

Psychotherapy Guidebook



STREET PSYCHOTHERAPY

Dan Kiley

**Street
Psychotherapy**

Dan Kiley

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](#)

Street Psychotherapy

Dan Kiley

DEFINITION

The primary goal of Street Psychotherapy is to improve the survival skills of the client. Concerns about the mental health of the client are always expressed in terms of the pragmatic day-to-day behavior that reflects the person's ability to maintain a source of legal income and humane shelter. Under these circumstances, the use of any ethical technique of human intervention is acceptable.

Street Psychotherapy differs from other systems of psychotherapy on two crucial points. First, the setting in which the therapy occurs is not the traditional office. The setting can be a poolroom, a bar or an alley, wherever the client, not the therapist, is comfortable. The therapist must go to the client since the client will not come to the therapist.

Second, the street therapist does not have the controls afforded by structured time, secretaries, and tests. In more ways than one, the therapist must work within the controls imposed by the client. This calls for a flexibility not found in most professional circles.

HISTORY

The first street therapists might very well have been Socrates and the Chinese thinker Mencius, both of whom employed unconventional methods of initiating behavior change.

More recently, federal and state projects have often focused on the use of indigent workers to organize and carry out self-help programs in depressed areas. The belief underlying these projects is that people who live in a situation can do more to change the situation than outsiders. Unfortunately, the indigent workers often had the motivation for change and understood what needed to be changed but lacked the preparation and willingness for ongoing training and supervision.

Professionals have often worked in “storefront”* clinics or within gangs to change destructive, violent influences. For the most part, they have not been accepted as equals by academicians, researchers and traditional clinicians. If street therapy can be seen as a viable “profession” for a certain breed of therapist, the wisdom of street survival can support, not detract from, professional therapy.

TECHNIQUE

Street therapy is both difficult and dangerous. It is difficult because the

therapist has to alter his style (in contrast with internship experiences) to accommodate the technique. It is dangerous because, unless carefully implemented, saying the wrong thing at the wrong time can result in physical injury.

There are three parts to the technique itself. They are: Survival, Modeling, and Teaching.

In the first stage, Survival, the therapist must learn the nature of the environment in which the therapy will be done. Understanding the “streets” and the needs of the people who live there is best accomplished by accepting the guidance and teaching of a leader in the streets. With minimal “psychologizing” or analysis, the therapist must learn to survive on the streets. It is a different environment and most middleclass therapists are too fearful and/or ignorant to survive without guidance. Thorough understanding of the rules of survival can minimize physical danger.

The second stage, Modeling, is most difficult. It is where most aspirants fail. The aspiring street therapist, in order to be a success, must find a personally satisfying and professionally sound manner of modeling survival skills that are better than the ones street people possess. That is, the therapist has to be able to survive in the streets better than the street people. Showing the street people how to handle a racist policemen without self-deprecation

or getting arrested will earn him the respect and praise of the street people. This respect can and does lead to the development of a confidential relationship in which persons will seek more answers to their respective problems. Modeling alternatives to difficult situations permit the therapist to attain a special rank among the street people. This rank has various labels, all of which are respectful: “cool dude,” “on-time mama,” “friendly old freak,” and (the one I prefer) “street shrink.”

The final stage, Teaching, is a very gratifying part of street therapy. Lonely, frightened, and disturbed people seek out the therapist to receive warmth, knowledge, and better survival skills. They are diligent and responsive students. If the street therapist is constantly aware of the need to learn about the changing conditions on the streets and create new alternatives to old problems, his relevance can have a long life.

APPLICATIONS

There are many people who feel disenfranchised from society. They may not have had a primary family unit or may find their family irrelevant to their needs. Street therapy can apply to any person who is living under outcast conditions in which he finds little or no comfort in the institutions (including the family) held in esteem by most people. Street therapy knows no economic barriers. Many street people have money in the bank but no

home for their heart. In this view, no one is excluded from street therapy because of socio-economic level.

The therapist who wishes to practice street therapy will find that the client “population” will have some type of police record. In fact, many of the survival skills that must be taught center on reducing the risk of contact with law enforcement agencies. Thus, the street therapist must be prepared to deal with drugs, gambling, theft, gunrunning, pornography, and even violence. The major obstacle for the therapist is the person’s self-image, which says, “I’m one of the ‘bad’ people in life. I must accept that; then I can work to be the best of the bad.”