

Essay

Students Who Visit University Counseling Rooms

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Abstract

The types of problems requiring counseling to university students were reviewed, based on my experiences as a counselor at a Japanese university. In general, students have a strong inclination to move in groups. They try to establish close relationships by making friends within groups. University students also are strongly inclined to care about how they are perceived by others and tend to be preoccupied about making a good impression. In this paper, six major problems that I have encountered during the course of my counseling at the university are discussed. The first problem concerns students who suffer distress and despise themselves for their excessive show of intimacy with friends. The second is students who demand that their friends be on closer terms. The third is students who are troubled by the difference between their own personalities and those of others. The fourth is students who are anthropophobic. The fifth is students who cannot become independent of their parents. The sixth problem concerns students who have a vague sense of anxiety in their daily lives. Finally, two case studies involving the relationship between parents and children are presented.

Introduction

For many students, their university years are a period during which they are able to bring problems that they have carried since childhood to closure. However, a good number of students cannot solve their problems by themselves and bring the issues to school counselors. At the university where I work as a counselor, a total of 300 cases are handled annually. The ratio of males to females is 1:5. However, if the ratio of male to female students in the university population is taken into consideration, two to three times more female students actually seek counseling. This is consistent with the tendencies at other university counseling rooms across the country. The most conspicuous gender distinction among students who come to counseling rooms is that female students are better at talking about their problems. Unlike male students, many female students are able to talk about their problems as if they are relating stories. Perhaps, confessing their problems to others is a sign of acceptance in the female society. Because women are raised in such a culture from childhood, it appears that they have naturally acquired the ability to skillfully talk about their problems with others. There is little gender distinction, however, in the content of the problems. If asked to somehow make a distinction, I would say that more female students have problems with human relationships and more male students have problems that are neuroses-related. However, it is impossible to make a statistically clear distinction in this regard.

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In this essay, the types of problems university students have are reviewed based on my experience as a counselor at the university. First, a few comments on student behavior as a whole are presented. Second, an example for each of the six major problem areas is given. Many problems encountered in the counseling process can be classified into these six patterns. The cause of many of these problems can often be traced back to the relationships between parents and children. In addition, two case studies involving outpatients I treated as a psychiatrist at a hospital are presented. The two patients were a little older than university students, but in both cases, the causes of their problems were traced back to their relationships with their parents, as is the case with many university students.

General tendencies of university students

1) Group behavior

Many of the problems experienced by university students have to do with human relationships, especially within groups of several students. At this university, for example, it is not unusual for groups to form in just a few days after the entrance ceremony. This tendency is especially true among female students. They try to get on close terms with each other, not only by sitting close to each other in lecture rooms and having lunch together, but also by inviting each other to sleep over at their homes or apartments. Therefore, once such a group is formed, the framework is very difficult to change. Also, the transfer of a member of one group to another group is difficult. For students, the group is an effective system for avoiding anxiety. However, because the group is such a small and closed society, human conflicts are more likely to occur among its members.

2) Evaluation by others

Speaking of groups, some students are unable to join a group, and some are expelled after they have become a member of one. These students often brand themselves as dropouts. They are overly concerned with what others think of them. It is not necessarily wrong to care about what others think of oneself, but according to my study, such anxiety does not always result in the inner growth of students. In other words, when students care too much about how they are judged by others, they become overly concerned about how they can make themselves look better. To be more specific, they try to rid themselves of such anxiety by presenting an image of intelligence, physical beauty and a sense of humor. Furthermore, they judge their own self-worth by their appearance.

Students who visit counseling rooms

1) Students who show excessive intimacy

Among the problems I handle, the largest percentage are concerned with friendships. In many cases, students feel they have trouble keeping an appropriate distance from friends. Even though they need friendship, they become fatigued from excessively conforming to their friends' preferences. Many also feel a sense of guilt for having a two-faced character. They are not good at lying and are very rational, to the point that they feel a sense of guilt for adopting different behavior under different circumstances. Many have undergone domestic trauma, for example, he or she may have grown up in a family with discord between the parents.

