

What's Money Got To Do With It?
The Role of the Topic of Money in the Therapy Relationship

Please take a few moments to write down your responses to the following queries. Really. If you do, it will help you to better understand the findings & conclusions of this article. If you don't, when you are finished reading this article come back and do them. If you don't want to do that, have some of your friends and colleagues answer them. In whatever manner you collect this information, you will be fascinated by the information you collect.

- Write down the first eight to ten words that come into your consciousness when you hear the word "Money".
- Now underline all of the words that you would judge to be signs of negativity in terms of money.

- Write down three things that you are proud of in terms of your relationship to money.
- Write down three things that you feel badly about in terms of your relationship to money.
- Identify which list was easiest for you to come up with.

- Write down your most joyful experience with money.
- Write down your most painful experience with money.
- Identify which memory was easiest for you to recall?

- Now take out a ten or twenty dollar bill and look at it. Write down the answer to this question, what has this ever done to hurt you?
- The obvious answer is that this object you are holding in your hand has done nothing to hurt you. (Unless you suffered a paper cut pulling it out of your wallet or purse). The pain, if you have ever been hurt in terms of money, comes from our experiences with people associated with the experience, not the actual money itself.

If the questions you just answered were about one of your client's sexuality instead of money, and if the answers reflected predominately negative judgments, painful experiences and historic pain, many counselors would be alerted to the possibility that they were looking at a client that had been traumatized in their relationship with sex.

The purpose of this article is to suggest the same is true for a great number of clients in terms of their relationship with money. It is very common that the responses to these and similar exercises will reflect to an outside observer a great deal of client negativity and pain. In our experience, just having clients begin to answer these kinds of questions brings up a wealth of material counselors can use in working with clients. The intriguing thing is that when a skillful counselor follows the money trail, they will always end up with the client at some basic core-wounding place. They will discover as we have in our work with clients, "it's never about the money".

And yet, with all the shame associated with money, according to leading financial planner and leading financial futurist Dick Wagner, was originally developed and is “based on generosity and virtue, not greed, fear, and pain”(Wagner 2004)

It is ironic in a sense that money is seldom if ever explored in the therapeutic setting. Counselors for the most part feel very comfortable and justified in helping clients examine their relationship with their work, partner, family, sexuality, family of origin, nicotine, alcohol and other drugs, food, spirituality, chronic illness, and so on. Why not money?

Working with clients around their money issues does not necessarily involve a counselor learning a new skill set. By using the same techniques and tools that counselors have developed over the last twenty years to help clients resolve trauma associated with physical abuse, sexual abuse, painful families, death and loss, and other life circumstances, the counselor can help clients heal the money wound(s) also.

There are, however, two additional prerequisites required to work effectively with clients. The first prerequisite is the gathering of information and expertise about the nature of money. The second prerequisite is for the counselor to understand and make peace with one's own history and current relationship with money. This is no different a standard than that of a counselor who wanted to begin working with clients around their sexual abuse. Gathering the appropriate information about and coming to terms with one's own sexuality would be considered basic and prudent.

First let's examine some of the information a counselor might find helpful in working with clients around their money issue. We're not talking about the 'external' knowledge of money: how to invest or what a good financial plan looks like. What we are talking about the counselor developing is a body of knowledge about the 'internal' side of money. This internal side of money represents discovering some of the common ideas, beliefs, and attitudes that are at the very foundation of client's behaviors around money (and as we have discovered, many other issues).

Everyone has a relationship with money. That relationship, for the most part, is unconscious. To the degree that the relationship is unconscious, one will be controlled by it, and be susceptible to 'out of control' behaviors around money. Out of control money behaviors include; overspending, debting, hoarding, enabling children, sabotaging financial plans, avoidance/obsession with money issues, misrepresenting financial status, money behaviors and stated values/ideals/goals don't match, and work compulsion are but a few examples.

“Money is the most powerful and pervasive secular force on the planet”. (Wagner, 2004) Though it may be a powerful and pervasive force most people carry significant shame around the topic of money. Primarily the shame manifests itself through people having a sense of having too much or not having enough. At the end of many interviews we are doing with clients for a upcoming book on our relationship with money, clients report that they had great difficulty being honest when we asked them questions about their annual income and net worth. This sense of shame creates a condition that supports nearly everyone carrying secrets in terms of their relationship with money.

