

CONNECTIONS

Healthy Individuals, Strong Families, Thriving Communities

Fall 2020



Counseling Through COVID: YFC Community Triumphs Over Challenges

Mental health issues do not stop during a pandemic. In fact, COVID, along with months of home confinement, often magnifies problems for individuals of every age dealing with life traumas, behavioral issues, and emotional and relationship distresses. With COVID's rapid spread, Youth and Family Counseling's (YFC) leadership team had days to successfully implement an entirely different method for delivery of mental healthcare. On March 20th, YFC's Libertyville and satellite offices closed, forcing all clinical staff to cease in-person appointments and utilize only electronic outlets and video conferencing platforms to provide vital therapy sessions to clients throughout Lake County.

Two of YFC's clinical staff, Bithynia Abarca (Marriage and Family Therapist) and Dr. Jim Shackelford (Licensed Clinical Psychologist, Marriage and Family Therapist, and Certified Substance Use Counselor), shared with CONNECTIONS their experiences about adapting and counseling virtually during the pandemic.



**Youth & Family
Counseling**

***Opening doors to
mental healthcare
so people can cope,
heal, and thrive***

continued inside



Bithynia Abarca
MA, AMFT



Dr. Jim Shackelford
PhD, LCP, LMFT, CADC

How has COVID affected your caseload and changed the types of issues your clients face?

Bithynia Abarca: When COVID first affected our services, a third of my clients requested a pause. A majority of those were parents and Latino clients, and it was due to several factors: lack of privacy at home, not understanding video technology, or, fear of a session being hacked into, and worry about ability to pay. Now, the story is much different. My caseload is full as existing clients are coming to terms with the current situation, and I have a lot of new, mostly Latino clients, requesting to do family work, which makes sense. Families start to look deeper into matters they may have avoided in the past or been unaware of previously.

Jim Shackelford: Many years ago, I read a book on thought reform and brainwashing in Chinese and Korean concentration camps. China used isolation to break down prisoner morale, Korea used overcrowding, no privacy was allowed. COVID combines both of these stressors: isolation and too much togetherness. For example, one recovering client had faithfully attended AA meetings until the pandemic struck. Meetings then stopped and virtual AA meetings were just not the same. He feels isolated and has to actively work at connecting. He now meets with his sponsor in a park and is also deepening his relationship with members of his family. On the flip side, crowding in homes—due to remote working, e-learning, no participation in faith or community activities—is creating way too much togetherness. Change adds to stress and anxiety, and COVID has added way too many changes.

Bithynia: Some clients and I have created new treatment plans based on their current needs. Most of what I see is the fear of, or actual, loss of income. In other

cases, it's coping with sadness, not being able to socialize, or feeling ostracized by family for not feeling, thinking, or acting the same way they do about the coronavirus.

Have certain client populations been more severely impacted?

Jim: The elderly patients are definitely on edge. Staying fit and healthy in the best of times is challenging for seniors. No gyms, no gatherings, getting needed supplies and food safely, no family celebrations, all these factors contribute to making life harder for the elderly.

Bithynia: I saw it mostly with my Latino clients. Many worried about high-risk family members and, also, the dilemma of job loss or work reduction. Some clients were scared to take an essential worker job but knew it was necessary.

As a counselor, what is the greatest challenge you faced in providing therapy virtually?

Jim: Clients are caring for family members, often in the background, often compromising privacy and confidentiality. This may mean a client's deepest issues do not always get addressed. And, building the therapist-patient relationship is harder.

Bithynia: With teletherapy the connection is literal. Sometimes I lose important information the client is trying to convey, or I cannot read non-verbal communication. Also, there is an emotional sense of connection through the sharing of physical space that teletherapy does not provide.

What are the biggest challenges your clients faced?

Bithynia: Probably the change itself. We had to process through our new "normal" and some clients fought change, others grieved the change. Most have come to accept the way things are.

Jim: One basic challenge for my clients is understanding and using technology. Some do not have computers or devices with cameras and speakers, others do not understand what an URL is or how to sign in using IDs and passwords. Some clients only use phones and I miss seeing their reactions.

And the advantages of teletherapy?

Bithynia: Clients don't have to worry about transportation or taking time to get to our offices. Those who prefer teletherapy are my younger clients who are better acquainted with technology.

