CASE STUDY 4: THE FICTIONAL CASE OF BATMAN/BRUCE WAYNE

This is a case study of the Bruce Wayne/Batman character played by actor Michael Keaton in the original Batman movie. Bruce Wayne is an extremely wealthy man who lives in a vast mansion, alone except for his loyal, elderly manservant, Alfred. In contrast to the old Batman television series, which portrayed Wayne as a "playboy," a social butterfly, the movie is truer to the original D.C. Comics characterization of a darker Bruce Wayne, a man who is somewhat lonely and aloof. But in any case, Wayne has a secret: an alter-ego identity as the masked crime-fighter, Batman. Batman takes the pulse of sleeping Gotham City from his state-of-the-art electronic "Batcave," then moves through the streets in disguise, punishing criminals and protecting the innocent.

In the course of the movie, Wayne falls for a news photographer, Vicky Vale (played by actress Kim Basinger). Vale is intent on discovering Batman's true identity, and thereby becomes a focus of interest of the city's archcriminal-du-jour, the Joker. At the same time Vale is seeking to unmask Batman, she also begins to dig into Bruce Wayne's past, trying to understand him. She discovers that his parents were murdered before his eyes when he was a child, and that he revisits the scene of the crime on its anniversary.

The Joker (played by actor Jack Nicholson) is a sociopath, a former small-time crook who sets himself up as a big crime boss after an accident in a chemical factory leaves him horribly disfigured. Even though Joker's injuries are a direct result of his own actions, he blames Batman and seeks revenge. Joker plays on the fears of Gotham's police, who are not sure whether to hail Batman as a hero or to arrest him, since he seems to be almost as bad as the criminals he purports to fight. Batman's desire for concealment, the fact that he only appears at night, and the somewhat raw justice he deals out make police and criminals alike wonder with whom they are dealing.

CASE SUMMARY

Identifying information:

Bruce Wayne is a 35-year-old white male, single, who lives alone and administers his philanthropic concerns.

Presenting concern:

Bruce sought assistance with general anxiety and difficulty with relationships. He says he is feeling like he should settle down, perhaps marry, as he recently turned 35; however, he has never had a serious, committed relationship with a woman and fears he is not able to establish one.

Background, family, and relevant history:

Bruce's father was a well-known physician; he and Bruce's mother were prominent members of Gotham City society. When Bruce was 10 years old, his parents were murdered in his presence on a city street. Bruce has had nightmares and flashbacks of the scene ever since. After the death of his parents, Bruce continued to live in the family mansion, cared for by a manservant, Alfred, who is also a family friend. Bruce reports that, although he has many social contact and has no difficulty engaging with women and pursuing sexual relationships, he has no real intimates besides Alfred. He says he often feels lonely and as though no one really understands him.

Bruce reports a disrupted sleep pattern because of feelings of anxiety: Whenever he learns of innocent people being victimized by criminals, he is unable to sleep. He actively seeks out information about crimes that have taken place, avidly reading newspapers and frequenting police department briefings. Bruce revealed that he has created a secret persona, called "Batman," a masked crime-fighter. When he is in the guise of Batman, Bruce is able to move freely about the city, stopping crime. Alfred is the only other person who knows about Bruce's activities as Batman. Bruce estimates that he spends about half of his waking hours in the persona of Batman. Bruce has recently become involved in a romantic relationship with a news photographer; he says he is struggling with whether to tell her about his alter-ego.

Problem and counseling history:

Bruce reports that he has a history of sleeplessness and general anxiety ever since the death of his parents. He has no previous history of counseling.

Counselor goals and course of therapy to date:

Bruce has come in for three counseling sessions; it was during the most recent session that he disclosed his activities as "Batman." Counselor goals include establishing a warm therapeutic relationship, alleviating anxiety and sleep disturbance, and encouraging Bruce to evaluate whether previously adaptive behavior may have an undesirable effect on his current life.

Diagnostic Impressions

Using the <u>DSM-IV-TR</u>, prepare your own multi-axial diagnosis to describe Bruce Wayne/Batman's symptoms, and "compare notes" with others in class!

DEVELOPING AN INVERTED PYRAMID FORMULATION

<u>STEP 1 – PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION:</u>

Sleep disturbance; general anxiety; loneliness; recurrent nightmares; persistent flashbacks of parents' murder; lack of satisfaction with relationships; compulsive collecting of crime information

STEP 2 – THEMATIC GROUPINGS OF SYMPTOMS:

- (1) Re-experiencing a traumatic event
- (2) Restricting range of affect
- (3) Persistent symptoms of increased arousal

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder?

