

Psychotherapy Guidebook

# DEPTH THERAPY

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# **Depth Therapy**

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# Depth Therapy

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## DEFINITION

Depth Therapy is a new phenomenon (developed in the sixties and seventies) which is based heavily on Otto Rank's theory and technique. In the initial stages of the psychoanalytic approach, the Freudian model (dating from the 1890s to the present day) endeavored to keep the psychoanalyst as neutral as possible so that the psychotherapeutic process of "making the unconscious conscious" would not be interfered with by the contamination of an outside personality. This, as is well-known, lends itself to a prolonged process of intellectual discovery of the unconscious, leading to many years of consistent therapeutic involvement, often on a daily basis.

## HISTORY

Rank, in the 1920s and 1930s, became dissatisfied with this approach, attacking not only the technique itself but some of the very basic Freudian theoretical formulations (Oedipal complex, libido theory, etc.). He was in essence the first to break through the length of the process and accelerate the reaching of the unconscious. He claimed that he could help a person

transform from a highly blocked, disturbed existence to a highly creative and artistic way of life within a nine-month period (the time period being equal to the time involved in the process of pregnancy), at which point the birth of the self would take place.

With the introduction of this concept into psychoanalytic thought came many new approaches and techniques. Among the more well-known are Psychodrama, Gestalt theory (Fritz Perls), and many more psychoanalytically based systems that deal more directly with the intrusion of the therapist's personality into the therapeutic process. As with Freudian theory, most of the modern therapeutic systems have also been influenced by Rankian theory. This is basically the case with Depth Therapy.

Otto Rank's theories were largely disseminated in the United States at the University of Pennsylvania's School of Social Work. Depth Therapy extends that theory somewhat by including more fully the idea that to be totally alive one must be creatively involved in daily living, just as an artist is involved in creating art. This includes freedom of choice, freedom of will, and constant creativity. In Depth Therapy, which includes some aspects of Will Therapy (Rank), the therapist's personality, creative ability, and skill are more fully integrated into the process of psychotherapy. Further, Depth Therapy extends Rank's "positive will" theory by including in it a method to stimulate motivation through the positive will.

Depth Therapy, or more accurately an intensive experiential interacting with a therapist, is dynamically grounded in the overall psychoanalytic framework, with a strong leaning toward a Rankian theoretical and technical base. It accepts the premise that there is an intra-uterine psychobiological influence that culminates in its impact in the birth process. The birth process is probably the essence of a future ability to change (Rank, 1952). The combination of the following factors seems to set the blueprint for a future ability to grow and change: the sensitivity of the nervous system and the impact of the intra-uterine existence suddenly erupting into a totally different physical, emotional, and sensuous experience by exposure to a drastically new environment. The severity of the change at birth, correlated with the physiological sensitivity of the nervous system, could well be the basic determinant of future adjustment to change, growth, and use of the “force of life.”

As the infant develops, the other factors of parental (especially maternal) influence, their sensitivity, reactive behavior, care, and, above all, acceptance of the child as a separate being that is continuously developing, create the all-important environment in which the newly forming self becomes a uniquely creative, separate entity.

The end product of this growing child is an accomplished individual who is creative in life, relationships, job, and society. This is the ultimate goal

in achieving a full life. If the self is a uniquely creative entity, the taking in of stimuli from the environment goes through a process of creativity within the unique self. The result is constant vibrance, freshness, and consistent growth into new horizons and experiences.

Within the spectrum of Rankian and psychoanalytic theories, we see that in the vast majority of homes parents, in their reaching out for eternity by remaining parents, fear the individuation of their child. When their child becomes a unique being different from themselves, their job is done and they are ready to be discarded by nature and die (this, of course, is their unconscious conviction based, in part, on their own lack of a unique self). In view of this death fear, the parents hold onto the child as an extension of themselves and do not allow for individual expression. This causes the child to grow into a shadow of the parent with severe guilt about his or her uniqueness and drive toward unique creativity (Rank, 1935).

