch model of emotional intelligence (Mayer et al., 2004) and many of the activities below can be used to navigate multiple levels within the model as well.

Who's who?

Introduction to the characters in counseling can be a creative intervention that lays the foundation for subsequent activities. In addition, an introduction activity prompts a client to recognize and perceive emotions, as suggested in the first segment of Mayer et al.'s (1999) four branch model of emotional intelligence. This activity can be done in two ways: (a) providing the character or (b) seeking the character. In providing the character, puppets, pictures, or figures can be used. The counselor shows one primary emotion character at a time to the client and inquires, "Who is this?" The client may respond with the name, however, deeper processing can ensue with prompting. For example, the counselor may show a client a figure of Sadness, and ask the client: how do you know the character is Sadness?, what expressions does Sadness show?, and what kind of things does Sadness say? Instead of using a figure or image, the counselor may provide the client with art materials and ask the client to illustrate one character at a time. This is

particularly helpful for adolescents who may be able to draw intricate expressions. The counselor may process by asking the client to explain their drawing. For example, the counselor may ask the client to explain the eyes on Anger. Regardless of artistic ability, the counselor and client may describe how the character appears beyond the image. For example, the client may be able to share the process in which Anger's eyes narrow when he is upset. In addition, the client may be able to use his or her own expressions to demonstrate and illustrate the emotion. The Who's Who activity can assist in clarifying the characters to accurately use *Inside Out* (Rivera & Doctor, 2015) as a creative intervention in the future. This intervention tackles the first of the four branches in the model (Mayer et al., 2004), as individuals are sharing their perception of the characters and collaborate in identifying primary emotions.

Getting to know you

The emotion characters in the film are mainly explored in conjunction with the main character, Riley. In this activity, the counselor and client get to know the client by understanding the emotions inside the client. Therefore, this progression delves into the use of emotions to inform thought, the second aspect of Mayer et al. (1999) four branch model of emotional intelligence. This activity may be primed with a discussion pertaining to the universality of emotions. To personalize the process, drawings or photographs can be used. The client can draw what the different emotions look like, however, if applicable, a digital camera can be used to snap images of the client. The counselor may ask a client to show what it looks like when a character is in control. The counselor can prompt a client further by asking, "What types of things do you say when [character] is in control?" In reference to the counseling process, the counselor may inquire, "How would I know if [character] is in control when we are speaking?" If the counselor wishes to foster rapport and/or facilitate understanding of the variability in emotions he/she may also take part by sharing how they appear when the different emotions are in control. If pictures are used, the photographs can be used for check-ins, challenges, clarifications, and confrontation when discussing emotions in future sessions. In addition, this activity can be used to further delve into the experience of emotions by asking a client to recall a time in which a certain emotion was in control or to imagine a situation in which a certain character would take control. This activity targets the first branch of Mayer et al. (1999) model by assisting in recognizing emotions, potentially in regards to self-awareness and in reference to others' emotionality as well. Further, the second branch of the model, understanding and using emotions, may be targeted when a client is able to link emotions to experiences. Processing such experiencing in connection with thoughts, feelings, and behaviors allows the client to better understand the utility of emotions.

Underneath it all

In this activity clients are able to process the depth of emotions. The counselor guides the client in delving into what thoughts, behaviors, experiences, and memories may underlie emotions. This activity can be done with the broad aspect of the emotion, or the prompt may pertain to a specific experience in which the client experienced the given emotion. The visual aspect of the emotion and hidden aspects can be conveyed multiple ways: (a) a puppet or figure could be placed on an empty box, (b) a picture can be placed on top of sticky notes, or (c) the client may act out the emotion and there may be pieces of paper underneath his or her seat. The counselor may ask the client to consider a memory in which he or she was very angry. Because emotions are often attached to triggers and additional experiences, the counselor may allow the client to write these aspects on paper and place them in the box, beneath the picture, or under the seat. The counselor asks the client to share what is underneath the emotion, while being respectful of his or her individuality and validating his or her experiences. Together, they are able to reflect and examine emotions, while bringing awareness to why emotions surface. In this intervention, the third branch of Mayer, Caruso, and Salovey's model (1999) is targeted as the client is able to analyze his or her emotions and to better understand the underlying causes for experiencing such emotions. Through this activity, the significance and function of emotions can be explained.

