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E- Leader Vienna

Professional Guilt

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Ways of feeling Guilty

“Did you ever feel that you failed to give a patient proper care?

Or that you hadn't handled a staff problem effectively?

The complexities of modern nursing make it especially easy for such feelings to develop.”

Robert W. Hyde and Norma E. Goggon (1958)

Guilt

It is normal throughout life's professional journey to be left with little harbingers of guilt.

We all try to do our best every day, but become aware in retrospect that our best may not be good enough when we realise that something has been left undone or forgotten, or that we could not give a certain matter the consideration that it required.

This paper will explore professional guilt, and how guilt feelings of guilt can be channelled into a force for good.

Guilt Trap

It's amazing how quickly guilt can kick in for the smallest, most meaningless things in our lives.

Guilt is an emotional warning sign that most people learn through their normal childhood social development.

Its purpose is to let us know when we've done something wrong, to help us develop a better sense of our behaviour and how it affects ourselves and others.”

Grohol 2007

The Source of Guilt

May be very small, such as not remembering to do something until you are off duty.

On the other hand, it might be that despite working hard all shift/day, you go home feeling you have not done the best you would have liked to have done:

For example, when time driven, we might not have given a particular person the extra time that he or she really needed.

Example

As a senior student midwife I had spent several days with a young 15 year old mother who was desperate to keep her baby despite knowing that Social Services were coming to take her baby away.

After the baby had gone, the mother berated me for not telling her that Social Services were on their way.

She was angry that I had not given her time to prepare for the visit and to enjoy the first and last few minutes that she and the baby could be together.

Existential psychology

Existential psychology tends to consider guilt under five categories. Corso (2016) defines them as follows:

- Guilt for something you did.
- Guilt for something you did not do, but want to.
- Guilt for something you think you did.
- Guilt that you did not do enough to help someone.
- Guilt that you're doing better than someone else.

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Heidegger's philosophy tells that if we listen to the voice of our conscience warning us that we are falling short, that we have slipped into inauthentic living again, we can wake up and return to ourselves.

Tillich (2000) also described how existential psychotherapy can be seen as a reliable method of confronting our concerns to bring about a positive outcome.

Cognitive Dissonance

Crigger and Meek (2007) suggest cognitive dissonance creates tension when a person has to handle what can be done with what they consider should be done.

Festinger (1957) described it as a person trying to create harmony in their thinking. So are we trying to rationalise our thoughts when they become tangled as a result of a difficult situation which we could not resolve?

Festinger (1957), nurses must be prepared to deal with many conflicts of competing beliefs, which could lead to a high level of dissonance, in order to avoid harm.

Most stress that Nurses should find a way to diminish or reduce this mismatch.

Self Evaluation

The concept of self is one recognised by the Western World, not by all communities. Are we in the West more likely to feel this type of guilt?

If we look at self-esteem we know theoretically that it refers to the extent to which it parallels our values. Therefore, we know our own acceptable standards and can see if we fall short.

Emile Coué, back in the 1920, described a concept similar to the protective system; he called it self-affirmation.

Sherman and Hartson (2011) “Self-affirmation may be considered as one process that operates as part of a psychological immune system that is engaged when individuals experience self-threats” . This is an in-built process which could be taught through an understanding of mindfulness. Should we teach mindfulness?

Research is very limited

Hyde and Coggan (1958), who interviewed nurses to elicit their feelings and how they related to guilt. They discovered that nurses do often overtly express guilt as it is not seen to be professional to acknowledge this feeling.

These comments were supported by a paper written in 1975 by Jones, who was exploring why degree nurses stayed or dropped out of their courses. One of the reasons cited was guilt. Are we surprised and would it not be similar today?

Kasman et al. (2003). They undertook qualitative research which looked at everyday emotions and experiences which trigger off certain feelings. “Guilt, however, implies an understanding of where they judge failure sits on its relevant axis of right or wrong, good or bad, and of the values and beliefs that placed it there.”

Alum Jones (2009) explored how palliative care staff managed their life when working in these settings. Staff repeatedly said they had feelings of guilt in relation to the people they are caring for. Their work has emotional complexities in relation to the many different types of patients they deal with.

Bond (2009) who examined the need for shame and guilt to be identified during education so that problems could be addressed and resolved.

Kaya et al (2012) recommended many changes in education in order for this aspect to be explored before students were confronted by situations.

Reflective Practice

Kolb (1975) said that reflection is central to the process of turning experience into learning.

Boyd and Fales (1983) suggested that it was more complex.

“The process of reflection is the core difference, whether a person repeats the same experience several times between becoming proficient in one behaviour, or learns from experience in such a way that he or she is cognitively or effectively changed”

Rees (2007) found that those who were responsible for mentoring reflection often found it too difficult, and were unable to be supportive.

Finlay (2008) says “the problem with reflective practice is that it is hard to do and equally hard to teach”.

Mindfulness

Origin is in ancient Greek, in many religions especially Buddhism and more recently in Gestalt and humanistic psychologies.

The present practice is said to be based on Jon Kabat-Zinn's (1990) stress reduction programme at the University of Massachusetts Medical Centre, which was developed to help people with chronic physical pain and disease.

Mindfulness is said to concentrate on the grey matter in the brain, which covers the memory processes and emotion regulation, thus becoming a called-on process.

This helps the person to be equipped to tackle different situations positively.

*Thank you for
listening.*

Any Questions