



Mutual Storytelling Bridges Gaps in Mental Health Care for Older Adults

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The World Health Organization estimates that by 2030, the number of people aged 60 years or older will rise to 1.4 billion, and a significant portion of this population will experience mental health disorders. Despite the prevalence of depression, anxiety, and substance use disorders among older adults, many do not receive the treatment they need. Meeting older adults' mental health needs requires the same urgency and attention as physical health.

One of the key challenges in providing mental health care to older adults is the stigma associated with seeking treatment, which can dissuade individuals from accessing mental health services. As a result, there is a critical need for enhanced professional training and interventions that seek to reduce stigmatization and improve the therapeutic relationship and responsiveness of counselors to vulnerable populations.

Recent research from the Department of Counselor Education explores using innovative counseling techniques, such as mutual storytelling (MST) to address the unique needs of older adults by enhancing the adaptability of counselors. Counselor Education and Supervision doctoral students, Javier E. Ponce, Sheria Kwok, and Rotem Moshe, along with Kelly Emelianchik-Key, Ph.D., associate professor of Counselor Education published their conceptual analysis of this approach with older adults in the *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health*.

Using MST and adapting it to incorporate counselor self-reflection and broaching components offers a promising approach for bridging the gap between counselors and older adults. Originally used with children and adolescents, MST encourages clients to craft fictional stories that reflect their experiences and emotions. Counselors then analyze these stories to identify adaptive cognitions and emotions. In particular, MST can help older adults by reducing resistance or the stigma of counseling and build rapport between the counselor and client.

A crucial component of a successful MST intervention is responsiveness, which refers to a counselor's lifelong process of engaging in self-awareness, self-reflection, and self-evaluation to reflect on the changing needs of their clients. By expanding this proficiency, counselors can establish empathetic and nonhierarchical relationships with older adults. Broaching, the third component of MST, refers to a counselor's ability to effectively address clients' individual differences within the context of their presenting concerns. By integrating broaching and responsiveness with MST, counselors can better understand and address the unique needs of older adults.

"Creative interventions like MST can empower individuals to share their stories and experiences in a meaningful way, while fostering informed and empathetic counseling relationships," said Dr. Emelianchik-Key. "Counseling that emphasizes flexibility and understanding can help reduce stigma, improve treatment retention, and ultimately enhance the mental health and well-being of older adults."

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The team's work offers a conceptual pathway for improving emotional well-being for older adults and highlights the importance of innovative approaches in mental health care for older adults. As the population ages, it is imperative that mental health professionals are equipped with the tools and techniques necessary to meet the evolving needs of their client populations. MST represents a promising step forward in bridging the gap between counselors and older adults, ensuring that mental health care is both accessible and effective.