

Case Study Paper: Norah

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The following scenario is an attempt to analyze Norah, a student at the university, and her current situation, using various counseling theories: Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy, Psychoanalytic Therapy, Person-Centered Therapy, Gestalt Therapy, and Behavioral Therapy. Various aspects of the theories will be incorporated to allow a counselor to best help Norah in her current state. Most of the following analysis uses Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy to help Norah, but all theories will be incorporated at the conclusion of this paper.

a) Explain Rationale for Choosing Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy

I chose Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy (REBT) because the case study provides evidence that Norah might be psychologically disturbed due to the beliefs she holds about herself and her relationship with her son. These beliefs have caused her to consider dropping out of the university, which may or may not be the most rational decision at this point in her life.

It is my opinion that Norah might benefit from cognitive restructuring so that she might be able to recognize her self-defeating thoughts and behaviors and began to have new, more rational feelings. In the case study, Norah mentions the way she *feels* at multiple times. Corey (2009) says that Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy's basic hypothesis is "that our emotions stem mainly from our beliefs, evaluations, interpretations, and reactions to life situations" (p.276). In this case, Norah's feelings are manifestations of her husband's recent death and her decision to return to college.

Finally, I feel Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy might benefit Norah because of the last statement she makes in the case study—"She says she feels very torn and that she would like your help in figuring out what to do". In REBT, the counselor is seen as a teacher and the client, the learner. In asking for help, Norah is essentially asking the counselor to teach her how to

manage her emotions and help her come up with a plan of action. Therefore, it seems to me that Norah would be accepting of the counseling relationship provided through REBT.

It may be problematic, however, that Norah has placed a large focus on her *feelings*, since REBT does not place a large emphasis on the sharing of clients' feelings. However, these feelings that Norah has are leading her to irrational consequences and behaviors that can be further analyzed through REBT. Allowing clients to talk about their feelings is important, however, Ellis, as cited in Corey (2009), says that clients need not to *feel better*, rather they should *get better* by changing their thoughts and actions.

b) Major Issues for Norah from the Perspective of Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy

According to Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy, Norah, in her current situation, is “disturbed”, “crooked”, “irrational”, or emotionally disturbed in her thinking. However, REBT accepts that humans are fallible, and seeks to teach individuals that they may make mistakes, but are capable of learning from them and being comfortable in their own skin. In Norah's case, some of the key problems in thinking confronting her are self-destruction, potential repetition of mistakes, avoidance of growth potential, “musterbation”, and mainly, self-blame. After Norah's husband passed away, her problems did not stem from his new absence, rather from the views she took of the situation. In the same sense, upon returning to college, her problems did not come from her return, rather from the view she took of her return to college. Consequently, many of her views began to result in self-destruction.

Also, as a counselor, I would be curious to find out if Norah possessed the potential to commit similar mistakes. Since she dropped out of college as a young woman to get married, I would be interested to find out if there were any recurring thoughts or feelings upon her return

that made her prone to dropping out of college again. This might also relate to her avoidance of her self-actualizing growth potential. Norah mentions that she feels that college may help her advance her degree and get a better job, but by considering dropping out, she might be trying to avoid her potential to succeed.

Norah also suffers from what Ellis, as cited in Corey (2009) calls “musterbation”. Certain “musts” lead us to self-defeat, and one of these is the view that we “must” do well and win the approval of others. In this case, Norah feels she should drop out of school so she can “be more available to” her son, thus showing she feels the need to please him. This leads to one of Norah’s main problems, self-blame. Norah is blaming herself for neglecting her son, forgoing her household duties as a mother, and for returning to school instead of staying home with her son. This self-blame is the major issue surrounding Norah’s situation and can be best attended to using Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy.

c) Primary Goals in Counseling Norah

As Norah’s counselor, I would normally begin the session by setting goals of therapy with Norah. However, for the sake of this case study, I will identify some goals that I feel are appropriate for Norah’s therapy. After identifying the major issues in Norah’s thinking, I would hope that Norah would be able to ultimately minimize her emotional disturbances and self-defeating behaviors. If this happens, Norah would recognize the best decision that benefits her emotionally, cognitively, and psychologically.

