Suffering and Healing

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Cassell (2004) and Draguns, Gielen, and Fish (2004) pointed out that holistic and culture-sensitive approaches to suffering and healing of societies around the world have been regarded as primitive, outdated, and unscientific since the advent of biomedicine. Biomedicine took cultural processes and the experiences of suffering, healing, and well-being to be an epiphenomenon of biological processes (Lewis-Fernandez & Kleinman, 1994). Till the 1970s, rare attempts were made by psychiatrists and psychologists to study the experiences of suffering and healing except for the study of symptoms and their treatment or psychotherapy (Draguns, Gielen, & Fish, 2004).

Suffering: Threat to the Intactness of the Person

Cassell (2004, p. 32) defined suffering as “the state of severe distress associated with events that threaten the intactness of person”. Suffering is associated with feeling overwhelmed by the symptoms and their treatment. Young (1998) elaborated, “. . . [S]uffering is associated with somatic pain and the moments of consciousness that accompany or anticipate this pain. To experience such suffering, an organism requires only a nervous system evolved to a point where we can say that it is conscious of its pain” (p. 245). However, as Priya (2012b) found, (a) suffering experiences are culturally constructed, (b) suffering associated with physical illness is the awareness of the psychosocial impact of having a disease and receiving treatment for it, and (c) suffering may not be associated with a disease or a disorder.

Healing: Restoring Intactness of the Person

Kleinman (1988a) defined healing or remoralization as the process (mediated by cultural symbols or beliefs) of retrospective narrativization by a sufferer in an experiential space created with an empathic listener (who is existentially committed to be with the person) that provides meaning and value to the sufferer's experiences. Clearly, healing is not only about attempts to remove or minimize symptoms of a disease or a disorder. Also, it is the person (or the self) who suffers and needs healing through culturally authorized interpretations of crisis and recovery from it and not just the biological entity of the person that is often taken to be the embodiment of physiological or behavioral symptoms. Kleinman (1988b) illustrated this with the help of examples of two patients in two diverse cultures; one in the sociocentric culture of rural Taiwan and another in the more egocentric culture of North America. The relational self (defined by seeking a sense of harmony in relationships) of the Taiwanese patient developed a new enabling meaning in life, in addition to a more supportive social life through the culturally authorized myth given by his shaman that he was possessed by a calm and reassuring spirit. The individualistic self (that values a sense of agency and control) of the North American woman developed a sense of self-efficacy through the culturally authorized protocol of behavioral intervention.

Moving beyond those Western forms of healing called psychotherapy, let us examine the aspects of indigenous healing observed in cultures which are more sociocentric in orientation.

Aspects of Healing in Sociocentric Cultures

A close look at reports of the healing process and its effectiveness for suffering persons in sociocentric cultures reveals two salient aspects (Kleinman,
by the indigenous healing system. Klienman (1988b) observed that the Taiwanese person seeking the help of a healer not only developed a new enabling meaning in life, but the healing process also helped him re-establish his relationship within the community. As Kleinman observed,

As a member of the healing cult, moreover, his status is elevated and practical difficulties in his social life (e.g., too few clients for his wood-working business, and the absence of close friends to whom he can explain his fears of business failure and from whom he can receive affective support and practical advice) are overcome through his new social network. (p. 135).

Wolfgang Pfeiffer (1994), a German psychiatrist who has extensively studied indigenous healing, also concluded that the healing process facilitates the person's integration into the group rather than providing a sense of individuation as a unique person – something that is a common observation as an outcome of the Western form of healing called psychotherapy. 

SEE ALSO: Indigenous Healing Systems; Integral Psychotherapy

References


