
ACROSS THE SEVEN SEAS: EXPLORATION AS THERAPY

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Exploring new contacts and new situations can have a therapeutic effect if it leads to a greater perception of meaning. This can be helpful in depression, anxiety, burnout, eating disorders, ADHD and many other mental health conditions. Communication-Focused Therapy (CFT) focuses on how communication patterns and the exposure to new meaningful information can lead to more adaptive and helpful adjustments of own communication patterns and to more success in meeting own needs, values and aspirations.

Keywords: exploration, communication-focused therapy, CFT, communication, psychotherapy, psychiatry

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Finding New Meaning

Meaning is important as it leads to motivation, provides direction and adds purpose to life. Since meaning is a result of communication, the sending and receiving of information, the journey to find what is meaningful is also a search for better communication, with others and with oneself. Many mental health conditions are affected by and affect how one communicates, where the term mental health condition should be given a broad interpretation. Burnout, for example, leads to a disconnect from one's work, but also one's own emotions. Exploring communication and reconnecting is the most important and most successful way to deal with burnout.

Exploration can happen on several levels. First, there is internal and external exploration, depending on where the new information is sought. While this is an artificial separation of information that freely travels between the intrapersonal and interpersonal realms, the distinction can be helpful when analyzing how an individual uses communication patterns differently with oneself and in interactions with others.

Internal meaningful information can be explored through very different means. Work with dreams has been traditionally one mode of internal exploration, as this has been described and discussed in Freudian, Jungian, Gestalt, phenomenological, client-centered, and even behavioral schools of psychotherapy. (Hill, 2004)

The purpose of any exploratory work is to find new meaningful information. Meaning bestows on information the capability to induce change in the recipient. (Haverkamp, 2010, 2018f, 2018c) This can happen on many levels and in different categories, such as changes in emotional states or perspective. However, for this to be successful meaning has to be identified in a message, and usually also in a source of messages. What is often overlooked in psychotherapy is that there is also a need for exposure to a source of meaningful information. To successfully adjust one's communication patterns in a relationship, for example, is easier facilitated if one is in a relationship, although meaningful information can also come from groups, therapy sessions and even books. While feedback is an important ingredient of change, aspects of it can also happen internally.

Connecting

A broadening in the opportunities to communicate is often exciting to people, it connects the world and helps us all to benefit from each other. However, communication with new people and in new

situations also has an intrapsychic effect. Communication is the exchange of meaningful messages, information which has the potential to bring about change in an individual. It makes meaning possible, but it also helps in one's own intrapsychic regulation. It can help to find direction, but also the means to actually get there.

Communication happens all the time, and there is no situation in life which is free of it. To experience the world around and in oneself, information needs to be communicated, processed, understood and interpreted. This happens on so many channels all the time that it happens mostly outside conscious awareness, but it is no less dynamic and follows the same basic laws as the communication one is aware of. Becoming aware of some of these streams of information outside consciousness can have a therapeutic effect.

An important objective of the therapeutic process should be that the patient has more information to choose from. Often, in depression and anxiety, for example, new information and new meaning could bring about a change in the condition. In psychosis, on the other hand, perceiving meaning can anchor and individual firmer in the shared reality.

Exposure to New Communication Spaces

A communication space is the dimensions within which messages can be received or sent without changing one's position. This should not only be seen in a geographical sense but could also be a functional or abstract communication space. In many mental health conditions, the communication space shrinks for various reasons.

Communication spaces can mirror the physical environment, but most often they do not. The reason is that individuals can choose from an almost infinite choice of information channels and modes. Over time, the potential communication patterns a person can use have increased, sometimes slowly and at other times exponentially. Over the last years technology has become available which dynamically attaches newly created digital information such as voice notes photographs to the physical environment (Rekimoto, Ayatsuka, & Hayashi, n.d.), which blurs the distinction between a physical and virtual communication environment even more, ultimately making the physical environment one aspect in the environment which can be sculpted by the human mind.

Meaningful information can come in many forms, such as the own internal emotions or a message sent around the world. Openness to it is an important piece in the maintenance health, sometimes quite literally. Fear of emotions, for example, appears to be a primary reason for individuals' negative attitudes toward seeking psychological treatment. (Komiya, Good, & Sherrod, 2000) Communication-Focused Therapy® as described by the author works with communication patterns to reduce these barriers to communication by relying on autoregulatory processes and basic rules about communication.

Quite literally, one may expose oneself to a different group of people to be in a different communication space. Different people have different experiences, different communication patterns and will provide different feedback and messages. However, exposing oneself to new surroundings is not necessary to find oneself in different communication spaces. Another way is to open up and make accessible another part of oneself, and so open communication spaces on the inside. Through the therapeutic process, patients can learn to more effectively communicate, which can then also be applied to the inner reaches, the communication one has with oneself.