I would also hope that Norah would become accepting of herself and accepting of her son (the “other” according to Corey, 2009). If she is able to accept herself, become aware of her mistakes, and accept her ability to make decisions, she might be more likely to be understanding of and accepting of her son. While we do not fully know the thoughts or feelings of Norah’s son,

if, in reality, he does feel resentful of his mother, by the end of therapy, Norah might be able to better understand his thoughts and be accepting of them as normal human behavior.

Finally, as Norah's counselor, I would hope that by the conclusion of counseling, Norah might be better equipped to avoid future irrational beliefs. Through self-acceptance and a decrease in certain behaviors, I would hope that Norah is more understanding of herself and the way she tends to react to certain situations. This might help her unconsciously avoid irrational beliefs in the future, and when irrational beliefs tend to appear, she may already know how to cope.

d) Description of Approach with Norah as the Counselor

When using Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy to counsel Norah, I would use a combination of cognitive, emotive, and behavioral techniques. Together, these techniques might help Norah understand her irrational thinking and practice more effective behaviors.

Cognitive Methods

As part of Norah's therapy, I would begin by disputing her irrational beliefs that she must drop out of the university to be more available to her son. I would have her consider what would happen if she did not drop out or if she did not appease her son by making this decision. Hopefully, this would help her think of alternative options and understand her son's point of view.

Next, I would encourage Norah to analyze the language she uses. In the case study, Norah uses very strong language such as "feeling resentful", "exhausted", and "guilty". As Ellis, as cited in Corey (2009), mentions, this kind of language "reflects helplessness" (p.283). By using language such as "it would be unfortunate" or "I have conflicting ideas about how to

handle this situation”, Norah might approach the situation with a more optimistic outlook and behave differently.

Finally, as a cognitive method, I would teach Norah about Ellis’s (Corey, 2009) A-B-C model, and encourage her to use it in life outside of counseling. This form of psychoeducation would assist Norah in thinking more rationally, and also equip her with the knowledge to handle future similar situations. I would encourage Norah to use this model every time she has irrational beliefs about a situation so to avoid negative behavioral consequences.

Emotive Methods

In REBT, Ellis, as cited in Corey (2009), offers the suggestion that humor might assist a client in seeing the absurdity in certain ideas and put life into perspective. However, in Norah’s situation, humor might not be appropriate early in therapy, especially with a subject such as the death of a loved one. However, Norah might benefit better from role playing and shame-attacking exercises. Allowing Norah to walk through a discussion she might have with her son or academic advisor might help her work through her thoughts, behaviors, and feelings. Similarly, shame-attacking exercises allow a Norah to act out certain situations with her son and find out what his true feelings are in regards to her going back to school. Depending on the outcome of his reaction, she might have a better idea of whether or not to drop out of college.

Behavioral Methods

Finally, as Norah’s counselor, I would engage Norah in the idea of self-management and modeling. Self-management principles may assist Norah in managing her thoughts and the behaviors that result from them. Similarly, modeling the preferred behaviors that I would like Norah to learn, may help Norah understand how to use REBT and adjust her behaviors on a regular basis to reflect my behaviors in therapy.

e) Dialogue Between Norah and Counselor

Norah: Norah is a 43-year-old returning student to the university. She comes to you, the counselor because she is feeling a lot of stress from juggling her roles as a student, worker, and mother. Widowed last year and the mother of a 15-year-old son, Norah explains that she is holding down a full-time job as a secretary in a local business and attending classes on a part-time basis. She indicates that she dropped out of college after her sophomore year in order to get married and that this is her first semester back at school. She also says that up until her husband's death, she hadn't held a job since her son was born. Norah says she feels exhausted most of the time and feels guilty about not spending more time with her son. She feels he is resentful of having to help around the house—prepare meals, etc. She is concerned that, having lost one parent, he may feel like he is losing the other one, too. Norah says she is really enjoying classes and that she believes when she finishes her degree, she will be able to advance to a job that will pay more and that will be more interesting. She's wondering, though, if perhaps she should drop out of the university until after her son finishes high school so that she can be more available to him. She says she feels very torn and that she would like your help in figuring out what to do.

