

COMMUNICATION- FOCUSED THERAPY (CFT) FOR ANXIETY AND PANIC ATTACKS

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Communication-Focused Therapy (CFT) is a psychotherapy developed by the author, which can be applied to a number of mental health conditions, including anxiety disorder and panic attacks. It focuses on creating greater awareness and insight into internal and external communication patterns and making changes to them. This also helps gain insight into the basic parameters, the needs, values and aspirations which are important for motivation and the direction of changes, behaviors and interactions with oneself and others.

Keywords: anxiety, panic attacks, communication-focused therapy, CFT, communication, psychotherapy, treatment

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Introduction

Anxiety is like any other emotion a heightened mental state with a higher probability of certain conscious processes and behaviors. In anxiety an individual dreads uncertain and often ill-defined events in the future or immediate future. It is not a fear of a specific event, but an unpleasant feeling of heightened arousal which can cause various thoughts and feelings of dread.

Anxiety and Panic Attacks are related to how people communicate with themselves and with others. They often occur when a relationship breaks apart or some other interpersonal change or issue causes. The result is often communicative patterns that are maladaptive to the individual. These changes in communication patterns are what causes then the problems to the individuals.

Often, there are already maladaptive communication patterns before, that cause the problems in the relationship or interpersonal interactions. These patterns can be analyzed and changed. Another important element is that communication can also take place on the inside of the individual.

Anxiety

Anxiety is an emotion characterized by an unpleasant state of inner turmoil, often accompanied by nervous behavior, such as pacing back and forth, somatic complaints, and rumination. It is the subjectively unpleasant feelings of dread over anticipated events, such as the feeling of imminent death. Anxiety is not the same as fear, which is a response to a real or perceived immediate threat, whereas anxiety is the expectation of future threat. Anxiety is a feeling of uneasiness and worry, usually generalized and unfocused as an overreaction to a situation that is only subjectively seen as menacing. It is often accompanied by muscular tension, restlessness, fatigue and problems in concentration. Anxiety can be appropriate, but when experienced regularly the individual may suffer from an anxiety disorder.

People facing anxiety may withdraw from situations which have provoked anxiety in the past. There are various types of anxiety. Existential anxiety can occur when a person faces angst, an existential crisis, or

nihilistic feelings. People can also face mathematical anxiety, somatic anxiety, stage fright, or test anxiety. Social anxiety and stranger anxiety are caused when people are apprehensive around strangers or other people in general. Furthermore, anxiety has been linked with physical symptoms such as IBS and can heighten other mental health illnesses such as OCD and panic disorder.

Anxiety can be either a short term "state" or a long term "trait". Whereas trait anxiety represents worrying about future events, anxiety disorders are a group of mental disorders characterized by feelings of anxiety and fear. Anxiety disorders are partly genetic but may also be due to drug use, including alcohol, caffeine, and benzodiazepines (which are often prescribed to treat anxiety), as well as withdrawal from drugs of abuse. They often occur with other mental disorders, particularly bipolar disorder, eating disorders, major depressive disorder, or certain personality disorders.

Communication Confidence

Anxiety often occurs when the confidence to communicate one's needs, wishes or feelings is compromised. Humans learn early on that their well-being and survival depends on communicating their needs to others, originally their parents, later their work colleagues, friends, and romantic partners. Communication makes us feel safer in the world, because it is the main tool with which we fulfil our needs, values and aspiration. (Haverkamp, 2010a) Thus, the more confidence one has in one's communication abilities, internally and externally, the less uncertain the world seems and the safer one feels. This can also reduce anxiety in general, but probably requires a somewhat lengthy learning process.

Uncertainty

In life, one has to live with uncertainty. Uncertainty just means that there is no manual in the beginning and there are still unknowns which leave room for excitement and exploration. Life is a learning experience. An individual suffering from anxiety may have areas in life where she thrives on excitement, and other areas where images of worst case scenarios cause her to freeze when she just considers a change in action or any action at all. Uncertainty to someone suffering from anxiety seems to be bearable

in some areas and avoided in others. Often, the areas where it is not tolerated feel meaningful only to the person suffering from anxiety.

