Strategies for Creating Clinical Dynamite:

Working with Kids & Their Parents Who Are Anxious & Depressed

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Disclosure

- Dr. Karen Cassiday has no financial disclosures
- The content of this presentation reflects only her clinical experience and opinion
- Dr. Cassiday also wishes she had magic wands to hand out to all participants…
Goals for Today

- Overcome your worst clinical nightmares
- Typical mistakes made by therapists dealing with multigenerational presentations of psychopathology
- Interventions that overcome multigenerational psychopathology
- Maintain therapist optimism and persistence
What is Your Worst Clinical Nightmare?

- Kids who won’t try who have...
- Parents who won’t try and....
- Live in a family culture of anxious despair
  - Pessimism
  - Negativity
  - Passivity
  - Therapist Eaters!!!!
Signs That This is Not Treatment as Usual

- The referral source makes a special request and apologizes profusely for the referral.
- The entire family is in therapy, including couples therapy &/or family therapy.
- Both the parents and the kid are blaming each other &/or the school for their problems & inertia.
- Many good therapists have previously worked with this family/kid.
Other Warning Signals

- Parent says that there is nothing that they can do in front of the kid
- Kid says that there is nothing that can be done in front of the parents
- No one seems interested when you discuss diagnosis & treatment options
  - “Yes, but….”
- Parents & kid openly express dislike for each other and their family
Nothing I ever do is good enough

I cannot stand my kids

No therapist has ever been able to help my kid....

No therapist has ever been able to help me...

We have already tried everything....and we are possibly getting a divorce...

We cannot stand ourselves & neither can anyone else!
Culture of Defeat, cont’d

Depressed & Anxious Parent

Frozen & Passive or Overreactive & Overprotective

I am a hopeless, worthless, bad parent

Everything I try is wasted effort or creates more emotional pain

Overprotection alternates with passivity
Culture of Defeat, cont’d

1. Kid is depressed & anxious.
2. Kid seeks reassurance & support.
3. Parents try to reassure but lose temper & give up.
4. Kid retreats.
5. Kid gets irritable.
6. Parents argue with kid & likely end up clashing.
7. Kid feels justified in gloom.
8. Parents argue with kid & likely end up clashing, then give up.
Anxious Family Cycle of Defeat

- Kid looks for reassurance but sees mom’s anxiety & despair
- Mom & kid look to others for safety signals in vain
- Others get anxious &/or irritable, helpless & hopeless
- Mom sees kid’s anxiety & panics & gives up
- Anxious Kid's distress triggers parent distress
Traditional Approach to Treatment

- Kid gets individual therapy
- Mom gets referred to therapy
- Couple gets referred to therapy
- The whole family gets turfed to family therapy
What’s Wrong With This Picture?

- Quid pro quo mentality
- Failure to identify useful targets
- Failure to work with what you have
- Setting yourself & the patient(s) up for repeat failure
What is the Goal?

- It might not be what you think!
- Remission of symptoms, but which ones?
- Need to target treatment interfering behaviors & beliefs first
- Target symptoms of depression & anxiety second
Creating Clinical Dynamite

How to break up & blast lose the following:

- Unhelpful beliefs (even when they accurately reflect reality)
- Unhelpful behaviors
- Improper focus upon
  - Self-blame
  - Blaming others (including therapists)
- Psychopathology
- Being rescued by professionals
What Can be Done?

Goal #1 - Do not repeat the mistakes of the past

- Find out what has been done in previous therapies
- Assume that you cannot improve upon it
- Aim to be different and creative
Goal #2

- Change the family belief system
- Use concepts used in individual therapies
  - Pleasant events scheduling
  - Act “as if”
  - Radical acceptance
- Defeat defeatism with gratitude, good humor and realistic hope
**Typical Unhelpful Early Targets**

- Failure to complete homework in the child
- Failure of parents to follow through with consequences/rewards
- Lots of expressed negative emotion
- Crisis management mentality
- Chronic fighting/arguing
- The identified disorder(s)
How to Talk to The Parents

