

# **SPACES as a Counseling Approach in Treating Traumatic Experiences of the Typhoon Sendong Victims in Iligan City, Philippines**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The creation of a counseling approach for Filipinos remains a big challenge to counselors. Foreign counseling methods do not meet the needs of Filipino clients in addressing diverse issues. Moreover, different regions have different perspectives as far as problems, etiology, manifestations and solutions are concerned. The study aimed to show that SPACES, an innovative counseling approach, can be a tool in counseling. SPACES is multidimensional counseling approach designed by Dr. Alexa P. Abrenica, a Filipino psychologist, which evaluates the spiritual life, physical health, attitude, creativity in solving problems, emotional health, satisfying work and support network of Filipino clients. It is believed that a difficulty in one dimension will affect and bleed into other components. The author used SPACES during a counseling service mission at Iligan City, Philippines after the onslaught of typhoon Sendong in 2012. In the case of Mina, a 43-year old widow and a victim of typhoon Sendong, SPACES was proven effective after its results were used to provide her treatment. SPACES allowed the client let go of all the negative thoughts from the traumatic experience and considered it as an enriching experience. The use of SPACES proves that counseling approaches must resonate culturally to achieve the real purpose of counseling.

*Keywords* – Psychology, post-trauma counseling, counseling approach, SPACES, case study, Iligan City, Philippines

## INTRODUCTION

Typhoon Sendong (international name: Washi) is the 19th tropical storm that entered the Philippine area of responsibility in the year of 2011 and considered the deadliest storm based on the data of National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC) (Malig, 2011). The death toll reached a record of 957 and still counting with hundreds of people missing (Daniel, 2011). Government agencies and concerned citizens worked hand in hand to account for the dead bodies and to help people who had lost their loved ones (Malig, 2011).

Seldom hit by storms, citizens in 13 provinces in Mindanao will never forget the fateful night of December 16 (Daniel 2011). Cagayan De Oro and Iligan City were the areas hardest hit by Typhoon Sendong (Gluck, 2012). Villages such as Cala-Cala, Isla de Oro, Isla Delta, Isla Copa, Isla Bugnaw, and Isla Baksan were declared a “no return” zone namely (Ledesma, 2012). The typhoon left hundreds of people traumatized because of the tragic flash floods in many areas in Mindanao. The raging waters from Cagayan River together with big logs from the mountains proved too much for people especially those living near the river banks. According to Archbishop Ledesma (2012) post-trauma counseling is considered one of the most urgent need of the survivors of typhoon Sendong because of the difficulty of coping for the lost loved ones and their entire home. Although material donations continue to overflow after the onslaught of the typhoon, the mental and emotional support is considered vital in the survival of the people.

In times of natural disasters of this magnitude, counselors, and mental health professionals are very much needed on the ground to help traumatized victims. Tropical storms are realities that cannot be avoided because of the location of the Philippines being surrounded by bodies of water. Although Filipinos are known for being resilient, traumatic experiences, can often trigger anxiety and depression on a deeper level.

The word “trauma” means a negative reaction from a very stressful event (Giller, 1999) as explained by Allen (1995):

It is the subjective experience of the objective events that constitutes the trauma. The more you believe you are endangered, the more traumatized

you will be...Psychologically, the bottom line of trauma is overwhelming emotion and a feeling of utter helplessness. There may or may not be bodily injury, but psychological trauma is coupled with physiological upheaval that plays a leading role in the long-range effects. (p. 14).

Trauma differs from one person to another based on the subjective perception of the situation. Few people escape the direct or indirect effect of the traumatic event (Allen, 1995). Sometimes, a person tries his best to avoid situations that serve as a reminder of the tragic event not knowing that facing this tragedy can lead to healing (Allen, 2008). A person who is experiencing trauma experiences various symptoms of the disorder. Trembling every time the event is being recalled in memory, anxiety, sleepless nights, crying and being emotional without much reason, and substance dependency are some of the symptoms if a person has trauma (Levin, 2011).

