

Psychotherapy Guidebook

SELECTIVE AWARENESS THERAPY

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Selective Awareness Therapy

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Selective Awareness Therapy

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DEFINITION

Selective Awareness Therapy (S.A.T.) is a short-term, holistic approach to the treatment of physical and psychological symptoms through integration of body and mind. The underlying assumption of S.A.T. is that both physical and mental symptoms are the product of unresolved thought/emotion complexes that upset the natural homeostatic balance of the individual through misallocation of energy. Through a combination of deep relaxation, breathing, and imagery, clients learn how to achieve insight into the connection between the symptom and the thought/ emotion process of which it is a manifestation. Once insight is achieved, clients are taught to get in touch with their own self-healing potential to release blocked energy and regain and maintain natural health and vitality.

HISTORY

Dr. Peter Mutke became aware of the need for a new approach to medical and psychological problems during his career as a physician and surgeon. He was fascinated by the variety of different ways in which people

react to illness or injury, and he noticed that patients' belief systems and mental attitudes seemed to be powerful factors influencing survival and speed of recovery. In his search for a tool that could utilize these powerful factors, Dr. Mutke turned to Hypnotherapy, which he used, for a time, with great success. However, he was troubled by the numerous misconceptions and expectations associated with hypnosis, especially the client's expectation of being passively controlled. So, Dr. Mutke began to develop a new approach that would have the advantage of neutral expectations. Based on sound principles of psychophysiology, S.A.T. combined positive aspects of hypnosis — such as deep relaxation, access to amnestic material, and use of creative imagery — with techniques for teaching clients to adjust their own physical and psychological functioning to normal and to take responsibility for their own well-being. S.A.T. differs from Hypnotherapy in several important ways. The S.A.T. relaxation induction purposely avoids any connotation of “trance” or “sleep,” and is regarded rather as a state of “super-consciousness” that facilitates increased insight and receptivity to change. The client's consent is sought at all stages of therapy, giving reassurance that the client is in control and can return to social awareness at any time.

S.A.T. has elements in common with a number of other therapeutic approaches. Autogenic training, for example, also employs deep relaxation and positive imagery, which are effective in temporary relief of symptoms. However, Autogenic training is a lengthy procedure that fails to provide

techniques for dealing with emotional abreactions (reexperiencing a previous emotional event) and amnesic material that may spontaneously appear during relaxation. Thus, clients cannot achieve the insight essential to lasting change.

The structure of S.A.T. is unique and it is one of the few therapeutic approaches that effectively bridges the gap between psychology and medicine, giving clients an awareness of their power to influence their own physical and mental health.

TECHNIQUE

S.A.T. is a short-term therapy; a series of from three to five one-hour sessions at weekly intervals are expected to lead to significant change in a client's illness pattern. After identifying and breaking the perpetuating thought/emotion/physical symptom chain, the client is helped to adjust attitudes and self-image accordingly so that the changes will become permanent. When a client has a number of unrelated symptoms, it is necessary to explore the dynamics of each symptom in turn, allowing two or three sessions for each disease. An initial S.A.T. session begins with a short inquiry into the client's social and medical history and current complaint. Evidence of a recent medical work-up is essential when treating physical symptoms outside of a medical setting. After discussion of the S.A.T.

approach, the client is introduced to the state of selective awareness through a process of deep relaxation. An eight- to ten-minute tape of the relaxation induction is made during the session and the client is asked to listen to the tape twice a day. Finger signals are established to facilitate communication on a subconscious level and especially to check for the client's consent at all stages of therapy.

A typical second session begins with a brief relaxation induction into a state of selective awareness. Then the client is asked to orient himself back to the most recent time when he experienced the symptom (for example, stomach pain, insomnia, depression), to describe the situation, and to reexperience the thoughts and emotions that were dominant at that time. Examination of a succession of such "symptom-producing events" leads back to an original "sensitizing event" and reveals a clear pattern of relationship between the symptom and a triggering thought/ emotion complex. When the client gains insight into the origin of the symptom and begins to take responsibility for ill health, then healing and change begin to take place.

A third session would make use of "bio-automation" or creative image rehearsal" to sever the connection between symptom and thought/emotion complex. Bio-automation involves using mental imagery to gain positive influence over autonomic functions of the body, such as circulation, digestion, and healing. Negative patterns of behavior and communication can similarly

be influenced through creative image rehearsal, a process of mentally visualizing and rehearsing desired changes in behavior. A tape is made of this therapeutic process, which includes positive feedback to reinforce the client's new symptom-free self-image. Positive feedback is important at all stages of therapy to ensure that the client takes credit for the fact that he is using his own natural healing potential to create change in himself. After the third session, therapist and client review progress and decide on the number of additional sessions needed. At the conclusion of therapy, a single review session is scheduled in four to six weeks to reinforce progress and change.

The structure of S.A.T. is of great importance, but within the basic framework there is great scope for creativity in catering to the needs of each particular client. S.A.T. combines well with other approaches such as Gestalt, Transactional Analysis, and Psychodrama, and it can also be used effectively as a tool for self-help.

APPLICATIONS

Theoretically, there are few physical and emotional symptoms that cannot be alleviated with S.A.T. However, the success of S.A.T. is directly proportional to the client's motivation and ability to concentrate and use mental imagery.

S.A.T. is particularly well suited for use in a medical setting where

holistic counseling can take place in cooperation with a team of medical personnel. However, therapists and counselors with training in psychology must be cautious about treating physical symptoms without first obtaining evidence that the client has had a complete medical checkup.

Psychosomatic complaints that respond particularly well to short-term treatment with S.A.T. include migraine headaches, muscular pains, digestive and circulatory disorders, skin allergies, and asthma. S.A.T. has also been used effectively with before surgery patients, helping to promote rapid healing, and postoperative recovery.

Habit disorders, such as smoking, obesity, and nail biting, respond well to the S.A.T. approach, which facilitates direct insight into the negative thought/emotion complexes that underlie such symptoms.