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IDENTITIES AND CRISES. THE SOCIAL WORKER, A PROFESSIONAL OF SOCIAL INTERVENTION

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Abstract

The global crisis caused by the spread of COVID-19 disease is a difficult period for humanity, apart from other catastrophes, such as floods, fires, the refugees' conditions etc. The social effects are immediate, such as: major changes in people's relationships, lifestyle and the quality of their lives. Prolonged isolation becomes extremely stressful to people and it can reach serious mental illnesses. The mass media points out that in a pandemic, many parents turn to counselling sessions because their children have become neurotic. The online courses have a major effect on pupils' psyche, with the risk of emotional disturbances that may occur due to overexposure to the screen, isolation, repressed emotions and not discussing with parents or friends. This article reveals effective interventions of the school social worker in order to get out of the crisis.

Keywords: crisis intervention, school social worker, online school, cyberbullying, suicide.

Résumé

La crise mondiale causée par la propagation de la maladie COVID-19 est une période difficile pour l'humanité, en dehors d'autres catastrophes, telles que les inondations, les incendies, les conditions des réfugiés, etc. Les effets sociaux sont immédiats, tels que : des changements majeurs dans les relations, le mode de vie et la qualité de vie des gens. L'isolement prolongé devient extrêmement stressant pour les gens et peut atteindre de graves maladies mentales. Les médias de masse soulignent que lors d'une pandémie, de nombreux parents se tournent vers des séances de conseil parce que leurs enfants sont devenus névrosés. Les cours en ligne ont un effet majeur sur le psychisme des élèves, avec le risque de troubles émotionnels pouvant survenir en raison d'une surexposition à l'écran, d'isolement, d'émotions refoulées et de ne pas discuter avec les parents ou les amis. Cet article révèle les interventions efficaces de l'assistante sociale scolaire pour sortir de la crise.

Mots-clés: intervention de crise, travailleur social scolaire, école en ligne, cyberintimidation, suicide.

Rezumat

Criza globală provocată de răspândirea bolii COVID - 19, reprezintă o perioadă dificilă pentru omenire, la care se adaugă și alte catastrofe, precum inundațiile, incendiile, situația refugiaților, ș.a. Efectele sociale sunt imediate, precum: schimbări majore ale relațiilor interumane, ale modului de viață și ale calității vieții lor. Prelungirea izolării devine

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extrem de stresantă pentru unii oameni, care pot ajunge la stări grave ale unor boli psihice. Mass media semnalează faptul că, în pandemie, mulți părinți apelează la ședințe de consiliere, întrucât copiii lor au devenit nevrotici. Cursurile online au un efect major asupra psihicului elevilor, existând riscul apariției unor tulburări emoționale care pot apărea pe fondul supraexpunerii la ecran, al izolării, al emoțiilor reprimite și al nediscuțării cu părinții sau prietenii. Prezentul articol relevă intervenții eficiente ale asistentului social școlar pentru ieșirea din criză.

Cuvinte cheie: intervenție în criză, asistent social școlar, școală online, cyberbullying, sinucidere.

“Life is one crisis after another”

RICHARD M. NIXON

1. Introduction

Professional identity can be characterized as the way we perceive ourselves in the occupational context and it can evolve through socializing in the workplace, observing others, and developing a common expertise. The profession of social worker has a clear identity, being a nationally recognized qualification, with job descriptions and well-defined developmental skills. The professional social worker establishes the identity of their profession, building on the standardized requirements of the job.

The current global crisis is a difficult period for people, and the risk of falling ill has made us much more concerned about our health, which has made us accept all the restrictive rules. The long period of forced isolation can be a source of inner tension that can lead in time to behavioral disorders and serious mental illnesses. There may even be pathological forms of loneliness: from transient states of dissatisfaction, boredom in the presence of others, to a chronic feeling of mental isolation, the lack of communication and trust in others, which can lead to serious mental illness, even the decision to commit suicide (Zamfir, Zamfir, 2020, p. 11).

During the conference organized and presented by Alexandrescu Gabriela (“Save the Children” Association) entitled “Dramatic consequences of the pandemic”, it is revealed that anxiety is becoming more common among pupils, there are more and more cases of aggression in schools and in the online environment. There have recently been many suicide attempts in children who do not see another solution to get rid of bullying and/or cyberbullying but to take their own lives. It is the case (that was also presented in the media) of a sixth - grader, a victim of bullying, who threw himself out of the window at school, and some of his classmates even encouraged him to do so. The mentioned conference presents the study “*The impact of the pandemic on the children's social-emotional health*”, conducted by “Save the Children” Association, which reveals that more than 90% of diagnoses given by psychologists last year, are generated by the pandemic context, and marginalized children and the ones living in poor economic conditions are very affected, especially since the same context has led

to the suspension of social and medical services. The same study reveals that primary school pupils felt the negative impact of isolation more strongly whereas adolescents felt lonely, sad or angry (Alexandrescu, 2021).