The Need for Meaningful Information

Exploring the outer physical world and the inner psychological world exposes an individual to new potentially meaningful information to select and choose from. Positive effects of travel experiences on perceived health and wellness have been demonstrated by multiple studies (Chen & Petrick, 2013), not just for their relaxation opportunities. People travel to places they regard as exotic to make new experiences or they study a field which they find exciting. On the other hand, they also go on meditation retreats or take a course part-time at a local college to explore their inner worlds.

Humans need an amount of stimulation, which can be found in many different ways. We experience stress when virtually all sources for perceptual inputs and sensations are removed. Even more so, a greater stress reaction to this perceptual isolation also leads to a greater "need" for stimulation. (Zuckerman & Haber, 1965) A steady flow of meaningful information is a basic requirement of life. (Haverkampf, 2018f, 2018c)

Changing States

The need for meaningful information derives from the need for changing, and over time evolving states in living organisms, which again produces new information content and new meaningful information. A lack of meaning in the world can lead to reductions in the quality of life, burnout, stress and several mental health symptoms. (Haverkampf, 2013, 2018d) On one end we find various addictions, from chemical substances to work or even sex. The problem is that while these substances can change a state, such as an emotional state or a mental energy level, the change is not lasting and falls back again. Important is to find activities that broaden the horizon by making more meaning available.

But a lack of information, whether internal or external, can also lead to maladaptive ways of making meaning from other information, which can lead to problems over time. Infant mental health problems, for example, are thought to emerge when the meanings infants make selectively limit their engagement with the world and, in turn, the growth of their state of consciousness in the long run. (Tronick & Beeghly, 2011) When chronic and iterative, these altered meanings can then interfere with

infants' successful development over time and heighten their vulnerability to pathological outcomes. (Tronick & Beeghly, 2011)

Lasting change requires new information, meaningful messages, which can bring about a change in the recipient. Exposure to people with different experiences can do this. If one only looks carefully and closely enough this can be found close by. Sometimes a new source of meaningful messages may not be apparent from the start and has to be identified. Looking at a painting makes one open to receiving a meaningful message from the information contained in the painting.

Depression

When faced with depression, people see less meaning in the world, as they either take up less information or have greater difficulties in decoding messages and relating them to the information stored in memory, which decreases the amount of resonance and thus perceived meaning. The bias in emotional access towards the negative end of the spectrum also biases the perception of meaning in things and reduces motivation to interact and communicate with the world.

Empirical studies have shown a significant interaction between meaning in life and depression. (Owens, Steger, Whitesell, & Herrera, 2009) Since how we find meaning in the world is related to the communication patterns we use (Haverkampf, 2010, 2018b), they can have quite a direct effect on the mood one experiences. Work with communication patterns in Communication-Focused Therapy®, for example, has been developed for several mental health conditions, including depression. (Haverkampf, 2018e)

Exposure to meaningful information is an important step to get out of the depression. This means information which has some novelty in it and can bring about a change in the recipient. The reason is that meaning anchors the patient more firmly in a shared present and lets her experience more value and joy in certain activities and the world in general. Unfortunately, individuals suffering from depression often tend to withdraw rather than engage with the world around them. To make communication and interaction with others more appealing exposing them to communication situations with meaningful messages is helpful. This could be participation in a group, for example, which discusses issues that are of value to the individual and resonate.

Impact of Meaning

Better engagement in the world can lead to a greater perception of meaning in it, which in turn leads to more engagement. This 'helpful cycle' only requires on how one exposes oneself, selects for and processes information. The key to it is better communication patterns. Different sets of information, and thus meaning, result in new patterns of thinking about the world and interacting with it, new perspectives, because the communication patterns with oneself and the world determine how effective one is in communicating with others and oneself, how many meaningful messages are send

out and how many meaningful messages are received. Messages that can potentially bring about a lasting change in some parameter are meaningful. This can include a lasting change in thinking patterns, emotional states, and more, irrespective of how small the impact of the meaningful information is on the mind.

Anxiety

Anxiety is a feeling about an uncertainty about oneself, usually in terms of emotions. People with a fear of flying, for example, are often not so concerned about a plane crash, but that they could ‘crash’ emotionally while sitting on a plane without a way out. At the root of anxiety is a disconnect from oneself. The more one knows about anything, the lower the fear or anxiety is. With anxiety about one’s inner life this is no different.