<u>STEP 3 – THEORETICAL</u> INFERENCES

(Existential-Humanistic):

- (1) Need to confront the implications of choosing to live a restricted existence
- (2) Need to engage in self-confrontation

<u>STEP 4 – NARROWED</u> <u>INFERENCE</u> (Existential-Humanistic):

(1) Search for meaning
(ie., human suffering can be turned into human achievement by the stand an individual takes in the face of it)

INVERTED PYRAMID CONCEPTUALIZATION NARRATIVE EXPLANATION

In the inverted pyramid case conceptualization for Bruce Wayne, the presenting concerns listed in Step 1 were sleep disturbance, general anxiety, loneliness, recurrent nightmares and persistent flashbacks of his parents' murder, lack of satisfaction in relationships, and hyper-awareness of and collecting of crime information.

These symptoms were then collected into thematic groupings in Step 2. The recurrent nightmares and persistent flashbacks of his parents' murders were characterized as "re-experiencing a traumatic event," as Bruce does more than just remember – he reports actually feeling the fear and recalling the sights and sounds of the event. Loneliness and lack of satisfaction with relationships were grouped together as "restricted range of affect:" Since Bruce described his relationships as many in number but lacking in intimacy, this may be an indication of an inability to have loving feelings. Finally, sleep disturbance, general anxiety, and compulsive collecting of crime information were seen as a sort of hyper-vigilence and grouped together as "persistent symptoms of increased arousal." As a further delineation, these constellations taken together may support a mental disorder diagnosis of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder.

For Step 3 – Theoretical Inferences, an existential-humanistic approach was used. From this perspective, it is important that the utility or adaptiveness of Bruce's behavior be acknowledged. In response to a traumatic event in his childhood, Bruce developed a very creative way to maintain the core of his being, and, indeed, to continue to grow into a person able to act in the world. However, as he matured, Bruce has come to realize that he is somehow incomplete, not quite what he might have been. There is something missing, and his awareness that the missing piece is an ability to form stable, meaningful relationships is what brought him to counseling. It will be the task of the counselor to help him confront the fact that his isolation is the direct result of the course he has chosen. Implicit in this stance is the belief that, while his behavior may have been adaptive in the past, it may have ceased to be so now. He may be ready to move to a deeper level of self-understanding.

Continuing with the existential-humanistic approach, the bottom line is the universal human search for meaning: How can one make meaning out of experienced and witnessed human suffering? This is Step 4 – the deeper level that may be reached through the therapeutic journey with a caring, genuine psychotherapist.

TREATMENT PLANNING I: INVERTED PYRAMID STEPS 1 & 2 TREATMENT GOALS, INTERVENTIONS, AND MEASURE OF CHANGE

A solution-focused treatment plan for Bruce Wayne might have the following goals: 1. sleep without being disturbed by dreams of his parents' murder; 2. be able to describe the traumatic event in as much detail as possible; 3. experience increased comfort and ability to talk and/or think about the murder without emotional turmoil; 4. identify current feelings/cognitions/actions/physiological effects that are the result of the trauma experienced in childhood; 5. learn how PTSD symptoms affect personal relationships, functioning, etc.

Corresponding interventions that would be used include: 1. teaching relaxation, biofeedback, and positive imagery to induce relaxation and encourage healthy sleep; 2. gently exploring the recollection of the facts of Bruce's parents' murder and his emotional reaction at the time; 3. using guided imagery and systematic desensitization to gradually reduce the intensity of the emotional response; 4. teaching about trauma, its impact on survivors, and their subsequent adjustment; and 5. talking therapy to explore the effects of PTSD symptoms.

One way to measure outcomes or change would be to track the number of sleep disturbances Bruce experiences. He could be expected to engage in a behavioral outcome of telling one other person about his parent's murder. (Eventually he could be expected to engage in a behavioral outcome of telling another person about his activities as Batman). Finally, Bruce's progress in treatment would be measured by his own report of improvement in the quantity and intimacy level of his relationships.

TREATMENT PLANNING II: INVERTED PYRAMID STEPS 3 & 4 TREATMENT GOALS, INTERVENTIONS, AND MEASURE OF CHANGE

Using an existential-humanistic approach, the basic goal for therapy would be to enable Bruce to recognize that his choices are keeping him from becoming all that he is capable of being. He would be helped, through a positive and caring counseling relationship, to confront the fear he has been avoiding in his waking life yet reliving in his dream life. He would be confronted with his own choices that are limiting his growth – behaviors and thoughts that Bruce himself described as the reasons he sought therapy. The restricted existence that does not allow for intimate relationships must be named and brought out into the light so that other options, other choices, can be explored. For example, what would happen if... he told his girlfriend that he is Batman?

As therapy progressed, Bruce would be encouraged to think about what new response he might make to the suffering he witnesses every day. His progress in therapy would mainly be measured by his own report of lessened anxiety. Bruce's becoming more fully engaged with other people would be another measure of occurring change.