

HYGEIA COUNSELING SERVICES

WORKSHOP:

Neo-Paganism - How Pagan Beliefs Impact Counseling

In this session we will cover topics including:

- What are Neo-Paganism and Wicca?
- Demographics of adherents
- How counselor attitudes may need to change to service these populations
- A preliminary look at spirituality versus psychosis and the challenge these belief systems present in this regard
- How Pagan beliefs impact counseling

Time permitting; we might touch on the similarities between Neo-Pagan spiritual techniques, psychotherapeutic, and hypnotic practices. It is hoped that by devoting study to Neo-Paganism counselors will be better able to service these clients and may find within themselves a greater respect for the many positive values and influences of these religions.

BIO:

Michael Reeder, MS, LGPC is an Associate at Brookland Pastoral Center in Washington, DC and also owner of Hygeia Counseling Services in Baltimore, MD. Michael holds a Masters degree in Clinical Community Counseling and a Post-Graduate Certificate in Spiritual and Existential Counseling from Johns Hopkins University. He is also Wiccan and teaches regularly at several regional and national Pagan conferences.

More information can be found online at <http://www.hygeiacounseling.com>

Michael's blog on Pagan Therapy is at <http://www.pagantherapy.com>

© Michael Reeder. All rights reserved.



What is Paganism?

Neo-Paganism refers to a group of Eurocentric religions that focus on reviving the pre-Christian practices of Europe and/or developing new and borrowed practices compatible with ancient pagan worldviews.

- Wicca (the largest religion in the cluster), British Traditional Witches, Asatru (the worship of ancient Norse and Germanic deities), Hellenismos (the worship of Greek gods), Druids, and many others.
- Immanence of deity and the interconnectedness of life
- A predominant focus on the here-and-now rather than the after-life
- The earth is considered sacred, not a trial, punishment, or exile from the Divine
- A religious interest in and rites to acknowledge the seasons of the year, and other sacred natural processes such as birth, growth, dying, and fertility
- Exploration of ancient wisdom for its relevance to the modern world
- Direct personal deity contact with little to no church hierarchy
- Personal responsibility for spiritual growth and mundane world affairs
- The extensive use of tools and props in religious ritual
- Subdivision of the Divine into components for easier understanding & more personal relationship (gods and goddesses, nature spirits, ancestor spirits, elemental forces, etc.)
- A belief in magic, which may be best thought of as prayer that is enhanced through the use of tools and rituals; and
- A “harm none” philosophy (especially in Wicca); or other strong ethical code



What Paganism is Not

- Aboriginal faiths (Amerindian, African, etc.)
- Santeria and Voodun
- Major non-Abrahamic faiths from Asia (Buddhism, Hinduism) and scripture-based religions
- Satanism is a twisted offshoot of Christianity. Paganism is a separate religious movement
- A Cult
 - Cults have charismatic leaders; separate followers from money, family, and friends; & encourage childlike dependence
 - Paganism encourages study and thought, worldly interaction, and personal responsibility



Common Characteristics You May Encounter:

- A quest to develop the self (internal locus of control?)
- Many Pagans believe in inherent divinity (humans are perfect & divine), only needing to grow into full expression.
- Reincarnation and the earth as a training school for evolving souls
- Pagan interests are many and varied – just about any spiritual or occult topic is fair game (dark night of the soul, meditation, guided journeys, labyrinths, sweats, reiki, shamanic journeying and healing, chanting, self-hypnosis, divination . They are also generally interested in divination (like Tarot cards and runes), herbalism, auras, qabala/kabbalah, etc.)

Wicca Traditions Specifically:

- Often duo-theistic (Lord and Lady).
- Some feel that all of the various gods and goddesses are alternative names for the Lady and the Lord
- Others are “hard polytheists” (pantheon of discretely separate deities)
- Some groups place a stronger focus on the Goddess in their workings

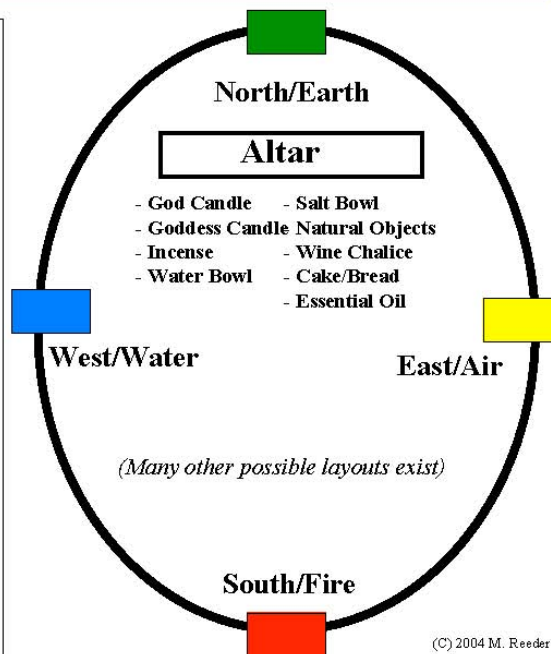


What is Paganism?