From the Executive Director



Dear Friends,

Seven months ago, when Illinois' COVID Shelter-in-Place orders took effect, YFC abruptly shifted from in-person counseling sessions to teletherapy. Since then, we have delivered well over 5,000 counseling sessions. While we re-opened our Libertyville office in June, many of our clients still prefer to connect virtually.

Video conferencing platforms have made accessing treatment easier for some people and more difficult for others. To that end, we are currently working to open additional doors to mental healthcare through the imminent launch of several new initiatives. Please stay tuned—the next *CONNECTIONS* issue will contain full details about these innovative and exciting programs.

But programs are only as good as the people who run them, so I owe a heartfelt and huge shout-out to each of YFC's teams.

Since March, our Board of Directors has logged countless hours in meetings strategizing next steps for our organization and its financial sustainability. Our exceptional YFC staff has successfully managed new schedules while working from home and accommodating e-learners, mastered new technologies, and handled magnifying clinical issues. Several loyal donors made early or larger gifts, providing the operating support to design new programs and retain our talented, experienced staff.

Thank you—I am immensely grateful for all the amazing people on Team YFC.

While I rank mental health as one of the greatest issues confronting our nation today, making it so that people can get the treatment and support they need is a problem we should be able to solve if we work together. If you aren't already a member of Team YFC, please join us. The people we serve need you!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Janelle". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Janelle Moravek
Executive Director

Please Help YFC Meet the Need

In a typical year, YFC provides over \$300,000 in therapy fee subsidies to clients demonstrating financial need. Suffice it to say, 2020 has been anything but "typical." COVID, social unrest and economic uncertainties have added incalculable stress and anxiety for YFC clients, many of whom live in underserved Lake County communities. Our client base and therapy session appointments have grown exponentially this year and show no signs of abating.

YFC was founded on the belief that everyone should have access to quality mental healthcare, regardless of ability to pay. Many donors have contributed to YFC most generously this year. Thank you for your gifts and endorsement of our mission.

However, the need for support is even greater right now. As a YFC friend, we hope you will take this opportunity to make a financial contribution, or perhaps consider making an additional gift before December 31st. To contribute, please use the enclosed envelope or visit www.counselingforall.org/donate.

Every gift makes a world of difference in the lives of people YFC serves.

Thank you!

Cheers to YFC's Million Dollar Dream Team



After eight years, Maria Rill (left) and Anne Brandt (right) “retired” this fall as co-chairs of YFC’s Gala, the Auxiliary’s annual fundraiser. Since 2012, this dynamic duo has raised over \$1,085,000 for YFC, helping pave the way for the organization’s recent growth. “We are indebted to Anne and Maria for their

incredible commitment to YFC, our Auxiliary and the Galas they have so skillfully and creatively co-chaired,” said Executive Director Janelle Moravek. “Their contributions are truly incalculable. I know they look forward to working more behind the scenes and supporting future Gala chairs,” noted Janelle.

Counseling Through COVID continued

Jim: Teletherapy is ideal for clients who are homebound, have health issues or limited access to transportation. Also, individuals with social anxiety or those who are sensitive in relationships definitely do better with telehealth.

Is teletherapy here to stay?

Bithynia: Without a shadow of a doubt!

Jim: I hope so.

Reflecting on the last seven months, what has impressed you the most about YFC as an organization?

Jim: We had to alter many processes previously performed on paper to completing them electronically. There were many challenges with all the technology changes. YFC’s staff has been exceptional in rising to the occasion. Gina (Tober), our clinical director, is sharp and has a great sense of humor. That helps! As therapists, our biggest challenge is working with children. You can’t play games on the floor when you are counseling remotely. YFC staff is always finding creative ways to interact.

Bithynia: I have always believed in YFC’s spirit of community and these months have only highlighted that strength. I don’t think we are the same agency we were; there are so many levels where this community came together. Our Board of Directors, clinicians, administrative staff and donors were, and are, always thinking about different ways to meet the needs of the communities we serve and maintaining YFC as a beacon of support for all people with mental healthcare issues. We face the challenges but we do it together!

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CounselingForAll.org
facebook.com/YFCLibertyville

Youth & Family Counseling helps people of all ages and all walks of life cope with life’s challenges and heal from traumatic events. We believe everyone should have access to mental health treatment when they need it—the well-being of our children, families and communities depends on it.

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