Alienation from the self and others goes hand in hand. Since internal and external communication patterns are strongly related and even reflections of each other, alienation from the self and alienation from others frequently go together. (Haverkamp, 2017) Boyd and Mackey have described the alienation from self and others as a serious psychosocial problem in a population of rural alcoholic women. (Boyd & Mackey, 2000) But even before one can alienate from the own sense of self, one actually has to find it. One reason for the epidemic rates of depression, anxiety disorders, and substance abuse seen among privileged adolescents is seen by Levine in her book *The price of privilege: How parental pressure and material advantage are creating a generation of disconnected and unhappy kids* in the lack of an authentic sense of self, a basic foundation of psychological development. (Levine, 2006)

Dealing with anxiety means reconnecting with oneself on a deeper level. ‘Connecting’ means being more aware, curious and interested in internal and external meaningful information one is exposed to. As information is processed with other information in the brain into new information, changes take place, similar to an entropic process in the natural sciences. The more freely one can exchange information, and be aware of these information flows, the greater the perceived stability will be, which in turn reduces the levels of anxiety. (Haverkamp, 2017, 2018a) Anxiety comes from the uncertainty one perceives, in particular the uncertainty one perceives about one’s own inner states.

Thus, an exploration of the inner worlds is one step in dealing with anxiety. It requires a second step, however, which is interpreting it correctly and being open to the information. However, this second step comes automatically the more one is open to the information from inside. While anxiety can come with heightened self-consciousness, it does not come with self-awareness. The focus is turned on the body or various thoughts, while it is various emotions underneath which initiate and maintain the anxiety. Exploration through communication, including the interaction in a therapeutic session, helps the patient to acquire the tools for the internal exploration, which can help reconnect emotionally. The term ‘exploration’ refers here to a process in which the patient actively reflects on

causes for emotions and associated thoughts. The reflection is meaningful communication process as information is received and processed which brings about various changes

Burnout

If there is little meaningful in the world, people are at risk of going into a burnout. They feel like hamsters running in a wheel, disconnected from their work, their relationships and themselves. Burnout is very common. One reason is probably that one has to cut through more complexity to see meaning in the things one does every day. It is not as obvious anymore. If you work as a financial analyst for example, you do not see the workplaces you may help to create. However, this change in perspective requires some communication, whether internal or external. Often, to get the process going some form of meaningful external communication, such as in a therapeutic process, is necessary.

Eating Disorders

Eating is a simple behavior, but it is necessary to stay alive. If one tries to control one's eating or loses control over it, this is also a sign of disconnect from oneself. A patient with an eating disorder attempts a change in oneself by this behavior, but it is crude and without sensitivity for adaptations and changes that are really needed, but more importantly without an understanding for the own needs, wishes, values and aspirations. It is an attempt to change without direction.

Seeing less meaning in one's uniqueness is a result of maladaptive communication processes with others and oneself. This can have many explanations, such as external problems among and with primary caretakers or internal problems, including an ability to decode messages correctly or certain mood disorders. One important approach is therefore to improve the communication patterns and styles and develop a better sense for what one needs, wants, values and aspires to.

Elucidating these basic parameters makes it easier to identify sources of meaning, joy and greater happiness. Trying to re-focus can be difficult, especially if there is fear or resistance to do so. However, if someone suffering from an eating disorder finds something that appears meaningful, an eating disorder can often decline appreciably.

ADHD

It is quite well known that if someone suffering from ADHD, whether child or adult, engages in an activity which is meaningful and enjoyable, focus and concentration usually improve. It can therefore be worth the investment to find things and activities that are meaningful and enjoyable to the

individual. Encouraging a patient suffering from ADHD and offering support to explore more options can be very helpful in finding activities where focus is easier.

Another strategy is to help the individual see more meaning in activities such as school or the workplace. This may require a new perspective on what the activity is ultimately for, better goals and better communication with others. The fundamental idea is again to broaden the exploration of the world.

Exploring the World

For many people travelling and working or studying somewhere else can be helpful. Learning new information and new ways of doing things can increase one's tool set and enrich one's life. However, I have seen in many patients the belief that if they just go somewhere, their life will radically change for the better. Usually, that is not the case. Meaningful change also requires a change on the inside. A change from one day to the next does not change what we know and how we do things overnight. However, if the identification of meaning happens within an open and genuine communication process, change will not only happen, but also be transformative and adaptive, as well as leading to more stability and greater happiness.

Changing the external situation can bring about internal change. However, often this is only temporary if there is no resonance with the values and basic interests one holds. Values change little over time but learning new information can lead to new perspectives and new ways of doing things, which helps us to find more value and more meaning, and thus greater happiness in the world.



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