

# Feasibility of Using Counseling Techniques from Ramayana for Managing Negative Emotions: An Anecdotal Review and Analysis

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Applied psychology has shown that behavior, emotions, and actions, including cognitive processes, can differ in content and magnitude in individuals, based on cultural context.<sup>1,2</sup> Hence, an understanding of the cultural context is essential before diagnosing, interpreting, and managing any emotional problems. Modern methods of counseling extensively used by mental health professionals in treating persons with emotional problems have proven to be effective. While these therapies have a common goal of helping a distressed individual, the mode of delivery (methodology, techniques, and concepts) differs according to the individual's nature of distress and its conceptualization.<sup>3</sup> Experts have opined that psychotherapeutic models need not have universally accepted principles and techniques and that they can be unique in nature and depend on one's cultural relativism.<sup>4</sup>

Indian philosophy has depicted varied instances in the ancient scriptural texts where psychotherapeutic and counseling constructs could be at play.<sup>5</sup> These

therapeutic factors based on ancient Indian scriptures guide one's principles, morals, and values and help manage difficult life situations.<sup>6</sup> The ancient Indian scriptures guide individuals on the process to achieve a higher aspect of spiritual realization (*Moksha*).<sup>7,8</sup> This process enables the individual to reach a level where he/she is adept at dealing with what is conventionally considered as suffering in daily life situations.

The Bhagavad Gita has been examined extensively by mental health professionals for its psychotherapeutic elements.<sup>9-14</sup> The Bhagavad Gita depicts Arjuna's dilemma (existential issue) to fight his own brothers on the war-field, causing him guilt, lack of motivation, and distorted thinking. To this crisis, lord Krishna provides his supreme knowledge as a means of a discourse through a process akin to counseling.<sup>15</sup> Ramayana is another Indian Hindu epic, dated



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from around 7000 BC to 7279 BC.<sup>16</sup> Documented by the sage Valmiki, Ramayana comprises more than 24,000 verses. It narrates the story of prince Rama of Ayodhya, whose wife Sita is abducted by the demon king Ravana of Lanka, and details Rama's journey in search of her, leading to the annihilation of the demon. Various situations of the Ramayana depict how, during a demanding situation, one strong character emerges and takes on the role of a counsellor and resolves various emotional upsurges.

While the Bhagavad Gita has been explored for its psychotherapeutic potential, the anecdotal references from the Ramayana have not been explored as much in a clinical setting. Trivedi suggested the use of anecdotes from Ramayana for supportive, interpersonal, marital, and couple therapies.<sup>17</sup> He observed that acceptance of death became easier for those who could understand the philosophy that "soul is immortal." Furthermore, other researchers<sup>18</sup> added that for a Hindu population, awareness of the epics and anecdotes from the Ramayana could help increase the clients' insight about the situation and help enhance their coping.

Many individuals grasp the deep and subtle points of philosophy when they are presented through a medium with which they are familiar (e.g., episodes and fables). Metaphors from religious texts (*Upanishads* and *Puranas* from Hindu texts and *Jataka tales* from Buddhist scriptures) continue to be used in the counseling process to help in processes, such as problem-solving and acceptance. In the ancient period, the traditional pattern of imparting knowledge was through religious channels,<sup>19</sup> such as fables from religious texts, to guide or regulate the listener's negative behaviors and emotions. Worldwide, emerging fields in counseling have used religion- and philosophy-based methods, in culturally specific models, for persons with mental health problems. An example of such a framework is demonstrated by religiously integrated cognitive behavioral therapy (RCBT), which integrates the philosophy of five major religions of the world (Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism) with the principles of cognitive behavior therapy (CBT), for the treatment of major depressive disorder

in chronic illness. RCBT has utilized concepts such as contemplative prayer, memorization of scriptures, engaging in religious practices (e.g., gratitude, altruism, and forgiveness), and involvement in a religious community in a therapeutic application.<sup>20</sup>

Ancient Indian texts are rich in knowledge and there is a need for cross-cultural adaptation. Metaphors and fables from more familiar sources would be important, and therefore, tapping texts, such as Ramayana, which has a wealth of such anecdotes and metaphors, would be useful. It would be easier for a counsellor to use specific metaphors that are already documented, instead of developing newer ones that may not be culturally suitable. Only one paper, by Jacob and Krishna,<sup>18</sup> has discussed the anecdotal references from Ramayana and its relevance in psychotherapy. In this context, as the first step in building an indigenous counseling framework, this paper makes a unique attempt to specifically review the Ramayana to identify a counseling framework to help manage negative emotions.