A Wiccan Esbat:

(There are many possible formats)

- Cleanse Space/Raise Circle
- Call Elements
- Call in God and Goddess
- Celebration:
 - Poems, songs, meditations.
 - Magical Work
 - Great Rite
 - Bread and Wine
 - Cakes and Ale (Discussion)
 - Thank God and Goddess
- Release Elements
- Release Circle



USA Demographics:

Reliable statistics and demographics are hard to estimate due to reluctance to come forward for fear of persecution, solitary followers unaffiliated with known groups, and Pagans identifying themselves as “no religion”, Unitarian Universalist, or New Age on surveys. Here’s a good attempt:

Estimates in the United States have the Neo-Pagan population placed at between 200,000 and 1,000,000 (See The Pluralism Project at Harvard University, 2007, and American Religious Identity Survey, 2001).

Wiccans doubling in the USA every 30 months (Religioustolerance.org (2007)).

Voices From the Pagan Census (Berger, Leach, & Shaffer, 2003):

90.8% White

64.8% female

52.9% with at least a college degree or better

87.9% between the ages of 20 and 49

28.3% homosexual or bisexual

High rates of acceptance and/or practice of group marriages, cohabitation, and ritual but not legal marriages (called handfastings).

Politically active. Tend strongly towards liberal and democratic parties (only 6.6% are Republicans). Strongly support environmental concerns.

Neo-Pagans generally look like anyone else. There may occasionally be a tendency towards fantasy symbols (like dragons & fairies) on clothing. Some may sport symbols such as a pentacles, goddess symbols, triple moons, and spirals on jewelry or tattoos.

Not all people wearing pentacles are Neo-Pagan – some wear them for shock effect or other reasons.

How do Pagan beliefs impact counseling?

Pending significant research, common sense and personal experience have to suffice.

- Personal responsibility.
 - This religious stance can be used to empower clients towards internal locus of control and taking responsibility for their lives.
 - Internal locus of control has been shown to relate significantly to better coping skills (Pargament et al., 1988, as cited in Wong-McDonald & Gorsuch, 2004).
- Inherent divinity -- should be useful with clients suffering low self-esteem.

- Personal connection to the Divine.
 - Type of gods being worked with might be adjusted to help the client:
 - An artist = Bridget (Irish goddess of inspiration)
 - Social skills deficits = Oghma (Irish god of eloquence) or Aphrodite (Greek love goddess).
 - Clients needing healing and love = nurturing, mothering aspects of goddesses (or the Wiccan Goddess).
 - Look to myths, Jungian, & archetypal psychology
 - Some clients will be amenable to the idea that gods are alive and formational in the make-up of the human unconscious and personality (like Jungian archetypes).
- Pagan rituals and spiritual practices.
 - Full of meditation, guided imagery, affirmations, and relaxation exercises.
 - Many Pagan clients only use these skills in certain religious and spiritual contexts and don't realize that broader use of them could effect mental health benefits.
 - Huge overlaps between many Neo-Pagan spiritual and meditative techniques and hypnotherapy/meditation/guided imagery.
 - "Ground and center" = standard relaxation visualization

How Paganism might impact issues brought to counseling session (Crocker (2005))

- Occasional festivals instead of regular congregational involvement or sparse Pagan populations in some areas may lead to feelings of isolation.
- Questioning the reality of shamanic experiences
- Higher percentage of women, lesbians, and gays, counselors = more conscious, personal grappling with issues of sexuality, gender, and sexual orientation.
- Impact of telling others about their religion (coming out of the "broom closet"), which can impact jobs, relationships, and child custody.
- Symptoms of trauma may be more prevalent, owing to the lack of acceptance or the outright hostility shown by family and prior religious institutions.
- Confidentiality issues may surface in therapy due to many Pagans being forbidden by oath from discussing certain aspects of their training or rituals.
- Strengths that can be capitalized upon including existing familiarity with Jungian psychology, high educational level, strong social support from small ritual groups, the psychotherapeutic value of Pagan rituals, & Pagan leadership training in helping professions.

Examples from my practice

- I work from within the client's worldview. I start from the premise that psychic and religious phenomena can be healthy and assume its ok until I see evidence of dysfunction.
- Multiple clients with anxiety using "ground and center" exercise

- Client afraid to be alone for long periods of time – Designed ritual to call on gods/guardians for assistance, then used drumbeat CD to get into meditative state for 30 minutes. Heard message that he interpreted as it being okay to be himself. A bit more okay being alone after that.
- Dissociative Disorder NOS client – Ritual baths and lesser banishing ritual to feel calm, energetically clean, and safe. Gives overwhelming emotions to tree temporarily until can handle them and takes them back. Uses coven herbalist for sleeping and health mixtures (I’m encouraging psych meds, but no luck).
- Use of counseling decks like “Planning on Purpose” and “Dreaming in Color” that take advantage of Pagan comfort with use of cards in counseling. Allowing the client to use Tarot – either for their own divination reading (while I stick to psychology) or to describe parts of themselves.

Counselor Attitudes and Spirituality versus Psychosis

The professional counselor can demonstrate sensitivity and acceptance of a variety of religious and/or spiritual expressions in client communication.

