

IMMIGRATION: GOING HOME OR GOING TO PIECES

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ABSTRACT: Immigration may constitute a family crisis. Because of its lengthy duration, this crisis may be an unrecognized factor in the problem which brings patients into therapy. The immigration crisis may bring an individual into renewed contact with past unresolved emotional issues. It also affects the structure, hierarchies, and values of the family as a system. The therapist who relates only to presenting symptoms and ignores the context of the immigration crisis may lose credibility with patients and miss important therapeutic opportunities. Case studies are given to illustrate the statement.

KEY WORDS: immigration; family crisis; therapist awareness; therapeutic opportunities; Israel.

Immigration is a process which brings stress to bear on individuals and families even where the immigration is voluntary, an immigration of choice. When immigrants come to therapy it is important that the therapist be knowledgeable about the impact of immigration upon individuals and families. If this is not the case, one of the basic tools of therapy—that of empathy—cannot be effective. Without a specific understanding of the losses and changes sustained in the immigration process, the therapist will be handicapped in giving practical suggestions for improving the situation. Again, if the therapist is unaware of immigration stress, he or she may see presenting symptoms as deeply rooted whereas they may be transient. In this case,

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instead of normalizing by relating some of the disturbance to the universal difficulties inherent in immigration, the therapist may pathologize, by implying the problems presented are inherent in the individual personality or family structure of the person or family group that presents for therapy. Where a therapist is sensitive to and informed about immigration phenomena, he or she will explore its effects even if the migration is not recent because the adjustment period to this upheaval is longer than that of some other crises (such as marriage, divorce, birth of a child). Lastly, as in all crisis situations, unresolved and painful issues from childhood and adolescence which have “gone cold” and might normally only surface in the course of long therapy, may have been “awoken” by the specific strains of the immigration. The therapist who is sensitive to immigration issues can use the opportunity to deal with these long-standing problems and thus help the client in a fundamental way.

This paper sets out to describe the effect of immigration on the individual and on the family. Case examples will be given. Lastly, specific suggestions for therapists will be made.

ORIGIN OF THIS PAPER

The references used for this paper indicate that the effects of immigration are universal. The motivation for the writers came from their own experience of immigration to Israel, from an English speaking country. Their observations were compared with those of colleagues, all family therapists from English speaking countries, working in a freestanding family therapy institute in Israel. Observations were also supported by experience with patients who had immigrated to Israel from various countries, including Russia, but mostly from Western, English-speaking countries.

THE EFFECT OF IMMIGRATION UPON THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE FAMILY

A Lengthy Process

In recent years immigration appears on lists of major stressful events. It is different from stressors like marriage and divorce because it lasts longer. It is unlikely that an immigrant will have solved