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WOMEN—ISSUES IN COUNSELING

Barbara Quigley, MSW

Much is written on women's issues such as PMS, depression, lesbianism, the female alcoholic, the feminist movement, and the battered woman. I would like to address my thoughts to the needs we have as counselors to increase our awareness of the wide scope of women's concerns, of how these concerns may differ at different ages or of how these concerns are similar in all age groups. I also believe we need to look at our own biases, interpretations, perceptions, and values in working with women clients. Audrey Faulkner (1980) states: "Our professional technology requires that we place a certain distance between Social Worker and client in order to facilitate the objective assessment that precedes intervention. No assessment is totally objective, however; it always reflects our view of reality" (p. 85). Our intervention must take into account that women of different ages reach womanhood at different times and in vastly different personal styles. I will deal specifically with six areas: (1) age, (2) roles and relationships, (3) expectations, (4) identity, (5) life experiences, and (6) options. I will also examine the similarities and differences in these areas as they may apply to a teenager, a young woman, a middle-aged woman, and an older woman.

Age

Age is an area of difference that we need to take into account. Gail Sheehy (1977) writes: "We are not unlike a particularly hard crustacean. The lobster grows by developing and shedding a series of hard, protective shells. Each time it expands from within, the confining shell must be sloughed off. It is left exposed and vulnerable until, in time, a new covering grows to replace the old." With each passage from one stage of human growth to the next, we, too, must shed a protective

structure (p. 29). In adulthood, “as in childhood, each step presents not only new tasks of development but requires a letting go of the techniques that worked before” (p. 31). Though we may feel uneasy, “the courage to take new steps allows us to let go of each stage with its satisfactions and to find the fresh responses that will release the richness of the next” (p. 514). “It would be surprising if we didn’t experience some pain as we leave the familiarity of one adult stage for the uncertainty of the next” (p. 513). Often it is this pain that brings our clients into counseling.

For the teenager, this is a time of conflicting immaturity and cultural sophistication, of insecurity and questioning, of exploring options such as drugs and alcohol, of driving, and of entrance into the job market with its questions of “What do I want to be?”

The young woman is moving into the adult world, trying to decide the things she should be doing and trying to prove herself competent in those choices, whether they be education, career, marriage, or family beginnings. The work, stress, frustration, or failure involved with trying to accomplish chosen dreams and goals are often issues that bring the young women into our offices. These women were raised in the atmosphere of the Women’s Rights Movement. They have been told they can do “anything” and too many of them try to do “everything.”

The middle-aged woman is facing a plentitude of endings and beginnings. For some women, the nest begins to empty, and they may feel the label of “misplaced homemaker” or “depressed housewife.” For the women who have never married or have chosen to delay child-bearing, there may be the anxiety of the biological time clock winding down. It is a time of deadlines and a sense of urgency to move ahead. It can be a pivotal point of new options such as returning to school, entering a profession for the first time, or deciding to make a change of vocation. At a women’s conference in Scandinavia, Camille Kimball (1976) said:

Any woman may be under the necessity of earning her own living and helping to support dependent children. If she has been trained she will be much happier and have a greater sense of security. . . . Not all of a woman’s lifetime could possibly be completely filled with the demands of a family, home, and children. A woman who has the foresight can see that through forty years of experience she has matured the ability to commence a grand and useful second half of her life. Let her study a profession, or adopt a trade, or find subjects for study and research. There are many learning opportunities. These years should be viewed as a time that can be socially and professionally productive. (p. 12)

Audrey Faulkner (1980) writes: "Women now in late life reared families in an era when they were expected to be totally devoted to their children and involved in their care 24 hours a day. . . . Now, when these children have reached adulthood, their mothers are told they should not be 'over-involved' with their grown sons and daughters. Supermom is now told that 'hands-on' has become 'hands-off'" (p. 67). No wonder depression has its highest incidence in the middle and late years, but these also can be years of renewal—a time for an exciting fresh start.

