

Increasing Self-Awareness and Cultural Competence in Genetic Counseling through Reflective Journaling

Background

Engaging in active efforts to increase self-awareness is a fundamental aspect of increasing cultural competence. Personal written journals can promote self-analysis, reflection and positive action. Journaling facilitates experiential learning for trainees, clients, and practicing genetic counseling professionals by using one's own experiences as the context for learning. While journaling is often limited to a free-writing activity to promote introspection, it can also promote the process of learning and change, by structuring the journal instructions on the work you want students to accomplish. Journal keepers may begin by recording concrete examples and feelings, followed by reflection, and culminating in integrating observations and reflections into a plan for making decisions and solving problems. Required reflection encourages students to delve into deeper levels of learning that often result in personal growth. Assessment for the journaling activity can be informal and private, or formal and linked to achievement of clinical competencies. Ask students for feedback on journaling assignment instructions to be sure they will result in the intended focus.

Definitions

“**Reflection** entails *looking forward* to goals we might attain, as well as *casting backward* to see where we have been. When we reflect, we *project* and *review*, often putting the projections and the reviews in *dialogue* with each other, working dialectically to *discover* what we know, what we have learned, and what we might understand” (Yancey, 1998). Reflection entails writing, which requires attention and intention. Reflective writing is a means to organize our thoughts and assess what we know and where we can go. When we ask students to reflect, we are asking them to *think about their learning as it happens*, to imagine, evaluate and revise their goals and progress, and to contextualize their learning within the class, the clinical rotation, or their personal and professional development (Malek and Micciche, 2009). The real value of any learning experience comes *after* the experience, when the student is able to identify his/her learning and apply it to a new situation. *Transfer of learning* is essential for maturation of counseling skills and building professional knowledge over time.

Comprehensive Reflective Journaling for Genetic Counseling Students and Practitioners

The developmental quality of journaling helps genetic counselors transfer knowledge drawn from past experiences, which increases their clinical acumen and cultural competence. The following journaling activity suggests a template that may be useful to adult learners with little or no prior exposure to genetic counseling, trainees with some counseling experience, and practicing counselors with considerable clinical experience. The student or counselor may journal continuously over time or at particular benchmarks in training or practice, depending on the intended goal of the journaling activity.

Choose one or more topics from the following lists. Write a journal entry that describes how your own feelings/attitudes/beliefs/reactions may influence a genetic counseling session that deals with the selected topic(s). Refer to clinical experiences whenever possible. Note how you felt during the session(s), what counseling strategies you used, and how effective they were. Consider what you could have done differently in the session(s) and note the counseling strategies you would use in the future. Also consider whether there were other issues that were not addressed, and why.

Emotions: Reflect on how you and others deal with these feelings. Use personal and clinical experiences to demonstrate coping strategies.

Conditions: Reflect on personal or clinical experiences with these conditions. How do you react when you learn an individual has one of these conditions? When applicable, how have these conditions influenced your life?

Genetic Counseling Issues: Reflect on personal or clinical experiences with these conditions and issues. Consider what would you do if faced with making a decision involving these issues? What might your reaction be when seeing a client whose decision is not the same as yours?

Cultural and Communication Factors: These topics contribute to the uniqueness of each individual. Reflect on your definition of one or more topics, and note your attitudes and beliefs about them. How do other people define these factors? Reflect on personal and clinical experiences where cultural and communication factors influenced the dynamics.

Emotions	Conditions
Anger Grief/loss Guilt/shame Ambivalence/uncertainty Embarrassment Burnout/stress Resentment Despair/fear Anxiety/apprehension Confrontation Denial Crying Humor	Substance abuse Mood disorders (bipolar disorder, depression) Cancer Obesity Infertility Mental retardation Alcohol/recreational drug/tobacco use in pregnancy Short-limbed dwarfism Maternal PKU Learning disabilities Multiple anomalies Unknown diagnosis Miscarriage/stillbirth Life-limiting conditions

Cultural and Communication Factors	Genetic Counseling Issues
Cultural identity Marriage Spirituality/religion Deaf culture Belief in a higher power Definition of family Consanguinity Sexual orientation Divorce Gender roles Power issues Assimilation Acculturation Health care beliefs/practices Adoption Child/spouse abuse Privacy Limited English proficiency Education Access to services Family communication	Prenatal screening/testing Testing minors Crisis Termination Giving advice Discrimination Confrontation In vitro fertilization Preimplantation genetic diagnosis Sex selection Decision making Self-disclosure Preselection Genetic risk Communication style Directiveness/nondirectiveness Cultural competence Reporting test results Breaking bad news Transference Countertransference

More Ideas for Reflective Journaling Activities in Genetic Counseling

- Adapt this activity as a *counseling intervention* for clients, to reinforce genetic counseling and promote coping, adaptation, decision making, and/or communication.
 - In the case of a husband and wife seen for genetic counseling after losing an infant with Trisomy 18, the counselor notes that the couple has considerable difficulty talking about future reproductive options. The husband wants to know everything about prenatal testing and the wife becomes very quiet and teary. The counselor could give this husband and wife a reflective journaling “homework” assignment, to be done before their next genetic counseling appointment. The couple would be assigned to write about what feelings emerge when they think about having another baby, and how these feelings relate to the complexity of emotions they felt since the baby was diagnosed. At a follow up genetic counseling session, the counselor could ask the couple to share their respective feelings about having another baby, and facilitate a discussion of the normality of

convergent and divergent emotions, and the impact of previous emotional palettes. This activity may help the couple appreciate the emotional burden involved in reproductive planning, demonstrate greater tolerance and empathy for each other, and facilitate setting a future planning timeline that is realistic for both husband and wife.