~ 5th spiritual counseling competency by Miller (1995) & widely adopted by ASERVIC

I had one client quit her former psychiatrist and therapist after he increased her anti-psychotic medications without discussion once she made mention of talking with her goddesses. Our dialogue on this topic quickly revealed her deity contacts to be sources of comfort and strength that in no way damaged her abilities to hold a job, maintain friendships, or otherwise engage mundane reality.

What will you do when your client mentions that:

- the goddess Hecate visited in a dream,
- he regularly sees the dead,
- she danced around a fire at full moon last night,
- he decided how to handle a problem through divination.

Healthy vs. Psychotic:

Careful work needs to be done to make sure such contacts are actually harming the client, causing them to lose connection with reality, and are outside the Pagan norm.

Understand Pagan religious and cultural norms

Understand common sense considerations. Does it bother, hurt, or move the client away from health? Does it interfere with work or everyday living? Can the client put it aside, or tell it to go away for a while? Can the client focus on mundane life when needed? Will the client listen to trusted people to tell him when it’s interfering with life and social

connections? Is the client unduly rigid and inflexible in religious matters? Does it assist the client's functioning in some way and/or bring peace and joy?

Ritual Possession:

- A positive thing in the eyes of many Neo-Pagans. (Does not vary greatly from many Pentecostal Christian practices).
- Clergy leading ceremonies are sometimes considered possessed by gods or goddesses during portions of the event.
- Appropriate behavior during and timing of possession states (according to the norms of the group) may help indicate whether or not these are healthy or indicative of mental illness.

Common Spiritual Emergencies (Grof & Grof, 1989):

- Peak Experiences: Unitive consciousness, becoming One with nature, time and space transcendence
- Possession states
- Communicating with spirit guides and channeling
- Crisis of psychic openings
- Shamanic crisis: Often misdiagnosed as schizophrenia or depression.

So how do you tell a spiritual emergency from straight psychosis?

- Grof & Grof (1989): Change in consciousness involves significant transpersonal emphasis, individual views it as an inner psychological process, capacity to form a therapeutic alliance.
- Lukoff (1985): Ecstatic mood, sense of newly gained knowledge, delusions have mythological themes, no concept disorganization.
- Barnhouse (1986): Responses to voices and visions are in direction of healthier self-understanding, better relations, or constructive action. (Rather than self-oriented, paranoid, and idiosyncratic)

The implication is that there may be something useful about spiritual emergencies in a religious person's development.

Time Permitting -- Pagan spiritual techniques, psychotherapeutic, & hypnotic practices

(Cite examples from workshop "The Similarity of Pagan and Therapeutic Practices")

Voudun & Santeria as a Mental Health System (And to some extent Paganism too)

A houmfor is an all-purpose care society (in Voudun). People go there for community support. They also go to the hougan for cures of physical and mental afflictions.

Many Santerios see therapy and medicine as good for the surface complaints, but religious causes as underlying -- especially if the same issues keep getting "cured" then reoccurring.

Santeros often see Orishas as in the human subconscious, but see them as the real source of the personality. This suggests a place of common ground -- both therapy and Santeria want to help the person balance their unconscious drives. (See Gestalt sub-personalities).

Depression, fainting, obsessions, hypochondria, phobias, and unreasonable fears are most likely to be religiously handled.

Why santerios or hougan cures might work:
(As seen from a psychological perspective only)

- Authority and suggestion: The religious authority says it will work.
- Projection: The internal psychological issue is projected out where it can be manipulated. For example, a depressed woman is told that a Lwa is displeased with her. She can fix the depression by honoring the Lwa. This projects the problem external to herself (so she believes there is nothing wrong with her). She then has to get busy with preparations (activity might lift the depression). The Hougan gives her herbs to get back in balance with the Lwa (perhaps they fight depression!). She gets to fight the ambiguous problem in concrete ways.
- "Therapy" adapted to religious views: The hougan's cures are in accordance with the patient's religious views. Beginning evidence that therapy in accordance with religious views is more effective.
- Fear & respect: Fear and respect of the Lwa and the Santerios may provide sufficient motivation to overcome problems.
- Catharsis Event: The bloody sacrifice of a chicken provides a climax and relief of anxiety.
- Group Therapy: Santerian mass resembles group therapy -- a safe place to disclose and reveal selves. Group cohesion and trust. The group members provide support and the Santeros moves from person-to-person providing counseling.
- Hope: A clear path to cure is revealed.
- Gestalt: Gestalt therapy tries to integrate sub-personalities. Santeria and Voodun try to balance the demands of the Lwa/Orishas. Role-playing, confrontation, reliving, and re-experiencing unfinished business all occur during masses.
- Relaxation: Candles and incense in rituals could function as relaxation techniques.

Personal Impressions:

- In addition to being Pagan myself (and so religiously believing in it) I have the following unproven hypotheses based on personal experience so far:
 - Hypothesis: That magical religions can serve as psychological support for persons who are just mildly mentally ill and are easily suggestable.
 - Hypothesis: That persons with traumatic backgrounds are attracted to magical religions and often well-supported by them.