

The Challenge of Therapy in times of Financial Crisis and Personal, National and Global Despair

— Ofer Zur

Many of us, as therapists, are faced with clients who have or are about to lose their jobs, houses, or life savings. Many therapists are personally concerned and frightened, as are millions of people in the US and around the planet who are up against the economic crisis we are all facing.

As we listen to our clients who are desperate and frightened, as we read in the paper and listen to the media that this is probably only the beginning of the crisis we gradually realize that, in fact the crisis is more than economic. It is more than about foreclosures and rapidly depleted retirement saving. In fact, it is a crisis of faith. The economic system we have been so proud of has turned on us, our leadership that was supposed to protect has lost control at the wheel, and many of the investors we have trusted have betrayed us. Whom are we to turn to? Who are we to trust? In the same way that September 11 shattered our sense of physical security, the recent crisis has shattered our sense of economic security. Both raised doubt about the integrity of our institutions, government and leaderships.

Most psychologists talk with greater ease about physical and sexual abuse, depression, anxiety, suicidality or even death and sex than about issues related to money. After all we have chosen to peruse doctorates in psychology not and MBA's. However, this is NOT the time to avoid the subject of money, bills, debts, mortgages and savings. ***Avoiding discussions of financial concerns with many of our clients would amount to ignoring the elephant in the living room.*** Not only is this confusing, it is, in fact, 'crazy making' not to discuss an obvious issue that is so survival-based in its emotional power. The fact that we, psychologists may be hurting financially and are also fearful about our own financial future, can make it even harder to discuss the issue with our clients.

Following are some thoughts, comments, and suggestions for how to interact with clients regarding the current economic crisis, and how to deal with it. I start with some general points, then discuss clinical and practice management issues, then shift to recap issue of therapists' self-care and conclude with reminder that crisis almost always also present opportunities.

General Points:

- Money is one of the most potent metaphors of our culture. In fact, money, sex, and time seem to be the 'big three' issues and metaphors of our time (Zur, 2000)
- Money concerns are obviously, often closely tied to issues of security, identity, self-esteem, sense of power, hope, and much more.
- Obviously, people worry about money regardless of how much money they have in saving or how many houses they own. Losing large percentage of one's savings is generally as upsetting (if not more) for those with a few millions as it is for those with a few hundreds in saving.
- Paradoxically, some wealthy clients may be more upset than clients who are poor. This may stem for variety of reasons, which include the fact that wealthy people often put higher emphasis on money issues than those who are not wealthy and the fact that poorer people may have more sense of survivability and resilience than wealthy people.
- Men and women often have different relationships to money and may attach different meanings to the crisis. Traditionally, men relate to money as part of their role as providers and protectors and therefore it is tied to their identity and self esteem. Women, however, often associate money with security and the ability to care for their children and family more than with identity. Of course, these generalizations are not likely to apply to all cultures, age groups, people of different sexual orientations, etc.

Clinical Considerations

- It is important that psychologists do not avoid the subject of fear, panic or despair around financial issues when your clients bring it up.
- Even if your clients do not bring it up, but you suspect it is on their minds, it is important that you introduce the idea and take clients' lead thereafter.
- Many clients can benefit from the sheer fact that they share their deepest fears, or sense of failures to an empathic ear.
- Inviting clients to express their concerns and responding with empathy and compassion is extremely important. It is likely to help clients if they get the sense that you, their therapist, can handle their despair, fears, dreads, and hopelessness.
- Money issues are obviously, often closely tied to security, self-esteem, identity, power, hope, and much more. When appropriate, help clients to think also about the metaphoric issues connected to the financial crisis.

- Help clients think about the issues in realistic terms by assisting them in differentiating between exaggerated anticipation of doom and more realistic possibilities. Obviously, this is easier said than done. With the dire prediction of economic gloom, the line between realistic and exaggerated fears is blurred at best.
- Do not hesitate to get into the nitty-gritty details of your clients' situations. Some clients can benefit by making and sharing detailed (itemized) budgets. Such budgets can give both of you a more realistic picture of the situation.
- Help your clients brainstorm about what they can change by cutting or reducing expenditures. You do not need to be a financial expert to facilitate their process by asking them what they can eliminate, reduce, or restructure. Refer to financial advisers or accountants if necessary.
- If appropriate, teach them stress management techniques, such as breathing, thought stopping, exercising, meditation, taking a break (i.e., hiking, watching movies). Some clients may benefit from building an altar, praying, or reciting helpful mantras.
- Pay attention to suicidal ideation and note premature thoughts of divorce, separation, or relocation.
- Inquire how the financial crisis may affect their marriages, intimate relationships, or relationships with children and friends. Therapists have reported increase in marital conflict during such time of financial stress.
- Share with clients (i.e., self-disclose) your thoughts, feelings, or situation, as clinically appropriate and at your comfort level. Different clients benefit from different types and different degrees of disclosure.
- Consider supportive group therapy, online support chatrooms, etc.

