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## A re-entry program for peacekeeping soldiers: Promoting personal and career transition

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Marvin J. Westwood

Timothy G. Black

Holly B. McLean

*University of British Columbia*

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### ABSTRACT

A re-entry program for peacekeeping soldiers is described. This program was developed to assist with military personnel's transition back into Canadian society by aiding with their personal and career re-adjustment. Group-based life review and therapeutic enactment counselling interventions are used to identify critical incidents and facilitate the resolution of stress-related reactions soldiers have experienced after a peacekeeping mission. The principle guiding the development of this program is the belief that free from the distraction of these stress reactions and accompanying personal difficulties, soldiers are better able to concentrate on career-building activities. An overview of the program is presented along with a case study to exemplify how the program is applied in practice.

### RÉSUMÉ

Cet article décrit un programme de réinsertion sociale destiné aux soldats du maintien de la paix. Ce programme a été mis sur pied pour venir en aide au personnel militaire réintégrant la société canadienne en mettant l'emphase sur le développement personnel et l'orientation professionnelle. La thérapie de groupe et des mises en situation sont employées pour faire un bilan de vie et pour identifier les incidents critiques, ceci afin de faciliter la résorption des réactions au stress éprouvées par les soldats suite aux opérations de maintien de la paix. Le principe directeur de ce programme est le suivant : les soldats sont davantage capables de se concentrer sur les activités de promotion de carrière lorsque les réactions au stress et les difficultés personnelles s'y rattachant n'empêchent plus leur concentration. Une vue d'ensemble de ce programme est présentée ainsi qu'une étude de cas afin de démontrer de quelle façon le programme est appliqué dans la pratique.

The Transition Program for Peacekeeping Soldiers is designed to provide psychological and career support services to military personnel returning from active peacekeeping duty. For returning peacekeeping soldiers, re-entry into civilian life following a peacekeeping tour often begins a period of unexpected transition with associated difficulties related to social and occupational adjustments (Westwood, 1999). Researchers in the field of career and cross-cultural transition refer to "reverse culture shock" when describing the unanticipated adjustment

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difficulties and unmet expectations by both individuals and significant others following a re-entry experience (Arthur, 2000; Westwood, Lawrence, & Paul, 1986). Although some soldiers manage the feelings of disorientation, anxiety and frustration associated with reverse culture shock and negotiate their transition to civilian life successfully, for others it becomes problematic. Soldiers attempting to move beyond their military experience can find themselves experiencing personal distress, unemployment or underemployment, as well as struggling in their personal relationships and overall accommodation to civilian life (Westwood, 1999).

In addition to the typical stresses inherent in any re-entry experience, many peacekeeping soldiers also return home with unresolved issues and stress reactions related to their peacekeeping mission. Indeed, it can be argued that post-deployment stress reactions present the greatest health risk that military personnel face on peacekeeping missions. Peacekeeping soldiers have a greater chance of developing harmful stress reactions than they do of being fired at, physically injured or killed (Rosebush, 1998). Although peacekeeping duty may not involve active combat, military personnel are exposed to such events as witnessing of atrocities and torture, being taken hostage, casualty handling of both civilian adults and children, and the retrieval and disposal of human remains (MacDonald, Chamberlain, Long, Pereira-Laird, & Mirfin, 1998). The high prevalence of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD (DSM IV-TR, 2000) among peacekeeping soldiers, ranging between 15% and 35%, is most likely a reflection of the effects of these and other distressing experiences that military personnel face on peacekeeping missions (Delimar, Sivik, Korenjak, & Delimar, 1995).

Despite the general agreement that peacekeeping missions subject soldiers to potentially traumatizing events, very little attention has been paid to the lasting impact of these experiences and soldiers' re-adjustment to civilian life (MacDonald et al, 1998). Research has shown that if left untreated, stress and trauma-related reactions can lead to adjustment difficulties and to the use of negative coping strategies. Herman (1997), for example, has pointed out that untreated stress reactions can result in increases in aggressive behaviour, poor functioning in relationships, withdrawal and depression. In addition, while coping strategies used by soldiers such as denial and emotional detachment may initially assist them in dealing with the psychological stresses of peacekeeping, these same strategies can negatively affect post-deployment functioning and the soldiers' quality of life (Rosebush, 1998). It seems necessary that effective programs be developed to help returning soldiers resolve these stress-related issues as well as the typical re-adjustment difficulties associated with their transition to civilian life.

