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Practitioner Profile: An Interview with Barbara Mitchell, LCSW

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An Interview with
Barbara Mitchell, LCSW

Barbara Mitchell, LCSW is a clinical social worker and certified Imago Relationship Therapist who has maintained a private practice in New York City for over 30 years. Her work in the addictions field, which is informed by self-psychology and a 12-Step approach, led her to the discovery that one's relationship to money can be transformed from self-destructive to life-enhancing.

Keywords: Mitchell; financial therapy; addictions; 12-step approach; self-psychology

Q. Tell us a bit about yourself.

A. I am licensed clinical social worker and certified Imago Relationship Therapist who has maintained a private practice in New York City for over 30 years. I work in the addictions field, which is informed by self-psychology and a 12-Step approach. This has led to the discovery that one's relationship to money can be transformed from self-destructive to life-enhancing.

Q. Define what you do professionally.

A. In my private practice in midtown Manhattan, I provide individual and couples therapy to adults. My clients are primarily professionals in the corporate, legal, and financial world. They seek help with relationship problems at home and at work, confusion about career choices, work/life balance decisions, as well as anxiety, depression, and compulsive disorders (drugs, alcohol, sex, food, and money).

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Q. What activities encompass your professional responsibilities?

A. In addition to my clinical work, I train and supervise other therapists in identifying and treating money problems. As president of the board of New York Association of Imago Relationship Therapists, I am actively involved in the activities of our chapter. I am a member of three peer consultation groups in which colleagues share and discuss our cases.

Q. How long have you been engaged in your professional activity?

A. 34 years.

Q. What led you to your professional calling?

A. I grew up in South Africa and India, the child of American ex-patriots. I was profoundly affected by the dehumanizing effects of poverty and political repression on the people I loved and their countrymen. My sense of injustice was further fueled when I returned to this country just in time to become caught up in the anti-poverty and civil rights movements. After college, I decided to apply to social work school with the intention of acquiring the skills I would need to help the disenfranchised gain more control over their lives. I was determined to make a difference.

I ran out of money at the end of my first year of graduate school and was on the verge of having to withdraw when I came across a notice inviting interested students to apply for grants to be trained in alcoholism treatment. I wasn't particularly interested but I was desperate, so I applied and was awarded an NIMH grant for full tuition and a stipend. I didn't know what to expect, as I knew little about alcoholism other than my misconception that all alcoholics end up on skid row. To my surprise, I was drawn in and fascinated by what I was learning. I really "got" how addiction worked, behaviorally, psychologically, and within the family system. I decided to change course and use my talents and newly developing clinical skills to make a difference in the lives of individuals caught in the trap of compulsive disorders.

Over the next fifteen years, I pursued further training in individual and group therapy while I gained experience in treating chemically dependent people from a wide variety of backgrounds and circumstances. I utilize a flexible approach, calling on the disease model, the 12-Step framework, and a psychodynamic perspective as needed. Later on, I added Imago Relationship Therapy to my toolbox, allowing me to work effectively with couples in recovery.

This was an exciting time, as the identification and treatment of the alcoholic employee began to be mandated in industry and the corporate world. I collaborated with colleagues in EAPs and professional organizations as we developed policies and treatment guidelines together. I am reminded of that time now, as our new field of financial therapy is

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getting off the ground. As then, professionals from a number of fields are coming together with the common goal of creating something new. Again, here is an opportunity to make a difference.

Q. How are you compensated?

A. I receive fees directly from clients, based on an hourly rate.

Q. Do you work alone or do you have a team?

A. While I maintain an individual practice, I have a network of related professionals to whom I refer when necessary.

Q. What theoretical framework guides your work when dealing with clients and/or conducting research (e.g., some practitioners use a solution-focused theoretical framework while others are more eclectic)?

A. My own relationship with money has been a powerful source of inspiration for my work. In late 80's, I had to confront the money demons that were wreaking havoc in my personal life. I found that the addictions model gave me the framework to understand and

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deal with what was going on, while the 12-step approach supplied the healing. Coming out the other side, I was motivated to share the wisdom I had gained from confronting my money disorder. I developed a treatment approach in which we work on a practical and emotional level simultaneously. Dealing with the specifics of the money problem brings the relationship issues (for a couple) or the underlying emotional distress (for an individual), to light. I have found that working in this way has a synergistic effect: "It's about the money, and it's not about the money."

Q. What needs to happen so that 10 years from now we can say that financial therapy is a respected field of study?

A. I'd like to see our organization establish minimum qualifications for practice and encourage empirical research on both a quantitative and qualitative level.

Q. What benefits can the Financial Therapy Association provide to others doing work that is similar to your professional activities?

A. As we are a growing field, this association can support our professional identities by holding conferences where we present our work in a collegial atmosphere. Online, topic-focused discussion groups would enhance our communication with one another and highlight areas for collaboration. Exploring contact with professional organizations in the field of behavioral economics, marital law, and accounting would get the word out that we have something to offer their members.

Q. If others are interested in finding out more about you personally and professionally, where can they obtain this information?

A. I would love to hear from my new colleagues, either to brainstorm about something or just chat. I can be reached at mitchell.relationships@gmail.com or 212-867-5507.

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