Finding Joy in Social Work (Private Practice, Too!)

I suppose the comments could be overlooked if made by a colleague of lesser stature, but any New York City social worker (and many elsewhere) recognize Susan Matorin as one of the vital practitioners of this generation. It is therefore both surprising and disappointing that her recent letter, “Finding Joy in Social Work” (Matorin, 2015), took a gratuitous swipe at “many social workers [who] defect to a psychotherapy identity to avoid these challenges.” This polarized and elitist view of our profession is an outdated lament and fails to recognize social work’s leadership in an endeavor that has benefited the lives of hundreds of thousands of men, women, and youths. Matorin and I cut our clinical teeth on the work of Helen Harris Perlman (1957) and Florence Hollis (1964), who would have been the first in line for cognitive therapy (Beck, 1976), eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (Shapiro, 1995), and family systems training. To vilify psychotherapy or those who provide it as “defectors” is to repudiate the core concepts of Towle’s (1965) Common Human Needs, a first primer for many senior clinicians.

Have I forsaken my social work roots for Matorin’s “psychotherapy identity” when I help a young man with Asperger’s syndrome by collaborating with his job counselor in travel training him and in modifying his anger outbursts in my private practice? What about finding a safe, no-cost exercise program for a severely obese inner-city 10-year-old boy while providing intensive behavior therapy to correct his energy imbalance in my hospital office?

And while we’re at it, I have “psychotherapy” colleagues who work until 10 p.m., take emergency phone calls at 2 a.m., and feel that every session must be productive and justify the fee paid. Could these and other factors result in greater involvement or even competence?

The other issue in Matorin’s letter is her use of the word “heroic” (twice). At a time when American men and women are risking death and crippling disability to safeguard our freedom, describing social work and all professionals who serve the disadvantaged as “heroic” seems a bit inflated and inappropriate. Just ask our colleagues at Walter Reed or in the Veterans Affairs system whether they feel like heroes.

Barry M. Panzer, in private practice
Brookdale University Hospital, Brooklyn, New York

REFERENCES

LETTERS

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