

Beyond Impairment

Finding Meaning in Neurocognitive Rehabilitation

By Michael Fraga, Psy.D., and Melissa A. Marrapese, M.A.

When a patient walks into your office, how much time do you spend genuinely looking at them? As the therapist or evaluator, do you take into consideration the experience of the client in that moment, in his or her fragility as a being, as they sit in front of you, or as a symptom constellation, or endorsement of your own theoretical leanings? In other words, can you go beyond the *symptoms*, beyond *knowing* and see the person in as they are, instead of who you may need or want them to be? As therapists, we strive to help our clients succeed, and arguably, find meaning in the direst of circumstances. This is true despite our preferred theoretical orientations, or the context in which the therapy or evaluation occurs. In this instance, the focus is on finding *meaning* when working with patients who are involved in neurocognitive rehabilitation.

Neurocognitive rehabilitation is a relatively new frontier whose beginnings are tied more closely to the “rehabilitative” arena of TBI/mTBI, as opposed to older adults, dementias and neurodegenerative disease in general. Historically, rehabilitative protocols have focused on the re-establishment of pre-morbid (pre-injury/trauma) levels of functioning. Neurocognitive rehabilitation with elder adults is focused more on the maintenance or extension of cognitive abilities to sustain independent functioning for as long as possible. Independent functioning for the elder adult translates into decreased mortality, improved quality of life, and decreased terms of residency in care facilities (assisted living, semi-skilled and skilled nursing facilities).

As the population ages we are witnessing an explosion in the number of adults over the age of 65 who comprise the majority of adults over the age of 21. We are living longer, remaining active longer, and experiencing a host of problems, including social and personal challenges not previously faced in our society. Housing costs, medical/healthcare costs, and the cost of living in general read-

ily pose daunting challenges to our elder citizens. Mobility, much like financial security, is a critical element to successfully traversing this challenging terrain. Yet, how comfortable are we with octogenarians driving? Do they have the mental acumen, skill, and functional abilities to navigate today’s roadways? Can they reasonably be expected to manage their financial and medical affairs without oversight? And, if they can’t, who does? Neurocognitive rehabilitation can help in answering some of these questions via the evaluative process that specifically assesses the individual’s memory skills, executive functioning, attention/concentration, auditory/visual/tactile abilities, processing speed and visual-spatial abilities, which are all critical elements in operating motor vehicles, balancing checkbooks, monitoring one’s or their spouse’s medication’s and appointments.

Finding Meaning

The process of human experiencing is complex and prolific, consisting of multiple layers of feeling, knowing, and sensing (Schneider, Bugental, & Pierson, 2001). According to Cain and Seaman (2001), *meaning* is created as a result of individual experience, which includes values, culture, and personal history. Understanding experience is a cardinal need of all human beings. People often become alarmed, shaken, or terrified when they encounter situations in life that are incongruent with their *sense or experience of self*. The person then embarks on an investigation as a way to comprehend a new behavior or life event. One of our jobs as therapists includes helping clients understand the larger picture (or meaning) and template of their lives. In these instances, the application of certain humanistic principles is invaluable. By helping clients discover meaning, it helps them to experience an increased level of certainty, redefine goals, and experience a feeling of holism or connection to themselves on a profound level.

For many of us, adjustment to the ever-changing process of aging is gradual and all but innocuous until we become aware of our decreased cognitive and physical abilities. As we become aware of these deficiencies, our reluctance to acknowledge the process can often times lead to depression or anxiety, which can further exacerbate symptoms, i.e. memory loss, decreased tracking abilities, confusion, etc. Consider the following case: Mr. B was a successful cabinetmaker, who, in his retirement had begun to specialize in a particular type of Japanese cabinetry, which he thoroughly enjoyed. Mr. B presented for service when he noted he was having difficulty recalling designs and measurements, which was increasing his production time and causing delays in delivery of contracted items. Initially, Mr. B was reticent to acknowledge the changes in his cognitive functioning. However, over time, as he came to understand and accept the subtle changes in his own abilities, his symptoms decreased in severity, and he was able to develop compensatory strategies to accommodate his work load successfully.

By reframing Mr. B’s cognitive difficulties as normal aging, and gently acknowledging his reluctance to address his limitations, he experienced remarkable progress (amelioration of the depressive influences). Admittedly, Mr. B’s case was an easy one, however, all too often the key element is effecting a more positive quality of life for an individual who is beginning to manifest cognitive decline is the reassurance of the value of the “who” of them as opposed to the “what” of them. In most cases, the decline in ability is accompanied by a decline in self-image, worth and value. In the elderly and the infirmed this can readily translate into a failure of the will to thrive. Effective and comprehensive neurocognitive rehabilitation not only addresses the technical aspects (i.e. the functional impairment in memory, attention, concen-

continued on page 13

As the struggle for freedom in Burma shows us, it is through the unwavering dedication to non-violence and insight into our inseparable nature that reservoirs of courage and beauty rise in the human spirit. Through this process of inspired commitment, one's innate wisdom is touched, lifting us out of oppression, self-censorship, and fear. As these entanglements are released, the heart of shared liberation opens and we actualize the meaning of Relational Dharma.

Beyond Impairment

continued from page 6

tration, etc.), but the critical humane aspects as well. Very few of us wish to be a burden on others, and most of us highly value our independence. Effective programming, which involves the individual and their supportive family members, can readily improve the quality of life of all involved. At the Ananda Institute, in conjunction with Neuropsychological Associates, the focus is not on the symptom, or the disease, but the person in their entirety and the family system that surrounds them. A comprehensive evaluation of the individual, which includes a thorough review of their medical, psychological and behavioral functioning (ADLs) informs the programming developed by a neurocognitive rehabilitation specialist, tailored to meet the patient's specific needs. Twice weekly sessions with the patient are often accompanied by sessions with family members, dialogues with prescribing physicians regarding medications, and linkage with community based ancillary service agencies and providers. A holistic, or person centered approach such

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as this has many benefits, chief among them the ability to help the patient and their family redefine meaning when faced with a difficult transition or life altering circumstance. By valuing the person, the potential is limitless, and the space is created for interactions filled with empathy, congruence, and unconditional acceptance.

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Marketing

continued from page 10

information you have to share better, more relevant than what you're listening to? Find out what the requirements are for speakers. It may be that there's a waiting list, so this is perfect for you. Get on the calendar, then get busy developing a program. Do you think you're a good writer? Identify publications that would be a good medium for you to share your experience. Find out what the demographic information is—don't waste

your time if you're not targeting your audience.

Join one networking group that meets regularly, preferably weekly. This group becomes your core networking organization. Think about joining Toastmasters—this group is amazing in terms of learning how to speak in front of groups.

Keep in mind that generating new business is a process and there is a sales cycle. Don't attend a networking event, then give up because you didn't get any new clients.

References

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continued on page 14