Anxiety requires a certain amount of uncertainty. It often occurs in situations when there is uncertainty about external events or situations, often interpersonal ones, or uncertainty about one's own feelings, mental or physical states. Without uncertainty about oneself or the world around there is no room for anxiety. However, this it is impossible to achieve a state of complete certainty, which would also make any change or progress impossible. The environment does not even have to change to make changes in the individual necessary. For example, if one develops greater insight in something in the environment or in oneself, changes in one's thoughts, perspectives, behaviors and interactions may become necessary. Change helps people not only to survive but also to make the best out of their place int the world. The more open an individual is to change and the easier it is for one to implement the change the less reason there is for anxiety. Accepting that there is a level of uncertainty in life makes it easier to develop the tools to deal with it. This raises self-confidence, the sense of efficacy in the world, self-awareness and lowers anxiety.

Information reduces uncertainty, and communication is the mechanism which provides information. Meaningful information has the potential to bring about adaptive and beneficial changes in an individual, even if it only leads to a change in perspective. The information can be about the environment or about oneself, come from the outside or the inside. Communication-focused therapy (CFT) has at its objective to improve the internal and external communication to lead to a reduction in mental health symptoms, greater satisfaction and contentment, as well as greater success in the world to get one's needs, values and aspirations met. Especially in cases of anxiety and panic attacks, an ability to deal with and integrate uncertainty into one' s life is very effective in reducing the symptoms.

'Out of Sync'

Individuals often are more likely to encounter anxiety when there is an underlying feeling that something or things in their life are 'out of sync'. This can occur in many situations in professional or private realms. A patient with anxiety may not be aware of the signal directly but of the anxiety which is triggered by it. Anxiety then makes it even more difficult to connect with oneself or others to gain insight into what is

causing the anxiety. Communication on the inside and on the outside suffers in states of anxiety which makes it more difficult to resolve the issues that have lead to the higher anxiety states.

A life is 'out of sync' if it does not correlate anymore with one's values, basic interests, aspirations, true needs, wants and desires. Through one's behaviors and thoughts one finds out more about oneself, but one does not have to know these parameters consciously in order to have a sense for what is meaningful in one's life, which, however, requires being connected emotionally to one oneself in a meaningful way. Individuals who are suffering from burnout, for example, often experience this disconnect.

Communication Deficits

Areas which people often feel anxious about are where there has been an issue with their interpersonal interactions in the past. Early traumata, like a disappearing or abusive parent, stay unresolved. For example, if a parent feels fearful and angry with himself and this is picked up by a child, the latter may decode these messages correctly in that the parent is angry, but since the parent may not be conscious about it, the child does not pick up on the second important half of the message, that the parent has a problem with himself and his issue is unrelated to the child. Of course, one can learn to pick up on the self-blame and frustration of the parent, and therapists should become experts at reading between the lines in this fashion, but it requires experience, reflection and insight into transference and counter-transference phenomena, for example, to use the psychoanalytic terms.

Avoidance

Anxiety can lead to avoidance, which in turn can attach even more anxiety to the situations or behaviors which are being avoided. In social situations, not interacting with others deprives the person of continuously updating and honing the skills and confidence of interacting with others. Avoidance can thus lead to an increase rather than a decrease in anxiety in the long-run.

Since helpful communication, an open exchange of meaningful messages internally and externally, reduces anxiety, an avoidance of sources of meaningful information increases anxiety. Unfortunately,

avoidance may not be self-correcting and lead into a vicious cycle in which ever greater anxiety leads to ever greater avoidance to the point where a patient can become house or even bed bound and a normal work or private life are no longer possible.

Panic Attacks

Panic attacks are intense phases of anxiety and can often occur 'out' of the blue. Still, in any case, exploring and looking into the panic attack can often unearth reasons for the panic attack. Panic attacks are sudden periods of intense fear that may include palpitations, sweating, shaking, shortness of breath, numbness, or a feeling that something bad is going to happen. The maximum degree of symptoms occurs within minutes. Typically, they last for about 30 minutes but the duration can vary from seconds to hours. There may be a fear of losing control or chest pain. Panic attacks themselves are not dangerous physically.