The Transition Program for Peacekeeping Soldiers was designed to address the above concerns and aid former military personnel in having more productive and fulfilling experiences in the world of work and family life following a peacekeeping mission. The Royal Canadian Legion and Veterans Affairs Canada have funded

the pilot projects conducted to develop this program, and thirty-nine peacekeeping veterans to date have completed the program. According to preliminary feedback obtained, the program is well received by the peacekeeping soldiers, and among the positive benefits they have attributed to the program are relief from stress-related symptoms such as nightmares and depression; healthier emotional responses when working with other people (calmer, fewer angry outbursts); feelings of pride and justification replacing feelings of shame, fear and remorse about their peacekeeping experience; and feeling energized and motivated for career pursuits (Westwood, 1999). Utilizing funding from Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the authors are currently in the process of planning a more sophisticated and extensive program evaluation.

In this article we introduce the Transition Program for Peacekeeping Soldiers which may provide an effective model for practitioners working with soldiers and other client populations experiencing re-entry, personal, and career transitions following stressful life events. This program offers an original approach by utilizing several counselling interventions including group work, life review, therapeutic enactment, and career planning. A program overview is provided as well as therapeutic cautions for practitioners to consider. The different phases of the program such as initial group sessions, life review, therapeutic enactment, and consolidation are also described along with their rationale for inclusion in the program. Finally, a case study is presented from one of the groups in the pilot projects to further elucidate how the model is used in practice.

#### TRANSITION PROGRAM FOR PEACEKEEPING SOLDIERS

##### *Program Overview*

The Transition Program for Peacekeeping Soldiers utilizes a small group format to address soldiers' stress-related issues and aid in their personal and career re-adjustment to civilian life. Various individual treatment strategies have been described in the literature for aiding with soldiers' stress-related reactions and vocational concerns (e.g., Flack, Litz, & Keane, 1998); however, the research literature has also shown that therapeutic intervention in small groups has distinct advantages. Sipprelle (1985), for example, has pointed out that the group format has been used more successfully than individual approaches for healing soldiers' unresolved stress reactions because of the therapeutic benefits derived from group member to member learning and interactions. Additionally, Yalom (1995) also highlights the key therapeutic and learning benefits of a small group experience. It should be noted that many soldiers have sensitivities around self-disclosure in health contexts fearing that any admission that could lead to the assumption of a psychological injury will spell "career suicide." For this reason the groups that form the basis for the program are offered outside the military establishment. Care is also taken in the groups to facilitate the environment needed for both support and self-disclosure to occur by giving soldiers an opportunity to share

their intense emotions with peers in a climate of trust, acceptance, and camaraderie (Molinari & Williams, 1995).

In the Transition Program for Peacekeeping Soldiers small groups of six to eight former peacekeeping soldiers meet weekly for three-hour sessions over a period of 14 weeks. These groups are co-facilitated by professionally trained group leaders, with one doctoral level psychologist assisting in the group's leadership. Soldiers who have been through the program and received further paraprofessional training also assist in the groups' facilitation, and medical personnel are available for consultation throughout the program as needed. The initial group sessions focus on the learning of effective listening and communication skills and the building of cohesion and safety in the group. In the next few sessions the group members participate in a life review process. Life review increases self-disclosure among the group members and provides a structured method to help the group members articulate their experiences. The initial sessions and life review build the foundation in the groups for the more intense repair work during the therapeutic enactment phase of the program. Therapeutic enactment then becomes the major focus of the remaining sessions, giving the soldiers an opportunity to work through some of their unresolved experiences identified in initial sessions and through the life review. Final sessions concentrate on consolidation, career strategies, and establishing future goals. Although what follows below further describes these basic phases of program, it is stressed that the groups are tailored to meet the needs of the soldiers participating in the program.