2) Students who demand closer friendships

Another common problem related to friendship is that of students who demand closer relationships from their friends. They want to talk more about serious subjects such as philosophy and personal problems, but cannot find friends willing to comply. They don't know how to deal with their friends, and they question

themselves for being troubled by this problem. Such students are enthusiastic about “finding myself” and have a strong inclination to seek perfect human relationships and philosophies. They can be vulnerable to “enlightenment seminars” and cults that tempt them with pseudo-solutions to their problems. They are likely to be dazzled by the experience of brainwashing, once they are asked to join such a cult.

3) Students who are dismayed at being different from others

Some students have friends with whom they have good friendships but are troubled because they feel they are different from other students, and worry about whether they might be “strange”. They may, for example, spend their holidays reading in their rooms without speaking to anyone or going out, at most just walking around their apartments. This behavior relaxes them, but they wonder if it is strange. Others such as not going shopping or for a drive like their friends do may reinforce the feeling of strangeness. “Can I become a decent member of society?” they ask themselves. As people enter the period of adolescence, secondary sex characteristics become clear and personality begins to show more individuality. It is a confusing time in which it is important that students affirm that they are fine just the way they are. It is also important to affirm that counselors will support them if they need help.

4) Students tired of paying excessive attention to others

University counselors encounter a surprising number of cases of anthropophobia. Such students react too anxiously to what others say and do. Even when chatting and laughing with friends, they don't find it at all enjoyable and, on the contrary, become distressed. They are overly concerned with human relationships and the fact that they can't live more freely. As a result, they are always tired. Initially, they might come to a counseling room because they are about to fail in their coursework or they may have problems in their relationships with co-workers at a part-time job. However, as counseling proceeds, elements of anthropophobia can be clearly seen. A number of these students have fallen into depression. It is important that they practice a lifestyle in which they can rest when they feel tired.

5) Students who cannot become independent of their parents

The most frequent problem other than that of friendships, is the relationships between parents and children, particularly the issue of independence from the parents. Even though students may come to the counseling room to talk about a different problem, the issue of independence from their parents surfaces as counseling proceeds. In one such case, a female student came to talk about her problems with finding employment. She said she couldn't decide whether to return to her parents' home or seek employment in a different city. She wanted to find a job in a different city but felt she had to return to her parents' house. As we spoke, she related that her parents had been having problems in their marriage and she was concerned about her mother. She was bitter about not being able to leave her mother. I have not confirmed if her image of her mother was real or false. However, her problem was that of a child deprived of her mental freedom by a parent who could not become independent of her child.

In the same vein, I surveyed university students on the satisfaction of their relationships with their parents and their own self-esteem. The survey showed that those students who had satisfactory relationships with their parents reported lower self-esteem than those who did not. If the relationship between parents and their children is the basis of all human relationships, how should we interpret this phenomenon? The issue of independence from parents seems to be a complicated one.

6) Students who have a vague sense of anxiety in their daily lives

There are a number of students who come to talk about a vague sense of anxiety in their daily lives. In general university students are most concerned about earning credits in the short-term and finding employment in the medium term. In addition to such substantial issues, some suffer from a vague sense of anxiety in their daily lives. They are afraid that time is passing by without them achieving anything. In the eyes of others, they might just seem dull. Such students feel that it is important to find a reason for every

action they take. For example, many students who work part-time cannot understand why they are doing so. Moreover, they don't know why they do other daily activities, such as going out with friends, attending lectures and participating in extracurricular club activities. For such students, time passes without any feeling of achievement. It is vital that they make a conscious effort to find a reason for every action they take in their daily lives.

Two case studies of illness related to relationships with parents

1) A female clerk who is obsessed with a delusion of persecution

This woman believed that her colleagues had spread bad rumors about her. She seemed to have taken the problem very seriously. Outwardly, she was an ordinary female clerk who dressed and wore makeup similar to any other woman her age. She was a slightly chubby, pretty single woman, in her late twenties who worked at a travel agency. She talked politely and did not possess any negative characteristics that could justify the rumors of her colleagues. If she believed that her colleagues had spread bad rumors about her without any concrete evidence, it could be called a delusion - a symptom that is not very good. She stated with downcast eyes, but clearly, "When I'm attending to customers over the counter, my female colleagues make signs with their eyes to each other. They say such things as, 'She's aloof.' or 'She is promiscuous - although she doesn't look like it.' I'm sure." "We usually have lunch together in the lounge but I can't join the conversation of the others. I sit alone a little away from the others. I'm afraid of being disliked by them. Of course, I'm not trying to outshine them."

