

The stigma of counselling is changed

Tony White
Monday, 26 March 2007

I have been a psychotherapist now for 20 years and have seen some changes in that time. One of the most interesting is the change in the stigma associated with psychology and psychotherapy.

Years ago when someone would come and see me they would park around the corner from my office, wear a hat and enter in the backdoor. To go and see a psychologist carried a stigma. "Only mad people went and saw psychologists", was the general belief. Only the insane went to such places. So it was something that many kept very quiet and battled with.

Times have changed and now many clients will park right out the front of the office and wave to others as they are coming into the building. It is no longer a stigma at least in a country like Australia. In fact it is fashionable to have a counsellor for many now. Its a fashion statement one can make at cocktail parties.

WHY?

A significant section of the community in this country has at one time seen a counsellor of some kind. Indeed in the family law court system where there is debate over access to children and/or property, before one can actually go to court the couple have to go through a sort of counselling/mediation session(s) to see if the matter can be resolved there. That amounts to a lot of people in just that way getting counselling.

I also think it is a sign of an affluent society. As the basic needs of food and shelter become more widely met and more secure, people can then start to think about other things. Such as navel gazing and then one can seek assistance when they look into their navel and are disturbed by what they find. People have the time to do that more these days.

Also and even though I hate to say it television shows like Oprah have had an impact. I have had countless people come to me at least partly because they saw this person on such shows like Oprah that in some way reminded them of themselves, and then wanted to investigate it.

Finally occupational 'counselling or debriefing' is very wide spread in the country that I live in. Any person who has had some negative experience at work is offered counselling paid for by the company. So this normalises counselling even if people don't take up the offer of free sessions.

Whatever the reasons there has definitely been a change over two decades. Of course that is good for me being in the profession. However regardless of the financial concerns I also think it is good that those who struggle with anxiety, depression and the likes do not have to also struggle with a stigma of seeking some psychological assistance.