



Getting to the Root of Anxiety, Depression and Unhappiness

Why do people go for counselling and psychotherapy? I was asked this question by a successful businesswoman and on the face of it you might think it was a bit naive given the range of human experiences of distress. I guessed that behind her question lay the opinion that she couldn't see herself ever turning to someone else for 'that kind of support'. She believed the answers were inside herself and that it didn't take someone else to find them. It's a familiar stance of successful men and women.

I answered with my usual reply, that sometimes people reach their limit. They come to a dead-end, or a brick wall and don't know how to get past it. This business mogul looked skeptical. So I dug deeper and found the following response.

Counselling and psychotherapy can help someone who finds that there is a difference between what they are experiencing, and their belief system, and this makes them feel threatened. The sense of threat may translate into behaviour driven by anxiety, defensiveness, or stress, or meaninglessness. Or they might just deeply know that they can't continue their present way of being. There's a snazzy term for this: 'cognitive dissonance'.

For example, someone might believe (whether they're fully conscious of it or not) that they are 'bad'. Yet when they find themselves being praised for some success, instead of feeling affirmed and good about life they are thrown into a sense of pointlessness and depression, or cynicism, or a sense of insecurity about the future. Your experience is directly what you feel - in sensation and emotion. It then gets filtered through your consciousness, processed by your cognitive functions and you respond accordingly. However your cognitive functions have been formed by all your accumulated conditioning, most deeply when you were young and influenced by the frustration and disappointment of basic needs for physical and emotional security. Neural pathways gradually become fixed in particular personal patterns of reaction and response. They will influence our sense of reality and who we are.

As a result of those basic frustrations, beliefs are formed which become mistaken for truths. They in turn become part of our conceptions that we have of ourselves, our personality. For an extreme example, an infant with a mother who consistently hurts them might form the belief that they themselves are intrinsically 'bad' because it is unbearable to believe that their primary care-giver on whom they depend for everything is not good. This becomes the template for the rest of their life. At a 'normal' and healthy level this dynamic is happening to us all in myriad ways. We all, for our most primitive survival, need to believe that our parents/primary care-givers are right and know best, especially when they get it wrong. A whole bundle of distorted beliefs about ourselves, and them, are the natural result.

My business friend might have formed the belief that she was self-sufficient because her care-givers couldn't be depended upon. But because it was worse to believe that they might not be worthy of the trust she placed in them, she takes it all the responsibility upon herself. She turns self-sufficiency into a virtue and feels critical of others who turn to others for support. This self-sufficiency may well be a virtue unless she finds that she compulsively isolates herself from those she loves, despite her best intentions.

As life goes on we're presented with challenges to our mistaken beliefs. This might look like falling in love and then discovering our partner is not what we thought. It might look like constantly

repeating a cycle of failures, or a sudden onset of depression or anxiety triggered by something apparently minor - or simply inexplicable. Until we adapt to reality by adjusting our mistaken beliefs we will be dissonant with the world we live in. The tragedy is that many people fail to adjust and in their unhappiness keep imposing their dissonance on those around them.

The challenge for the therapist is not to be drawn in to the client's subtle patterns of mistaken belief; And of course not to fall into imposing their own distorted patterns on the client. An attitude of 'presence' is called for - a balanced, open and receptive stance. When we are presented with ourselves in a neutral and compassionate perspective it becomes possible to recognise and understand what we have been unconscious of in ourselves.

How lucky we are when we find a counsellor or psychotherapist who can help us to disentangle ourselves from our misconceptions. We can loosen the neural pathways and patterns of thinking, reaction and response. The result is alliance between what is experienced and what is perceived and then what follows; being in harmony with the world around us. Who wouldn't want that?
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