She seemed to have trouble getting closer to her coworkers.

"Because I'm so concerned about my colleagues' behavior when working, I've been making more mistakes lately. Once I left the office early with an acute headache. On one holiday, I went to see a movie with one of my friends from junior high school but I felt so terribly faint and nauseous that I couldn't enjoy the movie at all. Then we went to have something to eat but still I didn't feel well. I felt sorry for my friend who had been so attentive to me. I'm disappointed with myself."

She showed little progress in the year following. One day we talked about her family. She had had an aunt on her father's side who went off with a married man with a child who lived in her neighborhood. The area where her family had lived was so conventional that the news about her aunt swept all over town. As a result, her father and his younger brother were greatly embarrassed. Her father worked hard and diligently for decades and finally was able to make the locals forget the episode. Still, her father often says that his sister ruined his life. As a consequence, the patient had often been told since she was very little that she should never do what her aunt had done, not only by her father but also by her grandfather and grandmother. She had grown up with the bitter memory of those family members who underwent hardship because of her aunt. Her parents also prohibited her from talking about this event to anyone outside the family.

"What do you think about your aunt?", I dared to ask her.

"Honestly speaking, I really do not know what to say. Based on what my father told me, I now believe that what she did was unforgivable. I've seen my aunt but I've never talked to her because my parents say I mustn't."

Somehow, after she told me the story of her aunt, she gradually became more cheerful. Now, one year later, she has gotten well enough to have a good time with her female friends on weekends.

I then asked her, "What do you imagine when you see or hear the words 'going off'?"

"Well, something romantic. We see or read about people who do it in movies and novels. I'm not really interested in what people do...including what my aunt has done," she answered, smiling.

2) A nurse who scratches herself all over because she experiences itching everywhere

She was a very capable nurse, about 30 years old, beautiful and also very observant. When I was talking with a patient and needed some notepaper, she would pass it to me without me having to ask her. Or she would start preparing to take a patient's blood pressure just as I was thinking about doing it. She would serve me a cup of tea just as I felt I needed to take a rest. Everything went smoothly without any words. From an efficiency point of view, her presence made a big difference in my work. Her enthusiasm for work and her devotion to patients had become known at the hospital. One day, she told me she had a problem she wanted to talk to me about. At first I thought she must be joking, but I agreed to listen to her problem just to make sure.

When she came to my room, she immediately stripped to the waist and said,
"Please take a look at this."

There were scratches all over her back and both upper arms. Some were even bleeding. This sight was hard to believe from the way she behaved in the hospital.

She said, "It itches so much at night that I scratch. Even when I am asleep, I scratch unconsciously." "Have you gone to see a dermatologist?", I asked.

"Yes. But he said he couldn't find the cause" she replied

I thought it might be connected to the unusual diligence of her work habits, so I wrote a medical excuse for her and had her take a week off. Her skin stopped itching, but when she returned to work, the itching and scratching started again all over her back and thighs.

The condition appeared to have something to do with her work but I couldn't see any improvement in her symptoms.

About six months later, she told me about her family.

"What is your mother like?", I asked.

"My mother and I are good friends. Since I was little, we have been friends. I never thought of her as a parent."

She continued, "My parents have had marital problems and are about to divorce. One day when I returned home from elementary school, my mother introduced me to a young man, saying, "This is my boyfriend." She has openly enjoyed his companionship ever since then. In the course of time, I became the one to listen to her problems. I have been her counselor. I like her very much and I have tried very hard to understand her problems. So I've never thought of her as a parent. We are still friends."

Eventually, she quit her work as a nurse, and found a job in the entertainment and amusement business. Now she lives with a boyfriend who is younger than she is.

Putting aside the issue of what the true problem is, she has no memory of being loved and nurtured by her mother, only of being depended on by her mother. Subsequently, she started to thrive on being depended on by others. Her choice of becoming a nurse and her life after quitting nursing also may be associated with this psychology.

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