
CHANGE IS GOOD

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Change is good. Whenever anyone embarks on a course of therapy, they want change. Often the shape and nature of the change is unclear, and an early task in the therapy session is to begin finding out. In not only this sense, psychotherapy is a journey in developing greater insight and learning to make good use of it.

One common problem is that, while humans often desire change, they are also afraid of it. Changing something is often seen as losing another thing. If I do something differently, I may feel the loss of no longer doing it the old way, or somewhat differently from the old way. A new relationship means losing to some extent an existing one or the status of not being in a relationship. However, even though this may cause feelings of grief or sadness in the beginning, one can experience also the excitement of gaining something new, if one can think of situations and conditions in terms of gradual transformation rather than as a cut from one state to another. It is

impossible to lose the past, as one cannot lose the effect it has on the present, such as experiences and memories in neurobiological terms. As meaningful information changes a system irreversibly, we always build on the traces of past information. However, while the changes brought about by the past are irreversible, subsequent changes are possible, which can reverse a specific effect of past changes. Over time, the possibility of change leads to greater stability. In the context of psychotherapy, it is the reduction in apprehension and fear of openness and change, which facilitates the healing process and subsequent improvement in the quality of life.

Change happens in the present moment. We cannot directly change the future as it has not happened yet, but as we change our perspective of the world and the usual way of doing things in the present, the future will be transformed. We only have direct control over our actions and interactions in the present moment, and even then, any intentional influence may be more limited than we sometimes would like to believe. However, we can change the influence a past event has on our present and our future by changing the emotions, relevance and meaning we attach to it, the information that is associated with it. In other words, by changing how we perceive and process information, 'real' change happens (Haverkamp, 2010b), a fundamental process which is exploited therapeutically in Communication-Focused Therapy (CFT) (Haverkamp, 2017).

A primary step in any change process is to ask the right questions. Much depressed rumination about the past or anxious worrying about the future is irrelevant and meaningless because it does not represent a constructive search for helpful answers or any real form of change. Rather, it is often an attempt to avoid change, whether due to anxiety, fears or various thoughts or images about what could go 'wrong'. However, the problem with avoiding decisions and actions because they might not be 'right' is that one has not set goalposts for what is 'right'. Once I know what is right for myself, it is much easier to make changes and decide. And it also helps other people around me, because I become more transparent, open and predictable in how I approach decisions and life in general, which helps others in overcoming their fears and trepidations about making decisions and changes.

Many psychotherapy clients, when they begin with their sessions, mull over unanswerable questions and questions that, even if they can be answered, lead to answers that aren't helpful. So, the journey begins with identifying helpful questions that can actually lead to answers, which are capable of delivering change. Asking what would be the 'right' job or career in life presupposes that one can measure what is 'right'. So, this is not a helpful question. Asking what makes one feel more connected with oneself and the world, which brings greater happiness, contentment and satisfactions would be a better question. Too often one sees a client postpone the 'moment of happiness' in the future after something has been

accomplished which is validated by others, and too frequently happiness does not unfold even when that point is reached, because there is another future goal which has to be accomplished first. That is not change, but more of the same, living life on a treadmill.

At some point it is therefore important to leave these vicious delusionary cycles, these spirals into nothingness and irrelevance and to really begin asking the relevant questions, such as what would be nice to have for lunch today, for a start. Even this seemingly minor detail is more productive than solving a metaphysical question about one's future. We all have to eat after all; otherwise we die. So, the question about what to eat is relevant.

Life is normally relevant to people, while people find unique ways how to live it. The journey towards finding out how to live it is also unique to the individual, while there is plenty of information available on how to make the journey more enjoyable and rewarding. Learning from others can be important, as well as being aware of the own communication patterns with oneself and others. Since the use of these communication patterns and the experiences and other information one has are again unique, the narrative of life, the journey, is by extension also unique. Any change that happens needs to take into account this uniqueness to be helpful.

Gaining greater insight into the own uniqueness requires that one connects with oneself and gets an understanding about how one feels about the future and past, and how all these fit into the larger

picture of one's life story. Being able to reflect on past interactions and experiences requires the skills and practice to not only retrieve information from memory, but also to reflect on the internal communication of information, whether images, emotional signals or information about interconnected thoughts. The abilities to identify and to work with this information are primary targets in Communication-Focused Therapy (CFT), as well as other therapeutic approaches. Being more receptive to meaningful information increases the feeling of the relevance and meaningfulness of life. Communication, internal and external, is thus a main determinant in the relevance we attach to life. But communication is also the instrument we use in therapy to help, support, comfort and bring about change. It is the flow of meaningful information that makes all that possible.

While it is important which kind of information is being communicated, it is at least as important how it is communicated. In Communication-Focused Therapy (CFT), for example, the focus is on the communication patterns individuals use, both within themselves (internally) and with other people (externally) (Haverkamp, 2017). Changing these communication patterns brings about change in the individual, in the environment and in the relationships with the environment, because the flow of potentially meaningful information changes. For example, if one changes the information flows that are associated with depression, the mood changes.

Important is also to keep in mind that change has a ripple on effect. If one changes these communication patterns, constellations in the environment may change as well, and they usually do so. For example, if one partner in a relationship tries out new communication patterns, this may lead to changes in the relationship and in the communication patterns the partner uses, even in the internal dimension. Thus, changes in communication patterns often lead to real and concrete changes. If the communication patterns use meaningful information, the real changes are practically a necessity.

If the changes in communication pattern are adaptive, then the outside and inside adjustments taking place will also be adaptive. A free flow of information, which can include anything from thoughts about a relationship to a simple emotional signal, is often considered better than the opposite in the long run. In the short-term, a more structured flow of information can be helpful to reduce fears or to overcome any other hurdles that may exist.

Over the long-term, doing things one finds meaningful and relevant brings greater happiness. The basic parameters, one's values, needs and aspirations can help get more insight into the things that bring more happiness over the long-term (Haverkamp, 2010a, 2018b). One important way of finding them is to look at situations, interactions and actions in the past that led to greater happiness and more positive feelings. Using feelings as a compass is helpful, because feelings and emotions integrate a large amount of

information, that can be reflected upon together with other information by the rational mind, which offers the synergies of connecting the heart with the mind.

The journey of life is after all about making appropriate changes from time to time, using as a compass needle the experiences we have made over a lifetime, because they allow us to gain greater insight into ourselves and the world. And what is to be found on the inside as well as in the interactions with the outside world, reflects how we work with, receive and process meaningful information and the communication patterns we use in interactions within and without ourselves.

Another way of finding one's basic parameters, which provide greater stability in life, is through greater awareness and reflection about the communication patterns we use (Haverkamp, 2018a). Since they reflect how we interact with ourselves and others in the world, they can provide helpful information on how one experiences the world and on how one would like to experience the world. If this information informs the changes one makes, the journey through life usually becomes easier and more rewarding in the long run.



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