“Talking about (one's personal relationship with) money is a social and psychological taboo”. (Wagner 2004) “If I ask a client to tell me about their sex life they will do it, if I ask them questions about their finances they will begin lying” (Robinson 1998)

Money is the number one area of contention in primary relationships and the number one cause of divorce within the first seven years of marriage. (Ramsey 2002) A recent APA study concluded that 73% of Americans reported that money is their number one stressor. (CNN 2004)

It's important to understand that everyone's money behaviors make sense if we understand the beliefs, or Money Scripts™ that drive their behavior. A Money Script™ is a mostly unconscious, only partially true lesson or message about money that is so deeply internalized in early life that it is seldom, if ever questioned, even when acting on the belief causes repeated painful consequences.

An example of a common Money Script is "rich people got that way by taking advantage of poor people". What makes that a Money Script? It is a Money Script because it represents a partial truth.

One client's story represents a typical consequence of following this script. At the tender age of 20, Fred found himself 'worth' \$20,000,000. He was a well known celebrity and hit it big. He was born and lived in abject poverty. His financial advisors sent him to us because for the last seven years he was spending at the rate of three times his income. He had gone through \$13,000,000 in that time. The amazing thing is that he didn't spend the money on himself. He was living in a rented home. He supported about 13 families who were 'bad off'. He paid \$25,000 a month, to take care of stray dogs and cats that he ran across. He reported that he grew up "not wanting to be like those rich people who looked down on him and his family". His Money Script was that being rich made you 'bad'. His behaviors would make sure that he and his family of a wife and three children would be penniless within the next 10 years.

Until our work with Fred and his wife, they had no knowledge of the dire state of their family's financial affairs. Our work with them helped them begin to understand some other possible pieces of the truth. We explain that while it is true that some people take advantage of poor people to get rich, it is also true that others were just in the right place at the right time. They were able to risk following a personal dream or vision and have become fabulously successful financially.

When Fred heard this part of the script, he began gently weeping. That is his truth. He had a dream and worked to make it happen. We call this process re-scripting, an important part of the healing process.

The changes this client has made in terms of his finances in the months following our work with him have astounded his advisors. He is now doing many of the things that he needed and had been advised to do to provide for his family and future. Though this is an extreme example, research indicates that the average individual who comes into money from lottery winnings and insurance settlements, are back where they started financially within seven years.

How pervasive are Money Scripts™? Everyone carries dozens, if not hundreds, of them. Many of them are contradictory. Since they are mostly unconscious beliefs, the half truths and conflicting messages causing incredible havoc. If you did the exercises at the beginning of this article, go back to the 'most painful experience' exercise and see if you can discover a Money Script™ that contributed to the painful situation. Most pain around money comes from acting on one or more of these partial truths or Money Scripts™.

The treatment process is fairly straightforward. The first step is identification of the Money Scripts™. Sometimes, the re-scripting process (adding the rest of the truths to a script as described above) is in itself curative. It works like those moments of enlightenment when one finally ‘sees’ and is able to go into action. Often the Money Scripts™ are tied to strong memories and emotions. These emotional bonds must be dissolved before the client can begin to make changes. The therapeutic techniques that work for trauma resolution situations work well here. In our work we have found experiential therapy tools such as psychodrama, role-play, re-enactment, art, guided imagery and meditation extremely efficient and effective. We also have found it essential to the process of healing that we have a financial professional in the therapy setting at all times.

The treatment model that we developed involves a five day program that combines didactic lectures by a financial professional with experiential group therapy, situated in a retreat setting. In addition to the five-day program, we also work with individuals, couples, and families around challenging financial issues that their financial advisors and counselors have not been able to help them resolve. The success of our program lies in teaming a counselor and financial planner, who are both present during all didactic presentations and group therapy sessions. Our model requires a counselor who has special training in money issues and a financial planner who has special training in the therapeutic process. During the five day workshop, the client is exposed to a series of exercises and discovery processes. The therapeutic goal is financial integration, which we define as a client’s sense of being whole around money where their behaviors and values around money are in alignment. A financially integrated client has the necessary interior (emotional) and exterior (knowledge) money skills that result in sound financial decisions.

The second prerequisite for a counselor to work effectively with clients around their relationship with money may very well be the most challenging. This prerequisite is the counselor working to gain an understanding and making peace with their own personal and professional relationship with money.

