

# *What Therapy Involves*

By

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The noted hypnotherapist Milton Erickson, said that therapy is like starting a snowball rolling down a mountain. Once started it builds up momentum and can grow into an avalanche. All the therapist has to do is to start the ball rolling. In essence, a therapist needs to find a way to get the process to begin. After that, the individual's internal systems will take over from there.

Therapy consists of a process of change which is consciously and deliberately entered into between a therapist and the client. This process needs to be designed to achieve mutually desired results. In order for this process to be effective the therapist must secure the client's agreement to undergo change. It is necessary that the client has given conscious and unconscious commitment and agreement otherwise change can not easily be achieved.

For any therapy to be effective it must be made compatible with the client's social and personal values and beliefs. This is what is meant by being *ecologically sound*. The reason this is so important is because **beliefs limit unconscious resources**. Whatever the client believes about him/herself, his/her life, and what she/he deserves from life will affect external behaviors, relationships, and the roles that will be assumed as well as how those roles will be played out.

Social roles are sets of communications and behaviors. They limit our ability to communicate with others. Whatever role we acquire will dictate the behaviors and communications we will use while assuming that role. Acquiring new ways of communication can affect the way a role is played. If a whole pattern of communications of a role is missing it will limit the performance of that role.

Social roles shape our communications with others. The roles through which we are raised shape our perceptions. These roles limit our control and the range of communications possible. What therapy has been seen as is the *acquisition of a new social role*. This role expands the client's ability to communicate and respond in the environment.

People come by problems due to faulty or insufficient learning, or the inability to utilize the learning already acquired. Many problems occur as discrepancies between beliefs and unconscious resources and behaviors. Internal conflicts originate as interpersonal conflicts. That is, as a child we saw how our parents behave toward each other, their attitudes toward other people (verbally stated beliefs, values, stated or implied needs, perceptual predispositions), and toward us. Consequently, we assumed that what they are doing is the appropriate behavior. Once we begin interacting in the world we find that some things that we learned work and some things do not. This causes role confusion and we take on behaviors which approximate the role behaviors we assume will consistently work.

We experience stressors as part of everyday life. Our ability to adapt or contend with stressors determines our ability to mobilize them. When we perceive stressors as challenging we are able to mobilize resources. If we see them as "overwhelming" it becomes difficult to make any changes. All clients, even those "thinking for themselves" have painted themselves into a corner; a small limited area of life where they feel comfortable. This comfort zone is the area of certainty where they can fully predict as much as possible. This comfort zone becomes a specific theoretical lens and is used in order to maintain the problem.

A problem can be defined by appearance, function, cause, history, or its relationship to other things. A person will report problems when there is *first* of all, a modified awareness or a change which brings the problem to the forefront. *Second*, there is or can be an altered intensity from the normal desire state with personal needs not being met or fulfilled. *Third*, there is or can be a determined act of will where the individual notices a problem and intentionally does something about it. *Fourth*, there can be a personal understanding being reached. *Finally* there is a particular situation being defined as the problem.

People tend to continue in their problematic behavior until something happens. An individual is not going to notice a problem until certain characteristic symptoms are present. These include:

1. an intense focusing on the painful sensations and seemingly being unable to ignore them;
2. an altered intensity of emotional experience (e.g. a change in mood such as depression or fear);
3. an unintentional experience occurs so that the "symptom just happens." The situation is out of the client's control so s/he doesn't feel like s/he did anything to cause it;
4. an unintentional reaction seems to occur (e.g. "I go crazy when he does that");
5. situations being *defined* as problems (a problem for one is a challenge for another).

