

SECRETS OF HAIR - A CASE STUDY IN ADOLESCENT PSYCHOLOGICAL COUNSELING

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Abstract: This article explores the underlying reasons for frequent hair washing, interpersonal relationships, and family relationships through case studies, and demonstrates the power of personal growth in the case. In addition, I conducted self-evaluation and reflection on the process of this case.

Keywords: Hair washing; Loneliness; Mental health

1 GROWTH JOURNEY

1.1 Emotional Journey: Exploring the Secrets of Hair

Zhang Xiaojun sat uneasily on the sofa, her hands unconsciously twisting the hem of her clothes. Her figure appeared slender, and her shoulder-length hair looked somewhat unkempt, clearly neglected, with a few strands falling messily beside her cheeks. Her eyes were dark and bright, like a bottomless, deep pool, but at this moment, what stirred at the bottom was unease and confusion. Her lips were slightly pursed, with the corners turned down, displaying a hint of both stubbornness and helplessness. Zhang Xiaojun's whole demeanor was extremely reserved; her feet were neatly together, and her hands were folded on her knees. Occasionally, her fingers would twitch slightly, betraying the turmoil within her.

I gently closed the door behind me and sat down across from Zhang Xiaojun. "Hello, Zhang Xiaojun, I'm glad you could come here."

Zhang Xiaojun expressed that she had some difficulties in interpersonal relationships; she was always afraid that others would dislike her. As a result, she frequently washed her hair. When we delved deeper, Zhang Xiaojun mentioned negative experiences from her childhood with her mother, which led to a fear of water. She explained that when she was very young, her mother would take her to the bathhouse for a wash, and during hair washing, her mother wouldn't care if the water splashed into Zhang Xiaojun's nose or mouth; she would just wash her hair without considering Zhang Xiaojun's feelings.

Later, Zhang Xiaojun developed a strong aversion to water. Even now, despite her hair not being messy, she still chooses to wash it frequently, and everything she uses—her tissues, body wash, shampoo, and conditioner—must have a fragrance. She always feels particularly dirty. Zhang Xiaojun believes that if she doesn't come into contact with water or doesn't wash her hair, she will feel very dirty, and those around her will dislike her. Yet, she also hates water, so she feels compelled to force herself to adapt to it, leading her to wash her hair frequently and expose herself to water.

Here, a logical conflict arises: Zhang Xiaojun is afraid of water, but at the same time, she fears being dirty. Water, to some extent, can help her stay clean, yet her fear of water is also attacking her. Amid this intertwining of fear and disgust, Zhang Xiaojun has developed a compulsive behavior pattern—frequently washing her hair[1].

Zhang Xiaojun believes that this behavior is both an escape from fear, as she frequently exposes herself to water in an attempt to gradually adapt and reduce her fear, and a way to mask her feelings of disgust, as keeping clean helps her avoid the dislike and disdain of others. Additionally, she further conceals her fear of water and dirt by using scented tissues, body washes, shampoos, and conditioners.

Zhang Xiaojun has integrated her fears and disgust, developing a coping behavior pattern. However, this logic also makes me feel the internal conflict she experiences. Upon closer reflection, I considered another possibility—that Zhang Xiaojun uses "frequent hair washing" to express her anger and dissatisfaction, and she seems to take pleasure in it.

In this part, I shared my perspective: "It seems you have a profound understanding of this behavior, but I sense another meaning behind it, as if you are using this behavior to express your anger and dissatisfaction. Of course, this is just my feeling, and it may not be accurate."

Upon hearing this feedback, Zhang Xiaojun began to mutter softly to herself, and I couldn't quite make out what she was saying. Later, she hugged her head and cried uncontrollably, unable to calm down for a long time.

1.2 The Meaning of the Ring: Focusing on the Power of Self

Zhang Xiaojun showed me the ring she made at a craft shop, which is engraved with her initials, zodiac sign, and birthday. She believes that she is like a trapped little bird, tethered by this ring she created.