Yet the child cannot help but try, throughout childhood, to reach out toward expression of the self. Guilt is increased, and being unique and creative becomes a dangerous phenomenon. This, in turn, encourages the child to be submissive, noninventive, guilt-ridden, and helpless. The child, and later the adult, becomes filled with anger, depression, feelings of inadequacy, and so on.



Why don't children take more of a risk and tear themselves away at an early age to grow on their own? To an extent, some do: the artists, the inventors, etc. Yet there is always the threat of death. If mother and father do not approve, they will withdraw care, love, protection, food, and the child will die. Therefore, the child, battling all the way, finally gives in as an adult, enters into the "family of man," and becomes a creature of dependence and a conformist.

## TECHNIQUE

The goal of Depth Therapy is to help the individual coming for help diminish the conditioning of the self from all the defense mechanisms and conditioned responses that are based on the concept of "right," "wrong," "good," and "bad." The process helps expose the buried self to stimuli and utilize the feeling aspects of our system rather than the intellectual aspects as the basis for survival and creativity.

In attempting rediscovery of the feeling self, the environment in the therapeutic milieu becomes one of womblike security and safety, later to become a source of environmental acceptance. Finally, the therapeutic relationship provides encouragement to the newfound self to separate the real in the relationship from the distorted (transference) part. To accomplish this final goal of separation, the process of therapy becomes the process of

growth into a creative, separate self. All this, of course, cannot be totally accomplished since contamination of conditioning is great by the time the person seeking help comes into the office. Yet one can succeed in helping individuals reach a level of functioning that is much more creative, satisfying, and even exciting.

The therapeutic process is as follows:

The first stage is that of establishing an intense relationship with the therapist. It is vital that, above all, the therapist must be talented beyond the average in the ability to accept and even enjoy individual differences. In this first stage, this acceptance of differences must only be hinted at. The goal of the first stage is to help the individual enter into a symbolic, womblike existence with the therapist (on an emotional level). This helps to motivate the individual to enter, in future work, into the “dangerous” territory of feelings that were never allowed before.

The second stage helps the individual to begin to get in touch with his or her feelings. Within the safety of the newfound intensive relationship and the therapist’s acceptance of the individual’s unique feelings, the person in treatment becomes more accepting of his or her own feelings.

The third stage is the working through of the new experiences caused by the new feelings, i.e., what to do with one’s feelings of rage, anger,

frustration, love, hate, fear, sexuality, tenderness, and so on. In this stage, the individual works through these feelings, with the therapist acting as a representative of reality.

The final stage is one of separation, and it is extremely difficult both for the individual seeking help and for the helper. Despite his or her professional background, the separation is difficult for the therapist in this particular approach, due to the intensity of the relationship that has existed for several years. The pain and anxiety of separation are part of the process that engages both the helper and helpee. Yet it is ultimately the helper who must involve the individual coming for help in a process of separation and let go of the newly alive person.

Due to the brevity of this paper, the more complex, intricate, and complete explanation of the psychoanalytic and Rankian basis for this therapeutic approach cannot be dealt with. Yet the reader surely notes the relationship of the theory and process to the above-mentioned approaches. One of the most significant differences between Depth Therapy and similar approaches is that it emphasizes more fully the use of the therapist's own talent, capacity for intensity, appreciation of difference, and love of the uniqueness of life.

## APPLICATIONS

Depth Therapy can be applied to most of the emotional and mental disturbances that are listed in the psychiatric nomenclature. This is due to the emphasis in this theory on the qualities of the therapist necessary to help the patient grow (skill, talent, capacity for intensity, etc.) rather than the diagnosis of the patient. The selection of the proper therapist for a particular individual seeking help is vital, and this is where diagnosis of the patient is important in order to match the individual with the personality of the therapist.

As Depth Therapy has as its goal the effecting of major change in the personality and life of the individual seeking help, it is more applicable to ongoing individual psychotherapy of long duration rather than to crisis intervention work. More recently, however, Depth Therapy techniques have been applied with some success to short-term psychotherapy.