### *Initial Group Sessions*

Developing group cohesiveness and safety helps the participants in the Transition Program for Peacekeeping Soldiers share their experiences with one another and begin the work of integrating those experiences. Yalom (1995) describes cohesiveness as the attractiveness of the group for the group members: "It refers to the condition of members feeling warmth and comfort in the group, feeling they belong, valuing the group and feeling, in turn, that they are valued and unconditionally accepted and supported by the other group members" (p. 48). The group members, particularly those who are experiencing stress-related reactions, also need to feel that the group is a safe environment, that there is minimal perception of psychological danger (Briere, 1996; Herman, 1997). According to Yalom, it is therefore necessary to alleviate group members' anxiety by removing ambiguity in terms of group expectations and give the group members a sense of control and protection. Following this basic premise, Borgen, Pollard, Amundson, & Westwood (1989) developed a format for initial group sessions that is followed in the Transition Program for Peacekeeping soldiers. Norms and goals for the group are established, responsibilities of group members are clarified, and confidentiality guidelines addressed. Through structured activities the group members learn basic communication skills and the skills required for the appropriate giving and receiving of feedback to each other. Once a cohesive atmosphere and climate of safety is established in these initial skill-building sessions,

the group members are introduced to the life review method that becomes the focus of the next several sessions.

### *The Life Review Approach*

In group-based life review (also referred to as guided autobiography by some clinicians and researchers; e.g. Birren & Deutchman, 1991), participants write aspects of their life story at home, and then share their writing with peers in a small confidential group setting. One of the reasons that the life review approach was chosen for the Transition Program for Peacekeeping Soldiers is because it offers a structured format for self-disclosure. There are certain advantages to having some systematic approach and activities for self-disclosure in small groups. The structured activity provides a degree of purpose reducing the feelings of uncertainty prevalent in a less clearly focused group process (Johns, 1996). As well, because the life review process offers the group members an opportunity to prepare what they will disclose in the group at home, and thus in a sense rehearse what they share in the group, the group participants are provided with a means for containment and control over the self-disclosure process (Birren & Deutchman, 1991). This in turn helps to alleviate some of the group members' anxiety around self-disclosure of distressing experiences in the group.

Furthermore, the life review approach was utilized in the Transition Program for Peacekeeping Soldiers because there is a large body of research that has shown the measurable positive effects of this method (Silver, 1995). Birren and Deutchman (1991) and deVries, Birren, and Deutchman (1995) summarize the research related to the benefits of life review including the recognition of coping strategies, increased self-understanding, increased sense of social connectedness, and willingness to disclose to others. Traditionally researched and used with a geriatric population, life review has been used successfully and investigated with various populations including those people experiencing career change (Rife, 1998), and World War II and Korean War veterans (Molinari & Williams, 1995; Westwood, 1998). With these client populations, life review has been shown to help people identify and work through unresolved conflicts, gain insight, and develop a sense of personal integration and life satisfaction (Rife, 1998).

As delineated by deVries, Birren, and Deutchman (1995), group-based life review is a structured small group experience that involves two basic steps. Each participant writes short autobiographical essays on pre-selected themes outside the group and then reads these stories aloud to each other in the group. After each group member has read his or her story, the other group members are given the opportunity to comment and provide feedback. Several life review themes are recommended by deVries, Birren, and Deutchman (1995) and have been used extensively with life review groups. In the Transition Program for Peacekeeping Soldiers two particular themes are used. The theme of "Major Branching Points" is included in the program to elicit the soldiers' pre-military experiences. Major Branching Points refers to events, experiences, and happenings in life that significantly affect the direction or flow of one's life (Birren & Deutchman, 1991). This

theme helps the soldiers expand their awareness of themselves as people and what shaped their lives prior to their peacekeeping experience. The theme of "Experience with unnatural and abnormal events" was developed by the first two authors (Westwood & Black) to specifically help elicit the soldiers' experiences while on peacekeeping tours. Group members benefit from the process of self-reflection involved in writing the essays related to these themes, and see themselves in the lives of other soldiers as the stories are read in the group and serve as agents of support for each other (deVries, Birren, & Deutchman, 1995). In addition, the life review experience helps group members recognize unresolved issues that have prevented them from living their life fully (Brooks, 1998; Brown-Shaw, Westwood, & de Vries, 1999). It is these critical events that group members may then explore further during the therapeutic enactment phase of the program.

