



Illustration by Ethel Hammer

Adriane, defy your demons and lighten up!

Conflicting Advice

Anglo-Saxon Therapy Clashes with the Greek Psyche

By Aphrodite Matsakis, Ph.D.

Your obviously depressed *nouna* (godmother) refuses to see a therapist. Your Uncle John thinks counseling is *psahlamares* (rubbish) and even your quite Americanized niece complains therapy is only worsening her identity crisis. Why?

Perhaps for some of the same reasons more than half of Hispanics seeking counseling leave after one session: the clash between the mental health world's emphasis on autonomy and

self-development with the high value many Greek Americans place on family life and friendship. Another area of conflict lies between the Anglo-Saxon stoic ideal of remaining cool, calm and collected no matter what the circumstances and the emotional expressiveness that is more acceptable among Greek Americans and other ethnic groups. In what is sometimes labeled "Anglo-Saxon psychology," emotional expressiveness may be seen as a sign of poor impulse control, "hysteria" or some other negative symptom.

THE FAMILY DYNAMIC

One needn't belong to an ethnic group to love one's family. Nor does one have to be non-ethnic to strive for personal fulfillment and success. However many people have ancestors who came from

relatively communal cultures where family and community obligations take priority over personal happiness.

Problems arise when therapists with little or no training in cross-cultural counseling negatively view strong family bonds as a sign of co-dependency, immaturity or enmeshment. For example, when John's* sister began binge eating and drinking over a troubled marriage, colossal family arguments arose over the situation, causing John's widowed mother also to start "falling apart." To help his family, John sought advice from a therapist.

The therapist thought John's entire family was overreacting to the situation and overreacting to everyone else's over reactivity as well. She told John he was overly involved and needed to let go and focus on himself instead.

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This advice conflicted not only with John's sense of family duty as eldest son, but also with his understanding of the meaning of truly caring about another person. In his Greek psyche, *se agapo* was paired with *se pono* (to empathize with someone's pain on such a gut level that one experiences it almost as if it were [his/her] own). Hadn't his elders repeatedly told him that it wasn't enough for a woman or friend to simply love him? *Prepei kai na se ponesoun.* (When you hurt, a part of them hurts too.)

To John, there was no contradiction between being his own person and hurting because his relatives were hurting. But to the therapist, this meant John's individuality would be forever stunted and she accused him of being co-dependent (translation: emotional cripple) because he loved his family too much.

"There's no such thing as loving family too much!" John insisted.

"Your concern is only hindering their growth – and yours. You need to detach," she replied.

John threw up his hands. "Detach? I need to attach! I'm already losing my sister to alcohol. My aunt won't talk to my mother. My niece won't talk to anyone. We should be pulling together, not going separate ways. I want my family back ... is that a crime?"

When the therapist began talking about attachment disorders and relationship boundaries, John left and never returned. The therapist was relieved. Although her role was

helping people with their feelings, the intensity of John's emotions overwhelmed her. She was used to working with people who wanted to reduce their emotional reactivity or who, after uncovering some strong emotion that was blocking them, wanted to let go of it as soon as possible. She had an arsenal of techniques that guaranteed people relief from emotional distress only if they

were willing to view events in a more positive light, visualize themselves as successes and practice saying certain affirmations or thinking power thoughts.

But John was perfectly comfortable expressing his emotions as dramatically as he wished and had no desire to neutralize them. The therapist, however, couldn't help but be affected by the widespread view that being too emotional signifies weakness or mental instability. In the dominant American culture, if one is too upset, too sad or too angry, [he/she] may be judged by others, even by some mental health professionals, as neurotic, abnormal or addicted to drama. Even being too happy can be seen as a form of denial or childlike naivete.

Yet John had grown up with people for whom there was no such thing as loving too much, dancing too long or suffering too deeply. Depth of emotion was not only respected, but applauded. John could dance as exuberantly as Zorba without being viewed a sissy or a fool; and when dancing a *zembekiko* to show how fed up he was with life, his friends showered him with dollar bills.

Although not all ethnic groups such as Greeks, Italians and Hispanics are emotive, that tends to be the stereotype. Many are reserved, either by nature or by training. Nevertheless, their cultures permit emotional expression if the individual is so inclined. In the face of loss, they are permitted to grieve without being accused of self-pity or dwelling in the past. In contrast, in the dominant American society, the appropriate response to loss, disappointment or rejection is often a form of stoicism. One is expected to

"get over it" as soon as possible. "Don't cry, don't feel, don't suffer or if you do, don't show it" is the message. Even people struggling with massive stresses are expected to remain cheerful and optimistic and "get over it as soon as possible."

In my 30 years as a psychologist, I've found that people coping with irreversible losses or multiple dilemmas seldom profit from Anglo-Saxon therapies, which insist on making lemonade out of every single lemon life has handed them.

Elsewhere, however, suffering is not automatically seen as a defect of character or a sign of mental illness, but rather as a normal part of life and even a pathway to wisdom. Our Greek heritage, from the ancient tragedies to popular songs and everyday conversations, is rich with expressions of the full range of human emotion. Not only the joys, but the sorrows involved not only in romantic love, but in family relationships, friendships, aging, social change and identity confusion are addressed. It is noteworthy that people living in cultures where there is widespread acceptance of the fact that life entails misfortune and injustice as well as joy and goodness have been found to recover more quickly from traumatic events.

It is no accident that the Greek word *pathos* means both pain and passion. The dual meaning of this word indicates that the ancients had grasped a deep psychological truth: that the experience of pain and loss is the birthplace of our joy and creativity. When we are stuck in denying or stifling our pain, we are also crippled in experiencing the happy parts of life. Emotional expressiveness is not the same as being emotionally out-of-control or debilitated by emotion.

When emotions cause one to harm themselves or others or to significantly interfere with functioning, there is cause for concern and need for some type of intervention. However expressing feelings through words, music or art gives them form and thereby contains them. Often giving voice to one's emotions is the first step in controlling them. ©