

THE THERAPY SESSION THAT WASN'T

Men feel just as intensely

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Self care articles for the bereaved

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I was employed for twenty-seven years as an addictions counselor and clinical supervisor for the state of New York. As a beginning therapist, I made my share of mistakes with clients either through lack of experience or poor judgment. I readily owned my missteps to myself and my clients, vowing to learn from them.

Thanks to quality education and training and competent supervision, my direct practice skills gradually developed. As a clinical supervisor, I readily shared my own experiences with the counseling staff for whom I was responsible. I wanted them to learn from my mistakes, so they could avoid making the same ones.

Though accountability may make one vulnerable, it allows us to acknowledge our humanity to ourselves and others. The genuineness—a natural byproduct of accountability—helps both supervisory and counselor-client relationships to truly flourish.

I retired in July 2012, eager to start a new chapter in my life. At the end of my career, I felt that I served those individuals requesting services from me and those staff whom I supervised, honorably and ethically.

AN AUDIENCE OF ONE

In June 2002, my 18-year-old daughter Jeannine was undergoing her first chemotherapy treatment. Shortly after giving birth to our granddaughter Brianna, Jeannine was diagnosed with an incurable sarcoma. Given her poor prognosis, Jeannine's oncologist ordered a therapist to meet with me and my wife, Cheri.

The recommended therapist was a clinical psychologist who was supposed to have had extensive experience with children and families. We were in Jeannine's hospital room when the therapist first introduced herself. Jeannine was sleeping soundly so the psychologist took us into another room and for the next forty-five minutes spoke with my wife. I looked on, anticipating that at some point, she would inquire as to how I was managing the stress of dealing with a terminally ill daughter. Unfortunately, that never happened.

This wasn't couples counseling as I knew it to be. It was more like individual counseling with an audience of one.

I have given a lot of thought as to why the session transpired as it did, without this therapist acknowledging my presence or bearing witness to the emotional pain I was experiencing.

Perhaps she knew that I was a therapist and felt that I didn't need her attention as much as my wife did. Perhaps she figured that I was managing by using the coping skills I had taught to others.

My background as a therapist didn't remotely prepare me for the road that lay ahead. My daughter was terminally ill and, short of a miracle, certain to die. All of what I knew about therapy was useless to me now.

There are certain missteps made in therapy that can prevent a counselor-client relationship from ever being established. Feeling dismissed and ignored are two of them.

Needless to say, I did not sign up for a follow-up session with this therapist.

Thankfully, I had a network of solid support during Jeannine's illness. I would need that network when on March 1, 2003, Jeannine died at home, six weeks short of her 19th birthday.

MEN HURT TOO

I was pleased that this therapist was attentive to my wife's needs. However, I would've welcomed her asking about my needs as well. I may not have opted to express them, but I would have been glad to have been asked. Every individual should be given the opportunity to be heard.

She may have also interpreted my silence as stoicism or quiet courage in the face of untenable circumstances. Perhaps she felt that for the moment, I had everything under control, which allowed her to focus exclusively on Cheri.

If she had chosen to involve me in the conversation, she would have discovered that I too was experiencing fear and uncertainty about the present and future, instead of the stoicism and courage that she may have perceived.

Men feel just as intensely
as women, we just deal
with it differently.

Rather than directly express my emotions, I simply worked through them, or entered the world of my own thoughts. That world had always served me well during previous life challenges.

If I was uncomfortable with my wife's tears, it was because her tears were a reminder that I could not protect her and our sons from the pain of our daughter's death.

A KARMA OF SORT

The bad taste of an unfulfilling therapy session was soon washed away by a simple act of natural compassion. During one of Jeannine's chemotherapy treatments, I was sitting at the foot of her bed, head in my hands, fatigued beyond belief. I was broken and overwhelmed. As I was pondering my fate, one of the nurses touched me gently on the arm. In a soft soothing voice, she asked, "Are you doing okay?"

As I fought back tears, I simply replied that I was okay. I was okay, because for that moment she knew that my silence and stoicism served as a mask for what I was truly thinking and feeling. The fact that she took the time to check on me gave me a moment of much-needed comfort during what was—and will be—the most tumultuous time of my life.