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Understanding and Appreciating the Communication Styles of the Millennial Generation

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An essential component of effective counseling is the quality of empathic connection between counselor and client. This is where basic understanding starts and healing can potentially begin to occur.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to access that essential connection without some level of understanding of how the client's cultural experiences have influenced his or her communication style and life choices.

Generational culture is one very important aspect in developing personality and communication preferences. People develop a peer personality through shared influences and events that occur during their formative years approximately ages 10 to 18, which impact their generational value system and methods of interaction (Strauss & Howe, 2000).

When considering peer or generational personality, it is important to keep in mind that generations transition over time. They do not change abruptly; and their descriptive norms and trends do not fit all members singularly, but rather the cohort as a cohesive whole.

Overview of Previous Generations

The silent generation (born 1925 to 1942) was affected by the reality of a major war and a threat to the continuity of society as they knew it that resulted in a generational value system focusing on duty, honor, hard work, and respect for rules. As a group they tend to be dedicated and reverential with a somewhat practical and formal communication style.

The baby boomer generation (born 1943 to 1960) was brought up in an era of safety, prosperity, security, spiritual sterility, and conformist attitudes that lead them to rebel against what they perceived to be a vacant and hollow societal system. Their peer personality and communication style focuses heavily on personal growth, achievement, and political correctness.

Generation X (born 1961 to 1981) experienced a marked transformation of societal values during their formative years and have reacted against excesses of

idealism by becoming tough, pragmatic, and individualistic. As a generation they tend to be skeptical, pragmatic, and unimpressed with authority. They are adaptive and balanced and are most comfortable with casual communication (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000).

The Millennial Generation

Because of rapidly increasing use of electronic communication, a globally capricious political climate, and immense exposure to popular culture, the Millennial generation (born 1982 to 2002) has a considerable number of factors influencing their generational peer identity. This generation has, since birth, been immersed in technology, and their communication and learning styles are affected accordingly. In order to effectively serve this generation in a counseling setting, a greater understanding of the origins and processes of their communication styles is of considerable significance.

Major events affecting the Millennials include school shootings, Oklahoma City, 9/11, war in Iraq, and the Clinton/Lewinsky controversy. Only time will tell what the long-term effects of these events will be on their generational personality as a whole.

Important influences on the communication styles of Millennials include diversity, their parents, educational trends and challenges, psychological issues, technology, and, last but not least, popular culture (Strauss & Howe, 2000).

Diversity

Millennials have been growing up in an increasingly diverse and multicultural society where barriers of race tend to be disappearing. According to the 2002 U.S. Bureau of the Census, 37.6 % of Millennials are non-White (Strauss, 2004). Because of their diversity, Millennials are more accustomed to a wide range of global and cultural viewpoints, and their acceptance and tolerance is reflected in all areas of their lives, public as well as private.

In fact, according to the 2001 Lifestyle and Media Monitor, 50% of current students believe the possibility exists of an African American president in the next 20 years, and a full 58% percent think there will be a female president (Fields, Manning, & Roberts, 2001).

Parents of Millennials

Millennials are perhaps the most wanted children in history. Due to the availability of contraception, pregnancy termination options, and fertility advancements, women have many choices concerning when and how they wish to become parents. According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, more than half the babies born during the years 1990 to 2000 were to mothers who had used fertility treatments to conceive.

Baby boomer parents of Millennials are extremely involved in their children's lives and very protective of them. They have enacted numerous child protection policies since 1982, including tougher punishment of child offenders, stricter child restraint/helmet rules, stricter vaccination/child health protocols, urban curfews, TV V-chips, new movie and video ratings, tougher child-labor enforcement, laws targeting dead-beat parents, and the list goes on and on.

For Millennials all of this attention and planning regarding their lives and well-being has resulted in a feeling of safety and a sense of confidence (Strauss & Howe, 2000).

Educational Trends and Challenges

Today's most prolific educational trends focus on team learning and service. Team teaching, group projects, peer evaluations, community service, service learning, student juries, and noncompetitive sports are just a few examples of the current educational climate's focus on learning to work together as a group and the importance of civic responsibility. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2001), 83% of high schools incorporate community service into their curricula (up from 27% in 1984), 75% of high school students have volunteered, and 86% want to go to college.

In addition to the focus on teamwork and service in the school system, today's children are living very structured lives with most participating in team sports. Millennials are truly team oriented and tend to work very well with and for each other (Strauss & Howe, 2000).

