



Chrysalis Community Counseling Services: 30 Years of Feminist Therapy in Sonoma County

By Mary Susan Sams, Psy.D.

During a recent conversation with Chrysalis colleagues Lisa Mathiesen, Executive Director, and Debra Kelly, MFT, Clinical Supervisor, they offered a sense of the history and unique place of Chrysalis within our community of local mental health resources.

According to Chrysalis co-founder Debra Kelly, back in the early 1980's a group of Sonoma County feminist psychotherapists and counseling interns began exploring the possibility of creating a low fee, feminist therapy clinic. The group was motivated in part by their desire to support the presence of feminist therapy in the County, as well as the feminist tenet that no one should be blamed for being abused. While the latter may now seem a given, back in the 80's a lack of adequate services for sexual assault survivors and a "blame the victim" mentality presented serious problems for victims of abuse. As a part of the growing movement to address this inequity, other like-minded Sonoma County resources emerged, such as Women Against Rape (now Verity), a new YWCA women's shelter, and M.E.N. (Men Evolving Nonviolently). The presence of such agencies is no longer unusual.

So this hale and hearty group of clinicians did it. They mobilized to build an agency providing feminist therapy to women and their families and providing feminist therapy training and a stipend to their interns.

Incorporated in 1982 as Chrysalis Counseling Services for Women, the mission was—as it is today—to provide high quality, affordable feminist counseling to Sonoma County. Chrysalis continues to provide training, supervision, and consultation in feminist therapy to interns and licensed therapists.

According to Lisa, the question she hears most often is: But what do you mean by feminist therapy? Having answered so many times over her 26 years with Chrysalis, Lisa laughs (who says feminists have no sense of humor?) and sets the record straight. "It's not really a modality, as much as a set of values

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that can be applied to most modalities of treatment." Several core values guide feminist therapy, for example, to acknowledge and minimize the inherent hierarchy and power imbalances that affect the therapy relationship. Feminist therapists

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respect the integrity of the therapist-client relationship through transparency and appropriate self-disclosure, e.g., sharing relevant personal experience or identity, or acknowledging the limits of training and competency (now called “scope of practice”). Another core value is the pursuit of personal and professional growth, whether seeking



timely consultation, training to enhance our skills and abilities, or opportunities to work for social change. At Chrysalis, this shared commitment to personal and professional growth has sparked unusually strong bonds among interns who have graduated from Chrysalis but remained in connection in long-term consultation and practice groups.

The feminist therapist also supports client empowerment, self-definition, and self-determination, while acknowledging that one’s circumstances and self are affected by economic and social position in society. As feminist therapists, we believe that we live, work, and provide therapy in a society in which gender does make a difference. According to Kelly, “In addition to the intrapsychic work we do, feminist therapy recognizes the social, economic, and spiritual influences on peoples’ lives.” While feminist therapists are generally attuned to social

justice issues, some choose to actively and publicly work for social change.

But does Chrysalis serve only women? Lisa clarifies the priority on working with women and women’s issues, while emphasizing that the treatment of men remains integral and necessary to that mission. This commitment to enhancing inclusion and minimizing marginalization is found in another unique aspect of Chrysalis: the commitment to function as a collective. In practice, this means that interns, licensed therapists, clinical supervisors, executive director, and board of directors all work as a cooperative unit to direct evolving policy, as well as day-to-day decisions about the running of the agency.

This contributes to the strong sense of agency that has resulted in a considerable number of Chrysalis interns who have stayed or returned as supervisors and licensed counselors, which brings a great sense of history and grounding to the agency. With 12 interns and licensed therapists, Chrysalis provided 4500 hours of individual, couples, family, and child therapy in 2011. Over the years, Lisa—the glue that holds this little agency together—has fine-tuned a model in which less than 18% of the annual budget

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goes to administrative costs. This is a remarkable feat, but necessary for an agency that operates solely on client fees and donations from the community. Lisa added, “donations are what make it possible for us to subsidize clients fees for those clients most

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in need.”

A staff of seven supervisors provides individual and group supervision for interns and post-docs, as well as consultation to the licensed counselor group. They currently have several Chrysalis alumni as supervisors and an extremely bonded and supportive group that meets monthly to consult and collaborate around supervision progress and challenges, as well as agency and administrative matters.

Thanks to the founding members and the good, hard work of all the women who have been a part of Chrysalis over the years, they're still going strong! In fact, this fall Chrysalis celebrates their 30th anniversary. The staff is tremendously excited to welcome alumni and friends from the community to the Open House on Friday, September 28, 2012,

4-7 p.m., to help celebrate this remarkable milestone.

Chrysalis welcomes licensed psychologists interested in providing clinical supervision. Please feel free to contact Chrysalis supervisors and RPA members Mary Susan Sams, Psy.D., and Robin Anderson, Ph.D., about their experiences as Chrysalis supervisors. The referral of pre- and post-doctoral psychology interns, as well as MFT interns, is also welcome. Chrysalis offers rolling admission to the intern group throughout the calendar year.

For more information or to make a donation to Chrysalis, please visit their website www.chrysaliscounseling.org. For referrals or for more specific information about services, please contact Lisa Mathiesen at (707) 545-1670 ext 208.