Regardless of the source of emotional trauma, it contains three common elements: it was unexpected, the person was unprepared, and there was nothing the person could do to prevent it from happening (Jaelline, Segal, & Dunke, 2005). These truths mean that it is not about the situation but how a person perceives the experience and how it affects one's psychological functioning. A natural disaster can surprise even the richest and the most prepared person. The realization that the control is not anymore within reach and one is helpless to avoid it sometimes proved too much for a person.

In the Philippines, traumatic events are being treated lightly by some Filipinos. The Filipino spirit is not weaken even with the most tragic events (Dela Cruz, 2013). But reports prove that not every Filipino is water-proof regarding adversities. The study of Halili-Jao (2011) revealed that there are many Filipinos who are depressed and traumatized after a very stressful event especially after a natural disaster. Filipinos cope with the situation by talking with someone, often with a friend (Buan, 2013) or through alcohol drinking or smoking. However, trauma is not an overnight feeling that would soon go away but a persistent recurrence of the traumatic event that is hard to handle. Since Filipinos cope with such situations differently because of cultural values and environmental influence, there is a need to conceptualize an approach that would best fit the Filipino norm.

According to Corey (2015) culture and diversity of the client is very important. He further discussed that Western approaches claim a universal application and assume that values and perspectives are the same in all nations

lacking the essence of multiculturalism. In the case of individuation wherein there is a separate existence of self, as the foundation for maturity and choice, the person is bounded by the culture he/she was exposed to. The responsibility rests primarily on the self not on groups that is why universal applicability cannot be considered.

Cultural assumption of counselors to their clients often resulted to biases that resulted to the refusal to avail of the services of mental health institutions by different populations (Corey, 2015). Western counseling techniques also focus on structures of the self as separate entities, not interconnected with one another. According to Gines (1999), “Western counselling approaches which are predominantly used in the Philippines work well “in their environs of origin but certain elements in the strategies “seem” inapplicable to Filipinos because of cultural values.” Numerous studies have shown the effectiveness of western counselling approaches (Comstock, Hammer, Strentzsch, Cannon, Parsons, & Salazar II, 2008) but there are still some doubts to its actual applicability (Enriquez in Pe-Pua & Marcelino, 2000).

In a study of Abrenica (2002) where 116 counselling outcome master’s theses were reviewed based on these four criteria: method of assessment, instrument used, experimenter’s expectancies and statistical inference, it was found out that more studies are needed to solve the issue as to whether these approaches work with the Filipino people. Deficiency on cultural perspective and understanding, assumed labels, and fixed ideas and concepts, serve as a hindrance to rapport building and counselling efficiency. Salazar-Clemenita (2000) suggests that in all these efforts the Filipino worldview should be considered.

Gines, (1999) claimed that because the Philippines has a network of values, beliefs and assumptions that are part of the human environment, it is logical to use indigenous therapies that fit the Filipino psyche. Most western approaches do not have the spiritual dimension in their technique which is very important in the Filipino culture (Abrenica, 2002). The Filipino’s belief to *babaylans* and *catalonans* can be traced way back its existence. *Babaylans* are considered the first Filipino psychologists and the values and beliefs exhibited by Filipinos like “utang na loob,” (debt of gratitude) “hiya,” (shame) “mainit na pagtanggap sa panauhin,” (warm welcome to guests) encompass Filipinos’ own ideologies and traditions (Pe-Pua & Marcelino, 2000).

SPACES published by Dr. Abrenica (2002), is an acronym for S – Spiritual Life; P – Physical Health; A – Attitude; C – Creativity in Solving Problems; E – Emotional Health; S – Satisfying Work and S – Support Network. It is believed

that a difficulty in one dimension will affect and bleed the other components (Abrenica, 2013). The study aimed to show SPACES as an innovative counseling approach that can be a tool in counseling. The author was able to utilize SPACES during a counselling service mission at Iligan City after the onslaught of typhoon Sendong on January 20-21, 2012.