Psychodynamic Psychotherapy and CBT

Both of these therapies have shown effectiveness in the treatment of anxiety and panic attacks. Both have theories about why they help. The former sees learning processes and certain thought patterns as central, the latter the processing of content at various levels of consciousness and certain processes between therapist and patient. However, they both place little emphasis the communication processes between therapist and patient and inside each that often in clinical processes are what brings about substantial change in the right direction. (Haverkamp, 2017a) Communication-Focused Therapy (CFT) in this respect may be seen as a standalone therapeutic approach or combined with one of the other two approaches.

Communication-Focused Therapy (CFT)

Communication-Focused Therapy (CFT) was developed by the author to focus more specifically on the communication process between patient and therapist. The central piece is that the sending and receiving of meaningful messages is at the heart of any change process. CBT, psychodynamic psychotherapy and

IPT help because they define a format in which communication processes take place that can bring about change. However, they do not work directly with the communication processes. CFT attempts to do so.

Communication is Life

We engage constantly in communication. The cells in our bodies do so with each other using electrical current, molecules, vibrations or even electromagnetic waves. People communicate with each other also through a multitude of channels, which may use several technologies and intermediaries. It does not have to be an email. Spoken communication requires multiple signal translations from electrical and chemical transmission in the nervous system to mechanical transmission as the muscles and the air stream determine the motions of the vocal chords and then as sound waves travelling through the air, followed by various translations on the receiving end. At each end, in the sender and in the receiver, there is also a processing of information which relies on the highly complex networks of the nervous system. Communication, in short, happens everywhere all the time. It is an integral part of life. Certain communication patterns can, however, also contribute to experiencing anxiety and panic attacks.

Communication supports autoregulatory processes by making information available which leads to better adaptation to given situations but also helps to create a better future for the individual by making greater insight into the world available. At the same time, communication also takes place on the inside. Unresolved emotional memories and conflicts maintain and trigger anxiety and panic attacks and lead to anxiety about one's own emotional states in the sense of being anxious about becoming anxious. Better connectedness on the inside and better insight about one's own emotional states and what triggers and maintains them can thus reduce anxiety and panic attacks. However, it is important that this information can lead to changes, hence be meaningful, which usually requires significant openness and flexibility on the inside, as well as in one's communication with others. This can be developed in CFT.

As already discussed, communication also helps bring more certainty in the world. The more confidence one has in oneself to communicate effectively, the safer one feels in life and the more certain it seems. Being able to deal with a certain amount of uncertainty is important to come up with novel answers and solutions to problems or to be creative in any meaningful way.

Autoregulation

Communication is an autoregulatory mechanism. It ensures that living organisms, including people, can adapt to their environment and live a life according to their interests, desires, values, and aspirations. This does not only require communicating with a salesperson, writing an exam paper or watching a movie, but also finding out more about oneself, psychologically and physically. Whether measuring one's strength at the gym or engaging in self-talk, this self-exploration requires flows of relevant and meaningful information. Communication allows us to have a sense of self and a grasp of who we are and what we need and want in the world, but it has to be learned similar to our communication with other people.

Future Directed

Communication bridges the present and the future, as well as the past and the present. It helps store information or transmit it to people somewhere else we have never met. The principle behind it is that information will be transmitted on as long as the sender feels the message is relevant to another and/or oneself. Information endures as long as it is relevant to the people who communicate it. In an emergency information can get through because it is relevant, and the sender can expect help as long as he or she believes that the own emergency situation is relevant to others. The ability to communicate by various means, spoken, gestures, email, smoke and so forth, can thus make people feel safe, if they trust in their own skills and that their message will be relevant and meaningful to another. Patients with anxiety often have lower faith in either or both.