### *Therapeutic Enactment*

Following the initial group building sessions and life review, group members may move into the therapeutic enactment phase of the Transition Program for Peacekeeping Soldiers. Therapeutic enactment is a group-based therapeutic intervention that focuses on the acting out of participants' critical incidents from the past, present, or future, for the purpose of catharsis (the release of feelings that underlie unresolved personal issues) and cognitive re-integration (Brown-Shaw, Westwood, & deVries, 1999). Although therapeutic enactment traces its foundation to the therapeutic process referred to as psychodrama by Moreno (1957), it is distinct in that the emphasis is placed on a pre-planned, structured experience rather than on spontaneity as described by Moreno's traditional approach to psychodrama.

Therapeutic enactment is used in the Transition Program for Peacekeeping Soldiers because it has been investigated and shown to be well suited to the treatment of war-related stress and trauma issues (Ragsdale, Cox, Finn, & Eilser, 1996). By helping the soldiers to re-create critical unresolved events in concrete terms, and focusing on experiencing, doing and acting, this approach helps participants realize unexpressed feelings and provides a means for the full expression of those feelings along with new ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving (Corey, 1985). In comparison to other individual approaches for resolution of stress-related issues, during the therapeutic enactment process the soldier has the opportunity to complete or alter his or her response to the original traumatic incident and receive the support and comfort from peers provided from the group experience (Ragsdale et al., 1996). Although there has been comparatively little research investigating the therapeutic process and properties of therapeutic enactment, more recent work has emphasized that the reliving through physical action is central to the facilitation of the participant's experience of change (e.g., Brooks, 1998; Morley, 1999).

During the therapeutic enactment process, the group facilitators coach one individual group participant per session in systematically recreating a pre-determined critical event. The other group members act as witnesses during the

enactment and may be chosen by the lead participant to take on various roles of significant others who were part of the enacted event. As the enactment unfolds, the group leaders use various techniques to facilitate learning for the lead participant such as doubling, role reversal, mirroring, and feedback. These techniques help the lead participant access the buried feelings, negative cognitions, and beliefs attached to the problematic event. Throughout this process, the facilitators are coaching the lead participant to bring the event to a more adaptive resolution. Following the individual enactment, all the group members debrief, and share their thoughts and feelings with the lead participant. This debriefing is a crucial element of the enactment phase as it allows for the discharge of reactions experienced by all the group members. The group facilitators also encourage the group members to talk with each other during and following the enactment sessions to aid in the integration of the new learning for the lead participants. Follow-up individual counselling and support is provided for soldiers if working through the event activates other problematic issues.

### *Consolidation*

The final group sessions in the program focus on consolidation of learning and forming new goals and objectives for the future. It is in this part of the program that the group members move beyond repair and healing to develop a career plan and options. Group members receive career counselling, assistance with the recognition of their transferable skills, the acquisition of job search skills, interviewing techniques, and networking tactics. The Starting Points program (Westwood, Amundson, & Borgen, 1994), designed to assist people in their search for work and career-related decision making, is useful at this phase of the Transition Program for Peacekeeping Soldiers. The Starting Points program helps soldiers to make informed choices about the types of assistance that they may find helpful in beginning the process of reconnecting with the labour market (Borgen, 1999). It is thus a priority in the final sessions of the Transition Program to assist the soldiers in pursuing employment, retraining or education, if desired by them.

### *Therapeutic Cautions*

The counselling of any client population, but especially those who are experiencing stress-related reactions, requires that consideration be given to times when certain interventions may be contraindicated. The Transition Program for Peacekeeping Soldiers employs a Registered Clinical Psychologist to conduct thorough screening interviews with all potential program participants to determine their suitability for the program and group experiences. Those soldiers who are experiencing severe PTSD symptoms and who will therefore have difficulty tolerating the high levels of emotionality in therapeutic enactment, for example, are referred for individual therapy before program participation as a result of this screening. It also should be emphasized that extensive training and supervision are required for group facilitators using the therapeutic enactment intervention. Practitioners

are encouraged to contact the authors for more information regarding group facilitator training as well as more detailed program description and a manual.

#### CASE STUDY

The following case study is based on the experiences of the participants in one of the pilot programs of the Transition Program for Peacekeeping Soldiers conducted in Vancouver in June to August, 1999. At the program's conclusion, the first and second authors interviewed all six of the group participants. The soldiers were interviewed to gain feedback on their experience as well as suggestions for how the program could be improved. The quotes used in this case study are taken directly from those feedback sessions and used with the soldiers' permission. Several of those participants' stories are combined for this case study into one story that is representative of their experiences.