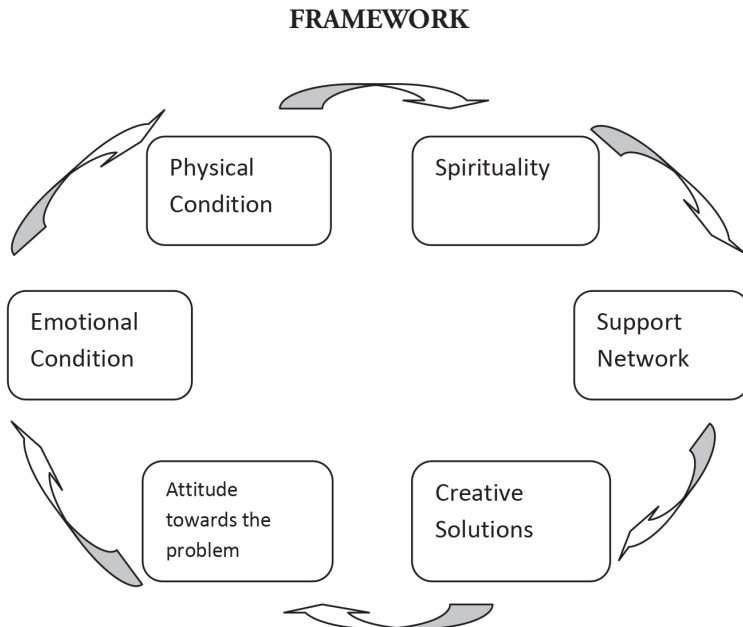


Figure 1. Model of SPACES as a Multidimensional Approach

### SPACES as a Counseling Approach

SPACES is viewed as a multidimensional approach (Abrenica, 2002). It is also worth mentioning that Filipinos from different regions have different perspectives as far as problems are concerned, their etiology, manifestations and solutions. The approach is based on the idea that problems can manifest themselves in the various dimensions of a person. In a book entitled, *SPACES Wellsprings of the Middle Years and Beyond*, Dr. Abrenica (2002) discussed the following dimensions:

**Physical Dimension.** Physical manifestations as a consequence of the problem or as a reason for consulting a counselor possibly somatization when a client has

concerns that are difficult to handle; persistent headaches or a migraine; cardiac condition, ulcers and so on; also refer to physical changes as a consequence of developmental transitions that need to be clarified by a professional.

**Emotional Dimension.** Emotional outbursts; depression can accompany the physical condition.

**Spirituality or belief in a Supreme Being.** This is very much a part of the Filipino worldview (Abrenica, 2013). Filipinos are very spiritual and prayers are seen as an antidote to problems.

**Attitude** is the tendency to act towards or away from an object, event or person. A positive attitude indicates an easier journey into a return to full functioning and wellness. A negative attitude can pose a greater challenge to the counselor. In the Filipino context, attitude toward the problem can be viewed as a test of faith, punishment for sins or wrong decisions.

**Creativity.** Inventiveness, or creative power or ability (Thesaurus). Points to creative solutions to the problem; Viewing the concern from a broader perspective can present various ways of dealing with it; Lack of creativity or obscurity of talents because of early experiences may figure in this component.

**Support Network of family and friends.** Family and friends can be identified as support system but also irritant in one's existence.