Trust

Trust in oneself is built through communication with oneself and others and an expectation that one can get one's needs, wants and aspirations satisfied through these interactions. Trust is thus a two-way street

as it depends on the own competency to send messages about one's needs, wants and aspirations into the world in a way that is most likely to get a result and for the world to respond in the way expected. From a communication viewpoint many parts to have to fall in place, from the own identification of what one truly needs and values to other people's own sense of their needs, values and aspirations. What makes the match possible are internal and external communication. Practicing communication. Internally and externally, can therefore build trust.

Building trust in oneself is an important component in the treatment of anxiety. A first step usually is that the patient can identify own needs and wishes, which is an important step in reconnecting with oneself. Feeling this reconnection is ultimately what builds more trust. If one is more connected with something, it becomes more predictable and closer to oneself.

Reversing the Disconnect

The disconnect with oneself and others can be reversed quite easily. The fears that are connected with it are often the hardest obstacles to overcome. Various CFT techniques are described elsewhere. (Haverkamp, 2010b, 2017b, 2017c, 2018a) Through greater awareness for the communication patterns and information flows one uses with oneself and others, the fears to experiment with them is usually reduced and meaningful change can happen. This can be achieved in a therapeutic setting through working with the external communication, which is also the only one visible to a therapist. Reflecting on the external communication is then transposed to the inside, where the same skills can be used with the internal communication. It is important to realize, however, that these observation processes have to come from the patient to be successful. This is why manualized therapies are unhelpful in this regard, because the patient has to find a style of communicating about communicating, or reflecting, which is his or her own. Thus, in a therapeutic setting the therapist should not merely supply the own style of thinking about communication, but support the patient in finding back, or forward, to his or her own style.

Looking Back

Memories of past experiences and the emotions associated with these past experiences can have an impact on how one feels in the present and the strategies one uses to act and interact in everyday life. Better internal communication allows to gain an understanding for any emotions that still have not found closure and other issues that have not been resolved yet. However, fears may prevent this, such as the fear to get lost in the past without resolving anything in a constructive way.

When patients learn to better connect with themselves emotionally, cognitively and in all other communicative ways, the fear usually of confronting unresolved issues usually decreases. The reason is that a better connection with oneself also makes the own resources more accessible, and hence visible, while making the sense of self feel more present and more clearly defined. These processes may not happen in complete synchrony, which can require a greater emphasis on support in therapy, whenever the pain is clearer than the positive resources. However, usually the process of connecting with oneself in itself makes the patient feel stronger and more in charge of his or her own inner life.

Meaning

Individuals suffering from anxiety and panic attacks often see less meaning in the things they do. In therapy an important part is to rediscover meaning, and find it in the things that are relevant to the patient. Relevant is anything that is close to his or her values, basic interests, aspirations, wants, wishes and desires. Meaning has the potential to bring about change, and meaningful information is what the individual should learn to select for more. Anxiety often leads to a withdrawal from meaningful information in the form of social withdrawal or greater rigidity in one's daily activities by increasingly shutting out sources of valuable information. In a therapeutic setting this should be reversed by encouraging the patient to ask questions again, by having an inquisitive mind in the world which always looks out for meaningful information. The goal is not to shut off the constructive facilities of the mind. Many forms of meditation, for example, thus not have as the objective to turn off the mind but to actually find more meaning in the world in the form of information which brings about a beneficial change. A greater openness to meaningful information can so also decrease anxiety and the feelings that can lead to a panic state in a panic attack.

Awareness of the Inner Workings of Anxiety

An important step in therapy thus to make the person aware of how anxiety affects one's thinking. Individuals from anxiety often focus differently from other individuals. There is often a focus on worst outcomes and strong fears which are caused by it. Underlying this are often strong emotions or conflicts which need to be defended against. The danger and uncertainty are quite frequently inside oneself, rather than on the outside. An individual with a fear of flying may be more afraid of not containing oneself and not being able to leave the plain than anything else. Anxiety is the fear of crashing oneself and the feelings of a dreaded uncertainty about oneself and one's emotional states.

