

For Post-traumatic Stress Disorder Counselors in China, the United States, and around the Globe, Cultural Beliefs Offer Challenges and Opportunities

Authors : Anne Giles

Abstract : Trauma is generally defined as an experience, or multiple experiences, overwhelming a person's ability to cope. Over time, many people recover from the neurobiological, physical, and emotional effects of trauma on their own. For some people, however, troubling symptoms develop over time that can result in distress and disability. This cluster of symptoms is classified as Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). People who meet the criteria for PTSD and other trauma-related disorder diagnoses often hold a set of understandable but unfounded beliefs about traumatic events that cause undue suffering. Becoming aware of unhelpful beliefs—termed "cognitive distortions"—and challenging them is the realm of Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT). A form of CBT found by researchers to be especially effective for PTSD is Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT). Through the compassionate use of CPT, people identify, examine, challenge, and relinquish unhelpful beliefs, thereby reducing symptoms and suffering. Widely-held cultural beliefs can interfere with the progress of recovery from trauma-related disorders. Although highly revered, largely unquestioned, and often stabilizing, cultural beliefs can be founded in simplistic, dichotomous thinking, i.e., things are all right, or all wrong, all good, or all bad. The reality, however, is nuanced and complex. After studying examples of cultural beliefs from China and the United States and how these might interfere with trauma recovery, trauma counselors can help clients derive criteria for preserving helpful beliefs, discover, examine, and jettison unhelpful beliefs, reduce trauma symptoms, and live their lives more freely and fully.

Keywords : cognitive processing therapy (CPT), cultural beliefs, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), trauma recovery

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