

Therapy on the Fringes

“We are the authorities on getting people off drugs, we are the authorities on the mind, we are the authorities on improving conditions... we can rehabilitate criminals... we can bring peace and unite communities.”

Tom Cruise (on Scientology)



Dr C. Verster
Psychiatrist,
Somerset West

The medical world is beset with wonder drugs and cures with outrageous claims of miraculous healing power, but usually without any scientific research to back up these claims. Unfortunately this is also very prevalent in the field of psychotherapy.

Space does not allow for an exhaustive list, and there are various opinions on what forms of therapy could be considered as “fringe therapies”, but the following have been suggested:

Aromatherapy, EMDR therapy, Handwriting analysis, meditation as psychotherapy, Rebirthing, Attachment therapy, Primal Scream Therapy, Dianetics and even Psychedelic Psychotherapy.

Whereas most of these cures are harmless and sometimes even providing the more worried affluent the opportunity to expand their horizons and explore different aspects of their lives, there are possible dangers to be considered.

The potential for manipulation and fraud is very real - especially where the guidance of a Professional Board is absent. Vulnerable people with real problems are often easy prey when their dependency needs are met by so-called therapists. Although some of these therapists may be well-meaning, a major concern is that without adequate training, major psychopathology is easily missed with potentially disastrous consequences.

Another issue to be considered is where the lives and families of patients have been severely disrupted by poorly trained counsellors. These include the treatment of the so-called “false/repressed memories syndrome”, where memories are falsely interpreted and encouraged.

There have also been tragic cases where lives have been lost. Candace Newmaker was a 10-year old adopted girl with behavioural problems. Her mother sought out “Attachment Therapy”, since she felt the child was unable to form loving attachments. The result was that Candace died as a result of asphyxiation brought about by a bizarre plan to re-enact the birth process so that Candace could be “reborn” to her adoptive mother. Attachment therapies have been implicated in the deaths of at least three other children.

There are a number of warning signs shared by fringe therapies:

- Harmful side effects. These may range from physical injury to the abuse of a family’s time and resources.
- Lack of empirical evidence confirming claims of efficacy.

- Therapies based on ideas that are not accepted as part of current scientific theory.
- Treatments do not comply with accepted standards of practice, such as physical contact or restraint.
- Therapies are not discussed in professional peer reviewed publications.
- Fringe therapies make excessively broad claims of effectiveness.
- Therapists tend to use other unvalidated therapies as well.
- Criticisms of these therapies are often met with cult-like defensiveness, rather than the accepted professional tendency to carefully investigate adverse events that follow a treatment.

Unfortunately, patients and their families often opt for controversial therapies when conventional treatment seems to have limited efficacy. In reality, this is usually a reflection of the condition, rather than the treatment, and fringe therapies often only lead to further emotional and financial strain without benefit.

Locally there has been some recent debate in the media regarding guidelines by the HPCSA regulating the scope and practice of therapists and counsellors. The aim of these guidelines is partly to protect the public against untrained therapists who are not registered with a professional board.

The Health Professions Act (56 of 1974) regulates the practice of psychology strictly and clearly states that any non-medical person who “mentally examines any person”, “performs any act of diagnosing, treating or preventing any mental defect, illness or deficiency...” or “advises any person on his mental state” for gain, is guilty of an offence. The risk of a therapist practicing outside his field of expertise is thus addressed by the professional body.

Strangely, according to the 2007 Annual Report of the Psychological Society of South Africa, prescription rights for psychologists are now back on the HPCSA’s agenda. This movement from within the ranks of psychology, aims to achieve exactly what the above guidelines are attempting to prevent, i.e. to practice outside your field of expertise and training.

Unfortunately, registered psychologists are also sometimes guilty of dabbling in fringe therapies. Professional guidelines are clear and state that any treatment modality used, should be according to current acceptable standards of practice or should have published evidence of efficacy

The reality is that psychotherapy is a powerful tool in the treatment of people with a variety of disorders. If it is not properly regulated and practitioners not adequately trained, the potential consequences for a patient’s mental and physical health should not be underestimated. ◆

[References on request](#)