Embedding Reflective Practice in a Dementia Intervention

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“As an interventionist and a therapist, you have the opportunity to reflect back the best of who they are and have been.”

Quote from a student interventionist

The Couples Life Story Project (CLSP)

- An intervention with couples where one person has memory loss.
- Goals of intervention include:
  - To increase meaningful engagement between the members of the couple.
  - To help them remember and recognize their strengths as a couple.
  - To enhance the couple’s communication.
- Intervention comprised of:
  - Five home visits by an interventionist, in addition to pre-test and post-test sessions.
  - Communication tips introduced each week.
  - Structured life review of their history as a couple.
- Meeting with interventionist to develop a Couple Life Story Book. Weekly home practice assignments include finding photos or mementos from periods of their life together.
- At the end of the project the book is given to the couple.

Reflective Practice Model

Students deconstruct and reflect on their clinical experiences with dementia, reinforced by a supportive team of faculty and peers.

Intergenerational Relationships with Couples

[Most valuable to me was] “hearing their love story from the old couple who have been together for 60+ years.” [It was] “really inspiring, rejuvenating. Their commitment to one another helps me think about what I am looking for in a relationship down the road, the quality of the relationship I am thinking [about in] a partner.”

“Despite his memory loss, we felt really connected. Also, with the caregiver, their children were my age, so they [the couple] were interested in me, I was interested in them. Some of the stories and lessons some couples told me really helped me.”

Highlighting Strengths in Couples

“I discussed with them my observations of positive interactions I’ve observed between them throughout our time together. I mentioned that they frequently compliment each other and that they are patient with each other. Both seemed pleased that I noticed. I also affirmed them for blending two families and creating a life together.”

Data sources / Method

Content analysis of data sources to identify themes:
- Process notes following each intervention session.
- Exit interviews with graduating students.
- Follow-up interviews with students several months later.

Student involvement in the CLSP

- Students participate as research assistants taking on many different kinds of tasks, including participating as interventionists, administrative tasks, data entry, recruitment, creating the Couple Life Story Books, and attending weekly debriefing team meetings.
- 14 MSW and PhD students have participated over the past 4 years.

Reflective Practice Model Components

- Enhances
  - Social work students’ understanding of couples by
    • Finding meaning from intergenerational relationship with couple
    • Being able to identify and highlight couples’ strengths

- Fosters
  - Students’ opportunities to grow as social work professionals by
    • Experiencing supervision in mentored team meetings
    • Implementing practice skills with couples

- Facilitates
  - Students’ understanding of the connection between classes, research, and practice

Intergenerational Relationships with Couples

“Most important, I learned that I could use therapeutic skills in a research intervention and being trusted with that responsibility. This project really lets you try social work in a different way was incredibly valuable. [It] gave me space to talk to [them] about things like field placements. It was very grounding. How wonderful team work can be.”

“Participation in Mentored Team Meetings

“I particularly valued the support of the team. This felt like genuine mentorship – for life, for classes, for field. A place where we could discuss all of those things. [It] really helped with facilitating my experiences as a shy person.”

“The project gave me a supportive, safe place to fail. Getting to know [faculty] outside of the classroom and in a different way was incredibly valuable. [It] gave me space to talk to [them] about things like field placements. It was very grounding. How wonderful team work can be.”

Highlighting Strengths in Couples

“The conversation concerning how the couple met and what attracted them went really well. I was able to engage the caregiver and care receiver an equal amount and they affirmed one another.”

Linkages between Classes, Research and Practice

“It was a huge thing to see how research works and to learn about recruitment. I have a better depth of understanding now about research, absolutely! Ideally I would like a project like this where I can do research and direct care both. I want to do both of these. I came to really understand the importance of research.”

“I learned that I could use therapeutic skills in a research study. It complemented other social work studies [and] gave me a place to incorporate and practice clinical skills. Made school much more meaningful.”

[The most meaningful part of CLSP was] “being an interventionist and being trusted with that responsibility. This project really lets you try social work in a way that field doesn’t.”