Emotion spectrum

A common activity for elaborating on emotions is the emotion scale or thermometer. Focusing on one emotion at a time, the counselor provides a number range and inquires details for the client at each numerical demarcation. For younger clients, 1-5 may be more appropriate, however, a broader range of 1-10 or even 1-100 may be appropriate dependent on the client's development. A visual representation (e.g., number line) is helpful to track the differences along the spectrum. Counselors are encouraged to use qualifying statements to detail the difference along the spectrum. For example, the counselor may ask, "What is it like when you are only a little bit angry?" On the other hand, the counselor may question, "What is it like when you are as angry as possible?" If the client experiences difficulty in personalizing his or her thoughts or behaviors at the different ranges, utilize the *Inside Out* (Rivera & Doctor, 2015) characters to provide a parallel, for example, "How can you tell when Sadness is very upset?" For this activity, it may be helpful to begin with the specific emotions addressed in the movie. However, the counselor may wish to expand into a different emotion if pertinent to the client's primary concern and if the client is able

to comprehend that feeling. Depending on the client, varying emotion vocabulary may be helpful to match comprehension such as by asking, “What is it like when you are irate?” This activity can be simply processed as a discussion, or artistic methods can be used. For example, the client may be able to act out the difference between being a two or five on the spectrum. If acceptable within therapeutic boundaries, photographs can be used. Stories and individual accounts can be used to further understand the client’s spectrum. A counselor may use a narrative from a previous counseling session to explore where on the spectrum the client was in that moment. In formats such as family counseling, the counselor may be able to ask other members where he or she believed the client was in addition to asking the client. A discrepancy can be used for exploration and consistency requires affirmation and validation.

It is suggested that this spectrum be kept and used as a reference. As sessions elapse in counseling and the client improves in emotional intelligence, the counselor may wish to revisit and edit the spectrum. Beyond thorough understanding of the spectrum, the spectrum can be used as an active tool in counseling. Motivational interviewing techniques (Miller & Rollnick, 1991) can be paired with this activity to discern how to regulate emotions, which is the third branch of Mayer et al.’s (1999) model. For example, a counselor may ask the client what coping mechanisms can be used to reduce a client’s worry from 10 to 6. Continual use of the spectrum will allow a client to be more aware and connected with his or her range of emotions. In addition, the counselor and client can then collaborate in analyzing and managing emotions, thus reaching the final task of the four branch model (Mayer et al., 1999).

Emotion grid

The reality of being an emotional being is that feelings are often experienced in combination. It is possible to be a degree of happy and anxious or to be worried and angry. In a popular Vox article, Todd VanDerWerff (2015) explored the complexity of the main emotions in *Inside Out* (Rivera & Doctor, 2015). A helpful image by Christophe Hasbursin depicts the characters along both horizontal and vertical axes and provides expert emotion vocabulary to detail the combination. For example, the grid explains that joy and fear may equate to surprise and disgust and anger may be equivalent to loathing. Depending on the development of the client, using the graphic may be a useful tool; however, to spark personal exploration, it may be helpful to use a blank grid for the client. Therefore, the client and counselor can collaborate to discern developmentally appropriate terminology for the given combinations. Instead of directly asking the client, “What is it like when you are both happy and sad” it may be useful to use exploratory

prompts. For example, “Can you think of a time when you were both worried and sad?” Or the counselor may state, “Tell me a time when you saw someone who was both happy and sad.” Generally, this activity requires higher levels of development and is not appropriate for children; however, be mindful that emotional intelligence is distinct from other multiple intelligences and thus may be suitable for a child. Although a child’s cognitive development may seem as though he or she is unable to process certain levels of thought, a younger child may excel in emotional intelligence and therefore may be fully capable of delving into this activity.

Exploring the client’s emotion grid helps clients to see the complexity of emotions. Therefore, when a client is experiencing confusion about emotions, revisiting the grid can be a validating experience for the client. In addition, when a client is having difficulty in analyzing the emotions of others, the grid can be a helpful tool to elicit empathy to understand the combination of emotions others may be experiencing. Finally, in exploring the complexity of emotions, the grid can be combined with the spectrum activity above in order to decipher the prominence of emotions, their triggers, and how to manage them. In exploring the complexity of emotions, the emotion grid opens points to process along all four branches of Mayer et al.’s (1999) model as you can progress from recognition to utilization, to regulation, and finally management of emotions.

Memory ball

In *Inside Out* (Rivera & Doctor, 2015), memory balls contain specific instances from the past that frame the character’s personality. The balls are influenced by core emotions and thus the recollection and emotion go hand in hand. The memory ball activity helps to engage clients in discerning and understanding their emotions in relation to particular moments in time. This is best done as an illustrative activity in which the client draws a circle or is given a circular piece of paper. However, depending on the client’s artistic ability, the client may wish to use other forms of media such as paint or photographs. In addition, because the memory must be processed, the client has the option to narrate the event aloud or in writing within the circle. To categorize by emotion, it is helpful to color code emotions and to highlight the area surrounding the ball in that color to give a luminescent appearance. Memory balls can be associated with multiple emotions; therefore, multiple colors can be emitted from the circle. This activity can be helpful in reference to assessment as counselors can use the memory balls as mediums for thoroughly discussing the past. Memory balls can be used as an activity to document emotional extremes. For example, the counselor may have a client create a memory ball for every outburst. The creation of the ball provides a cathartic processing experience as the client illustrates and narrates to the

counselor. After multiple anger memory balls are created over time, the counselor may use the memory balls to help decipher similarities amongst the experiences. Core themes and trends can surface with the use of this creative tracking tool. The memory ball can also be used as a termination activity to culminate the lessons in counseling and the therapeutic relationship with the counselor. The client may keep the ball as a reminder of therapeutic progress.

