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LO8 Empowerment At the heart of feminist strategies is the goal of empowering the client. Feminist therapists work in an egalitarian manner and use empowerment strategies that are tailored to each client (Brown, 2010; Evans et al„ 2011). Alma's therapist will pay careful attention to informed consent issues, discussing ways Alma can get the most from the therapy session, clarifying expectations, identifying goals, and working toward a contract that will guide the therapeutic process. Informed consent offers a place to begin a relationship that is egalitarian and collaborative. By explaining how therapy works and enlisting Alma as an active partner in the therapeutic venture, the therapy process is demystified and Alma becomes an equal participant. Alma will learn that she is in charge of the direction, length, and procedures of her therapy. Alma's therapist might ask her, “What is the most powerful thing you could do for yourself right now?” The intent of this question is to “interrupt the trance of powerlessness” by inviting Alma to notice how power is actually available to her (Brown, 2010, p. 35). Given Alma's cultural background, it may be particularly important to address power within the therapeutic relationship because Alma may view the therapist as an expert who holds the answers she is seeking. Self-Disclosure Feminist therapists use therapeutic self-disclosure in the best interests of the client to equalize the client-therapist relationship, to provide modeling, to normalize women's collective experiences, to empower clients, and to establish informed consent. The counselor engages in self-disclosure only when it is judged to be therapeutically helpful to the client. For example, Alma's therapist may briefly disclose her own difficulties in relating to members of her family of origin, acknowledging that at times hiding information seems important in order to keep the peace. The counselor might share how she decides when and when not to be open about her personal life. The counselor could then discuss with Alma ways in which they have both experienced cultural and social pressures to conform to a hetero-normative ideal. Alma benefits from this modeling by a woman who does not meet society's expectations for female behavior and appearance but is comfortable with the image she has developed and how it has worked for her, not against her. The counselor's disclosure would happen over time, for it is crucial that the counselor does not overshadow the client's time to explore the concerns that bring her to therapy. Self-disclosure goes beyond sharing information and experiences; it also involves the quality of presence the therapist brings to the therapeutic sessions. Effective therapist self-disclosure is grounded in authenticity and a sense of mutuality. The therapist explains to Alma the therapeutic interventions that are likely to be employed. Alma, as an informed consumer, will be involved in evaluating how well these strategies are working and the degree to which her personal goals in therapy are being met. Gender-Role or Social Identity Analysis A hallmark of feminist therapy, gender-role analysis assists clients in identifying the impact that their own gender-role socialization has played in shaping their values, thoughts, and behaviors (Evans & Miller, 2016). Some feminist therapists prefer the term “social identity analysis” because it reflects the importance of assessing all relevant aspects of a client's identity, including multiple memberships in both socially disempowered and privileged groups. For example, Alma identifies as a female, a lesbian, and a Dominican—all marginalized identities within the dominant culture. Social identity and gender-role analysis begins with clients identifying the societal messages they received about how women and men should be and act as well as how these messages interact with other important aspects of identity (Remer, 2013). The therapist begins by asking Alma to identify messages she has received related to sexuality, race/ethnicity, and appearance from her culture, society, her peers, the media, and her family. The therapist talks about how body image expectations differ between females and males in our culture and how they may differ in other cultures. The therapist explains how expectations related to appearance could intersect with beliefs about what it means to be gay or straight in Alma's culture, family, and society as it relates to her working environment. As Alma identifies the messages playing in her head and the voices behind those messages, she is living with a mindfulness of her internalized oppression. Alma decides what messages she would prefer to have in her mind and keeps an open awareness when the discounting messages play in her head. The goal is for Alma to adopt realistic and affirming internal messages. Gender-Role Intervention Using this technique, the therapist responds to Alma's concern by placing it in the context of society's role expectations for women. The aim is to provide Alma with insight into the ways social issues are affecting her. Alma's therapist responds to her statement with, “Our society really focuses on sometimes unrealistic beauty ideals with females. The