There are **four processes which will hold a problem in place**. These processes are unconscious and often the reason for their being is long since disappeared. They have become habitual and tend to be generalized to anything which may seem similar to the original inducer. The **first** of these processes is that of *conflicting motivations*. This means that the individual is torn apart inside. This is what is termed *cognitive dissonance* in psychology. You may recall that one part of cognitive dissonance is an internal conflict where a person wants to have and does not want to have the same thing. The other part is where the person wants one thing and its opposite. As the conflict continues to develop, stagnation becomes the result. Whenever we are considering conflicting motivators we need to look at another psychological concept. That is the approach/avoidance conflict. There are *three levels of the approach/avoidance conflict*. The first is *approach/avoidance*. Here the conflict is between one thing that is attractive and one that is not. A decision is quite easy in this instance. The second level is that of *avoidance/avoidance*. Here we have two equally unattractive things. A choice becomes a little more complicated. The last level is that of *approach/approach* when there are two equally compelling things. A decision becomes extremely difficult. "What if..." becomes the key to not making a decision: "What if I take this and I find out that the other one is better?" As long as an individual continues with conflicting ideas s/he will never make the changes necessary. The **second** process is that of *compromise*. This can be defined as settling for what you can get. This means that you will get into your comfort zone and stay there choosing not to make any decisions or making any changes. What you have now is the best that there is. The **third** process is your silent rules. These are the expectations, beliefs, and personal demands on yourself and others. Included here are the roles that you play as well as the behaviors and cognitions associated with them. The **fourth** of these processes is your *values, dependencies, and boundaries*. These boundaries include your own self-accepted boundaries and the boundaries that you place on your relations with others. The *last* process holding problems in place is *permission seeking*. In essence, this means that you are constantly seeking the

approval of others. If you find that someone, anyone, does not approve, you will not feel that it is appropriate to make the particular choice. Recall that all of these are unconscious responses. Consequently, other person's approval that you most want need not even be alive or even exist in reality. In essence, that person exists only in your own mind.

All problems have to be maintained. At some level active energy is needed to maintain the problem. The fact of the matter is that problems are self-maintaining. This means that the problem is in itself rewarding. A key process is that the reward could be from the secondary gain when assuming others are approving of it. This assumption can be from nothing more than someone's sympathy toward the problem. It can be self-rewarding because it goes along with something that we had learned decades ago about our self ("You'll never amount to much"). The mechanism by which the problem is maintained is perceived as outside of awareness.

Whenever a client comes to a therapist with a problem the therapist must look for symptoms that protect a homeostasis. Just like the physical body, our psychological and emotional systems need to stay in harmony. Look for *deletion*, *distortion* and *generalizations* as the main processes maintaining the homeostasis. Find the generalizations and change them in some way (e.g. reframe them or readjust the resources). This will bring about a shift and still maintain the homeostasis.

Whether we are aware of it or not, each of us "votes" on every one of our experiences in life. This vote either values or devalues the experience. Consequently, it installs the experience as being a friend or enemy, a resource or defect, an asset or deficit. It is assumed that the way a person relates to a phenomenon determines its value and the response to it. Such methods seek to transpose problems into solutions by changing the way a person "votes" on an experience. The shift from a self-devaluation to a self-valuation brings about change. In essence, if the rules are changed the organization is changed.

*The main goal of therapy is to get the person out of therapy.* The conclusion of a successful therapeutic relationship is evidence that the client has reached a level of individuation appropriate for accepting and managing the ongoing interaction between the self and the world.

The expressed goals of therapy are to:

1. **Identify** the specific values within a client that are expressive of his/her uniqueness. Look for those talents, abilities, skills and special faculties that may be unexpressed.
2. **Accept** the identified values as valid for that client. A person's values denote their feelings of self-worth. Where these feelings of self-worth are placed will help you to focus on the strengths and weakness of your client.
3. **Translate** these values into multiple dimensions of experience, especially behavior.

To assume that the client already has the know-how needed to solve the problem makes a therapist's job much easier. The client already has all of the talents, skills and knowledge she or he needs to make the changes necessary. Therapy should be the key to help him realize his own possibilities. Engaging those special talents, skills, abilities, and so on will redirect all of his or her inner resources and bring about the change. To bring this about focus on what is changeable. **Look for solutions and abilities rather than pathology.**

Every client has set up a series of expectations which will direct their behaviors. These expectations are expressed as silent rules. In order to understand a client's silent rules you need to understand his/her emotional expectations. Many of these expectations are directed at the

therapist. The therapist needs to be highly sensitive to these expectations. They will come across in the emotional climate that the client sets up that serve his or her purposes.