Despite the positive emphasis on teamwork and service, there have been some criticisms of the current educational system regarding grade inflation. In 1968 17.6% of the grades given in high school were A level and 23.1% were C; in 1998 42.9% of grades are A and 6.6% are C level. This brings up issues of whether or

not the school system is really preparing students for college and beyond or succumbing to the pressures of parents and students to make the educational process easier rather than more effective (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002).

Psychological Issues

There is no question that psychological issues are prevalent within the current culture of the country. The Annual Survey of Counseling Center Directors stated an increase of approximately 30% over the past 20 years of cases requiring therapeutic treatment (Hart, 2001).

Contributing to the increase in psychological issues is the fact that virtually all Millennials will be touched by divorce in an intimate way. With approximately 60% of marriages ending in divorce, Millennials will experience some of the ramifications of that figure either with their own parents, or the parents of relatives or close friends. The levels of divorce and blended families lead to a significant number of potential problems within the family and with the development of personal identity.

Another issue, much too large to go into in depth here, is the rapidly increasing use of psychotropic pharmaceuticals at a very young age. Many Millennials have been using this type of medication for years, and the long-term effects have yet to be determined (Benton, Robertson, Tseng, Newton, & Benton, 2003).

Technology

The popularity of this new activity among children has increased rapidly... and has brought many disturbing influences in its wake. Parents are bewildered by a host of new problems, and find they are unprepared, frightened, resentful, helpless. They cannot lock out this intruder because it has gained an invincible hold of their children. (Wartella & Jennings, n.d.)

This quote reflects the frustration that can be felt in face of new technology and shows the concerns of how it might affect children, and how parents will be able to cope with its seemingly unstoppable influence.

It was written by Azriel L. Eisenberg in 1936 about radio.

All new technology and methods of mass media have been held under strict and sometimes skeptical scrutiny. From radio, to movies, to television, and now to the Internet, advances and changes are never easily accepted into the daily life of children.

But the Internet is different. It is interactive and largely unmonitored by parents because they are

typically far less technologically savvy than their children. Because of the incredibly prevalent use of technology, Millennials will process information differently, approach academic research differently, and engage in cyberrelationships; and at some point they will experience cyberabuse of one kind or another (Shaw & Grant, 2002).

Millennials are used to being connected, by e-mail, instant messaging (IMing), cell phone, or online chat, to their friends and families at all times. They are comfortable with electronic communication and spend a lot of time online; in fact 13- to 18-year-olds spend an average of 6 hours per day in front of a screen (including television, movies, and computer). The extreme usage of electronic communication has brought up concerns regarding the long-term effects on the development of interpersonal communication skills within this generation (Shaw & Grant, 2002).

Through the use of the Internet, Millennials have access to virtually any information they might want at a very young age. They can also find recipes for explosives, pornography, gambling, and a host of other age-inappropriate things. And they are viewing unregulated information, not knowing if what they are reading is valid or accurate (Roberts, Foehr, Rideout, & Brodie, 1999).

Another significant factor that technology has introduced to Millennials is the reversal of the parent as teacher and child as student schema that has been the norm since the beginning of time. Now a lot of children are teaching their parents and other adults how to use technology, reversing the traditional roles in a completely unprecedented way. There has been some speculation that this role reversal will erode the sense of respect for authority (Shaw & Grant, 2002).

Popular Culture

Millennials are exposed to pop culture in ways no previous generations could have dreamed possible. They are bombarded with conflicting images and sound bites of, for example, Britney Spears, Iraqi prisoner abuse, Tiger Woods, Mickey Mouse, George Bush, Quinton Tarantino, the atrocities in the Sudan, Pamela Anderson, Michael Jackson's child abuse court case, MTV, Martha Stewart, Oprah Winfrey, Lacy Peterson, and JLo, in no particular order or organization.

They listen to MP3 players while surfing the Internet, while watching MTV, while IMing a friend (or many friends), while writing a paper for school . . . all at once.

They have a lot going into their heads in a lot of different ways almost constantly. What do they retain and how does it affect their emotional and social

development? The answers to those questions are yet to be determined.

Conclusion

The Millennial generation has introduced many new dynamics into the field of counseling. They are culturally diverse, well cared for, and wanted by their parents. They have benefited from a more enlightened and interactive educational system. But they are also affected by the conflict and upheaval of divorce and sometimes underprepared by their school system for higher education and adulthood in general.

The technology that connects them to the world at large is the same technology that cuts them off from the social interactions that have historically prepared young people for the transition into adulthood.

How do we connect with them? How can we reach them? The answers to those questions are as individual as we, as therapists, are. But an appreciative understanding of their unique generational experiences may be a good place to start.

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