Counselor: Norah, I sense that you have enjoyed your return to college and are excited about the idea of getting a job that pays more and is more interesting to you. However, I hear you talking more about the guilt you feel for going back to school and that you should drop out of school to be more available to your son.

Norah: I am excited about getting a better job and going back to school and have been wanting to do this for years, but I feel like I am not being a good mother and that I need to be home when my son is home so that I can be there for him.

Counselor: On one hand, going back to school is something you've been hoping to do for a long time, and you enjoy it, but you feel that you *must* be home all the time for your son instead of doing something beneficial for yourself at times.

Norah: I guess I don't *need* to be home *all* of the time for him, but I feel guilty about being away more than I used to be and I'm not sure exactly how my son feels about me being back at school. I know he's been through so much recently and I don't want to stress him with my problems too.

Counselor: Your son has been through some struggles recently, and so have you. Would it be catastrophic for him to find out that you are struggling too?

Norah: Well, I don't think it would be catastrophic. It might be hard for him to hear, but I know he cares about me and wants me to be happy. I'm sure we could have a discussion about it.

Maybe even, in a perfect world, if he heard that I am struggling with our new lifestyle, he might feel like we are struggling to adjust together and that we can rely on on each other. That might be good for us.

f) Successful Outcome for Norah

Ideally, at the conclusion of therapy, Norah will have made a decision regarding whether or not to drop out of college, and she will be equipped with the knowledge and understanding to navigate future situations. I would know that Norah has successfully navigated through therapy by hearing a sense of optimism and realism when analyzing situations. I would also hear Norah using more rational language and/or correcting herself when she does use language that is irrational. Hopefully, at the end of therapy, Norah will understand that it is not the end of the world if she drops out of school or if she chooses to stay in school. But, with whatever decision she makes, she will need to practice her new skills and accept both her fallibility and ability to make wise decisions.

g) Limitations of Using REBT

While REBT can be very useful in working with clients, it also has its limitations. First, REBT does not place a heavy emphasis on the relevance of clients' feelings. In Norah's case, she talks about the way she feels on a few occasions. This is helpful in analyzing her beliefs, but it does not allow the counselor to validate her feelings and discuss their implications. Another complication with using REBT might be the emphasis placed on the idea that clients are naturally disturbed. While this might help clients put their fallibility into perspective, it might cause some clients to feel less confident that they can strive for greatness. With this in mind, REBT also does not take into account environmental factors. REBT assumes that individuals are disturbed because of their own choices and behaviors, not because of certain instances in the world around them. It does not consider greatly the affect that the environment has on the way individuals live. For instance, the death of Norah's husband might have altered her life so drastically that she feels so much pressure from the environment to make the best life for her son. Instead, REBT assumes that Norah has put this pressure on herself and is the only person that can change it.

h) Other Helpful Theories

Psychoanalytic Theory

In Norah's case, psychoanalytic theory may have been helpful in understanding Norah's anxiety over neglecting her son. I feel that Norah might suffer from both reality anxiety and neurotic anxiety. Psychoanalysis and free association might help Norah express this anxiety more fully and lead the therapist to proceed. For instance, in Norah's resistance to continue school, a more detailed analysis might be helpful in exploring Norah's unconscious. This, along with an analysis of the past, might be helpful in understanding her resistance and anxiety. She

might have feelings that have been repressed and are resurfacing through her traumatic transition.

