

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Inclusion of Relationship and Religion/Spirituality Issues in Mental Health Counseling during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Survey of Canadian Practitioners

Bonnie K. Lee, Chance Bell and Samuel Ofori-dei

Introduction: The COVID-19 pandemic erupted as an unprecedented global crisis, ridden with risks and uncertainties. Families were profoundly affected in many domains, not only individually in the physical and financial spheres (Andrade et al., 2022), but also in the intricate fabric of their couple and family relationships (REL) (Leutke et al., 2020; Estlein et al., 2022), and in the spiritual realm (Connolly & Timmins, 2022). While some couples and families became stronger in the crisis (Evans et al., 2020; Tam et al., 2021), with many others, underlying fault-lines in family communication and social disadvantage were exposed under external stressors, exacerbating pre-existing mental health and relationship vulnerabilities (Lebow, 2020; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021; Watson et al., 2020). Religion and spirituality, (R/S) offering solace, meaning, hope and connection, gained prominence at this time of existential crisis, moral distress, end-of-life decisions, grief and isolation (Zhang et al., 2021; Kubitza et al., 2023). The pandemic has underscored the importance of addressing both relational dynamics and spirituality in mental health interventions (Fraenkel & Cho, 2020; Walsh, 2020). The surge in demand for counseling services during the pandemic especially in relation to REL and R/S was inadequately met by available services (Machluf et al., 2022; Papadopoulos et al., 2021; Vahratian et al., 2021). Despite these urgent needs, research on mental health prioritized targeting individual foci of interventions, while sidelining the pivotal roles of family relationships and spirituality in coping and resilience (Holmes et al., 2020).

Method: The aim of this study was to determine the degree of practitioners' engagement with REL and R/S issues in their counseling intake and assessment at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic (April – July 2021). Mental health practitioners (N=151) in two provinces, Alberta and Ontario, were recruited electronically via email sent to professional associations of psychologists, social workers, counselors and couple and family therapists. The cross-sectional surveys required 5-10 minutes to complete. We performed a Latent Profile Analysis with the aim to identify groupings of individuals clustered around three areas: (1) appraisal of the contribution of REL and R/S in relation to their clients' mental health and addiction problems during COVID-19; (2) practitioners' inclusion and confidence in assessing and counseling these areas and (3) their desire to enhance their skills in REL and R/S.

Findings and Analysis: Approximately 70% of practitioners inquired about REL issues and 40% inquired about R/S issues. Analysis revealed three profiles of practitioners' level of engagement with REL and R/S issues. The high engagers were the most experienced and highly educated with more representation in Christian and spiritual orientations, training in couple and family therapy and more often worked with couples and families. Practitioners were least confident working with couple issues compared to family and parent-child issues. Highest predictors of practitioners' engagement in these domains were their appraisal of the contributions of REL and R/S to clients' mental health and their confidence in working with these areas. Majority of practitioners in both provinces indicated they would like or strongly like to enhance their skills in working with REL (64%) and R/S (56%).

Conclusion: Traditional counseling and psychology programs have primarily centred on individuals and significantly fewer had courses on working with REL and R/S. The pandemic has magnified the importance REL and R/S as focal points for mental health interventions. The majority of practitioners expressed a desire for more training in with REL and R/S. The literature pointed to the prominence of REL and R/S in client issues that intertwined with mental health concerns. Education and professional development programs to enhance practitioners' conceptualization, assessment and engagement with both REL and R/S

in mental health practice is paramount to effectively meet the needs of clients in future global crises like the COVID-19 pandemic.