

Psychotherapy Guidebook

CREATIVE AGGRESSION THERAPY

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e-Book 2016 International Psychotherapy Institute

From *The Psychotherapy Guidebook* edited by Richie Herink and Paul R. Herink

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DEFINITION

The Creative Aggression (CAG) approach to individual and group psychotherapy is a body of theoretic principles and practical clinical methods that minimize, by rendering harmless, the hostile, hurt-oriented component of human aggression. CAG offers new ways of maximizing the playful, assertive, “impactful,” cathartic, information-rendering and affection-instigating effects of open and honest confrontations between intimates — friends, family members, spouses, lovers, and coworkers. The Fair Fight System provides angry and conflicted intimates with rules, rituals, and coping techniques that reduce the fear of aggression, avoid hurtful hostility, and facilitate basically good-willed “combatants” to fight fairly — not against each other, but for improvements in their relationship. CAG is differentiated by definition and by origin from so-called Assertion Training. CAG was developed and reported on before 1960, long before others took the assertive — I call it impact — aspect out of the context of the Creative Aggression principles. Also, Assertion Training considers anger and aggression unnecessary (as in Rational-Emotive Therapy), without providing methods of constructive utilization of this basic human energy source. The Creative

Aggression approach, however, helps patients and therapists to utilize — rather than to defensively deny, displace, or overcontrol — frustration, anger, and hostile feelings.

HISTORY

As the innovator of Creative Aggression Therapy, one of the roots of the approach was my own personality, including my way of confronting, fair fighting, and pressuring for changes. Another stimulus toward the development of CAG was my professional training. Predoctorially, I worked with both Kurt Lewin and Robert Sears, and both men influenced my interest in the psychology of aggression. My own doctoral research in 1944 impressed me with the intensity of play aggression in young children. Lewin's tension and conflict theory encouraged me to explore the role of aggression in group psychotherapy.

In the late 1940s, I sought further post-doctoral training as well as personal analysis from the late Adler student Lydia Sicher. Sicher reinforced me in my search of evolving clinical methods to put my “pro-conflict” ideas into practice, especially in group psychotherapy and couples and family therapy. During this time, my own creativity started and, then, my contribution of central significance: showing people how to utilize conflict and aggression creatively.

In my early group therapeutic practice (1945- 1953), I developed the clinical art of utilizing group processes — including my leader role — to maximize the mutual aid, the peer-therapeutic effects, in group therapy. In observing mis peer-influence factor, I was repeatedly struck by the relative failure of the nice-guy type of interaction — one might say the classical Rogerian stance of uncritical, unconditional positive regard — to move the patients through their resistances and on to new experiences. In contrast, I noticed that the more critical-aggressive confrontations, even “fights” — between patients themselves and between patients and therapists — tended to initiate new attitudes and opened people up to consider alternative ways of solving conflicts. The introduction of the time-extended “marathon group” schedule in 1963 provided longer-lasting group sessions in which the trust necessary for the open display of aggression had a chance to develop.

TECHNIQUE

CAG exercises are designed to reduce the stress due to the basic human fear of aggression (within oneself and from others). I do not believe in tranquilizing, distracting, or numbing human aggression. It's too basic a tendency. I do not trust that aggression can be reliably held down, and even if and when it is renounced, the price often is detachment. I view aggression as the most effective force in shaping oneself and the behavior of others. With CAG, clients learn and practice constructive ways of utilizing a variety of “fight

styles.” Their aggressive behavior is shaped by the therapist to minimize hurtful hostility and enhance and maximize open, authentic, information-yielding communications.

The Fair Fight for Change is the crux of the Creative Aggression system. It provides a step-by-step procedure for two (or more) partners of an intimate, ongoing association to constructively express criticism of one another and to assertively demand and negotiate changes for the better in the quality of their emotional or material interdependence.

It is the most effective Creative Aggression technique, especially in couple therapy. The capacity to conduct a mutually productive, exciting and even joyful fight for change is proof that the student has learned all of the other procedures of the aggression control system. Every one of the Creative Aggression exercises is an essential preparatory step to ready the opponents for the Fair Fight for Change.

The preparatory exercises, such as the “H-type rituals,” effectively remove hurtful hostility, punitiveness, vengeful smarting as well as irrational emotionality, such as raging anger, so that the fight for change can be not only fair but also realistic and rational. Other preparatory exercises, such as the “info-impacts,” remove hostility-escalating generalities and rigid stereotyping. They also render much information about options, “beltlines,”

and non-negotiable territory.

The fight for change, a fifteen-step procedure, is a communication training technique aimed at establishing a process for dealing with any one specific issue. It is a zeroing-in on a single issue, gripe, or “beef about a specific behavior pattern with a demand for change by one partner or the other.

APPLICATIONS

The CAG system is practiced in both individual and group psychotherapy. Its major applications are in the areas of self-improvement, pairing (where divorced adults are helped to improve their dating and mating skills), couples, and family therapy. CAG-trained therapists, as well as teachers and counselors, have effectively worked with co-workers in offices and factories, and with public school and university students.

The CAG approach lends itself ideally to the reeducation of the “A type” abrasive personality, as well as the fight-phobic fearful personality. The CAG approach has also been found psychiatrically effective with the difficult passive-aggressive patients; CAG brings indirect hostility into the open where it can be dealt with in a rational manner.

Last but possibly of first importance is the use of CAG techniques in self-

improvement and psychological self-help. Self-respect can be increased, which also facilitates decision-making.