- You have accidentally.....
- You have probably already know this...
- You are trying too hard
- You love your child too much
- It’s time for you to take a vacation from parenting, let me show you how
- Most parents in your situation would have given up by now
Why Refocus

- Do you want to be the next therapist who is eaten alive?
- Families who cannot establish reasonable behavioral management will be unable to utilize your interventions
- Time spent with each other is mutually punishing
  - The emotional pain threshold is very low
  - You need to stop the pain fast, before you lose the family
Create Experiences That Motivate

- Experience teaches better than talking

- Create experiences that promote hope, shared well-being & a desire to work together

- Undercut the cycle of mutually reinforcing psychopathology

- Avoid re-creating the cycle of mutual blame
How to Talk to Kids

Would you like to learn how to get your parents off your back?

Would you like to prove them wrong?

Would you like to get your parents to be quiet?

Would you like to stop being the focus of everyone’s attention?
Refocusing the Family

- Tell everyone that they all have a point, that they are all correct
- Normalize their situation, no matter how crazy
- Redefine the problem
  - How can we all learn how to make life better for everyone?
  - Get a long term focus on good living
  - We have to stop the pain before we can heal
What Helps Families Function Well?

- A culture that promotes
  - Good physical health
  - Good mental health
  - Gratitude
  - Acceptance & non-judgement
  - Social Support
Hot Button Areas to Address

- Sleep
- Exercise
- Lack of family fun time, sense of humor
- Therafamily Syndrome
- Nutrition & Diet
- Lack of novelty & excitement
Sleep

- Who is sleeping/not sleeping?
  - Ensure the sleep of the parents first
  - Ensure regular sleep/wake times for the family
  - What will help each person get adequate sleep?
    - Be willing to use antihistamines, melatonin
    - Family practice of laying in bed quietly
    - Fasting from TV/screens time
Exercise

- Who is active/inactive?
- Family walks, bike rides, dancing, dog walking, cat walking, Wii sports, DDR
- Parents need exercise breaks - exercise is compared to meds & therapy
- Make this part of the experiment - let's see what happens?
Failure to do Homework

- Go electronic
  - Use texting,
  - smartphone videos of doing the activity
  - smartphone voice recordings

- Or just scrap it—let them just tell you each week what happened
Ignore the Grumbling

- Normalize grumbling from both sides
  - I can see why it is horrible for each of you
  - Kids & parents always grumble about e.o.

- Rewards from therapist for ignoring it
  - Offer family reframes-family spam
  - Why listen to stupid things that people say?
Creating Family Fun

- Competition for best jokes/worst jokes
- Family movie night-no comments allowed
- Thank you competition
- Family grace that thanks God for 3 things each day
- Family gratitude journal
- Bed time ritual of naming 3 gratitudes
Creating Family Fun

- Contest for funniest Youtube video (ifunny.com)
- Watching comedies together
- Game night with non-competitive games
  - Charades
  - Guitar hero
  - Wii orchestra/rock band
  - Analyze Me, Party Pooper, The Game of Things
Family Fun, cont’d

- Avoid family board games—tends to provoke too much competition and criticism

- Go on weird tourism adventures
  - Use the Weird _your state’s name_ tour guides

- Create a strange family collection
  - Squashed bottle caps, scariest crucifix, most unusual thing done with bacon, weirdest find in a thrift shop
More Family Fun

- Mix up the roles/crazy day
  - Kids cook dinner and parents play video games
  - With teens-kids pay the bills and parents play the video games/watch TV or Youtube.com
Decreasing Hostile Behaviors

- Anti-nagging rule—parents pay a dollar for each nag or criticism
- Practice ignoring each other—playing turtle in the shell
- Report cards given by kids
- Stop futile efforts at persuasion
- Rewards for other family members staying out of a fight
Summary

- Improve family culture first
  - Stop the blame
  - Increase mutual pleasure
  - Instill family pride/positive identity
  - Change the topic of conversation
  - Establish good health behaviors
  - Decrease hostile behaviors
  - Create some fun!
Your Questions?

...and thank you!