## Material and Methods

For this review, the *Valmiki Ramayana* was the text of choice, as it is the original version of Ramayana in Sanskrit, documented by the scholar Valmiki. It comprises more than 24,000 verses. *Srimad Valmiki Ramayana* is arranged into six *Kaandas* or Books, that is, (I) *Bala Kaanda* (Book of Youth, 77 chapters), (II) *Ayodhya Kaanda* (Book of Ayodhya, 119 chapters), (III) *Aranya Kaanda* (Book of Forest, 75 chapters), (IV) *Kishkindha Kaanda* (The Empire of Holy Monkeys, 67 chapters), (V) *Sundara Kaanda* (Book of Beauty, 68 chapters), and (VI) *Yuddha Kaanda* (Book of War, 128 chapters).<sup>21</sup>

We reviewed the entire *Valmiki Ramayana* (*Srimad Valmiki Ramayana* with Sanskrit text and English translation, Gita Press, Gorakhpur [2 vol set]), one *Kaanda* (part) at a time. Each *Kaanda* has multiple chapters, which were reviewed for anecdotal stories depicting counseling techniques. These anecdotal stories were written in the Ramayana in the form of Sanskrit poetry, with English translation. The chapters were examined thoroughly by the first and second authors (Shree Raksha Bhide and Chhaya

Kurhade) to identify a situation where counseling was provided. One of the authors who is a "Vidwan" (sage) in Sanskrit (Sushrutha S) verified the Sanskrit translation of the situations where counseling was provided, and the remaining authors (Aarti Jagannathan, M Paulomi Sudhir, and BN Gangadhar) helped in coming to a consensus (inter-rater agreement) on which anecdotal situations should be considered for this review and analysis. Mr Sushrutha S also compared the English storylines prepared, with the original Sanskrit version for accuracy of translation and to check if the context described matched that in the original text. All the authors have experience in working and conducting research, either in the field of Indian philosophy or Indian psychology. Specific verses from the situation were identified, and the process, method of counseling, and the emotion addressed in each of these situations were analyzed.

## Results

The review brought out several instances where the characters in Ramayana counseled others for managing the latter's negative emotions. A few representative anecdotes that reflect negative emotions, such as anger, lust, sadness, and fear, are depicted in **Table 1**, along with the corresponding counseling techniques used.

## Discussion

The essential role of counseling is to alleviate emotional distress, where a person finds help from experts for dealing with the mind. In ancient Indian scriptures, negative emotions are dealt with through interventions related to *Dharma* (duty), *Karma* (fruitful action), and *Adhyatma* (spirituality). In contrast, concepts propounded by schools of psychology and social work are related to accessing the free will, choice, righteousness, and confidentiality associated with various therapies (strength-based approach, supportive therapy, CBT, reality therapy, and hope theory). The ancient Indian religious scriptures reflect how one needs to conduct in different life situations and channelize the emotions in direction of one's strength, abilities, and capabilities.

A process parallel to that of counseling can be seen in various situations in the epic of Ramayana, which exemplifies

TABLE 1.