**Satisfying work** can be a problem source or therapeutic balm for the troubled soul.

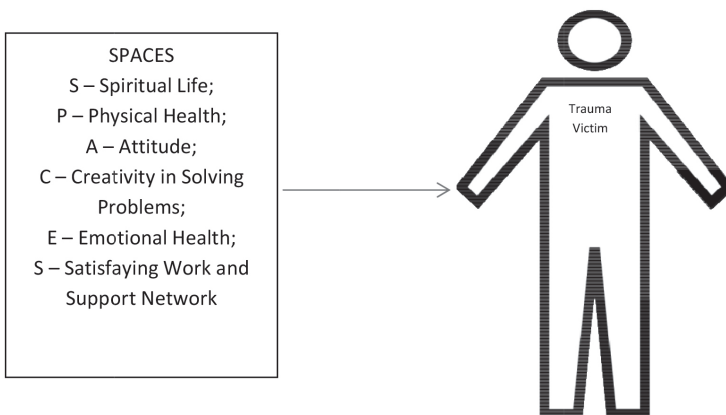


Figure 2. Conceptual Paradigm for SPACES as a Counseling Approach for Trauma Victims

Figure 2 shows the paradigm on how SPACES was utilized to help trauma victims of typhoon Sendong. The experience of the respondent was evaluated using SPACES. During the initial interview the client exhibited symptoms of trauma that can be attributed to the tragic events that the client personally experienced. The client was able to describe important areas of her life like spirituality, physical dimension, and attitude, creativity in solving problems, emotions, and support network. Spiritual dimension plays an important part in the culture of Filipinos. Western counseling approaches focused more on cognitive and inner consciousness while SPACES substantiates the belief to a Supreme Being. Prayers are therapeutic balm that calms the soul. SPACES compared to most western counseling approaches gives emphasis to faith and belief in God and use this as a positive coping mechanism which can be good to work through problems. Support network also exhibited the Filipino value of “pagmamahal sa pamilya,” (love of family) extending help and concern to members of the family.

## METHODOLOGY

### **Research Design**

The study utilized a single case design to analyze the traumatic experience of a survivor in Iligan City during the onslaught of Typhoon Sendong. Since the case study design is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (Yin, 2009).

A case study is a detailed study of a small number of cases. The collected data were analyzed taking into account the characteristic features of each case. Factual situation is vital for a case study to be able to understand the subject and how it was influenced by the environment and internal factors (Yin, 2009).

### **Population and Sampling**

Purposive sampling was used in the study for the respondent needs to meet certain criteria to be qualified. The respondent was chosen because of the symptoms of trauma present being one of the survivors of Typhoon Sendong.

### **Participant of the Study**

The study was a single case study of a survivor after the onslaught of Typhoon Sendong. The participant came from a referral of PILMICO, a company in Iligan City, which spearheaded the counseling sessions for the employees and their relatives. The criterion set was the actual exposure of the client to a traumatic event.

### **Data Gathering Procedure**

The class of Dr. Alexa Abrenica on counseling trauma victims expressed their desire to help traumatized victims in Iligan City. After coordinating with a university headed by Dr. Miriam Que, referrals from PILMICO, were given. The number of clients was based on trauma victims who voluntarily agreed to have a counseling session. The researcher utilized SPACES during the session with the trauma victim with the able supervision of Dr. Alexa Abrenica, the author of SPACES.

### **Data Analysis**

The client was encouraged to talk freely about her experience. Patterns were generated that describe the event utilizing the dimensions in SPACES. Seven areas in the life of the client were given detailed attention and importance such as spirituality, physical, attitude, creativity in solving problems, emotions, satisfying work and support network. These dimensions were used to generate initial codes and eventually themes, which comprise the final report. A comprehensive description of the clients' experience was done to fully analyze the gathered data and also to describe the effect of SPACES to the well-being of the client.

The study was limited to application of SPACES on a single individual who experienced trauma after the tragic Typhoon Sendong. The analysis was based on the subjective experience of the respondent. It was also limited to one respondent because it was based on referrals and the limited time that the researcher was able to stay in Iligan City to get information. During service missions wherein too much grief and sadness are present, the right words to say are crucial in counseling sessions. Since the main aim of the author during the mission is to help trauma victims, SPACES was utilized to the individual who was in dire need of counseling.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

SPACES is useful as a counselling springboard in opening avenues with the client because it covers almost all issues and concerns. One of my clients showed signs of trauma and was counseled using SPACES. My first-hand experience in the session with a trauma victim was not easy since rapport building was crucial during the initial meeting. Genuine concern and empathy were important gestures that helped the client feel safe and comfortable with the therapist. SPACES gives direction during the interview and assessment of the client.