#### "Brian"

Brian joined the Canadian Forces as a reservist at eighteen and was sent overseas as part of the Canadian Infantry to the former Yugoslavia. Upon his return from his peacekeeping tour, Brian experienced nightmares, flashbacks, night sweats, and uncontrollable bursts of anger. Over the next several years, Brian was unable to maintain employment and had difficulties with his personal relationships. Brian heard about the program through a comrade from his regiment who encouraged him to participate. Although Brian was initially reluctant, he agreed to go through the screening process and attend the group to support "his mates." After the first group session he realized he had unresolved issues from his peacekeeping tour, "I came here for everybody else but I had stuff myself that I had to deal with."

At the first group session, following initial introductions and the setting of group norms such as confidentiality and suspension of judgment, all the group members stated with whom they had served, where they had served, and what had brought them to the group. Brian discovered that he was not the only one who had struggled upon his return home. Brian left that initial session "feeling a little shaky," but also with a sense of relief that this might be a group of people who would understand what he had gone through: "It let me know that I was not the only one that things happened to, I was not alone."

At the next session, Brian and his fellow group members participated in communication exercises and practiced active listening, paraphrasing, and clarifying. The group members were also introduced to the life review process and what they could expect from the next few sessions. Brian took the theme description for "Major Branching Points" including the sensitizing questions and guidelines for writing home and spent several hours over the next week writing his story. At the following session, as the other group members read their stories, Brian could see himself in their experiences and felt a strong connection with the other group members. He discovered that one of the group members had experienced an



event very similar to his own and this gave Brian a sense of relief. He was also more willing to share his own story as a result: "Only being involved in this group with guys who had been over there that I felt comfortable talking about it. I found out someone had a similar experience and I didn't know that before."

The next life review theme was "Your experience with unnatural/abnormal events" which Brian found very challenging. For this theme Brian wrote more than two pages and the night of the group session he felt nauseous and had a tight feeling in his chest. As he told his story to the group, Brian was transported back to his experiences in Yugoslavia. Near the end of his peacekeeping mission the fighting between the factions escalated and Brian's unit was forced to engage in gunfire. Brian had shot and killed a soldier from one of the opposing factions in the conflict who had fired his weapon directly at Brian. Brian found himself re-experiencing this moment and with the help of the group facilitators was finally able to tell this story. The group facilitators kept reminding Brian to breathe, take his time, and that he could stop at anytime if he wished. After more than an hour and half Brian felt he was finished. He was exhausted and sweating, but he felt as if a tremendous weight had been lifted. He said, "I feel thirty pounds lighter." Brian also appreciated the next phase of the process when the other group members gave him feedback and validated his experience, reassuring him that he had done the right thing and that he did his duty as a Canadian soldier: "The army trains you to kill but the army doesn't train you on how to deal with taking someone's life. The group was phenomenal in helping me deal with that stuff. I didn't even know I had to do that until I came to the group."

Following that session Brian thought more about the incident and knowing that he could have an opportunity to explore it further with therapeutic enactment, he approached the facilitators to discuss this possibility. All the group members had been reminded throughout the group sessions that it would be possible to move from their life review themes to a therapeutic enactment. The group facilitators planned Brian's enactment with him and space was made available on the sixth night of the group for Brian to do his enactment.

Brian began his enactment walking with one of the co-facilitators (the Director of the enactment) in the centre of the group circle retelling portions of his story to set the stage. At this time and throughout the enactment process the Director would stop Brian occasionally to ask for clarification and check what Brian was aware of in the moment (e.g. "What of you aware of right now?"). Brian found himself once again being transported back to that night in Yugoslavia. He could feel his adrenaline and anxiety rise as he recounted the events of that night. The Director suggested that Brian choose a member of the group to act as his "double" to provide a degree of psychological separation from the event if needed and to enable Brian to gain perspective on what happened. Brian also chose a group member to enact the role of one of his unit comrades and another group member to enact the role of the Serbian soldier he shot and killed. The specific incident involving the shooting was then re-created. In this process Brian realized that what he needed to do was speak to the soldier he killed and state that

it was not personal and that he was only fulfilling his role as a soldier. The Director, employing the role-reversal technique, then asked Brian to assume the role of the soldier he killed. Brian then addressed his double as himself. It was during the role-reversal that Brian realized the man he had killed was just as scared and intent on killing him if needed. Reassuming the role as himself, Brian was able to let go of the feelings of guilt he had felt for killing this man: "The biggest thing for me was the assurance that the things I did were justifiable." The enactment closed with Brian receiving feedback and reactions from the group members.