On the other hand, psychoanalytic theory does not readily help clients adjust behaviors. It does not place a heavy emphasis on action and clients, such as Norah, might get stuck in the analysis of life that they do not make a decision or completely solve their problem. On the same note, if I had used psychoanalytic theory, Norah might have understood where her thoughts and feelings came from, but she may not be equipped to change her behaviors. Finally, psychoanalytic is very objective, rather than subjective. It does not allow the client to take ownership of her actions and work to make change. Rather, it attributes life's problems to the environment.

Person-Centered Therapy

Person-centered therapy can be very useful in working with clients like Norah. Similar to REBT, it places the focus on the individual. Unlike REBT, it allows the client to be the expert in the situation rather than the therapist. In this sense, Norah might have been able to guide the discussion more rather than allowing the counselor to analyze certain aspects of her problem and the language that she uses. Person-centered therapy is also beneficial in that it maintains that the core of the individual is positive, rather than disturbed. This might help Norah understand that she is generally good, but that certain situations have brought incongruency to her life. This type of therapy also allows the counselor to take into account the client's feelings. The counselor is able to show empathy for the client's situation and the client might feel more supported. Had I not chosen to use REBT, I believe I would have approached Norah's situation using person-centered therapy.

While person-centered therapy is beneficial in some ways, there are also aspects of it that might not fully assist the client in getting better. For instance, while the client might feel more support from the therapist, is the relationship alone enough to produce change? The therapist does not provide the motivation to make change in life, so the client may not take action or understand how to make change in future situations. Also, similar to REBT, person-centered therapy does not take into account the past. Understanding the past is often crucial in helping a client navigate a situation such as Norah's.

Gestalt Therapy

Gestalt therapy might also be very effective in helping Norah. Gestalt therapy seeks to provide awareness to the client of what they are experiencing. It focuses on the present and takes into account the environment in which the client interacts. Unlike REBT, Gestalt would take Norah's feelings into great consideration and how she experiences her current situation. Also, Gestalt therapy and certain experiments, like REBT, might help Norah practice how to navigate through her current situation so she might be prepared to do so outside of therapy.

However, Gestalt therapy would not take into account Norah's future and her likelihood to encounter similar instances. It may not teach her fully how to alter her actions and behaviors. It also maintains that the present is influenced by the past, but does not analyze the clients reactions to past behaviors. Gestalt therapy is also somewhat confrontational, which may not be appropriate for Norah in her current state of unrest.

Behavioral Therapy

The final theory that might be used to help Norah is behavioral therapy. Like REBT, behavioral therapy places a large emphasis on analysis of the client's behavior. Self-monitoring and self-modification might help Norah make decisions concerning specific behaviors. While

she might encounter failure, she may be more aware of her reactions and behaviors and be more equipped to handle future similar situations. Behavioral therapy is very action oriented and helps clients feel a sense of accomplishment.

However, overall, I believe behavioral therapy, in Norah's situation, might be least useful. For one, behavioral therapy, like REBT, does not take into consideration the client's past. Because the emphasis on action and neglect of past experiences, client's might not be able to understand the underlying themes of their actions. In Norah's situation, as mentioned early, she talks frequently about her feelings. Behavioral therapy might change her behaviors, but she may still undergo negative feelings. Behavioral therapy also lacks the ability to treat causes of certain behaviors and simply hopes to cure them.

Conclusion

There are many approaches that can be used to assist Norah in her current situation. While REBT might be very useful in helping Norah understand her behaviors and how to change them, other therapies, like Gestalt therapy, have aspects that might help Norah in other ways. As a student affairs professional, rather than using one therapy to assist a client like Norah, I would prefer to incorporate aspects of various theories and format the therapy to best fit Norah's style and needs. However, it is important to understand each of these theories in depth so that I may help clients effectively and efficiently.

References

Corey, G. (2009). Theory and practice of counseling and psychotherapy (8th ed.). Belmont, CA:
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