## I. PERSONAL PROFILE

Name : Mina (not her real name)  
Address : Barangay Hinaplanon  
Age : 43 years old  
Status : Widow

## II. COUNSELING PROCESS

Mina, is the sister of Charity, wife of one of the employees in PILMICO, Mina is presently staying with her sister because their house in Barangay Hinaplanon was one of the hundred houses that were washed out by raging waters from the river during the onslaught of typhoon Sendong.

### a. SPIRITUAL LIFE

Mina's spirituality can be attributed to her strong faith in God. It was only God that was on her mind the whole time that typhoon Sendong was lashing its wrath. She is a born again Christian. Three of them were in the house according to her. Her son was with his girlfriend in the living room while she tried to rest in the bedroom as the rain poured down hard on their roof. She started praying that the rain would stop since it was the first time that they experienced the rain pouring for hours. Around 11:00 pm, her son started shouting as they rushed to the second floor of their house where she was resting. The first floor was submerged in water for 30 minutes, and she told her son that they swim to the door since both of them are good swimmers. But his son's girlfriend did not know how to swim. The rushing waters started to reach the second floor and they climbed on their cabinet almost reaching the roof. "Ma pray ka, ma pray ka!" ( please pray mother), his son kept on shouting. Mina started praying hard, "Lord please save us!" as the water reach their thighs. "Ma subukan ko sirain yung bubong!" (Mother, I will try to destroy the roof). Her son started banging the roof with their stand fan. The girlfriend started crying as she was losing hope while Mina was praying in her mind. As if a miracle, her son managed to put a large hole on the roof and climbed. As he was pulling Mina and his girlfriend on the roof, the water continues to rise reaching their neck. Mina thanked the Lord for saving them that fateful day.

### b. PHYSICAL DIMENSION

As Mina recounted the tragedy of typhoon Sendong she started crying. Her hand was also trembling so was her voice. She always experienced shortness of

breath and felt her heart racing so fast every time she recalled what happened to them. At first, she could not eat that much for about three days, for she cannot believe that she lost everything and many of her neighbors died after the calamity.

#### c. ATTITUDE

Although she is experiencing some negative thoughts and fears, Mina is optimistic about the future. She and her son started to attend the church service for she believes that only God can help her in what she is going through. She also encouraged her son to go back to work in a factory so that he will be busy and will not always think of what happened. During the time of the counseling, Mina did not have plans in coming back to their barangay to rebuild their house although her son expressed his desire to go back. Mina wanted to start their life in a different place so that she will be able to forget the tragedy.

#### d. CREATIVITY IN SOLVING THEIR PROBLEMS

Mina's decision was somewhat tentative since she wanted to start life anew in a different place. She was also thinking to transfer to Cavite since one of their sister is in Dasmariñas. Her decision, however, was not yet final since her son wanted to stay in the same barangay because of his girlfriend.

#### e. EMOTIONAL DIMENSION

Mina was still very emotional during the counseling session. She cried as she recalled the tragedy of Typhoon Sendong. She still experienced nightmares and woke up trembling and shaking. As she prayed to the Lord, it was often with tears, and she found comfort in giving all her fears and worries to God. Every time it rains, she felt fearful that it would not stop. Mina was also very anxious about her son's decision since it was already five years when her husband passed away. She could not stay in Cavite if her son was not with her.

#### f. SUPPORT GROUP

Mina has a very solid support group with the family of Charity. They were the ones who convinced her to come to PILMICO for a counseling session. According to Charity, they encouraged Mina on decisions she made. They allowed her to stay with them as long as she likes until she feels she is strong enough to start her life. Mina is also very thankful to her pastor who always counsels her to remain strong in her faith with God. Mina believes that she will be able to recover with God's help and very thankful that there are people who are willing to help and support her.