- Incorporate reflective writing as a component of student (or counselor) *group activities*. Reflection on group activities helps individuals consider development of professional roles, issues of power, and learning gained from disciplinary and interdisciplinary interactions.
 - Bean (2001) suggests enhancing group interaction by *incorporating Rogerian empathic listening* into reflective writing assignments. By accurately summarizing another person’s argument or viewpoint in a debate or reflective paper, the student practices “walking in someone else’s shoes” and gains a deeper appreciation of multi-focal worldviews (Bean, 1986).
 - Ask students assigned to an inpatient genetics “consults” rotation (with a genetic counselor, geneticist, genetics nurse, etc) to reflect on *unique and overlapping professional roles*. The students could also reflect on *overall group dynamics* such as teamwork and/or communication, and the perceived impact of these factors on each professional and each family member. How are these dynamics linked to past interactions and experiences?
 - Incorporate reflective writing into *group activities that hone the counseling skills* of students and practicing professionals, such as peer supervision groups. A reflective journaling assignment on a group meeting to discuss “working with difficult clients” encourages forethought on individual emotional reactions to the topic, and is likely to stimulate discussion and facilitate problem-solving during the session.

- Use *lab notebook type journaling*
 - This journaling format can help students and counselors process components of genetic counseling practice that tend to provoke emotions in both providers and clients, such as communicating test results or breaking unexpected news.

What Happened?	What Was I Thinking?

- Other types of *multi-column journaling*

- The MORAL Model for Ethical Decision Making (Veatch, et al. 2003, p 231-233) prompts an individual to follow a trajectory of decision making steps before addressing an ethical dilemma. The steps include identifying the problem, outlining available options, recognizing values and practical considerations, taking a position and acting on it, and reflecting on the decision made.
- Use a column-style grid as a tool to identify the values that need to be considered in making a decision as well as the practical considerations that should be discussed before proceeding.

Options	Values	Practical Considerations

- The Rational Decision Making Model: (Veatch, et al. 2003, p 136-142) helps an individual think through a situation by evaluating all possible alternatives/options before making a decision. The steps include describing the situation or decision to be made, listing all possible options, considering the factors relevant to each option, evaluating how each option satisfies the relevant factors, and choosing the best option.

Option A	Option B	Relevant Factors

- Encourage artistically-inclined students to *use graphics and visual images* to enhance or represent the words and emotions in their journal.
 - This journaling technique encourages students to increase self awareness and exploration by visually expressing feelings, thoughts and experiences that may otherwise be difficult to convey using words alone. The finished product allows the individual to ‘see how they feel.’
- Develop an *e-portfolio-based reflective journaling* activity to help students assess their learning over an extended period of time. Using an e-portfolio as a template for reflection allows the student more freedom of expression by including written, visual and/or audio components.
 - An e-portfolio is an online tool created using Google documents that allows a student to compile a collection of personal writing using various media, including: videos, PowerPoint presentations, PDF’s, spreadsheets, pictures, and written documents. A Gmail account is required to create and access Google e-portfolios. Gmail users may use the following link to view a sample e-portfolio:

■ [Sample e-portfolio](#)

- Develop *writing prompts* to accompany clinical rotations
 - What was the most important point I learned?
 - What was the muddiest point?
 - What did I want to say but didn’t because I was afraid of offending the client, my classmate, my supervisor, etc.
 - How did I feel during the session/rotation?
 - What have you learned about yourself as a genetic counselor in training?
 - How would you describe your current level of confidence in your helping skills?
 - What have you learned about yourself as a genetic counselor?
 - What do you think is the most important skill for a genetic counselor?
 - What else do you feel you need to learn?

- What are you still confused about?
 - How have your clinical experiences affected your communication style?
 - What makes genetic counseling so difficult?
 - What differences do you see between genetic counseling and listening to a friend?
 - What could make you feel ‘burned out’ as a counselor?
 - What is one thing you expected to learn, but didn’t? One thing you did not expect to learn, but did?
 - How have your ideas changed about genetic counseling?
 - How helpful is genetic counseling? Why?
- Bean, 2001 (pp. 104-116) lists numerous ideas for incorporating exploratory writing to deepen students’ responses to courses, clinical rotations, research, and other professional activities. Many of these activities are suitable for adaptation to genetic counseling.

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