This insight into the inner workings of anxiety is useful because it helps to formulate new strategies in interacting with oneself and with others. A feeling of anxiety has usually the same basic mechanisms in most people, the uncertainty about one's inner world and affective states, the helplessness, the emotions where one has little insight, and which maintain the anxious state, as well as the at least partial disconnect which reduces the insight into the thoughts, sensations, perceptions and feelings which underlie the anxiety. But there are also the individual aspects of what triggers and maintains the anxiety, the own patterns and styles of communicating with oneself and others, which can be scrutinized and experimented with in therapy. Particularly the experimentation can be a helpful tool to create greater awareness for the communication pattern an individual engages in. In the practical context of therapy, questions about irreconcilable thought content or feelings, for example, can be helpful to get the patient to experiment with new perspectives and communication patterns. (Haverkamp, 2010b, 2013, 2017d, 2018b)

Understanding the internal and external communication patterns and styles also provides and understanding for the workings of the anxiety. The reason is that it is not particular content which necessarily leads to anxiety, but how this information is retrieved, viewed and processed. In a neural or any information network all these processes are different version of communicating information from one point to another. Manipulating information also requires communication. If different bundles of information are sent to one point they can be combined, and so on. On a larger scale, there are mechanisms which can malfunction and impede the proper workings of communication, information selection, and so on. In therapy, the focus should be on creating awareness for those points where helpful information cannot happen or can only happen partially. Important for this to work is a good therapist-

patient relationship, which is itself the product of awareness for, reflection about and experimentation with communication patterns and flows.

Interacting with Oneself

One of the most relevant exchanges one can have is with oneself. But it cannot be separated entirely from one's interactions with one's environment. They both are two sides of one coin. The same rules apply to internal communication as for external communication and vice versa. It is not only necessary to develop awareness for the information coming from inside oneself but also to form patterns that are helpful in the internal communication. As we have seen, anxiety is largely due to a disconnect from oneself and the outside world, as various memories and pieces of information can no longer be seen in the context of other information for the relevance and meaning they truly have, and the lack of cognitive and emotional insight attaches uncertainty not only to them but to one's inner world as a whole.

A therapist can help a patient reconnect with himself or herself in several ways. Using the external communication as a reflection of the internal communication, and vice versa, is a starting point. Patterns where the patient filters information in a certain way or a fear of certain messages may be obvious in patients from anxiety. Apparently high arousal levels without verbal messages that can explain the heightened arousal levels or the attempt to wrap an emotional signal in superficial rationalization of the information may be others. However, awareness of certain patterns is not necessarily a prerequisite of change. Using certain patterns to think about the patient's communicated thoughts and experiences can alter how the patient experiences this information, if the therapist's way is helpful to the patient. The patient integrates the meaningful information gained in a therapeutic setting with the other information contained in the various aspects of memory as well as in the neural network as a whole, which then influences the individual's communication patterns with himself or herself and others. The most effective messages to bring about a change in these communication patterns are those which are about communication itself and which are meaningful in the sense that they can be understood and lead to change. This requires that the therapist makes sure that the information from and about the interaction is understood by the patient. At the same time, both will try to keep the information relevant and helpful. The patient learns in the process to identify what is relevant to him or her, which then has an impact on internal and external ways of communicating.

Interacting with Others

Better interactions with others, which reduces anxiety, follows from better interactions with oneself. The reason is that since one cannot know the thoughts or feelings of another person fully, one will always project an element of oneself into the other person. We assume that another person will behave either as they did in the past or in a way that seems to us reasonable, if we judge the other person as reasonable. Thus, to a degree one interacts with oneself when one interacts with another person, while being corrected by the other person about one's assumptions as the exchange progresses. It is thus important to have a good sense of oneself to know what is a projection and what is not.

Interacting with oneself is also practicing communication, which helps in communicating with others. It is not a substitute for communicating with others, but helps in experimenting with different communication patterns. Also, since there are significant similarities among people on a more basic level, one's own reaction to a thought or feeling can be a good first indication of what another person might feel. This is how art, literature and films can excite multitudes because they touch what is shared by most people.