It is very easy to see the older woman placed in Erickson's final stage of ego integrity: the ultimate in emotional achievement, or its opposite of disgust and despair. Many of the older women have lived their lives in a traditional orientation, believing that marriage and motherhood are the only acceptable roles for women and that it is the man's role to take care of them; consequently, they are devastated when faced with widowhood. Other women who believe that the selection of the traditional role was a bad choice for them may be experiencing tremendous rage and disappointment, and yet feel only pessimistic about the possibility of change. This may be difficult for a young therapist to understand. The social worker in a nursing home may be called on to be empathic to the despair and hopelessness of some of its residents, yet also aware of the self-satisfaction shown by others.

Roles and Relationships

As all women are either a mother or a daughter, or both, I'll start this segment with a statement that Noemi Mattis made to a mothers-daughters group: "If a woman does not like herself, she most likely will not be satisfied with her daughter." This can be applicable no matter what ages the mother and daughter are. We may see in our offices the teenager who is in conflict or pain in one or many of her roles. She is, or could be, a daughter, a student, a friend, a lover, a young wife, or a young mother. For her, turmoil may arise from claiming maturity while acting immaturely, from wanting and refusing help, and from swinging through the emotional spectrum with its extremes of love and hate. The bombardment of choices from peers, media, and family pulls her in different directions, creating the conflicts we see unfold when counseling with this age group.

The years of the young woman include many roles and relationships, many of which are the same as those of the teenager—daughter, student, friend, lover, wife, mother, as well as possibly divorcee or wage earner. She is caught in a whiplash between all of the "shoulds" and "wants" of these busy years.

The middle-aged woman may have the same role and relationship possibilities as the young woman, adding perhaps the roles of mother-in-law, grandmother, widow, and daughter of aging parents. These roles may be intensified with "deadline" or "must do" approaches or lightened with the enthusiasm of the "get to's" of new directions, options, and freedoms that require many assessments and decision-making choices.

The older woman may have similar roles and relationships, or she may have dropped some of them. Most likely, she will lose the role as a daughter as well as losing other older and peer group relationships. For these women, coping with loss is a prevalent area in therapy.

Expectations

All age groups share in expecting to have their needs met. These needs are expressed in Maslow's pyramid of basic needs: (1) physical needs, (2) security needs, (3) social needs, (4) achievement needs, (5) self-actualization or self-fulfillment needs.

The teenager can express paradoxical needs of wanting to be left alone to handle her life at the same time as wanting to be dependent. She may feel no need to worry about the future and then helplessly feel the need to be rescued when things do not work out.

The young woman may expect herself to take on all options—and feel as if she needs to succeed at all of them to be fulfilled. Conversely, she may look only for the "he" to take care of her throughout their "happy-ever-after" lifetime.

The middle-aged woman may find herself floundering in an ocean of expectations, her own and those of the many significant others she feels responsible for. There are many decisions to make and options that are coming by for her to grasp—maybe for the last time.

The older woman may be expecting to go into the "golden years" physically and financially independent, surrounded by her children and grandchildren, traveling with her husband abroad, or leisurely enjoying retirement. Then she may find that the smaller retirement income does not even cover much more than the necessities. She may be left a widow, alone and lonesome as her children and grandchildren's busy lives only infrequently touch with hers. The greatest shattered expectation may be ill health that leaves her incapable of caring for herself. In all age groups one or many frustrated expectations can build up the hopeless, helpless components of depression.

Identity

The search for the discovery of self is a lifetime, ongoing endeavor. All of the age groups are seeking ways to measure their worth. The feedback we get from others creates our self-image—how we see ourselves. Many negative “readings” from feedback from significant others as children and throughout adulthood create a low self-esteem or self-worth. Many times it is identified for the first time, or at least seen more clearly and worked on, in therapy sessions. Maxwell Maltz (1965) described a good self-image as being “a reasonable approximation of ‘you,’ being neither more than you are, nor less than you are” (p. 10). All women may ask: “Who am I?” “What am I worth?” “What am I capable of?” The answers are constantly changing, so the questions will always continue to be asked.