The memory ball activity provides a way to address all four levels of emotional intelligence. First, the client ponders the associated emotion(s) as he or she recollects the memory. In describing his or her thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, the client is effortlessly using emotion to facilitate thought. Critical processing with the aid of the counselor allows the client to further understand the underlying cause of the emotion, its triggers, and general experiences of the emotion. From a thorough understanding, the counselor can collaborate with the client to prepare to experience the emotions in the future and can use prevention strategies for emotional regulation.

Considerations

To maximize on the benefits of creative interventions, ample preparation, time, processing, and considerations are required. Thoughtful implementation of creative interventions is essential to be sure the activity is appropriate for the client and thoroughly processed. The interventions are not to be done flippantly and forethought is suggested. With prior planning, the counselor will have a range of materials at hand for the client to use. In addition, the counselor would have sufficient time to provide adequate instructions, process along with the client, and deconstruct the process following the intervention. Although clients may very well enjoy the creative catharsis associated with these interventions, it is essential to remain engaged with the given treatment objective.

When using creative interventions in counseling, it is vital for the counselor to be mindful that they may not be appropriate for all issues or clients. However, that is not to say that clients of varying concerns and development may not benefit from these interventions. For example, a client diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder may have more difficulty discerning emotions. However, because emotional and social intelligences are often missing skills associated with this diagnosis, these creative interventions may provide a helpful path for increasing emotional competence in ways traditional talk therapy may not. Another consideration aligned with general development is age. *Inside Out* (Rivera & Doctor, 2015) is a movie that targets children, but it has become a popular film across age groups. Although these creative interventions may be more suitable for children, they can be adapted for use with adults as well. If using these interventions with an adult, be sure to provide a

preface and rationale to avoid offending the client and rupturing the therapeutic alliance.

Future research

The emotion-oriented premise of the film *Inside Out* (Rivera & Doctor, 2015) provides an opportunity to address emotions creatively in counseling. However, it would be beneficial to conduct research to examine the efficacy of these interventions in reference to facilitating emotional intelligence. For one, the interventions are founded on Mayer et al.'s (1999) model that posits that emotional intelligence can be fostered. However, according to contrasting trait models, it would not be feasible to develop emotional intelligence from these interventions (Mavroveli et al., 2008). Such models posit that individuals are born with their static level of emotional intelligence and interventions would be insufficient in increasing an individual's natural level. Quantitative studies should implement the variety of emotional intelligence assessments in order to better understand the effectiveness of these interventions. Because of the theoretical foundation, the Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso (2002) Emotional Intelligence Test-Youth Version may be most suitable. In addition, qualitative studies would provide helpful perspectives on the experiences of clients in using these creative interventions. Although this article focuses on the clinical use of the *Inside Out* (Rivera & Doctor, 2015) interventions, it is widely recognized that empathy and emotional intelligence are core aspects of counselor identity (Martin, Easton, Wilson, Takemoto, & Sullivan, 2004; Pellitteri, 2010). Thus, it would be helpful to implement these interventions as teaching activities and to monitor the development in counselor trainees.

Conclusion

According to Samuel Gladding (2008), creativity is an essential component in counseling that should be encouraged, fostered, and celebrated. Creative interventions provide clients with an opportunity to provide a voice to their internal experiences beyond traditional talk therapy (Bradley et al., 2008; Maynard et al., 2011). Recognizing, understanding, and managing emotions are essential skills for social functioning. In addition, these abilities are often tasks within the counseling process. Beyond talk therapy, creative interventions can be a catalyst for emotional comprehension and competence. The popular film *Inside Out* (Rivera & Doctor, 2015) provides an excellent framework for the use of creative interventions that focus on emotional intelligence. Paired with adequate preparation and developmental considerations, the creative interventions introduced in this article have the potential to target Mayer et al.'s (1999) Four Branch Model of Emotional

Intelligence. Future qualitative and quantitative research is recommended to better understand the experiences of clients with the interventions and the efficacy of these interventions in reference to increasing emotional intelligence.

Notes on contributor

Shainna Ali is an instructor at the University of Central Florida, Orlando, Florida. She also works at her private practice, Integrated Counseling Solutions, LLC, where she utilizes the methods suggested in this article.

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