Positive Mental Health through Meaningful Living

Paul T. P. Wong, Ph.D., C.Psych

Recently, mental health is very much in the news. In the United States, the Connecticut school shooting has triggered nationwide concern about mental health and its relationship to violence. In Canada, Bell Canada has started the mental health campaign, Let’s Talk Day. Most recently, CPA released a commissioned report, An Imperative for Change: Access to Psychological Services for Canada. The main challenge in Canada is that the current mental health system is not able to meet the mental health needs of our communities, especially those of minorities and marginalized people.

The problem has to do with limited accessibility to mental health services due to lack of expert resources and funding. For example, many people in need of psychological help cannot afford the fees. Also, gaining access to psychiatric services is not always easy, because of long waitlists. Another compounding problem is the stigma attached to mental illness, which prevents people from seeking help.

In view of the above challenges, we need new initiatives from psychologists to find creative ways to meet community mental health needs. In this report, I want to share with my colleagues how we can promote positive community mental health through Meetup groups that focus on meaningful living. The Meaningful Living Group grassroots movement is partly inspired by the concept of empowerment and synergy (Wong, 2013).

Our Meaningful Living Group Meetup consists of two components. The first half hour is didactic. Typically, I give a lecture on the adaptive aspects of meaning based on scientific research (e.g., Wong, 2012) and wisdom from Western and Eastern traditions. Such lectures are designed to equip participants with the principles and skills of living a purposeful and value-driven life.

The second part is made up of an hour of small group discussions. In this hour, group members discuss how to apply the lessons to their own lives and also help each other with their own experiences and wisdom. This part makes full use of the power of empowerment and synergy. In a safe and supportive environment, people feel free to talk about their own mental health problems, thus reducing the stigma of mental illness.

The group format also provides an opportunity for group members to learn new patterns of relating to one another and correct their own dysfunctional and habitual patterns of relating. The group facilitator serves the function of a resource person and intervenes, whenever appropriate, to shift dysfunctional interactions to functional ones.

One unexpected outcome is that individuals with serious mental health problems often seek additional help after the group meeting. In such cases, as a registered clinical psychologist, I either provide the necessary assessment and therapy or refer them to more appropriate mental health professionals.
We are in the middle of our third cycle of our Meaningful Living Lessons, each cycle consisting of 14 lessons in total. My powerpoint presentations can be found at www.inpm.org and video recordings of my lectures can be found on our YouTube Channel: http://www.youtube.com/user/DrMeaningfulLiving. These materials serve as resources for those who are not able to physically attend our meetings.

We now have a membership of 250, and it continues to grow steadily. Many people living in other cities and countries have also expressed an interest in joining our Meetup group. Clearly our focus on meaningful living is meeting a community need. We are now seeking funding to develop a virtual version of our Meetup and workbooks for different age groups and populations. Potentially, Meaningful Living Groups can become an effective and low-cost community mental health movement.

Here is a news video report on our last cycle of the Meetup: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PGFTI-Ftyuo. Below is a photo of the Meetup Group this past Victoria Day weekend. Just witness the diversity in terms of ethnicity and age. I might add that they represent different faith traditions, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity.

Those who are interested in our Meetup or trainings, please contact Dr. Paul Wong (drpaulwong@gmail.com). We hope that CPA, community mental health agencies, and other psychologists will partner with us in promoting positive mental health through meaningful living. I look forward to hearing from anyone who wants to be part of this growing, synergistic community.

Reference
