

Psychotherapy Guidebook

ENCOUNTER THERAPY

Will Schutz

Encounter Therapy

Will Schutz

e-Book 2016 International Psychotherapy Institute

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

All Rights Reserved

Created in the United States of America

Copyright © 2012 by Richie Herink and Paul Richard Herink

Table of Contents

[DEFINITION](#)

[HISTORY](#)

[TECHNIQUE](#)

[APPLICATIONS](#)

Encounter Therapy

Will Schutz

DEFINITION

Encounter is a method of relating based on openness and honesty, self-awareness, self-responsibility, awareness of the body, attention to feelings, and an emphasis on the here-and-now. It usually occurs in a group setting. Encounter is therapy insofar as it focuses on removing blocks to better functioning. Encounter is education, recreation, and religion in that it attempts to create conditions leading to the most satisfying use of personal capacities.

HISTORY

The Delphic precept, “Know thyself,” is a succinct statement of a fundamental tenet of encounter. Socrates used group stimulation in his dialogues, although they emphasized intellectual material rather than feelings, a preference not found in Encounter.

Perhaps the ancient Greek city of Epidaurus is most closely approximated by a modern growth center such as Esalen in California, a

location where, among other activities, Encounter group workshops take place. Epidaurus also had its variety of methods concentrating on the body, the unconscious, dreams and mystical elements.

Recently Max Lerner, a student of American civilization, has traced the history of Encounter through the American culture, beginning with Thomas Jefferson and encompassing the Oneida Community, various liberation movements, and several other phenomena. Lerner sees Encounter as the culmination of a variety of indigenous movements that have sprung up in America from its inception to the present.

Thus, the modern Encounter group is an integration of a wide variety of influences, ancient and recent. Many modern influences have made their mark on the present form of Encounter, including: group psychotherapy, T-Groups, group dynamics, psychodrama, Gestalt therapy, and theater and dance.

TECHNIQUE

Encounter usually takes place in a group of eight to fifteen persons in a room that has a rug and is devoid of furniture, with all participants sitting on the floor or on pillows. An Encounter workshop usually consists of several meetings, each typically two hours long, spread over a weekend or five days. Ages vary from fifteen to seventy-five, with most participants between twenty

and fifty. The workshop is held in a residential setting where all participants live. There is no formal agenda. The group members focus on becoming aware of their feelings, on expressing them honestly, and on taking responsibility for them.

Following are the principles of Encounter:

- 1. Unity of the organism.** You are a unified organism. You are at the same time physical, psychological, and spiritual. These levels are all manifestations of the same essence. You function best when these aspects are integrated and when you are self-aware.
- 2. Honesty.** Honesty and openness are the keys to your evolutionary growth. You must expend great amounts of energy to hide your feelings, thoughts, or wishes from other people, and even more energy to keep them from yourself. To withhold secrets requires a tightened body; it requires curtailment of spontaneity lest the secrets be revealed; it requires vigilance, shallow breathing, physical exertion, and a preoccupation with your own safety.
- 3. Awareness.** A main purpose of Encounter is to help you become more aware of yourself: to break through self-deception, to know and like yourself, to feel your own importance, to respect what you are and can do, and to learn to be responsible for yourself. You achieve these best through self-awareness.

4. Choice and self-responsibility. Coming to an Encounter group is always a voluntary act. Presence in the group assumes that you have chosen to be there. There is no need for concepts such as sick or well, psychotic or normal, neurotic or happy. Choosing to go to an Encounter group in no way implies sickness; it implies only a desire for more joy, honesty, self-acceptance, and awareness.

If you, as a potential group member, do not feel ready to go to a group, or if you have a dread of being brainwashed, denuded, robbed of all privacy, or made dependent, your path is clear: don't go. As the group leader, I routinely announce that you are responsible for making the choice of entering the Encounter group, and that you are responsible for everything that happens to you during the life of the group. All choices about yourself are yours. You may choose to have your brain washed or to use your judgment, to go crazy or to be sane, to learn something or to be inert, to be bored or to be interested, to enjoy or to be miserable, to resist or welcome efforts at opening yourself up, to reveal your sexual intimacies or to keep them secret, to be physically injured or remain intact. I regard you as capable of being responsible for yourself.

By assuming that you are responsible, I feel I elicit your stronger qualities. If I assume that you are not capable of being responsible, I tend to infantilize you and elicit your weaker qualities.

My assertion that you are self-responsible does not mean that I cannot choose to be responsible for you. I decide how responsible for you I want to make myself.

5. Naturalness and simplicity. I trust natural processes. My reliance on natural unfolding extends to virtually every facet of human functioning. All profound truths are simple.

6. Way of life. Encounter is a way of life, not just a therapeutic technique. It concerns itself with relations among people and offers an alternative to the present structure of society, a structure that is based on deception (diplomacy), masking feelings (tact), disowning the body (as primitive, irrational, obscene), and similar duplicities.

7. The rules of Encounter. From the philosophy and theory underlying Encounter emerge very specific ways of leading a group; these ways can be expressed as a set of rules for group interaction. The rules implement the principles stated above.

The first set of rules establishes open and honest communication:

- Be honest with everyone, including yourself.
- Start with the here-and-now.
- Pay close attention to your body.
- Concentrate on feelings.

The next set of rules focuses on the body, integrating it into the group activity:

- Meet in rooms and in clothes that allow maximum freedom of movement.
- Sit or stand in a position that allows you to move toward any other person easily.
- Don't drink coffee or eat during a meeting.
- Fight when it feels right.
- Take off your clothes when it feels useful.
- Whenever there is an opportunity to express something physically, rather than verbally, do it physically.
- Don't take drugs.
- Don't smoke.
- Don't wear glasses or contact lenses.

To establish your identity and to encourage you to take responsibility for yourself, several other rules are helpful:

- Take responsibility for yourself.
- Make statements, not questions.

- Speak for yourself.
- Don't use globalisms.
- Take responsibility for your choices.
- Speak directly to the person addressed.
- Avoid noncommittal words.
- If something is happening that you don't like, take responsibility for doing something about it.

The use of body energy to help expand the limits of the self-concept gives rise to two important rules:

- If you are saying something about yourself that you have said before, stop, and say something else.
- Do whatever you are most afraid of doing.

APPLICATIONS

Encounter as a style of life, rather than merely as a group technique, has been adopted widely. The Encounter movement is part of the larger social phenomenon embodying the various liberation movements, the renaissance of religion, and the call to honesty. The Encounter culture encompasses not only the use of the techniques associated with encounter and the human potential movement in general but also those social trends that express the

basic tenets of Encounter: honesty, self-responsibility, awareness, understanding and acceptance of the body and of the self, and an appreciation of the unity of the organism.

Applications have been made to psychotherapy, industry, theater, education, childbirth, parent-child relations, religion, society, and daily life.