Retrieving the lost soul: Treating trauma in the Hmong community

Alyssa Kayying Vang, PsyD, LP
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What is trauma?
- experiences or situations that are emotionally painful and distressing
- overwhelm people’s ability to cope
- Powerlessness
- Intergenerational trauma
- Transgenerational trauma
- Examples of traumatic events: war, death, accidents, natural disasters, rape, abuse, chronic illnesses

Hmong view of health

Our physical well-being is dependent on how well our spiritual functioning is and vice versa.
- The condition of a person’s soul is crucial to overall health, both in life and after death.
- Treatment includes both spiritual and physiological approaches.
Hmong view of physical health

Examples:
- Stomachaches, headaches
- Diabetes
- Epilepsy
- Cleft lip and palate

What is mental health for the Hmong?

Western view of health

Examples:
- Stomachaches, headaches
- Diabetes
- Epilepsy
- Cleft lip and palate
Mental health concepts and framework:

**Western:**
- Connection is between the mind and the body
- The mind is a very powerful thing
- The way I think affects the way I feel
- Therefore, if I change the way I think about something, it might change how I feel about it
- Mental illness is "a condition that affects a person's thinking, feeling, or mood." (NAMI)

**Hmong:**
- Connection is between the body and the soul
- The closest word to describe "feeling" is "muaj siab muaj ntsws"
- which is a physical part of who I am (possibly a core of who I am) and when hurt, may not be repairable.
- "Hloov kev xav" is unfamiliar. Rather, "txhob xav txog" is more familiar
- "Hloov siab" - our "siab" is part of our essence and our values system, which can be difficult to change or control unless:
  - Something significant or life-changing happens
  - Spiritual transformation

Important cultural concepts to consider:

**Western:**
- Internal locus of control
  - The behaviors and choices I engaged in influenced the outcome
  - "Grin and bear it"

- Because Western mental health services are based on Western beliefs about the self and healing, the benefits of talk therapy have historically been minimal for the Hmong.

**Hmong:**
- External locus of control
  - The outcome is based on luck, fate, VISA, timing, other people
  - "Suffer and endure"

- Uv tsis tuag, ua siab ntev, muab lub neej khi rau menyuam
- Hmong continue to use cultural expectations to carry out their duties (e.g., mother continues to care for their children) or the Hmong close-knit system picks up the slack for the one who cannot perform (e.g., a father who is abusing opium) and thus the mental health problems are not as evident or recognizable.
Mental Illness

- Natural/non-spiritual
  - Life stressors (financial, housing, schooling)
  - Psychosocial stressors (loss of status, marital discord)
- Spiritual/religious factor
  - Loss of soul
  - Possessed by spirit
- Treatment dependent on belief of cause

Hmong conceptualization and treatment of “trauma”

- Muscle tension, body tension, shivers, jumpy
  - Xais ceeb (massage the fright)
  - Nchos ceeb (shake the fright)
- Sleep problems, weight loss, fatigue, nightmares, changed personality, withdrawn, jumpy, vigilant
- Spiritual ritual/ceremony (shaman, soul calling healer, “hu plig” prayer)
- Domestic Violence, sexual abuse, verbal/physical abuse
- Traumatic event
- Physical evidence
- No physical evidence
  - Talk with clan leaders
  - Nothing
  - Herbs, massage
Symptoms of trauma

- Physiological symptoms are indications of having been frightened or soul loss
  - Shivering body
  - Difficulty sleeping
  - Startled responses
  - Loss of appetite
  - Fever
  - Cold hands and feet
  - Hearing things, seeing things

- Any symptoms that are outside of these physiological symptoms are not attributed to exposure to trauma
  - More withdrawn, more isolated
  - Difficulty focusing
  - Grades falling, unable to hold a job
  - Not smiling as much
  - Increased behavioral or emotional difficulties
  - More emotional dysregulation

Mental health problems that traditional Hmong treatment do not address and thus manifesting as social problems in our community today:

- Trauma (startled symptoms, flashbacks, nightmares are treated— but sadness, low energy, inability to fully function continues)
- Social isolation
- Homicide/suicide
- Addictions (gambling, drinking)
- Hopelessness/Worthlessness
- Seeking fulfillment outside of family (eg, extramarital affairs)
- Suicide/homicide
- Domestic violence
- Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse
Why we need to be open to Western treatment:

- Talk therapy isn’t the same anymore
- Elders vs. mental health provider
- Outlets that we once had are not as popular
- Traditional musical ways of communicating
    - Hais kwv txhiaj (traditional folk song)
    - Tshuab ncas, tshuab nplooj, tshuab raj (use of traditional instruments)
- It could get worse and untreatable (e.g., cancer)
- We cannot afford to wait it out (Hmong believe people are naturally able to realize their potential, accept fate, their mandate in life)

Misunderstandings resulting in ambivalence in and reluctance to seek Western mental health services:

- Fear of the unknown if I talked about difficult things
  - Will someone hear me?
  - Will someone help me?
  - What if I bring shame to myself or my family?
  - What if I fall apart?
- Sometimes help may be only in the form of
  - Prevention of deterioration / relapse prevention
  - Maintain an appropriate level of quality of life
  - Support for support system

Challenges and culturally appropriate treatment considerations:

- Variable success with Western treatment, depending on the person (deep breathing, visual imagery, EMDR, gradual exposure, etc.)
- No direct language translation for “trauma” in Hmong
- TF-CBT allows for psychoeducation and learning to use words to describe what they are going through
  - Iceberg
  - Common reactions to trauma
Culturally appropriate treatment considerations:

- Acknowledge benefits of traditional treatment and encourage integration of holistic and alternative approaches to the healing process.
- Identify any disruption in the afflicted person’s life as equally concerning and deserving of attention.
- Individual psychotherapy.
- Psychoeducation:
  - What therapy is, what it isn't.
  - Line example.
- Balancing in the therapeutic relationship:
  - Acceptance/respect, expertise, hope.
  - Use of metaphors and analogies.
- Reflective.

References:


Alyssa K. Vang, PsyD, LP
(651) 283-3794
akpsych@gmail.com
www.dralyssakvang.com