In this part, I expressed a different opinion: "I have some different feelings, but I'm not sure if they are right; I'm sharing them just for your reference. First, this ring is something you actively chose to make. Secondly, all the symbols

on it are related to you. Lastly, in the past, when people raised carrier pigeons, they would also put a ring on the pigeon's leg, which is somewhat similar to this ring. It feels like you have found yourself, and this ring serves as an anchor, a reward you give to yourself." After hearing my thoughts, Zhang Xiaojun quietly began to cry.

I noticed that Zhang Xiaojun's hair didn't cover her eyes. She believes that the eyes are the windows to the soul, and she actually doesn't want others to see her inner self. Now that she wants her eyes to be visible, it indicates her willingness to open up.

Zhang Xiaojun mentioned that she has recently been feeling anxious, often about thoughts concerning the future. Before going to sleep at night, she finds herself zoning out, and she usually forgets what she was thinking about after contemplating certain matters. Zhang Xiaojun also draws icebergs but struggles to identify what specific thoughts she is having; not being able to pinpoint those thoughts makes her feel very conflicted.

Zhang Xiaojun is unsure how to face the problems that may arise in the future, but she understands that these issues have not happened yet. Almost every day, she finds herself worrying about future matters. When I asked Zhang Xiaojun what she usually thinks about, she mentioned that there are so many thoughts that she finds it difficult to settle down and complete her current tasks, yet when it's time to share, she can't remember anything. Many times, she tries to control herself to avoid thinking about these things, but she can't help it. This compulsive behavior piqued my curiosity, so I posed a question: "What do you think you are doing?"[2]

Zhang Xiaojun replied, "Maybe I'm self-torturing? It could also be avoidance, but I feel like I don't really have anything to avoid—it's either interpersonal relationships or loneliness." After saying this, Zhang Xiaojun fell silent.

During our conversation, we uncovered a key piece of information—loneliness. In previous sessions, Zhang Xiaojun had been sharing the hurt caused by past events, but the topics gradually shifted to the present or the near future, as what she is currently worried about may occur later. Whether living in the past or the future, she realizes that she isn't living in the present. So, what is it that she doesn't want to face in the present? She inadvertently mentioned the word "loneliness."

It seems that Zhang Xiaojun's recent turmoil and anxiety may stem from a fear of and avoidance of loneliness. She attempts to fill herself up by excessively worrying about the uncertainties of the future, using busy thoughts to mask the deep-seated feeling of loneliness within. However, we should view this sense of loneliness dialectically; it could be a catalyst for Zhang Xiaojun's growth, prompting her to delve deeper into herself, to understand her needs and desires. When she learns to coexist with her loneliness and transforms it into an opportunity for self-discovery and growth, she is likely to establish a completely new attitude toward life.

I keenly captured this crucial piece of information and said, "Avoiding loneliness? Would you like to talk more about it with me?"

Zhang Xiaojun took a deep breath, as if gathering all her courage, and slowly began to unlock the floodgates of her memories. She said, "My parents went out to work when I was very young, and my only family at home was my grandfather. He had to get up before dawn to work in the fields. Often, when I opened my eyes, the house would be empty, and there would be no one around..." Her eyes instantly turned red, and her voice began to choke up. "I was only 4 years old at the time, and I had to go to the neighbors' house every day just to get a meal. The adults around me praised me for being sensible, but only I knew how scared and lonely I was..."

I gently handed her a tissue and said, "You've been through so much solitude since you were young. It must have been incredibly difficult for you. That kind of profound loneliness must have left deep marks in your heart."[3]

For the rest of the time, Zhang Xiaojun gradually revisited the dark and lengthy periods of loneliness from her childhood. She recalled countless mornings when she woke up alone to an empty house, the silence broken only by the sound of her own heartbeat. She thought of stormy summer nights when she would hide under the covers, trembling with fear, with no warm embrace to turn to. Recently, it seemed that life was deliberately setting up obstacles for her, drowning her once again in that familiar feeling of loneliness, like a raging tide.