Life Experiences

For teenagers the time involvement with the family, with friends, and with school changes. Friends and peer relationships often far outweigh the importance of family and school for them. We may see teenagers in crisis with an unwanted pregnancy or a broken relationship. Conflict at home or at school or with other authority figures are often problems that bring teenagers to counseling. Some find themselves involved with drugs, running away, dropping out of school, and breaking the law. Also, divorce or the second marriage of their parents is hard for teenagers to accept and to deal with.

The young woman may be asking, “Did I make the right choice?” or “Is this all there is?” as she tries so hard to make everything fit. This is especially true of the young mother who is trying to juggle a meaningful relationship, family, self, and most often a job too. It can also be true of the woman who works and fights so hard to do a good job in her career. Too often she finds that advancement and equal opportunity may have only men’s names written on them. Priorities of higher education or careers may postpone marriage and children, and she finds herself out of synchronization with her peers.

The middle-aged woman has traveled through the experiences of the teenager and the young woman, and she may now find herself in competition with younger women both for jobs and for men. Grey hair and facial lines are symbols of power in men, but symbols of decline and asexuality in women. The traditional woman who saw her only role as wife and mother may find herself out of a job as her children are raised, and losing out on a good relationship with her husband

as his job, or sometimes a younger woman, often becomes more important to him. Alcoholism, depression, or meddling in her grown children's lives may be where she spends long, dreary years.

The older woman of today is a casualty of our culture; she was rewarded in younger years for nonassertiveness and dependence, and in old age she is expected to take care of herself and not be dependent on others. This segment on life experiences may seem negative in the extreme, for success can be enjoyed in all ages; but success stories do not often find their way into therapy.

Options

Exploring options is a prime agenda in social work, and one where we see a more immediate result of our efforts. The teenager may have options of schooling or other career preparation, marriage, motherhood, abortion, or placement of a child for adoption. Other options may include working out differences at home, living in a foster home, or contending with the life of a runaway, a life that might include street life or even suicide.

The young woman may still have many of the same options as the teenager. She may be reevaluating choices she has previously made, returning to school, starting a serious relationship, beginning a family, or facing divorce.

The middle-aged woman is looking at a changing role in the home. She may be facing employment for the first time, deciding if it is time to move out of a dead-end job, going back to school, becoming politically involved, participating in cultural and arts interests, taking up hobbies, improving talents, taking time to read, giving volunteer service, traveling, and taking time for herself.

The older woman may also still have many of these options. She may be faced with the choice of dependency if health or finances no longer allow her the choice of independency. She can choose to wrap herself in the warmth of pleasant memories, or to be bitter because of the unpleasant ones; to continue to be as involved as limitations may allow, or simply to endure—or possibly to die.

I referred to our need as counselors to look at ourselves and our views of reality in interacting with our clients who are women. We need to ask ourselves many questions such as: "What positive or negative impacts have there been from the women in our lives?" "What will our personal experiences with women do to influence us in counseling?" "How will our experiences as a man (or a woman) influence us in counseling women?" "How might we look differently at women's

issues if we were younger (or older) therapists, dedicated feminists (and what would our definition of that be?), traditional women's role advocates, bitterly divorced, or victims of abuse or rape?" I am not saying the answer to any of these questions need make us less effective counselors of women, but I want to stress that social work asserts the rights of each individual to self-determination; and we must not require a woman client to adopt our approach. The burden of acceptance and understanding of generational differences rests with the helper, not the one being helped. I hope we as counselors will be more cognizant of the individuality of each woman we see, recognize how diverse problems may be at the various life stages, and how cultural influences at different periods of time may impact on the view of reality.

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