media bombards girls and women with the message that they must be thin, have long straight hair, and wear attractive clothing. The message is so ingrained that many girls are struggling with self-esteem issues related to their appearance as early as elementary school to avoid being bullied or to fit in.” By placing Alma's concern in the context of societal expectations, the therapist gives Alma insight into how these expectations have affected her psychological condition and have contributed to her feeling depressed and anxious about judgment from others. The therapist's statement also paves the way for Alma to think more positively about her unity with other women and even to think about how she might contribute as a role model for girls and young women in the future. Alma is increasing her awareness of the strong role media play in perpetuating oversexualized images of women and how those images affect her self-esteem. Alma may decide to begin a dialogue with other women to discuss ways to create significant change. Power Analysis Power analysis refers to the range of methods aimed at helping clients understand how unequal access to power and resources can influence personal realities. Together therapists and clients analyze how various forms of power in the dominant and subordinate group limit self-definition and well-being (Enns, 2004; Pusateri & Headley, 2015). Alma will become aware of the power difference between women and men as well as the power differences associated with sexual orientation and ethnic status in our society. Specific issues related to Alma's cultural perspective also are explored. The power analysis may focus on helping Alma identify alternate kinds of power she may exercise and learn how to challenge the gender-role messages that prohibit the exercise of that kind of power. Alma choreographs the changes she wants to make in her life. Interventions are aimed at helping Alma learn to appreciate herself as she is, regain her self-confidence based on the personality attributes she possesses, and set goals that will be fulfilling to her within the context of her cultural values. Bibliotherapy Nonfiction books, psychology and counseling textbooks, autobiographies, self-help books, educational videos, films, and even novels can all be used as bibliotherapy resources. Reading about feminist and multicultural perspectives on common issues in women's lives (incest, rape, domestic violence, and sexual harassment) may challenge a woman's tendency to blame herself for these problems (Remer, 2013). The therapist describes a number of books that address issues of relevance to Alma, and she selects one to read over the next few weeks. Providing Alma with reading material increases knowledge and decreases the power difference between Alma and her therapist. Reading can supplement what is learned in the therapy sessions, and Alma can enhance her therapy by exploring her reactions to what she is reading. For women with diverse social identities, books, biographies, and memoirs written by women with similar or related identities can provide concrete examples of empowerment and can facilitate growth. Assertiveness Training By teaching and promoting assertive behavior, women become aware of their interpersonal rights, transcend stereotypical gender roles, change negative beliefs, and implement changes in their daily life. Alma may learn how sexism has contributed to keeping females passive. For example, a woman behaving in an assertive way is often labeled “aggressive,” but similar behavior in a man may be viewed as “assertive.” Therapist and client consider what is culturally appropriate, and the client decides when and how to be assertive, balancing the potential costs and benefits of assertiveness within the ecological context relevant to the client. The therapist helps Alma evaluate and anticipate the consequences of behaving assertively, which might range from criticism to actually getting what she wants. Through learning and practicing assertive behaviors and communication, Alma may increase her own power, which will ameliorate her depression and anxiety. Alma learns that it is her right to ask for what she wants and needs in the workplace. Refraining and Relabeling Like bibliotherapy, therapist self-disclosure, and assertiveness training, reframing is not unique to feminist therapy. However, reframing is applied uniquely in feminist therapy. Reframing includes a shift from placing the problem internally and “blaming the victim” to a consideration of social factors in the environment that contribute to a client's problem. Rather than dwelling exclusively on intrapsychic factors, the focus is on examining societal or political dimensions. Alma may come to understand that her depression and anxiety are linked to social pressures to behave within hetero-normative gender-role expectations and to develop an appearance that matches these culturally and societally prescribed ideals. Relabeling is an intervention that changes the label or evaluation applied to some behavioral characteristic. Alma can change certain labels she has attached to herself, such as being inadequate or socially unwanted because she does not conform to ideals commonly associated with femininity. An example might be that