Existential Factors and the Treatment of Problem Gamblers

“If a way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the Worst”
Thomas Hardy

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National Conference on Problem Gambling
Milwaukee, WI
July 13, 2012

Talking Points
• Case example of Kathy
• Core theme
• Existential Context
• Application to gambling and the gambler
• Integration within the psychotherapy of the problem gambler
• Specific existential strategies and case examples

Case of Kathy
• 53 year old Caucasian woman, once divorced, no children, obese, recovering from alcohol/opiate dependence and living with sister; initially gambling and smoking cigarettes
• Dx’d with Bipolar, Type II, Recurrent Major Depression, Insomnia and medicated with antidepressants, mood stabilizers and sleep agents
Kathy

- Referred by treating psychiatrist/addictionologist; no prior gambling specific Rx
- Met criteria for PG: SOGS-R = 17; NODS = 9
- Initial harm reduction helped reduce negative impacts but still escaping from job and relationship (family) frustration with biweekly gambling

Therapeutic Themes

- Family of origin understanding
- Adolescent withdrawal to drugs and the street
- Patterns of escape and avoidance
- Field dependence, expectations and reality
- Bridges and mortality
- Guarded acceptance and “self” exclusion
- Release and acceptance

Core theme

Discussion of existential themes and how they may apply to a person’s progression into problematic gambling and how these themes, if addressed, can enhance treatment, recovery and life adaptation.

These themes are universal and treatment professionals, as well as our clients, often avoid taking them into consideration.
Existential Context

• Associations to the word EXIST and EXISTENTIAL
• Irvin Yalom, MD and *Existential Psychotherapy*, Basic Books, 1980 and the “ultimate concerns of life”
  – Death and mortality
  – Freedom and responsibility
  – Isolation and aloneness
  – Meaninglessness

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Death and Mortality

• Basic Postulates
• Life and Death are interdependent and sources of anxiety and distress that is both neurotic and normal
• An understanding of our mortality can enhance our life experience
• Therapeutic foothold: desensitization with repeated exposure and life inspection
Freedom and Response-ability

- Freedom, groundlessness and anxiety
- Avoidance strategies
  - Play, distraction, diversion, displacement and denial
  - The Devil made me do it
- Responsibility and existential guilt: “to know and not act is not to know at all” (Japanese proverb)
- Responsibility awareness, authorship and authenticity. From wanting/wishing to doing

Isolation and Aloneness

- Interpersonal – loneliness
- Intrapersonal – self fragmentation and dissociation
- Existential- separation from self and any other being in the world
- Fear of existential isolation can lead to dysfunctional relationships with self and others
- Therapeutic task – “no matter how close I get to others and they to me, I must still face life alone”
- If you are never solitary you are never spiritual

Meaninglessness and Value

- What is the meaning
  - Of life?
  - Of my life?
- Why do we live, why are we here, what do we live for, what shall we live by?
- Humans strive for meaning and closure
- Meaning refers to sense and coherence
- Purpose to intention, aim and function
Existential Issues and Problem Gambling
• Life involves reality, pain, anxiety, aloneness, loss, responsibility
• We all need distractions but not dependencies
• Gambling is a powerful way of avoiding life pain and for the problem gambler that paradoxically leads to more pain and suffering
• We tend to resist approaching these issues
• Treatment facilitates approach, awareness, acceptance and understanding

Integration within treatment
• We must accept where the person is; Custer’s admonishment
• The timing of introducing existential themes is critical and must be gentle
• We facilitate the shift from avoidance to approach
• Early treatment dropout may reflect a too rapid approach

Specific Existential Strategies
• Loss, grief and bereavement – Worden’s (1996) model
  – Acceptance of the reality of the loss
  – Experiencing the pain/emotional aspects of the loss
  – Adjusting to an environment in which the loss is missing
  – Relocating the loss within one’s life and finding ways to memorialize the loss
Specific Existential Strategies

- Development of an approach to responsibility and work – the financial work, the relationship work
- Approaching aloneness – forced freedom from distraction (e.g., Kalaloch) with a focus on journaling “where am I with my self right now?”
- The Medicine Wheel

Come to Kalaloch in July 2012

Thank you for your attention and curiosity.

Comments or questions:

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