Olivia Mellon coined the term, Money Monk, to refer to an individual who has a particular approach to money. (Mellon 1994). A Money Monk might best be described as one who looks to the higher meanings of life, feeling that it is to some degree degrading and debasing to ‘worry about’ something as mundane as money. My experience and observation is that the counseling profession is over-represented by money monks. If you don’t believe me, try talking to the average counselor about raising fees.

I believe that there is also an unspoken professional bias against counselors who might seem interested in the money side of things. A former businessman turned Social Worker told me that in Social Work school at a major urban university, it was very clear that if you were going into the profession looking at a business model, you were going into the profession with the wrong idea. There is an unspoken expectation that the counseling professional take what I call their own personal ‘vow of poverty’ confirmed by a number of other counseling professionals.

Perhaps this struggle or confusion? can be traced directly back to Sigmund Freud who, while equating the process of money with the anal stage of development, at the same time said that he felt best about himself when he was making a living. .

I was drawn to this work out of three very important experiences. The first was being confronted several years ago by a 82 year old friend, who said to me after engaging me in a conversation about whether or not I was taking care of myself financially, “Your problem is that you don’t believe that you deserve more than you need”. Her comment floored me. I knew she was absolutely right, how does anyone feel ok about having more than they need?

Over the next two years, I asked everyone I could, how he or she would answer the question, “Do you deserve more than you need?”. There were two intriguing things I discovered. The first was that nearly every one of them responded, “I couldn’t tell you, because I don’t have more than I need”. These were people making as little as \$40,000 a year to as much as \$400,000 a month. The amount of money a person had or made didn’t seem to make a difference. My thought was that even some of the homeless technically have more than they need, that’s why they have a couple of grocery carts full of stuff. The second thing I discovered was the incredible energy that was unleashed in those I spoke with when I began to talk with them about the concept of money and their relationship to it. I found both of these reactions notable.

The second experience was my own behavior in not following through on a savings plan I created so that I could someday retire. My financial planner helped me discover that I carried an unconscious Money Script™ that said, “Retirement means you quit working”. This script had been handed down through the generations in my family. “When you retire, you quit”. With his help I realized that the reason I was not saving for my retirement, was that I didn’t want to quit doing what I love to do, which is my work. By going through the process that we now use with others, we were able to re-script my belief to “retirement means doing only what you want to do, when and with whom you want to do it. Once I got that concept, I couldn’t and can’t save money fast enough. The remarkable thing is that I thought, “Why wait until retirement to start living that way?” So the quality of my work and life has changed dramatically in the last two years as I move closer and closer to that ideal. Who could have predicted those kinds of changes starting with the challenge my 82 year old friend made?

The following feedback from clients who have completed our five-day financial integration workshop illustrates the richness of using the money portal for healing:

“I realized that my money issues are not about money”

“I learned that my goals and dreams are not money driven or even related:

“I discovered that my Money Scripts that drive so much of my thinking and emotions are tied to my family of origin”

“I discovered that my inability to maturely handle financial issues has nothing to do with money”

“I have been able to clear a lot of pain around my money issues”

“I have been able to see how my past effects the way I spend and save”.

In conclusion I would leave you with the following:

1. Asking questions about a clients relationship to money is an acceptable practice
2. A client’s money experiences can serve as an exceptional treatment portal to their basic core issues.
3. Client information representing traumatic experiences with money can be treated as any other unresolved trauma.

4. A counselor needs specific information and the experiences needed to feel comfortable talking with clients about their money relationships.
5. A counselor needs to examine their own relationship with money, so that they can truly be present for the client as they explore theirs.

So many of us and our clients believe that money is magic, and if there was just enough, everything would come together. Perhaps the answers to the question “Do you deserve more than you need?”, is reflected by Jacob Needleman, author of Money and the Meaning of Life when he says: “We cannot get ultimate meaning out of that which cannot provide ultimate meaning”(Needleman 1991). In other words, it’s not about the money, but our relationship to it.

References

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Other Resources

- Financial Awakenings www.financialawakenings.com
- Onsite Workshop - Financial Integration Workshop www.Onsiteworkshops.com
- Kahler, R. www.consciousfinance.com
- Kinder, G. www.sevenstages.com
- Mellon, O. www.morethanmoney.com
- Wagner, D. www.worthliving.com