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# THERAPY AND ACTION

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Mood, emotions, thoughts, mental images, feelings and other psychological activity arises in interactions with oneself and the environment. Our actions influence not only the how our environment responds to us, but also how we feel and think. If you do something enjoyable, you will feel good about yourself and the world. If you do something unpleasant, you will feel worse about yourself and the world. Many factors can influence what and how many activities we find enjoyable. For example, if someone suffers from a depression, less is enjoyable.

One primary reason for acting in the world is that the world can provide feedback to us. We learn about the world and about

ourselves through acting in the world, as we also learn about ourselves through the shifting of meaningful information that takes place within the neuronal and non-neuronal communication systems within the body. It is important to realize that action can lead to new information which can be meaningful and bring about change in ourselves and others.

The kinds of actions that lead to greater insight and greater happiness can be manifold. It can be something seemingly very small like raking a line in a Zen garden or trying a new way to starting a letter or washing the dishes in a new way. It not always has to be a different action, the same action in a slightly different setting, at a different time or when we are in a different state can all lead to a different interaction with the environment. Even a repetitive action is thus not necessarily and truly repetitive.

Real world actions and interactions can be helpful in cases of anxiety and depression. Making the first step often helps to overcome an anxiety or a low mood. The reason is that change occurs, and any change can give the system a new chance to autoregulate itself on a better level. On the other hand, through one's actions one gets potentially valuable feedback. For example, to someone who suffers from social anxiety or depression, feedback from others that they appreciate one's presence, can lead to helpful changes.

A problem can be that in a depressed state one is not as receptive to information coming in from the outside world for several reasons.

One can simply be that depression, and many other conditions, can lead to cognitive impairment which makes it generally more difficult to pay attention, focus and process information. Another reason can be that one is not expecting as much from the world to begin with, which will also lower the receptiveness to meaningful and helpful information. One often has to learn again that acting in the world can have a positive effect on oneself.

Action is at its most helpful if it correlates with the individual basic parameters, the needs, values and aspirations a person has. Since communication with oneself and others are important ways in discovering more about the basic parameters, interacting with others and the world brings more insight into them.

Action also helps link the thoughts and the real world, which is important in achieving any improvement in the long run. When we imagine something in the world, we ultimately have to act on it to make it real for us. Even in the internal world, we have to commit to a line of thinking or a meditation exercise, for example, to bring about the change in the internal world that changes how we feel and how we think about ourselves and the world, our beliefs and our outlook and perspectives. It is difficult to feel an increase in the sense of efficacy without the experience of bringing about change in the world or within oneself.

Action is a form of communication with the world which provides feedback to the one who is acting. Every action transmits

information and triggers the sending of information. It is like a dance where one movement provides the cue for another one. Only that many interactions in the world, unlike the case of a choreographed and scripted dance, are like questions leading to responses that are uncertain, but which can lead to greater insight into the world. We know the sequence of movements in a dance, but we mostly cannot predict with certainty how events in the real world. However, the more interactions we have with the world, and thus the more feedback we get, the lower the uncertainty will be in the future. Helping patients form better communication patterns for interacting with the world is thus an important part of the therapeutic process, and ultimately helps them to raise their quality of life and reduce symptoms of anxiety, depression and other conditions (Haverkamp, 2010, 2017).

However, a precondition for any more complex action or behavior is that it has been thought about first. While our reflexes, for example, allow us to react faster to our environment than we could consciously think about a situation, they do not allow us to really change our environment in a future directed way. They merely help us to avoid the sting of an insect, ward off a threat, or hold on to a handrail so that we do not fall when slip on the stairs. If we use conscious thought, however, we can bring about a meaningful change in the world, such as making the staircase less slippery or avoid a location with many insects in the first place. This ability to shape the world and the own thoughts and perspectives requires

information, such as experiences, knowledge and skills, which depends on past interactions with the world and the internal communication patterns one has, such as how and which memories are retrieved and how one forms an opinion or theory and how one tests them, for example.

The difference between a thought and an action is important, and in many psychiatric conditions the inability of a patient to distinguish fully between a thought and the shared reality is what causes a whole variety of symptoms. Aside from the seemingly more obvious ones, like psychosis and schizophrenia, anxiety makes certain thoughts and images of the world more real, even though they are just thoughts and images. In depression, a focus on specific experiences of the past can seem more real in the present than they really are, and in OCD one key problem is usually that a link between a thought or ritual and events in the world seem more real than they could be. Working with action therefore helps and supports the ability to distinguish between a mere mental process and the reality of the outside world. The feeling of what it is like to act in the world can reinforce this distinction. A blurring of the distinction can help move humanity forward by giving us a greater sense of how thoughts and questions can lead to real changes in the world, but in many instances, it can also lead to anxiety, OCD, depression and other conditions. Helping the mind to use the flexible boundaries between the imagined and the real to one's benefit is an important goal of therapy. In Communication-Focused Therapy (CFT) this is

accomplished through work with internal and external communication patterns (Haverkamp, 2017).

Real world actions and interactions promote the sense of efficacy in the world as they offer bridges between the realms of the internal and the external. What begins as an internal thought can be felt to have an effect in the environment. This also offers a reflection on one's own self-perception and self-image, which arise from the information exchange within oneself but also largely from the information exchange, the communication, between oneself and the environment. Interactions with the world thus help to appreciate more the power of the own imagination and creativity, which can also lower anxiety and raise a positive outlook on life.



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