However, I saw Zhang Xiaojun's strength: "This is actually an opportunity for growth. Although it is painful, it allows you to confront the loneliness you have been avoiding. Let's change our perspective. Next time the feeling of loneliness washes over you, instead of panicking and trying to escape, take a moment to calm down and feel it. See what it is trying to tell you."

Zhang Xiaojun approached the exercise with a heart full of doubt and apprehension, trying to do as I suggested. I guided her in deep breathing and encouraged her to visualize what loneliness looked like. She expressed, "It feels like a devil, constantly closing in on me." She noticed her heartbeat quickening involuntarily, her palms sweating, but Zhang Xiaojun persisted.

After several rounds of deep breaths, she began to calm down. Zhang Xiaojun realized that loneliness was not entirely negative; it had been a harsh mentor on her path to growth, teaching her many valuable lessons. I invited her to pay tribute to the loneliness that had accompanied her throughout her childhood and still influenced her today[4].

Tears shimmered in Zhang Xiaojun's eyes, but there was an unprecedented sense of relief. When I asked her, "At this moment, if you could say one thing to your loneliness, what would it be?"

Zhang Xiaojun replied, "Thank you for teaching me to be strong in the dark; thank you for helping me cherish every bit of warmth; thank you for shaping the unique person I am today."

When I saw Zhang Xiaojun again, she had completely transformed. She stood tall, walked gracefully, and wore a confident smile. Her short hair was neat and vibrant, and her eyes shone with clarity and determination. She said, "I really understand now that loneliness is not scary; it is a part of me. I no longer run away from it; instead, I've learned to coexist with it and draw strength from it."

I grinned with satisfaction, saying, "You're truly amazing for having walked through such a difficult journey. Loneliness is no longer a shackle that binds you but rather the wings that help you soar." [5]

2 UNDERSTANDING OF THE CASE

Zhang Xiaojun may be indirectly rebelling against her mother's past behaviors through her "frequent hair washing." By constantly washing her hair, she may be subconsciously repeating and trying to control a scene that was once uncontrollable, thereby achieving some form of "correction" or "retribution" against her mother's actions. This effort to repeat and control is, in fact, a symbolic response to past trauma and a release of her inner aggression. The "frequent hair washing" behavior may later become a means for Zhang Xiaojun to maintain distance from others and protect her personal boundaries. In interpersonal interactions, excessive cleaning behaviors are sometimes viewed as a defensive posture intended to avoid excessive closeness or intrusion from others. Through this way, Zhang Xiaojun may be protecting herself from external harm while inadvertently expressing her dissatisfaction and distrust towards her surrounding environment and people.

Zhang Xiaojun often uses "busyness" as a way to divert attention during our conversations. Every time I see her, she shares what she has been up to recently—taking art classes, dance lessons, vocal training, and even studying business knowledge in the evenings after work. It creates the impression that her schedule is completely packed, especially since she also has a daytime job. If we break down the character for "busy," it symbolizes "the death of the heart," much like a soulless top that keeps spinning. When a person's life is filled with endless tasks and activities to the point where there's hardly any time to stop, reflect, feel, or engage in self-dialogue, this "busyness" might be more than mere fulfillment; it could be a form of escape, a way to avoid unresolved emotions or issues deep within. Zhang Xiaojun's choice to use "busyness" as a defense mechanism might have multiple factors at play. On one hand, it may stem from an excessive pursuit of self-worth, where she believes that only through continuous achievements and recognition can she validate her existence. On the other hand, it may also represent an avoidance of fear—fearing the confrontation with her inner loneliness, anxiety, or unresolved traumas. Busyness has become her shield, obscuring those corners she is reluctant to touch, while allowing her, in this seemingly positive activity, to momentarily forget her inner emptiness and unease [6]. However, Zhang Xiaojun also has her own resources. Each time she comes forward on her own initiative is a significant asset; this proactive willingness to seek improvement reflects her intrinsic motivation, which can become a strong driving force in our work together. Her initiative is a direct manifestation of her deep desire for change and pursuit of a better self. It not only inspires her active participation throughout the process, but also provides her with continuous motivation to move forward when faced with difficulties and challenges.

