

Psychotherapy Guidebook



**PHILOSOPHICAL
PSYCHOTHERAPY**

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Philosophical Psychotherapy

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Philosophical Psychotherapy

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DEFINITION

Essentially a cognitive-type psychotherapy, Philosophical Psychotherapy effects behavioral change and emotional control through one's thoughts, philosophical outlook, or attitude. Our beliefs, intellectual posture, or perspective on life can and does affect our personalities as much (if not more) than our physical environment or the external stimuli to which we respond. Often it is our philosophical attitude toward the world around us that governs how we will tend to respond to a particular situation or to a given set of stimuli.

To alter personality it is necessary to effect changes in a person's philosophy of life. While a certain type of philosophy predisposes one to pessimism, depression, or moroseness, another philosophical view on life can dispose a person toward being optimistic, exuberant, and content. What is so remarkable about Philosophical Psychotherapy is that it often succeeds when a number of other psychotherapeutic techniques have failed.

HISTORY

The birth of Philosophical Psychotherapy is traced to two patients who did not respond to the expert psychotherapeutic care accorded them by several psychiatrists. Because conventional methods of therapy proved futile, it was necessary to resort to novel techniques in these two cases.

One of these clients strove in vain to eliminate an incorrigible neurotic symptom. Neither he nor his therapists could uproot the symptom that he interpreted as an ominous sign of failing mental health. Convinced that his sanity would be debilitated if the neurotic symptom were not conquered and expunged from his personality, he rallied every fiber of his being to eject this unwelcome invader from his personality. The results were disastrous. Rather than finding any relief, he merely compounded his troublesome condition by exhausting himself emotionally in his vain attempts to gain mastery over his neurotic symptom. His succession of failures left him demoralized, depressed, and emotionally depleted. Without realizing it, he had navigated himself into a position where his neurosis was not the important issue, for the seat of his distress had now become the huge sum of emotion expelled to dominate a neurotic symptom that he felt would damage him mentally if left uncontained.

It was at this point that Philosophical Psychotherapy was introduced. He was advised to stop fighting his neurosis, to accept it — to be philosophical about it. To accept it with an air of indifference. If other people with handicaps accept theirs and yet continue with the business of life, why

could he not do the same? Rather than fighting his neurotic symptom, he was told, why not accept it as part of his personality? His attitude of philosophical indifference proved a turning point in his well-being. Immense amounts of energy were no longer wasted on rallying his forces to attack his neurotic symptom but were now used constructively in productive living. No longer emotionally depleted, demoralized, or depressed, he felt that he was a well man. What was remarkable was his insistence that he was cured of his neurosis, when all that actually took place was relief from emotional exhaustion.

The efficacy of philosophy as a therapeutic agent was first noticed when a number of students regularly reported “feeling good” after certain lectures. They derived more than a conveyance of information from the lectures; they felt as if they were more suitably equipped for confronting life’s problems and crises. A reassessment of the lectures that proved therapeutic as well as informative found them to be of a certain type. Many were stoical in character. A person was encouraged to face life’s problems philosophically — to face them with stoical indifference. If a situation cannot be changed, then one must change one’s attitude toward it. If you cannot achieve what you would like to attain, then like what is within your reach. There is nothing in heaven or earth worth losing your composure, for a tranquil state of mind is a priceless possession.

TECHNIQUE

It is important to explore the patient's philosophical attitude in order to ascertain whether it is supportive or counterproductive to wholesome mental health. Often a person's philosophical stance, belief, or outlook adversely affects his emotional or mental health. To be in this predicament, a person need not be brainwashed by some nefarious group; it may result from self-administered brainwashing. People can and do think and talk themselves into a philosophy or philosophical attitude or a belief that causes anxieties.

After determining that the client's philosophical beliefs are counterproductive to constructive responses or wholesome living, it is necessary for the therapist to act in the role of facilitator to change them for desirable ones. The therapist aids the client in changing his attitude or assists him in becoming more philosophical about his condition — even in cultivating an attitude of philosophical indifference.

In the case of the man mentioned earlier, our dialogue proceeded as follows:

You have told me of some of your neurotic symptoms and you say that you want me to help you to eradicate them. Why? I asked.

What do you mean, Why? he replied. Any normal person would want to

get rid of them. They are tormenting problems and disturb me terribly. They have made me miserable for a long time.

Have you ever tried to live with them? I asked. Some crippled people have learned to live with their ailments. They do not spend every hour of their waking day or an entire lifetime striving to gain mastery over their problems. They accept their plight and learn to live with it, as do many other people who are handicapped victims. Some persons with the loss of an arm or with a heart condition learn to live within the limitations of their handicap; they do not waste their time and exhaust themselves vainly combatting their problem. Is it not possible for you also to do something comparable?

After staring at me with a meaningless look for almost a minute, the patient's eyes and face lit up, and he smiled broadly and said: "Why didn't the other psychotherapists tell me this long ago? Of course I can accept it and live with it. In fact, I feel better already. It is most ironic," he added, "that I should come to a therapist, requesting that he cure me, and then have him tell me to keep my problem."

APPLICATIONS

Philosophical Psychotherapy is most effective in those recalcitrant cases that do not yield to other forms of therapy. Its value is best appreciated in dealing with those long-term cases where common forms of psychotherapy

have proved fruitless.

Other applications include cases in which more fundamental forms of personality change are sought — where a complete change of life-style or a new attitude on life will benefit the individual. Those with various emotional problems — especially people plagued with anxieties and other fears and those facing life's crises and other distressing situations — benefit most from Philosophical Psychotherapy. It is a boon to so-called normal people seeking to maintain their slim hold on “sanity.” It comes as a relief to neurotics of long standing.