The group facilitators followed up with Brian the following day on the phone and over the next few weeks. Brian participated in the therapeutic enactments of other group members and continued to gain new awareness and consolidate his insights as the program continued. Before Brian's participation in the program he had struggled to keep gainful employment, having been laid off or fired as a result of his angry outbursts and verbal assaults on co-workers. After his enactment experience Brian found himself feeling calmer and more in control of his anger: "I am calmer now, I don't get frustrated like I used to."

Having released some of the stress surrounding his peacekeeping experiences, Brian felt ready to examine his career possibilities. The facilitators referred Brian to a counsellor at a local community college and Brian subsequently returned to school and was trained in a trade complementary to his military training. When interviewed for feedback from the pilot program Brian said the following: "There was no way the shit bottled up inside me would have come out, no amount of counselling, anything could drag it out. Guys who had the same experience as I did helped pull it out of me . . . this short program changed my life and I am so grateful for it."

#### CONCLUSION

The Transition Program for Peacekeeping Soldiers could be an effective means for helping soldiers reach their personal and professional-related goals. The groups in the program provide a safe environment where soldiers can receive support and understanding from others "who've been there." The group experience in the program helps the soldiers with normalizing their peacekeeping experiences on tour as well as their difficulties adjusting to civilian life. The combination of the life review method as well as therapeutic enactment aids the soldiers in resolving stress-related issues arising from their peacekeeping experience so that they are free from the distraction and interference of these issues in their lives. Once their personal re-adjustment has been attended to, their social and emotional needs met, the soldiers are better able to return to the civilian world of work.

The application of this type of program for other client populations and counselling issues is also apparent. Certain groups of civilian professionals such as emergency room personnel, paramedics, fire department employees, and police officers all face potentially traumatizing experiences during the course of their work. These professionals may also benefit from the model for integrating these experiences that the Transition Program for Peacekeeping Soldiers provides. Ad-

ditionally, the Transition Program could be a complementary follow-up program for participants in other counselling interventions such as Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD; e.g. Mitchell & Resnick, 1981). The CISD model, for example, is typically a professionally facilitated, one-time peer-group discussion of a traumatic event by people involved in the incident. Those who continue to experience difficulties following CISD could be given the opportunity to participate in a more extensive program like the Transition Program. As well, the Transition Program model brings together groups of individuals who have had similar experiences, but not necessarily the exact same critical incident. One can envision the Transition Program model, for example, being especially useful for bringing together various people not necessarily from the same institution such as front-line personnel at financial institutions experiencing robbery or emergency room personnel from different hospitals. There may be individuals in these fields who have experienced different specific critical incidents, had the CISD with their peers, and yet still feel unsettled. These people could benefit from a program like the Transition program to engage in further exploration with other professionals in their field. Indeed, the Transition Program model could be flexible enough to be used in a variety of settings, with different populations and as a complement to other counselling approaches.

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### *About the Authors*

Marvin J. Westwood is a full professor in the Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education and an associate member in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of British Columbia. His teaching and research interests include cross-cultural transitions, life review, therapeutic enactment, trauma repair, group approaches in counselling, career and employment counselling.

Timothy G. Black is a Doctoral student in counselling psychology at the University of British Columbia. His research interests include group approaches in counselling, therapeutic enactment, employment in health care and trauma repair with both soldier and civilian populations.

Holly B. McLean is a Doctoral student in counselling psychology at the University of British Columbia. Her research interests include personal development in counsellor training, secondary traumatic stress, life review, cross-cultural and career counselling.

Correspondence regarding this article should be sent to M.J. Westwood, Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology and Special Education, Faculty of Education, University of British Columbia, 2125 Main Mall, Vancouver, B.C., Canada, V6T 1Z4 Email: <westwood@interchange.ubc.ca>. Fax: (604) 822-2328.