

The Shrinking World and the Growing Need for Social Workers

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The bigger the world gets, the smaller it seems. This dichotomy of a *shrinking world* that is actually enlarging sounds odd, but this is what we mean by that phrase. As people's environment expands, often by no choice of their own, the more anxiety producing it can become! What actually gets smaller is a person's ability to feel comfortable in their quaint world of family, friends, work, and home. That once intimate environment is shrinking away. An article in the March 2020 *Harper's Bazaar* quotes psychotherapist Akua L. Boateng as saying, "We are not only empathizing with the stress of a parent's job loss or a child's rough school year, but also with the distant experiences of mass shootings, natural disasters, and fires." Social media and the growing ways that information and news are delivered to people bring those distant experiences right to everyone's front door!

The growing world is creating cumulative outside stressors fueled by:

- tragic local and global news
- the influence social media friends and trolls
- networks that promote political influences in lieu of facts,
- social changes that redefine value systems
- other sources

At times these layers of stress can be too overwhelming and help is needed. A person can experience post-traumatic stress by viewing a horrific news story such as a school shooting. Anxiety and panic are natural responses to frightening situations. A recent example is the Coronavirus which first spread rapidly in China and has now reached the United States.

Social workers are trained to address the numerous stressors that contribute to anxiety. Social work addresses the individual and their environment, a concept called PIE (Person in Environment). To illustrate this point look at a dog who has fleas. Merely giving the pooch a flea bath will only kill the fleas that are currently on its body. To successfully treat the problem, the carpet and yard must also be disinfected, so once the shampooed dog rolls in the carpet and plays in the grass, it will remain flea free!

In schools, the social worker meets with a student, and additionally with parents, teachers, and others who comprise that student's environment to get a multidimensional view of the problem. In hospitals, social workers formulate discharge plans by participating on a multidisciplinary team of doctors, nurses, and agencies to determine the best post-hospital treatment. Licensed Clinical Social Workers (LCSWs), treat the intrapsychic needs of clients, but also look at family dynamics, biological trends, and social coping strategies to frame their treatment plans.

This three-dimensional treatment framework is called the biopsychosocial approach to social work. Looking at the three distinctive areas of biological, psychological and social aspects of a client's environment helps clinicians to formulate a thorough treatment plan.

The growing world that is expanding stressors require that social workers intervene to help clients shrink their world back to a manageable size! Our unique methods of treating the person in their environment, the biopsychosocial approach coupled with various theories, are our tools. In order to help people understand what we do, to enable us to make an impact on this growing world, we must publicize our practice.

What keeps social workers from tooting our own horns and advertising? Humility is one reason we believe that social workers are not prone to brag about our work. Another reason is that to explain what we do is no simple task!

Generally speaking, when people think of "therapy", counselors, psychiatrists, and psychologists come to mind. Social workers must find ways to bring public awareness to the fact that we are also key players in the field of mental health.

We close by extending well-wishes to our social work colleagues for a wonderful Social Work Month! Please use this March to acknowledge the work we do and to educate others about us. Some suggestions include putting a brief article about your services in your agency's newsletter, posting a blog, tweeting a short message, or sending a short public service announcement to a radio station. Find creative ways to prove that there is a growing need for our profession in today's shrinking world!

If you receive the Social Work Advocates, check out our article "The Millennial Shift" in the December 2019-January 2020 issue

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