

## LIVING UNDER THE THREAT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC: PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL REFLECTION OF A HONG KONG FAMILY THERAPIST

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### Introduction

This is a year of turbulence for people in Hong Kong and worldwide. We face the COVID-19 pandemic. The threat and challenges of this health crisis still linger on, with no sign indicating when we shall come out from the tunnel of darkness. Like people from every walk of life, family therapists in Hong Kong are inescapably affected by the pandemic. It is time of disbelief, worry and sadness. It is time for deep reflection of life and of our relationship with nature. It is time to look for opportunities to identify options and possibility for professional practice.

I would like to share with our family therapy community in Hong Kong and Asia my personal journey of facing the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Reflection of life and our relationship with nature

At my younger age I was amazed to read about the influenza pandemic in 1918-1919 and watch a movie on how a big fire in London had rescued the English from the fatal infection of black death or plague that spread across ancient Europe from 1346-1350. The first thought that came into my mind during that time is that all these epidemics will not happen in modern society. The reason is simple. Our sanitary system is good. Our public health service is comprehensive. The saying that "life is fragile and vulnerable" is no more but a cognitive understanding to me, rather than an experiential knowledge.

I came to have close contact with death and dying at the age of 36 when my mother was diagnosed with an end-stage cancer. The death of my mother was absolutely a great blow to me. Besides feeling sad, depressed and helpless, I was deeply pre-occupied with philosophical issues –what is life? How should I navigate my journey of life? It took me a year to grieve my loss and deal with my existential anxiety.

In June 2019 there was an outbreak of social unrest in Hong Kong. During the social unrest, I came to realize that law and order in our society should hardly be taken for granted. I was born and educated in Hong Kong. The stability of Hong Kong society was no longer the same as what I have known in the past. The onset of COVID-19 pandemic further heightened my sense of vulnerability toward life and toward nature. The pandemic can be interpreted as a war of nature against human mankind. It symbolizes the anger and protest of our ecology against people's greedy exploitation of resources in our ecology, a fighting back of the serious pollution and global warming as well as an ultimatum for our survival and sustainability on earth. The systemic thinking of our family therapy training reminds that we are no more but tiny particles of the universe. The pandemic has offered me an opportunity to appreciate the vulnerability and unpredictability of life and deepened my understanding of the wisdom of Diamond Sutra (金剛經): "All conditioned phenomena are like dreams and illusions, are like dew and lightning's flash. This is the proper way to perceive it (一切有為法，如夢幻泡影，如露亦如電，應作如是觀)".

### Looking for alternative way of professional practice

From March to April 2020, our city was in lockdown; so was our university. The Hong Kong government has enforced and implemented stringent social measures such as mandatory mask wearing and social distancing policies, which inescapably affected our professional practice. I could no longer meet the families in need on campus. I had to stop our clinical services. Our onsite clinical teaching was on pause; the same was applicable to our clinical research projects on multiple family therapy. At the same time our university changed our teaching mode from onsite teaching to online teaching via Zoom. Luckily the university had offered timely intensive training for all of the teaching staff to acquire the technological know-how for online teaching.

When I was hiking along the mountain track in the nearby countryside, an idea came into my mind. As

online teaching is technologically feasible, family therapy and family therapy training via Zoom might be possible. I started to search for relevant literature or materials (e.g., ethics of telehealth by AAMFT) in this area. Gary, Wong-Wylie, Rempel and Cook's (2020) paper confirms my idea. The authors recommended ways of better using Zoom for qualitative research, which is also applicable to clinical practice and clinical training. The recommendations include: (a) test Zoom ahead of interview; (b) provide technical information; (c) have a backup plan; (d) plan for distractions; (e) provide a direct link to meeting; (f) consider storage needs; (g) hardwire computer to Internet; (h) uninterrupted Internet connection; (i) create a visual reminder; and (j) manage consent process.

In May I began to offer online family therapy for families in distress and in July I conducted a two-day family therapy training for a social service agency via Zoom. I received favorable feedback from the families and the participants of the training workshop. Practice makes perfect. I have become more confident and comfortable in using Zoom for professional practice, which in turn has increased my sense of mastery of the technology. Never in my life would I imagine that "an old dog" like me would learn a "new trick" — couple and family therapy technology competence.

### Conclusion

Buddhism enlightens us that what is predictable in life is its unpredictability. Birth, aging, sickness, and death are an integral part of experiences in lifespan. The COVID-19 pandemic reminds us once more the importance of living in there here-and-now. Tomorrow may never come but why care about it! We may overlook the opportunity of identifying alternative ways of clinical practice and training if we fix our gaze at the danger. I am pleased to share that I have begun to appreciate the clinical utility of technological knowledge in family therapy and family therapy training. The use of ZOOM in clinical practice and teaching has overcome the geographical boundaries and enabled us to carry out our professional roles and functions during a time when our clinical service was desperately needed by our clients.

### References

Gray, L. M., Wong-Wylie, G., Rempel, G.R., Cook, K. (2020). Expanding qualitative research interviewing strategies: Zoom Video communications. *The Qualitative Report*, 25(5), 1292-1301. Retrieved from <https://nusworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol25/iss5/9>.

