

Psychotherapy Guidebook

EMOTIONAL COMMON SENSE

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Table of Contents

[DEFINITION](#)

[HISTORY](#)

[TECHNIQUE](#)

[APPLICATIONS](#)

Emotional Common Sense

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DEFINITION

Emotional Common Sense is a technique for educating the public to improve the balance in their emotional life between constructive action and self-destructiveness. I conceptualize it as follows: “Try to give the same good advice to yourself as you are capable of giving to your friends.” Self-destructiveness is defined as disregarding the predictable consequences of our actions.

This approach balances self-awareness, understanding of how people behave, and increased personal control or spontaneity as required. Many people benefit directly. Others find themselves prepared for psychotherapeutic consultation.

HISTORY

Looking at the world around us reveals tens of millions of people who are avoidably self-destructive, that is, they have life-styles that lead to suicide, jail, ruined marriage and other relationships, unnecessary failures in school

and on the job, etc.

Some of the concepts evolved from personal experiences, when I became aware of some of my own self-destructive goals and values. Personal psychotherapy and experiences in performing psychotherapy for others also clarified my understanding. Important theoretical concepts include: the Freudian unconscious and transference of feelings; Adler's ideas about style of life and fictitious goals; the effect of early fantasies and experience with our parents in forming images and self-concepts that subsequently affect us (Harry Stack Sullivan and Melanie Klein); the concept of role playing developed by Jacob Moreno; and my own study of evolution and human physiology.

Finally, leadership of many human relations workshops and larger goal-directed participation-discussion groups have been useful in helping me to understand the problems that people have in today's society, and to learn successful self-help techniques for overcoming them.

TECHNIQUE

Emotional Common Sense has been applied through: large participation-discussion groups focused upon a particular topic; smaller human relations workshops in which people are invited to exchange their thoughts and feelings on common problems; reading the basic text (Parker,

1973); a teaching component in group and individual psychotherapy.

The participant is invited to learn and accept these assumptions:

1. Degradation and manipulation of others poison the emotional atmosphere in intimate and business relationships, and are thereby self-destructive.
2. There is rarely any excuse to permit ourselves to be degraded by family, friends, employers, colleagues, etc.
3. By not erasing destructive experiences and images of the past, we retain out-of-date values, feelings, and memories that affect our self-esteem, perception of authority, etc.
4. People may not express their emotions appropriately. They hold back anger and pain, or exaggerate them to manipulate others through abuse.
5. Our own feelings are not always trustworthy. Displaced anger, low self-esteem, over-sensitivity, and the like are examples.
6. Substantial differences exist between people which derive from persistent constitutional (bodily) and temperamental (mood) qualities between people. These have their origin in the body's biological structure and functioning.

Achieving Emotional Common Sense involves:

1. Improving self-understanding. People are encouraged to be

sensitive to their dark moods (anxiety, depression, anger, loneliness) and to the social situations that arouse them. The question, “What sort of a person am I?” helps us to improve the balance of constructive to self-destructive actions.

2. Recognizing out-of-date values. It is important to live life according to the values taught by our own experience, not those of yesterday’s world taught by parents and teachers, or the media, etc. We must be particularly alert to values that are unsuitable for a person with our history and personal qualities.

3. Resist the temptation to act according to “unfinished business” from earlier experiences. The pain, humiliation, anger, and frustration of earlier life are compensated for at that time through fantasies, goals, and expectations about the future. We develop ideas while growing up as to how we want to be, what kind of a partner we want, how we ought to behave, fantasies of love and revenge, and so on. These scripts are played out by themselves toward our children, employers, lovers, and friends. Since the other party is not aware of the role we project on him, there is resistance and we may try to manipulate him to fulfill our needs. This is particularly true when people don’t take no for an answer in love affairs. Emotional Common Sense is designed to help people evaluate their needs and take action according to today’s world.

4. Not knowing how to express feelings appropriately. Most of us have been trained to hold back our feelings of pain and anger.

Consequently, we are pushed around since we can't defend ourselves. "Keeping a stiff upper lip" when we should object is an example of a false value.

5. Trusting our feelings excessively. Many people believe that their feelings offer completely accurate information. In contradiction to many encounter group leaders and others who state that "we should always trust our feelings," Emotional Common Sense teaches that many feelings have their origin in early experiences, misunderstandings, incomplete information, propaganda, and the like. It is self-destructive to act immediately in significant circumstances without some cognitive evaluation of the situation.
6. Relying upon momentary gratification. Small triumphs and momentary pleasure do not create a fulfilling life-style. Many people exercise little self-discipline, then enter into trivial relationships, do not prepare their work properly, or do not invest time in education. Quick sexual adventures, time frittered away with acquaintances, and so on can interfere with achieving significant goals.

Some active principles of Emotional Common Sense:

1. The "ouch principle." This is advised when people do not defend themselves properly. They are told, "If somebody steps on your toes, say 'Ouch.' This will give them a chance to explain why they have done something painful. It may be a misunderstanding, or it may have been inadvertent. If they apologize, it's one thing. If they insist on their right to

mistreat you, leave.”

2. Eliminating degrading relationships from our lives. These relationships include those with parents, children, and employers. Most people feel that this cannot be done, but exploration sometimes reveals that the emotional difficulties are so great that there is little choice. In the area of work, for example, it is useful to have a “parachute” in the form of some savings, so that one may quit a job without undergoing exploitation and abuse.
3. Developing the capacity for autonomy, as well as good relationships. Many individuals have not learned to feed themselves emotionally. Therefore, they have excessive need for continuous close contact with other people. They participate in very unsatisfactory relationships from fear of being alone. When we develop our resources — emotional, spiritual, and vocational — we are better companions since we are less demanding, as well as more interesting.
4. Developing self-assertion and self-acceptance. This evolves from a knowledge of who we are, so that we do not end up meeting the needs of others who have a clearer idea of what they want out of life than we do. Increasing our self-esteem is part of this process, so that we feel entitled to getting good things out of life. By developing self-esteem, we do not require excessive support from others.
5. Working on good relationships. It is important to develop a less critical attitude towards others, as well as to be

understanding and know how to meet others' needs. Emotional Common Sense emphasizes techniques of reaching out to others, accepting their good will, and increasing capacity for intimacy.

6. Developing a suitable life-style. An emotionally fulfilling life includes productivity (offering something of use to the community), relatedness (enjoying and being able to reciprocate with people), and autonomy (enjoying our own personality and functioning comfortably by ourselves).

APPLICATIONS

Emotional Common Sense techniques are designed to alleviate stress, emotional pain, guilt, anxiety, worthlessness, overcoming loneliness, deprivation, and depression. They also deal with improving self-assertion and emotional problems of employment, creativity, productivity, and decision-making.