#### g. SATISFYING WORK

Mina has a small sari-sari store before Typhoon Sendong washed away all her properties. During the counseling session, Mina has no plans to go back and re-establish her business. Charity, however, tried to convince Mina to start a sari-sari store in their compound. With no decision on when and how to start, Mina did not accept Charity's offer.

### III. CASE CONCEPTUALIZATION

**Problem:** Fearful feelings every time memories of the tragedy come to mind and related incidents (every time it rains). Anxiety for not being able to decide where to start because of son's decision.

**Precipitating:** Negative emotions were the result of a tragic incident by Typhoon Sendong which drastically changed their lives. Properties and lives were lost after the typhoon. The anxiety felt is caused by a different decision of mother and son on where to start their lives. The mother wanted to begin in another place because of the trauma she felt while the son expressed desire to stay because of his girlfriend.

**Perpetuating:** Crying, shaking and trembling were some of the manifestations of the fear that Mina felt every time she remembered what happened. Not being able to convince her son to start in another place also adds to her fear and anxious feelings.

**Predisposing:** No predisposing factors

### IV. TREATMENT PLAN

After the counseling session, the counselor conducted a relaxation technique to calm the client. She was able to let all her negative thoughts out of her mind so that she can relax. Using the results of the SPACES, the counselor pointed out strengths and areas of improvements to guide the client on what to do.

1. Spirituality and strong faith in God helped Mina to get over her traumatic experience. The counselor encouraged the client to continue with her prayer life since it gave her the strength to move on.

2. Cognitive restructuring was also recommended especially when it would rain. Instead of associating the rain to the tragedy, the client was encouraged to associate it to the miracle that God has done to her family. She was encouraged to thank and praise God every time it rains so that her mind will not be preoccupied by negative thoughts.
3. Relaxation technique like breathing deeply and meditating using God's word was also a tool in dealing with stress and anxiety.
4. Eating well, physical exercise and good rest were recommended to help her recover fast.
5. Her optimistic attitude can be utilized so that she can do more activities making her productive.
6. Her support group can serve as a motivating factor in helping her do more productive things like going to church, attending counseling sessions, engaging in business endeavors so that she will not think about the tragedy the whole time.

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on the counseling session, using SPACES as a counseling approach was seen to be effective. Since the Filipino culture is more expressive compared to others, talking to the client about the different dimensions was an enriching experience. I agree that one of the concerns of the counseling field in the Philippines is to make counseling approaches resonate culturally (Abrenica, 2002) and we are proud to have counselors who continue to create counseling methods that are applicable to our culture. Spiritual aspect is one of the highlights of SPACES, an area which is lacking in most Western approaches. Filipinos are known for their deep devotion with God and often use their faith to cope with problems and difficulties in life (Abrenica, 2002).

SPACES as a multidimensional approach is evident during my counseling session with Mina. Her fears and anxiety which is an emotional dimension can also be linked to physical dimensions like trembling and difficulty in breathing. Her anxiety also affects her creativity in making decisions and her feelings toward the decision of her son to stay. What is good about Mina is her strong faith in

God, her positive attitude, and her support group, areas that are also linked to one another that is why she did not succumb to depression and had high hopes of recovery.

## TRANSLATIONAL RESEARCH

The study will benefit persons who had experienced traumatic events in their lives. It will give insight into the emotions and thoughts of victims and how SPACES as a counseling approach can help persons who had experienced trauma as a result of a tragic event. Filipino counselors can utilize SPACES as they conduct counseling sessions with their clients. The consideration given to the values and culture of Filipinos will aid in effective diagnosis. The study will also be significant to the government so that loved ones of the victims of natural disasters will be given much-needed support psychologically. SPACES is another contribution to the counseling profession since it is culture sensitive and adheres to the Filipino values and belief systems.

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