Traditionally, the therapist's treatment plan has reflected the belief that the longer the treatment, the better it will be for the client. This comes from the mistaken idea that it took the client a long time to get where he is so it is necessary to go through a long and drawn-out deconstruction and reconstruction. It has been assumed that this is the best method to get more normal functioning. Study after study has shown that this method is not the best. One reason is that it is extremely inefficient and lacks elegance.

*Therapy involves the creation of new memories.* These memories are changes in how the client views the previously problematic situations. It is important that as a therapist you do what is necessary to promote therapeutic or growth experiences. One of the most effective means of doing this is through kindness and humor. Kindness and humor have been largely ignored by traditional therapy. There is a belief that the client is there because s/he is extremely troubled. In order to be most effective the therapist must be aloof to be objective and must be serious because this is a serious problem. What this does is creates an environment where rapport and trust take entirely too long to develop. When rapport develops, trust develops. The presence of trust enables barriers to be taken down. This increases communications and allows for the therapist to get into the client's worldview. From here the therapist can "see what the client sees" opening up possibilities for change.

Therapeutic change allows for the client to change in:

1. **viewing** of an event's perspective;
2. **disconnecting** (*deframing* or *reframing*) of a particular experience from an array of other associations;
3. **freeing** of a meaning from a frame set to satisfy that meaning.

It is important that the human be seen as a system within a much larger system. In this view the part with the most flexibility in a system controls the system. This goes both for the internal or personal environment of the client as well as his or her external environment. The more choices that the client has in his environment the more chance there will be for the client to control the environment.

Psychotherapy is moving away from explanations, problems, and pathology. The direction is toward solutions, competence, and abilities. In order to do this the integration of the total personality is the desired objective. This integration is termed *individuation*. Individuation is the awareness of, acceptance of, and acting upon those dimensions of self that define an individual as unique and autonomous. The implication is that the individual has:

1. an **awareness** of his or her own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors;
2. an **acceptance** of these as valid representations of his or her self and as personal experience;
3. their **identification** seen as separate, internal experiences existing within the boundaries of self;
4. these thoughts, feelings and behaviors serving as the basis for making **choices** in the course of daily living.

The goal in promoting individuation is to help the client maximize the range of choices and consolidate their many aspects.

There are certain values that facilitate individuation. These include the idea that:

1. ***Each person is unique.*** The problem is unique to that person. This doesn't mean that that person is the only one with that problem. This simply means that the way that the problem was acquired was unique and how the problem is being held in place is also unique. It was that client's own personal experience that brought the problem about.
2. ***Each person's experience is valid for him or her.*** No one can have another's experience. What happened to that person is their own.
3. ***Each person relates to ongoing experience from his own frame of reference.***
4. Join the client's frame of reference. In order to do this, ***rapport is of utmost importance.*** Without rapport you will be wasting both your client's and your own time.
5. ***The unconscious mind is rich in resources,*** is patterned from experience, and has positive capabilities. Tap into the unconscious by paying attention to the client. Reframe when necessary. Adjust the perspective constantly.
6. ***People make the best choice for themselves at any given moment.*** Everyone will choose what they think is the best for themselves. Choices tend to be based on self-interests and rarely involve the general environment. Increasing choice possibilities creates more choices that can involve the general environment.
7. ***Respect all messages from the client.*** Pay attention to what is said, and especially to what isn't said. More information comes through unconscious processes than through conscious.
8. ***Teach choice;*** never attempt to take choice away.
9. ***The resources that the client needs lie within his own personal history.*** Reframing the resources that already exist can get your client to make different choices. Allowing the unconscious to use whatever resources exist already will create *generative change*. This generative change will affect the client's whole life.
10. The explanation, theory, or metaphor used to relate facts about a person is not the person. ***"The map is not the territory."*** In fact, the problem itself is most likely a metaphor. By using another metaphor to replace the one that is dysfunctional, the client can operate with more effectiveness in his/her environment.

The therapist needs to keep these in mind. They're dealing with an individual, not simply a series of behaviors or a theoretical viewpoint. This will aid the therapist in accomplishing the first purpose of the therapeutic intervention.