Experiencing the World

To break through the vicious cycle of anxiety, in which emotions like fear and anxiety cause safety thoughts and behaviors, which in turn reinforce feelings of fear, loneliness, sadness, and so forth, it is helpful to focus on identifying what is meaningful and having more of it in life. Communication helps in identifying and finding meaning, either communication with oneself or with others. The exchange of messages is like a learning process in which meaning can be identified, found and accumulated. Through meaningful interactions one accumulates more meaning, more connectedness with oneself and the world and reduces the need for thoughts and behaviors which are triggered by fears, guilt, self-blame and other negative emotions. This also helps against depression and anxiety.

Perceiving more meaning also makes interacting with others and oneself more meaningful. This has a positive effect on one's interaction patterns, how and in which one ways one relates to one's environment and exchanges messages with it.

Values, Needs and Aspirations

Often, individuals suffering from anxiety or burnout have become uncertain about what is really important to them and the fit between these values and interests and their current life situation. Whether in the professional or romantic realms, following one's needs, values and aspirations has the best chance of maintaining happiness, satisfaction and contentment in the long run. If I value helping people, it is important that I do that to make me feel better in the long-run. Important is to identify those basic parameters which do not change much over time. Often people might be too focused on the short-run at the expense of a greater quality of life in the long-run and potentially higher anxiety levels. Open and rich communication with oneself and the environment can ensure that one gets the correct information about oneself and the world in this respect to make better decisions. Fears of connecting with oneself and the world may interfere with this openness, and it is important to find insight into them in the therapeutic process. Making the fears visible through greater awareness of the own communication patterns, internally and externally, leads to their resolution. This is in turn can then allow the autoregulatory mechanisms of internal and communication to lower the anxiety.

Since values and basic needs remain relatively stable over time, knowing about them can give a patient a greater sense of safety about oneself. Having knowledge of them also helps in interacting with others, partly because one feels more secure about oneself and partly because having a clearer idea about one's needs also helps one to have a clear of others' needs.

Self-Exploration

The process by which one identifies one's own needs, values and aspirations is self-exploration. It means engaging in communication with oneself, being open and receptive to the information one is receiving

from one's body and mind, while also being perceptive to one's emotions. The emotions can play an important role in gauging what is 'good' and what is not, because they are the end product of a large amount of information which has been integrated into them over time. So, if one truly feels contentment and satisfaction when engaged in an activity, it may be needed or of special value. Self-exploration is thus not a process of getting lost in one's thought but an active appraisal of the various aspects and activities in life. In a therapeutic setting it helps to ask the patient about how he or she felt in various situations and activities in life. Rather than focusing on the anxiety, greater focus should be placed on the areas in life which are meaningful and valuable to the patient. When focusing on the anxiety, the main focus is on exploring potential emotional conflicts, which can also include the patient having to do something which goes against the patient's needs, interests, values or aspirations.

Self-exploration has internal and external components, an assessment of internal basic parameters, needs, values and aspirations, as well as an assessment of activities, situations and interactions a patient may engage in. Improvements in internal and external communication can therefore lead to a shift towards following the own needs, values and aspirations, which reduces the level of anxiety.

Meaningful Messages as the Instrument of Change

Communication is the vehicle of change. The instruments are meaningful messages which are generated and received by the people who take part in these interactions. In a therapeutic setting, keeping the mutual flow of information relevant and meaningful brings change in both people who take part in this process.

The therapeutic setting is a microcosm in which the internal world can be played out and the external world be experimented on. An important quality in the therapist is not to take anything that happens in this setting as personal. What happens in the therapeutic setting should be seen as relevant to that specific setting only, which can give the patient a greater sense of safety to bring the internal world out into the setting. By then experimenting and daring new patterns in the setting, the patient develops insight and builds confidence in the communication process with oneself and others. It is the task of the therapist to support the dynamics of this process through observations, reflection, feedback, and by maintaining healthy boundaries between the therapeutic setting and the outside world. At the same time,

the patient will carry more of the insight and skills gained into the therapeutic process into the outside world if it appears helpful and relevant.



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