School staff may face potentially traumatic events that go beyond everyday experience and the ability to cope with them and that require response to the crisis. Pupils may experience death situations, death threats, or even be witnesses to them; they may even be marked by news of such major events (Smallwood, Williams, Monahon, 2016, p. 553).

A constant concern of school social workers is to keep a good, balanced mental state of pupils.

2. Characteristics of the intervention in crisis situations

The word “crisis” is used to refer to the event itself and the individuals' reaction to it; the crisis includes acute and prolonged disturbances that may occur in the emotional or social sphere as a result of “emotional danger”. Possible emotional risks that pupils may face are: starting to be teenagers, losing a beloved person, the departure of parents abroad etc. Children certainly react differently to such events: for some the effects may be low, sometimes even absent, while others need the specialists' support. Pupils in crisis find it difficult to perform their daily tasks, they become confused, depressed, or hyperactive, whereas the learning process becomes difficult, or even impossible, for them, not complying with class rules and lacking resources to solve problems. There occurs the psychological imbalance that is associated with irrational behaviour and withdrawal from normal contacts (Alexiu, 2011).

The theory of the crisis intervention was conceived according to studies conducted in communities, groups and individuals who went through disasters or situations of maximum tension, such as floods, earthquakes, refugees, mourning or injured people etc. When a crisis situation occurs, beneficiaries must be taught how to identify other ways than those commonly used, in order to keep balance (Alexiu, 2011, p. 347).

The crisis intervention is a permanent concern of specialists in the field of socio-human sciences. The words “*crisis situation*” refer to a potentially traumatic event that exceeds the individuals' normal ability *to cope* and that is extremely negative, uncontrollable and unpredictable (Smallwood, Williams, Monahon, 2016, p. 553). The crisis has an uncertain duration that will pass, and the normal problems of life will return at some point, but it will certainly affect people's quality of life.

The crisis is defined as “a violent rupture of the evolutionary process, and its direction is suddenly masked, changed or reversed”, which marks a profound discontinuity, the notion is beyond the impressions experienced by the individual who fails to overcome a conflict (Larousse, 2006, pp. 288). The crisis situation is characterized by the disturbance of the balance in which the solutions that the

individual or the family usually has for solving problems, end up not being sufficient and effective in certain situations.

Predictable crises, such as maturity crises, are often neglected as they are considered normal as their basis has biological, psychological and social components. They occur when the individual goes through a stage and starts a new phase of life, by going to kindergarten, to school, high school or work, by changing home, by getting married, the birth of the first child, changing jobs, the children leaving their families, retirement, etc. All these are events that can cause a series of predictable crises, but in a person's life there are also unpredictable crises, triggered by factors that can threaten physical and mental integrity, such as abandonment, divorce, absence, death, catastrophes such as floods, fires, pandemics etc. The support of social services is generally sought by vulnerable people for whom crises usually result in other repeated failures that amplify and cause feelings of inadequacy, inability and incompetence, which makes them unable to cope with further difficulties, even if they are minors. These people have low self-esteem and do not have confidence in their own ability to solve problems, therefore social workers need to know that a person who had a series of repeated failures becomes practically "conditioned" to consider themselves incapable and knows particularly what factors are likely to trigger a crisis, what are the signs by which beneficiaries manifest themselves in such situations. For example, intense pain caused by the sudden death of a beloved person has psycho-somatic symptoms that may occur immediately after the event occurred, or are delayed, exaggerated, or seemingly absent (Alexiu, 2011, p. 349-350).

The specialty literature (Payne, Vrasti, etc.) reveals intervention principles in crisis situations that must be adapted according to its type and specificity. The school social worker must support the pupils' attempts to regain their balance after a reaction to a dangerous situation. Such situations interfere with the children's learning process in schools, whereas school social workers have emotional and behavioral reactions, in parallel with the beneficiary going through a crisis, but it is essential to act properly in order to support pupils adapting to stress (positive coping).

H. Parah points out that, when social workers intervene in a crisis, they enter the life of a person, a family or a group, in order to reduce the impact of the stress that caused it, in order to help mobilize resources of the directly affected individuals, but also those around (Parah, 1965, p. 2). The goal of social workers who intervene in such situations has a double impact: to reduce stressors and to use the situation of those in crisis, to help them solve their current problems and control possible similar problems that may occur in the future, by using appropriate coping mechanisms (Alexiu, 2011, p. 347).

3. Applications regarding professional practice in crisis situations

By pointing out the counseling skills required of a social worker, Professor D. Şoitu PhD. reveals that “the profession of a social worker means social change, solving the problems of human relationships, empowering and liberating people in order to increase their well-being. By using theories of human behavior and social systems, social assistance intervenes at the moment where people interact with their environment” (Şoitu, 2012, p. 44).

The work of the school social workers requires flexibility as they are often required to intervene in situations that are the result of a crisis or trauma. Violent acts in school and in the community can cause trauma to children and adolescents. Witnesses of domestic violence may have similar traumas as those caused by direct physical abuse; behavioral, cognitive, social problems can occur, such as: aggression to colleagues, family members, vandalism, impulsivity, hyperactivity, sleeping problems, depression, cruelty to animals, tantrum, pregnancy or delinquency. The school social worker must establish a therapeutic relationship with pupils who are victims of neglect and domestic violence whereas school should be the place where children should not feel ashamed or threatened, but the place where they should feel protected and safe (Openshaw, 2008, p. 178-179).

