

Psychotherapy Guidebook

CHRISTIAN PSYCHOTHERAPY

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Christian Psychotherapy

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Table of Contents

[DEFINITION](#)

[HISTORY](#)

[TECHNIQUE](#)

[APPLICATIONS](#)

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DEFINITION

A recent condensation and summarization of the three basic forms of psychotherapy — the dynamic, the behavioral, and the experiential — has been published by Karasu (1977). He has provided a framework within which we can evaluate a technique with standardized dimensions, which I shall use to present my concept of Christian Psychotherapy. Christian Psychotherapy is defined here as a therapy that uses as its base the concept of the nature of man and the teachings about conflict resolution and behavioral control that are found in the Bible. This framework is completed by incorporating compatible theory and techniques found in the disciplines of psychiatry and psychology.

HISTORY

Although pastoral counseling has been performed since the beginning of the Christian church, it has been a real concern of the church only during the last few decades. Because there was no historical precedent for the development of a discipline that began with a distinctive Christian base,

secular concepts have been seen as sufficient to meet the needs of persons who counseled Christians. Only a few writers have begun with a Christian base and have attempted to elaborate a truly Christian psychotherapy. (The reader is referred to Tweedie's excellent historical review found in his book, *The Christian and the Couch*.)

TECHNIQUE

The starting point of all psychotherapies is the concept of the nature of man. The Bible teaches that man's nature has three parts: flesh, soul, and spirit (1 Thess. 5:23). The flesh is made up of more than the body, for it also incorporates the biological drives such as sex, sleep, and appetite. These give rise to certain behaviors that serve to satiate the appetites. The soul has within its functions the things that psychology places in the intellect. The spirit is an animating force that resides in man and operates through the flesh and soul.

In the Christian psychotherapeutic scheme, the spiritual aspect of man's existence is of great importance, for it is in this area of functioning that God operates. Christians believe that there is a prime mover in the universe, and that he is God (Rom. 1:19, 20), a person who manifested himself in the form of man, Jesus Christ. This Jesus died, was resurrected, and, after returning to the Father, sent His spirit (the Holy Spirit) to live in believers in order to reveal

truth, to give power and to fill them with love for their fellow man. God is experienced transcendentally by man through His spirit (1 Cor. 2:12) and His word (2 Tim. 3:16), the Bible. One of the most useful ideas in the Christian belief system is that God gives his followers the power to live according to the values he has given them in the Bible.

In his discussion of psychotherapy, Karasu used eleven dimensions. The reader is referred to his work for details. We will use his conceptual framework here.

Christians believe that at birth man has an inherited force called sin and that this force causes him to want to control and guide his own destiny. He cannot obey God's rules. Because he disobeys, he remains alienated from God and is not whole. When he is incomplete, he suffers. When he rebels, his behavior brings him pain, which causes him to suffer.

The prime concern of the Christian psychotherapist is, therefore, man's alienation from God and his lack of wholeness. His concept of pathology is that incompleteness gives rise to emptiness and meaninglessness, and his rebellion gives rise to suffering because of the consequences of sin.

The concept of health usually considered to be characteristic of Christian Psychotherapy is that of holiness or wholeness. Wholeness or sanctification begins with a transcendental experience (salvation), but at the

outset man remains incomplete. After salvation, the Christian life is one of constant self-inspection and therapy. Confession, reproof, instruction, and the performance of good works in love are all part of the process through which behavior is modified and men are made whole. It is necessary to emphasize the point that the body also be whole, for our view of the nature of man includes the body.

The mode of change in Christian Psychotherapy involves a synthesis of the various mechanisms used by the proponents of three kinds of psychotherapy — depth insight, direct learning, and immediate experiencing. Christian Psychotherapy adds as its primary goal reconciliation with God. With the completion of the man, the use of the three modes of therapy described by Karasu is enhanced.

In Christian Psychotherapy, we have to recognize that the “present is viewed through the past in anticipation of the future.” (Marias, 1971) Therefore, an understanding of the past is necessary to determine what changes must take place in order that the new patterns of behavior can be established. The objective reality of the patient’s present situation must, therefore, be examined in order to determine the significance of the subjectively remembered past. The intellectual and emotional knowledge gained can be used to help the patient understand his current behavior. After the therapist and patient have examined their findings in the light of the

biblical ideas, it is then easier to change behavior.

The Christian therapist begins by establishing an atmosphere of mutual acceptance in order to encourage the patient's self-expression. He has to determine his relationship to God, and to make this right, if it is wrong. He then has to uncover conflicts and assist in their resolution. If behavioral patterns need changing, he must program, reward, and shape responses. The therapist must further determine the order in which he will undertake these tasks.

The Christian psychotherapist should use all of the tools and methods commonly used in psychotherapy. He uses such techniques as free association, structured interviewing, persuasion, dream interpretation, hypnosis, psychodrama, visualization, role playing, and others to help the patient get in touch with his long-repressed feelings, so that he can take definitive action to deal with them. He will then use forgiveness and surrender as a method of ridding the patient of the undesirable emotions that have so influenced his behavior.

Conversion, as mentioned before, is an essential condition of Christian therapy, especially if this has not occurred. The fact that it is a useful and desirable change is documented in the secular literature (Wilson, 1972). Prayer and the understanding of biblical ideas concerning conflict resolution

and behavioral control are part of the therapy. Prayer, Bible study, and worship outside of the therapeutic sessions also help the patient continue to focus on a problem until he can effect a change. Finally, the promise of love, joy, and peace (Gal. 5:22, 23), to say nothing of abundant life and eternal life (John 10:10; Mark 10:30), are powerful incentives for working toward healing.

The treatment model utilized by Christians will be varied. Carlson presented Jesus as relating in roles that were priestly, pastoral, and prophetic. These are the same roles that are assumed by therapists in Karasu's system. Jesus was critic, preacher, teacher, interpreter, mediator, confronter, admonisher, advocate, sustainer, supporter, lecturer, advisor, burden bearer, listener, reprover, warner, helper, consoler, and pardoner. Christian therapists cannot, therefore, commit themselves to a single role model. Their treatment model must be all-inclusive.

If Christian therapy is to be effective, there must be something unique about the nature of the therapist-patient relationship. The relationship must be a loving and accepting one. The therapist assumes the role of a knowledgeable fellow struggler in a harsh world. It is an accepted fact that both draw on the same source of strength and wisdom. The therapist is a disciplined guide.

Earlier, we discussed the role and stance of the therapist as varied. His stand should, therefore, be varied. There are times when he will be loving, accepting, permissive, gratifying, direct, problem solving, and practical. At other times, he will need to be indirect, dispassionate, or frustrating. Each stance, however, will be taken in love.

APPLICATIONS

Christian psychotherapeutic techniques are applicable to all illnesses where wholeness is a desirable therapeutic outcome. It must be recognized that psychotherapy, whether secular or Christian, is not considered to be a primary treatment for biologically determined diseases such as manic depression and schizophrenia. If used in either, it must be recognized that Christian Psychotherapy is applied with caution. We have found it to be inadvisable in manic-depressive illness of the manic type. It has not proved useful in schizophrenia. The technique is particularly useful in alcoholism, drug addiction, chaotic personalities (the adult who was a maltreated child), and neurosis. The Christian dimension of therapy should be applied only in those patients who do not object to its inclusion in the therapeutic effort.