*Self-actualization* is another way of describing individuation. Self-actualization implies an inner-directed, efficient way of relating to ongoing experience. The client's expectations, values, beliefs, inner images, scripts and inner dialogues contribute to the self-concept and emanate from it. To aid in actualizing the self an "inner search" is necessary. This search can lead to more specific therapeutic changes.

Techniques for change would best be directed toward the unconscious in order to bypass the conscious. The conscious mind is replete with biases, rigid patterns and limited experiences and learnings. The conscious mind concocts limiting beliefs. These beliefs stop us from searching for the resources we can use. This means that it is necessary to evoke and utilize the unconscious learnings of the client.

All of us have an active unconscious. It is able to direct thoughts and behaviors

independently of the conscious processes. Consequently, in order to affect the deepest and longest lasting change it is more important to communicate with the unconscious than with the conscious. The unconscious manifests itself in a great deal of simplicity and literalness. Interventions which stimulate the unconscious to search for the most efficient and effective solution would be indispensable. Communicating directly with the unconscious is the only way to tap into its unexplored potential.

In order to affect change it is necessary to be thinking about the future in a particular way. This has important effects on the future. Have your client construct a picture of how things will be when the problem is solved. Research has shown that people who imagine and explain success actually perform better than those who explain failure. Failure comes about from identifying with and focusing on the past. From this focus an individual assumes that because failure had occurred in the past it is inevitable and will continue into the future. In order to overcome this past identification an approach using age-regression, doing and experiencing the present and a pseudo-orientation in time or age-progression eliminates that fixation.

There are five stages for making change more effective. The *first* is to *change the status quo*. That is, change the automatic responses, the familiar behaviors, and the predictable ("I did it before and I'll do it again"). Once the status quo had been altered it becomes inevitable that other things will change as well. The *second* stage is to *introduce something different into the system*. A new way of thinking, a new perspective, a change of consciousness will all cause shifts that affect personal change. The *third* stage is to recognize that *confusion and chaos are evidence that the system is responding*. Confusion is nothing more than a step toward change. The greater the confusion, the greater the learning experience once the confusion has been resolved. The *fourth* stage is to *understand that change is a constant process*. It is subject to continuing awareness, to nurturing and practice. Most change tends to occur not in great leaps and bounds but in small steps. These small steps readjust the system a little at a time until the whole system is in harmony with the change. The *last* stage is to *set up a new status quo*. This means that you need to shift the energy direction. This can be done by any number of means: changing the self-image; buy a new wardrobe; find a new job; move to a new apartment; doing visual imagery of you being without the problem; etc.

The first thing a therapist needs to do is to get the client to do something---anything that's different from the usual complaint behaviors. Create an environment where these "new" behaviors are really normal and part of the client's regular repertoire. These new behaviors should have the client acting in self-respecting ways. The therapist needs to make sure that the client is associating the new behaviors with "good times." This will keep him or her focused on looking for the more positive aspects in life. A therapist can assist this by giving the client an assignment to look for change and to report on it. What has the client noticed about the situation? Are these changes in the direction of the problem? Are they the kinds of change that are desired to be continued? Clients often notice something different between sessions. Often they will attribute the change to something other than the therapeutic session. Make sure that she or he understands that change occurs after specific alterations of thought have occurred.

It is necessary that the therapist is clear in his or her job as well. Here are some questions for the therapist to become clear on with each client:

1. What do I have to offer this client to assist him in becoming well?
2. Do I have faith in his ability to grow?

3. Do I have ways to help him access his resources?
4. What perspective am I seeing this person from (i.e. specimen, treatment category, a person in trouble, good, bad, etc.)?
5. What can I do to assist this person's change?
6. Am I willing to be aware of myself enough to get out of his way?

If the client doesn't go along with the efforts of the therapist it is a message that the therapist has suggested changing in the wrong way. The person that needs to change in this instance is the therapist. What you need to do is to change and do something different. Be flexible. Your flexibility becomes a pattern for the client on the unconscious level and this behavior can help install change in the client. Needless to say, if you are communicating with the unconscious of your client you have a definite advantage. The unconscious will tell you what you need to do. You can also ask it what to do to assist change. The unconscious knows what is necessary and will change when motivated.

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