Practice Management Issues

- It is time to be flexible with clients who are in crisis with regard to fees, frequency of sessions, even in taking a break from therapy.
- Do not hesitate to bring up the issue of whether they can afford therapy, or not. If you do not bring it up, they may simply drop out of therapy without processing the termination.
- Be responsive when clients suggest reducing the frequency of visits, seeing you at reduced fee, discount or sliding scale, or propose a bartering arrangement.
- It is not going to be very beneficial for you to have an empty hour in your schedule? Lower your fee when necessary or reduce frequency so you can still cover some of your expenses.
- When clients prefer a reduced fee, take the time for compassionate negotiation and propose a sliding scale, if appropriate. It is OK to say "let's try

this new fee schedule for the next two months and evaluate it again then."

- Some clients are too proud to pay a reduced fee and prefer to reduce frequency of sessions or to barter. Learn the ethical and clinically appropriate ways to negotiate with each client in a different way that suits him or her.
- Some clients may prefer to shift to cheaper and less time consuming modes of psychotherapy, such as tele-health, where therapy is conducted by phone and/or e-mail. Of course, make sure that you are competent to provide such services.
- Document the negotiation process and your clinical rationale in the clinical notes.
- Taking a break may be appropriate with some clients. Most clients do not like being pressured to stay in therapy and will drop therapy anyway. It is better to be open to the possibility of taking a break, or even terminating. Clients who view you as compassionate and who believe that you care about them, rather than just about your practice, are more likely to come back.
- Be cautious with allowing clients to defer payments. Accumulating more debts may not be helpful to clients who are already deep in debt and may also be counter clinical and difficult or impossible to collect.
- Some clients may propose a bartering arrangement. Be open, receptive and thoughtful. Generally bartering for goods is less complicated than bartering for services. Consult with an expert before you enter complex bartering arrangements and document the arrangement.
- Educate your clients about, the philosophy of intermittent-long-term therapy, where clients come back to therapy at different times and junctions during their lives.

Therapists' Self Care:

- Acknowledge your own concerns to yourself and be conscious about your own fears and worries. If appropriate, get personal support, consultation, or therapy to help you deal effectively with your own fears and worries.
- If necessary, seek professional-financial support so you can effectively deal with your own financial concerns.
- Practice what you preach and employ stress management techniques that are known to be effective: exercise, meditation, etc. This is not a good time to skip your exercise, yoga or Pilates classes. Return to your own basic self-care: eat well, get sufficient sleep, and engage in activities that renew your sense of vitality and hope, even if only through meditation or prayer if that is your source of renewal.

- Volunteer in ways that will assist the less fortunate. Sponsor food drives, book drives, or toy drives. Increase your civic responsibility. Pay it forward.
- Talk to people who will focus on solutions and positive possibilities rather, than those who exacerbate your fears and worries.
- If you are so inclined, focus on spiritual practice and community.

Crisis is an Opportunity:

- For many us, and our clients, the financial, housing and job crisis may trigger other crises. This may be a chance to work on both ends (of course, deal with the crisis at hand first).
- If when appropriate and, with special attention to timing, work with your clients, and yourself, on the potential blessing of the crisis, these can vary from:
- Deeper appreciation of intimate and loving connection.
- Appreciation of what we do have and what cannot ever be taken away from us and our clients.
- Developing better priorities by defining what is important, necessary, essential, and sustaining in contrast to what is unnecessary, frivolous or lacking in essential quality.
- Entertainment that costs nothing but brings people into closer interaction with each other. Examples would be board games, card games, badminton games, hikes, etc.
- Getting in the habit of sharing, borrowing, re-using, and creating, rather than buying and contributing to pollution.
- Saving for purchases rather than buying on credit.
- Perhaps the most important of all, question and re-think the consumerist identity that has fueled if not caused the whole financial crisis.
- Once people question their consumption habits, they are more likely to feel that they are not innocent victims in this crisis and that all of us have contributed to it. This can give everyone a sense of hope and a larger sense of efficacy and control.

Reference

Zur, O. (2000). From Speed.com to Soul.com: Reflections on a Hurried Culture and Psychotherapy. Retrieved month/day/year from <http://www.zurinstitute.com/techspeed.html>.

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