Crisis intervention combines a working methodology that can be used in situations which require emergency interventions while revealing the possibilities of short-term interventions. H. Parad was one of the psychoanalytic theorists who adapted the model of ego psychology to the needs of crisis intervention, initially using this therapeutic practice to help beneficiaries solve traumatic situations that exceeded their ability to adapt, such as: natural disasters, the death or departure of a beloved person, the loss of livelihood, serious illnesses or accidents. Subsequently, G. Caplan developed the model of crisis intervention to support families in such situations. Crisis intervention aims at restoring the beneficiaries' ability to adapt and cooperate, whereas social workers make efforts to assess the client's resources, seeking to enable their efforts to overcome the moment. Social workers offer beneficiaries in crisis situations support to regain their strength and self-confidence, to develop adaptive behaviors, which are vital to regain a functional level equal to, or even higher than the one which preceded the crisis. Thus the beneficiary has the opportunity to learn new action mechanisms in social life, which will contribute to the personal development. Therefore, the crisis situation can be turned into an opportunity for growth and development for the beneficiaries of social assistance (Roth, Rebeleanu, 2011, p. 316).

4. Social worker and group counseling in crisis situations

One of the most important activities of the school social worker is to provide support to several pupils at the same time. He/She can perform individual and group counselling, in the second situation it is necessary to plan ahead, establish the size of the group and the time limit. They happen to organize a group successfully, without having too much time to plan and organize members or complete the curriculum. Sometimes the school social worker is asked to provide group counselling in predetermined situations or for an entire class but, as he/she does not know the group of pupils, it is wise to ask the teacher to stay in the room and assist (Openshaw, 2008, p. 162).

The short-term group counselling has rapidly turned into an important and widely used therapy format, with WHO plans, constantly moving to shorter, less expensive and more effective intervention forms. Structured and homogeneous groups are favoured as a problem. A group facing an acute life crisis, such as parental divorce or bereavement, can benefit from eighteen to twenty-four counselling sessions. If the aim is to change persistent problems in short-term counselling, the school social worker may intervene in sixty or seventy sessions. Research shows that members with a milder disorder need fewer counselling hours to achieve significant improvements, as the return to morale can occur quickly and therefore eight or fewer sessions are sufficient to bring beneficiaries back to the pre-crisis levels. Also, if confidence is deteriorated early in the development of the individual, if a loss or trauma has been suffered, it is very likely that short-term counseling will be insufficient (Yalom, Leszcz, 2013, pp. 292-293).

If groups are formed quickly, in order to support pupils in crisis, group members must be assured of the confidentiality principle. Even in crisis situations, it is necessary to obtain the consent of the parents who must be notified that the school offers group counseling to children. When children have been exposed to traumatic situations, such as violence, natural disasters or the suicide of a classmate, the school social worker should advise children who face the fear and insecurity generated by such experiences. In group counseling for pupils, it is necessary for them to be the same age whenever possible, and the group should not be more than ten pupils, to ensure that each of them has the necessary time to speak and to express their feelings. When the school social workers deal with crisis and trauma situations, they must give pupils the opportunity to tell their stories repeatedly, in order to adapt in time to traumatic events. Also, their feelings generated by these events will lose their intensity in time, and the fact that they listen to the other colleagues' stories helps them to accept their own feelings more easily. Most crisis groups probably need to meet once or twice (Openshaw, 2008, p. 163).

Conclusions

The complicated situations of children and young people from disadvantaged/ poor backgrounds are a problem that will affect the future of the whole community, and its seriousness is ignored by the responsible public institutions. Lack of qualified staff, financial resources and vision to solve difficult situations for children and young people continues to be a permanent concern of public social policies. There is a need for reorientation of the social policy from individuals to communities, as we face the risk of transforming social communities (who lived on the margins of society) to evolve into organized crime groups, generated by lack of job opportunities, decreased attendance and the quality of schooling, the lack of perspective to integrate into the community, the lack of opportunities along with the expansion of pathological strategies of survival in poverty and marginalization, which lead to deviant ways of life and keep people prisoners in their own community. Especially children and young people are at risk of getting trapped in communities of “the culture of poverty and learned helplessness”, which reproduce their marginality and underdevelopment by passing them on from one generation to the next one. Social intervention must focus on the change and development of the community, on the change of those social systems that risk consolidating in their own “culture of marginality” (Zamfir, Zamfir, 2020, pp. 30-31).

We mention that a good collaboration between the school social worker, who must coordinate the multidisciplinary team that intervenes to solve social problems, and the family social worker, the school safety officer, the school counselor, the pediatric psychiatry specialist, would ensure the partnership between school, family and community, with beneficial effects on students' mental health and school integration. It is extremely necessary for each educational unit to have a school social worker, as an agent of social prevention and immediate and effective intervention, when problems and /or crisis situations occur.

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