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The Money Taboo: How It Affects Both Therapist and Client

It was suggested in the introduction that a money taboo is responsible for the avoidance of money issues. Let us first consider what lies behind this claim. By doing so, we will be taking the first step toward understanding inhibitions with regard to money and will be beginning to remove the roadblocks to understanding our clients and providing effective treatment.

WHAT IS THE MONEY TABOO?

What does it mean to say that money is a taboo subject? After all, people talk about money all of the time. Turn on your television set and you will hear reporters or commentators talking about taxes, interest rates, mortgage rates, the stock market, and government spending. On a face-to-face level, we tend not to share details of our financial situations; our feelings, attitudes, or beliefs about money; or how we behave when money is involved. We may talk about a stock in which we have invested or how much we won betting on the outcome of some sports event. In the face of a recession, we may commiserate over our need to cut back on spending, but

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we are not likely to talk about the size of our bank account or how much we owe on our credit cards or our tax bill. Several accountants and financial advisors I have spoken with have said that some of their clients are reluctant to reveal their financial circumstances, even when asking for their services. People often marry without having even a basic idea of how much debt their spouse will bring to the marriage or without discussing their expectations about how much income they expect their partners to earn, who will be in charge of the family money, and how all this will relate to their future well-being. Many husbands and wives do not discuss money. Children are often discouraged from asking about their parents' financial status and are, thereby, deprived of the opportunity to learn about the role money plays in their lives.

WHY IS THERE A MONEY TABOO?

Why is money a taboo subject? Freud's (1908/1959) identification of the equation *money equals gold equals feces* and its connection to anal eroticism suggests that shame is a powerful motive for reticence in money matters. A preoccupation with "filthy lucre" is experienced as unseemly. Similarly, identification of money with other issues, such as power, sex, love, or narcissism, which may become conflicted, may also result in inhibition of thinking or communicating about money. The basis for the money taboo also has sociological explanations. According to Lloyd (1997),

> in a society that claims to be a classless meritocracy on the one hand and a capitalist paradise on the other, there is no acceptable level of wealth. We have to pretend to be equal even as we know ourselves to have vastly different opportunities depending on our income. This contradiction necessitates that we speak of money euphemistically or keep quiet. (p. 50)

The money taboo is a cultural phenomenon. It does not exist, or is much weaker, in some parts of the world, such as Norway and Israel. Where the taboo is present, people give a variety of explanations for their reticence regarding money. They may, for example, suggest that to ask or tell others about their money would create social distance, would be an invitation for others to take advantage

6 Money and Psychotherapy

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of or judge them negatively, or might rob children of the incentive to work hard. They might express shame or guilt, claiming that they are not worthy of the money they have inherited, or fear that they will not be appreciated or loved for themselves. Of course, they may abide by the taboo and say that talking about money is not in good taste.

The very nature of money can make it a source of anxiety and add to the taboo. According to the dictionary (Stein, 1982), money is "something generally issued (by a government authority) as a medium of exchange and measure of value" (p. 861). According to Wikipedia ("Unit of Account," n.d.), money serves as "a unit of account" for measuring the value or cost of goods. This becomes a problem to the extent that people see themselves or others as persons of account or of no account based on income or not monetary worth. People do not like to be pigeon-holed based on the amount of money they possess, and they may experience some shame when they do it to others. Thus, when they have thoughts along these lines, they keep those thoughts to themselves.

As a taboo subject, money may become magnified in people's imaginations, often far beyond its real power to affect their lives. The philosopher John Stuart Mill (1863/1953) claimed that the worth of money is based only on things which it will buy, but money is often desired for itself and the love of money is one of the strongest moving forces of human life. Money may be seen as evil and to be avoided or as a source of salvation and the be-all-and-end-all of what is needed for happiness or success in life.

The avoidance of talking realistically about money and the magnification of money's importance are likely to create misplaced beliefs about and attitudes toward money that become problematical. These can result in greed and stinginess; working too much or failing to work; reckless spending, gambling, investing, or shopping; or committing embezzlement, robbery, and even murder. Problems with money can result in depression, anxiety, poor self-esteem, or grandiosity.

If therapists fail to understand and overcome the power of the money taboo to affect their clients and themselves, they will remain handicapped in their clinical work. They will be unable to provide effective help when issues involving money are part of their clients' problems. When therapists are able to inquire freely about money, it can become a powerful lens through which they can understand their clients' development and their concerns.

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Why is the money taboo stronger in America than in some other countries? Cultural history may have something to do with it. Much of the early settlement of North America was based on commerce. New Amsterdam, the Massachusetts Bay Company, and Jamestown were established by European nations as commercial outposts. Profit was an important motivation for settling in the new world for some, but religious freedom was the motivation for others. Religion and commerce do not always sit comfortably together. The Puritan forefathers had no qualms about making money and acquiring wealth. Indeed, it was considered a sign of grace to be financially successful. However, propriety dictated that wealth not be flaunted. In other words, Puritans were expected to work and they felt blessed if they prospered, but they were also expected not to show off or brag about their wealth. If they were not prosperous, they might have felt embarrassed or unworthy because God did not bless them with enough money to meet their needs. This ethic of not flaunting wealth might have contributed to creating the money taboo.

HOW CAN WE KNOW WE ARE AFFECTED BY THE MONEY TABOO?

Imagine that you are attending a professional workshop and the leader says that he plans to chose one member of the group to tell everyone else how much money he earns. He also says that, if called on, you will not have to reveal this information but, if you chose not to do so, he would like for you to explain to the others in the group why you do not want to do this. How would you feel, realizing that you might be the one who would be put on the spot? In workshops, when I have suggested doing this, therapists experienced discomfort and sometimes intense anxiety. When I revealed that I did not really plan to ask anyone to answer this question, relief was the feeling generally expressed. This led to a useful discussion about why the possibility of being asked about money was so uncomfortable.

Now, imagine that you are you are an intake worker at a clinic where fees are determined based on a clients' income and assets. You ask the clients to include this information on the application form but they resist. When you ask them why, they reply, "You tell

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