## Negative Emotions, Counselling Techniques, and Anecdotal Reference from Ramayana

Emotion	Anecdotes	Kaanda (Section in the Text)	Techniques
Anger	a. While in exile in Dandaka forest, Lakshmana expresses anger on his brother Bharatha's arrival from Ayodhya (kingdom). Rama pacifies him by asking him not to jump to conclusions, believing that Bharatha would have come due to affection and concern towards them after hearing the news of their exile and not to wage a war.	Aranya Kaanda, Sarga 97	Rama counsel's Lakshmana using a technique akin to perspective-taking and reviewing alternate views from cognitive therapy, <sup>22</sup> by asking Lakshmana to consider other reasons for Bharatha's visit.
	b. Rama expresses anger and helplessness on the abduction of Sita by the demon king Ravana. Lakshmana persuades Rama first to identify the person responsible for the misdeed and punish the individual, rather than destroying all worlds in anger.	Aranya Kaanda, Sarga 65	Lakshmana counsels Rama using techniques similar to that described in Gestalt therapy, <sup>23</sup> emphasizing perspective-taking of "here and now" about focusing on finding Sita instead of blaming himself for Sita's abduction. Lakshmana also reminds Rama about being a strong-willed, regulated person who usually does not react inappropriately to situations.
Lust	a. Ravana expresses lust for Sita. His uncle Mareecha counsels him against it as this would lead to his own destruction. He explains about Rama's valor, righteousness, and bravery. He then adds that lusting on another woman is the highest form of sin. After abducting Sita, Ravana's brother Vibhishana counsels him to let go of his desire for another man's wife and send Sita rightly back to her husband, Rama.	Aranya Kaanda, Sarga 65	Vibhishana and Mareecha counsel Ravana on distancing himself from Sita. The counselling technique used here is akin to techniques used in supportive therapy <sup>24</sup> on guiding Ravana to distance himself and cope with the emotions of lust as it would lead to his own destruction.
Sadness	a. Dasharatha (father of Rama and king of Ayodhya) expresses his sadness on his inability to beget children. The sages approve Dasharatha's decision to perform the Putra-Kaameshti-Yagna vedic ritual in order to fulfill his desire for an heir and guide him about the ceremony and its procedures.	Bala Kaanda, Sarga 12	This anecdote reflects the help-seeking behavior of Dasharatha. The key counselling techniques used by the sages, akin to those in supportive therapy, <sup>24</sup> include providing advice and guidance to fulfill his desire for an heir
	b. Dasharatha is sad as his beloved son Rama was going to exile for 14 years, and he is unable to accept the decision made by him. Rama, on seeing his father, consoles him by stating that Dasharatha's kingdom and wealth are not important to him. His only <i>Dharma</i> (duty) as a son was to keep his father's vow made to Kaikeyi (wife of Dasharatha).	Ayodhya Kaanda, Sarga 34	Here, Rama uses counselling techniques akin to those in cognitive therapy, such as cognitive reappraisal and perspective-taking <sup>23</sup> to address Dasharatha's sadness. He uses reflection as a technique to make Dasharatha accept the promise he made to Kaikeyi.
	c. Tara (wife of monkey King Vali) is depressed about her husband Vali's death at Rama's hands. Hanuman (a fellow monkey) consoles her by talking to her about the death in the background of Vali's <i>Karma</i> (actions) leading to his death. He also asks her to shift her focus on her <i>Dharma</i> (duty) that needs to be fulfilled henceforth, i.e., the funeral of Vali and the upbringing of Angada, her son.	Kishkinda Kaanda, Sarga 21	Hanuman counsels Tara using techniques similar to those described in grief counselling, <sup>25-27</sup> such as acceptance of reality and fulfilling present duties and responsibilities as Tara did not have control over the situation.
Fear	a. As a protective father, Dasharatha expresses the fear that his son Rama, due to his young age and inexperience, would not be able to face the demons and overpower them. Sage Vasishtha counsels Dasharatha about the king's duties and describes the capabilities of sage Vishvamitra and his knowledge of weaponry, which would protect Rama. He also reminds him about Rama's capability to defeat the demon in the forest	Bala Kaanda, Sarga 21	To allay Dasharatha's fear, Sage Vasishtha counsels him using techniques similar to persuasion, reassurance, and advice in supportive psychotherapy, <sup>24,28</sup> by depicting the capabilities of his son and Sage Vishvamitra. He also reminds Dasharatha of Rama's capabilities and for him to think as a righteous king instead of a father.
	b. Hanuman expresses fear and self-doubt about crossing the ocean to reach Lanka to find Sita. Jambhavan, the king of bears, motivates Hanuman by reminding him of his innate potential (from birth as the son of the god of wind and the boon bestowed on him by Lord Indra) and encourages him to fly across the ocean to search for Sita in Lanka.	Kishkinda Kaanda, Sarga 66	Hanuman's fear reflects his cognitive distortion of selective abstraction and catastrophizing the event and his capabilities. <sup>29</sup> Jambhavan counsels him using techniques akin to the strength-based approaches <sup>30-32</sup> to deploy his personal strengths to aid empowerment.
	c. Sita expresses fear while in Ravana's kingdom, waiting to be rescued by Rama. Hanuman pacifies her by reminding her that Rama is on the mission of finding her and will surely free her after killing Ravana.	Sundara Kaanda, Sarga 40	Hanuman counsels Sita akin to the counselling techniques similar to hope theory, <sup>33-35</sup> He tells her to have faith in Rama and instills hope by telling her about Rama's efforts to rescue her from Ravana.
	d. Rama expresses fear over the safety of Sita in Ravana's kingdom. He also expresses self-doubt about crossing the ocean. Sugreeva (Monkey king) allays Rama's fear about Sita's situation by asking him not to brood over the past but to take action in a rightful manner and start the construction of a bridge that will help them reach Lanka and defeat Ravana.	Yuddha Kaanda, Sarga 2	Parallels can be drawn between the technique adopted by Sugreeva to counsel Rama to help him regulate his emotions and the problem-solving approach. <sup>36-39</sup> He also advises him to focus on the problem, not procrastinate, and come up with solutions to rescue Sita, like building a bridge to cross the ocean.



