

Psychotherapy Guidebook

COOKING AS THERAPY

Louis Parrish

Cooking as Therapy

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Cooking as Therapy

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DEFINITION

Cooking is a practical mode of therapy through which the patient can channel anxieties, tensions, and aggressions via physical tasks such as cutting, chopping and beating into positive (and socially acceptable) outlets. Through cooking, the depressed patient can begin to reorient himself toward a simple goal-fulfilling task; the sense of accomplishment can be of great value in treating mild depression.

HISTORY

The kitchen, since the beginning of time, has been the central room or gathering place for the family. In this era of depersonalization, cooking together is a constructive activity that can better communication between couples as well as parents and children.

Cooking as a psychotherapy is probably a product of modern times. Prior to that, cooking was a necessary means of providing an adequate diet. Today, when people can eat out or bring in their meals, cooking is not all that

essential for physiologic survival. However, the more one knows about cooking and the more one prepares his own meals, the more likely he is to have a healthy diet.

And there is little doubt that cooking for the sake of cooking has helped stabilize the psyches of many people. The number who naturally take to the kitchen to soothe or release their emotions is amazing. It is such a common activity that we too often overlook it as a therapeutic modality.

TECHNIQUE

While cooking does not provide treatment for severe mental or emotional problems, it does afford the basically well-adjusted, functioning patient suffering from the anxiety/depressive syndrome so common today a means of working on his emotions and putting his problems into perspective. The technique is essentially Occupational Therapy. It is not only constructive but it utilizes a wide variety of basic activities that can express basic emotions. Cooking necessitates an involvement that can become a diversion. All the fundamentals of cooking, from the mechanics of slicing vegetables to the art of seasoning, can be used to good advantage.

APPLICATIONS

In prescribing cooking as therapy it is important to emphasize that part

of the preparation of the meal — whether it is shopping, preparing the ingredients, creating a dish, or serving — best suited to the individual patient's problems and needs. In the process of his utilizing the prescribed techniques to get a better perspective on his mental attitudes, the patient also gets a better understanding of nutrition. The overweight individual, for example, can be instructed as to how to prepare slimming but flavorful meals. In doing so, he feels a sense of accomplishment rather than the deprivation so often associated with dieting.

The person who needs a physical outlet for the pressures of daily life may find that beating a tough piece of meat until tender is a safe way of “taking it out” on something. If an individual is feeling emotionally shaky, or less than stable, “no fault” meals and menus — dishes he has prepared so often that he cannot make a mistake — in all likelihood are a useful kitchen prescription for a sense of security.