Alma is encouraged to talk about herself as a strong and healthy woman rather than as being “selfish” or too “masculine.” LO9 Social Action Social action, or social activism, is an essential quality of feminist counseling (Enns et al., 2013; Evans et al., 2011; Evans & Miller, 2016). As clients become more grounded in their understanding of feminism, therapists may suggest that clients become involved in activities such as volunteering at a rape crisis center, lobbying lawmakers, or providing community education about gender issues. Participating in such activities can empower clients and help them see the link between their personal experiences and the sociopolitical context in which they live. Alma might decide to join and participate in organizations that are working to change societal stereotypes about female beauty expectations for women or social groups that affirm people who identify with a variety of sexual and affectional orientations. Participating in social action can increase self-esteem and a sense of personal power. LO10 Group Work Feminist therapists often encourage their clients to make the transition from individual therapy to a group format such as joining a support group or a political action group as soon as this is realistic (Herlihy & McCollum, 2011). Although these groups are as diverse as the women who comprise them, they share a common denominator emphasizing support for the experience of women. The literature reveals that women who join these groups eventually realize that they are not alone and gain validation for their experiences by participating in the group. These groups can provide women with a social network, decrease feelings of isolation, create an environment that encourages sharing of experiences, and help women realize that they are not alone in their experiences (Eriksen & Kress, 2005). Groups provide a place where women are valued and affirmed and where they can share and begin to critically explore the messages they have internalized about their self-worth and their place in society. The self-disclosures of both the members and the leader foster deeper self-exploration, a sense of universality, and increased levels of cohesion. Members learn to use power effectively by providing support to one another, practicing behavioral skills, considering social/political actions, and by taking interpersonal risks in a safe setting (Enns, 2004). Through their group participation, women learn that their individual experiences are frequently rooted in problems within the system. Participation in a group experience can inspire women to take up some form of social action. Indeed, a form of homework can be to carry out what women are learning in the group to bring about changes in their lives outside of the group. Alma and her therapist will likely discuss the possibility of Alma joining a women's support group, a gay-straight alliance, or another type of group as a part of the process of terminating individual therapy. Participating in a group can enhance Alma's sense of community. She will witness the journey of personal and collective transformation and growth as she adds to her group of supporters, encouragers, and teachers. Other women can provide her with nurturance and support, and Alma will have the chance to be significant to other women as they engage in their healing process. The Role of Men in Feminist Therapy Men can be feminist therapists, and feminist therapy can be practiced with male clients. It is an erroneous perception that feminist therapy is conducted only by women and for women, or that feminist therapy is anti-men because it is pro-women (Evans et al., 2011; Herlihy & McCollum, 2011). Although the original feminist therapists were all women, men have now joined their ranks. Male feminist therapists are willing to understand and “own” their male privilege, confront sexist behavior in themselves and others, redefine masculinity and femininity according to other than traditional values, work toward establishing egalitarian relationships, and actively engage in and support women's efforts to create a just society. The principles and practices of feminist psychotherapy are useful in working with male clients, individuals from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds, and people who are committed to addressing social justice issues in counseling practice (Enns, 2004; Worell & Remer, 2003). Social mandates about masculinity such as restrictive emotionality, overvaluing power and control, the sexualization of emotion, and obsession with achievement can be limiting to males (Englar-Carlson, 2014). Female counselors who work with male clients have an opportunity to create an accepting, authentic, and safe climate in which men can reflect on their needs, choices, past and present pain, and hopes for their future. By using relational-cultural theory, female counselors provide a forum for men to consider the contexts that helped shape them (Duffey & Haberstroh, 2014). Any presenting issue of male clients can be dealt with from a feminist perspective. For a comprehensive treatment of counseling men in specialized modalities and settings, intersections of identity, and specialized populations and concerns, see Englar-Carlson, Evans, and Duffey (2014).