how to lead a virtuous life and successfully manage the stresses and strains of life (Table 1). One common theme that can be drawn from this review is that of emotion regulation strategies, specifically use of antecedent-focused strategies, acceptance, reappraisal, refocusing, and other supportive counseling approaches. Effective coping and staying in the present are another recurring theme, along with following one's sense of duty as a means of self-regulation.

Thus, there is a distinction between the counseling delivered in the epics and that conducted in counseling psychology, based on the theoretical background under which the counseling method is delivered. For example, throughout the Ramayana, it can be observed that counseling has been provided by various characters in the backdrop of the concept of *Dharma* (perception of righteousness) and *Karma* (duty) as described in the ancient Indian scriptures. In the case of counseling psychology, different psychological theories form the background for the strategies adopted; for example, the tenets of the psychoanalytical theory by Sigmund Freud form the basis of psychoanalysis.<sup>40</sup>

The nature of the therapeutic relationship and the nature of the human relationships in the Ramayana are also brought out clearly. For example, although Rama is the main protagonist, other characters also function as "counsellors" to Rama and significant other characters, based on the situation, irrespective of the character's societal role/hierarchical position in the text. In counseling psychology/psychotherapy, most often, the counsellor is in a position of power to deliver the counseling to clients and not vice versa (e.g., psychoanalytic psychotherapy and behavior therapy). However, the ultimate aim of the therapy in both models is to provide relief to the person from the distress and suffering and to provide insight into the situations.

Many mental health professionals believed that counseling was "alien" to the Indian culture and the sociocultural milieu of the country.<sup>41</sup> In such a scenario, developing techniques of counseling based on the ancient scriptural texts, in keeping with principles of counseling and Indian culture, values, and attitudes, could be a useful contribution.<sup>42</sup> The methodology

proposed in this paper is a generic form of using fables as anecdotes for purpose of counseling by anyone with skills of counseling. Those counsellors who are also proficient in Ramayana would be able to use these counseling techniques better.

Though the values and principles propagated in ancient Indian texts such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata are universal and can be used as counseling techniques without the need for a client to know the Ramayana, its acceptability in clients not of a specific cultural background can act as a limitation of implementing this approach. Furthermore, this review focused only on the anecdotes relevant to managing negative emotions; many more counseling techniques can be derived out from the Ramayana to manage varied situations, which could form the bedrock for developing an indigenous counseling framework. This study will help future researchers to use these concepts, incorporate these values into counseling process when working with the Indian population, and be more effective in the sociocultural milieu.

The application of these counseling techniques derived out from the Ramayana in a clinical population would be the next step toward developing an evidence base and an indigenous counseling framework.

## Conclusion

Indian texts, such as the Ramayana, are rich in knowledge, and the traditional concepts quoted in these texts can be used in counseling. There is a need for cross-cultural adaptation of the established psychological counseling techniques on the basis of the clients' social-cultural milieu.

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