3 SELF-EVALUATION AND REFLECTION OF THE COUNSELOR

Throughout the entire process, I believe the most commendable aspect of my work was the patience and support I offered Zhang Xiaojun. In response to her sharing, I remained focused and showed no hint of impatience. Whether she was repeatedly discussing trivial conflicts at work or recalling the painful moments of loneliness from her childhood, I listened attentively, using my gaze, nodding, and providing timely feedback to help her feel valued. I remember one occasion when she spoke through tears about being teased by classmates for not having her parents around; I gently handed her a tissue and let her express her emotions without rushing to interrupt, allowing her to gradually calm down and regain the courage to continue her story. This patience was like a warm sun on a winter's day, slowly melting the ice around her heart and laying a solid foundation of trust for the subsequent counseling work.

Another key factor in this success was my consistent commitment to sharing my genuine thoughts with her. Sincerity is always the key to opening one's heart. When Zhang Xiaojun fell into self-doubt, feeling that she could never escape the shadow of loneliness, I did not offer empty reassurances; instead, I spoke frankly, letting her know that my real expression showed her I was not merely an observer, but an ally fighting alongside her. This understanding encouraged her to engage more actively in her self-exploration.

However, our work was not always smooth sailing. As I engaged in deeper communication with Zhang Xiaojun, I was startled to realize that we shared similar themes of loneliness. She was abandoned by her parents as a child, facing an empty home alone; similarly, I too had experienced periods of being overlooked by family members and growing up quietly in solitude [7].

Whenever Zhang Xiaojun's feelings of loneliness surged, the memories of my own loneliness would be quietly awakened within me. I could truly feel her pain—the despair of being abandoned by the world—because I had also faced similar situations, licking my wounds in solitude. However, this "empathy" placed me in a dilemma. While this similarity helped build trust and understanding, it sometimes led to my emotional over-involvement. I might become so focused on Zhang Xiaojun's feelings that I overlooked important information or details, impacting my objective judgment and professional stance. Additionally, the presence of such similarities sometimes made it difficult for me to clearly distinguish which emotions were my own projections and which were Zhang Xiaojun's genuine needs. This similarity, in an unspoken way, became a barrier that interfered with my judgment, preventing me from accurately understanding Zhang Xiaojun's true intentions and ultimately affecting the effectiveness of our work.

Recognizing the issues at hand is the first step toward change. I should take a more proactive approach in monitoring my emotional responses during the work process. By using methods such as journaling and peer supervision, I can document my feelings and thoughts after each session, ensuring that I maintain a clear self-awareness. This is not an

easy task, as I need to confront long-buried painful memories, but only in doing so can I achieve true self-healing. Through journaling, I can trace back to every detail of my childhood experiences of loneliness, analyzing how these experiences have shaped who I am today and the emotional responses they may trigger during my work. Additionally, by participating in supervision or professional personal growth workshops, I can leverage external resources to examine my inner world from different perspectives, break through rigid thinking patterns, and accelerate my personal growth process[8].

Moreover, I need to ensure that every word and reaction during our sessions is based on professional knowledge and skills rather than personal emotional projections. I should use this similarity to deepen my understanding of Zhang Xiaojun's experiences while remaining vigilant to avoid excessive identification with her situation. I also need to work harder to guide Zhang Xiaojun in developing her self-reflection and problem-solving abilities, encouraging her to express her individuality and needs rather than solely relying on our similarities to establish a connection.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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