

The Therapeutic relationship

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The role of the herbalist is to help facilitate people to heal themselves. While it is true that we are not psychotherapists the therapeutic relationship and communication skills of the herbalist are central to the success or failure of the patients treatment. The original Greek meaning of the word psycho means 'breath, spirit or soul'. So in essence we could say that psychotherapy is about healing the individual at a very deep and fundamental level i.e., the soul. Today there are many intellectual power struggles within psychology and psychotherapy as to which school of thought is the best at reducing mental suffering.

The American Psychological Association carried out a meta-study to find out what works for the client in psychotherapy (Norcross, 2001, 2002). The factors that were significant in the therapeutic relationship included: empathy, alliance, cohesion, collaboration, positive regard, congruence and feedback.

A lot of psychotherapy today has been reduced to healing the mind, and this has been restricted to what happens inside the head. The need for healing is growing as more and more people are being constructed as diseased by our dominant capitalist culture and its narrow prescription to what is considered a 'normal or happy life'. Many people don't fit the 'normal' and so get sick or

are labeled as sick by the system. More and more people are suffering the iatrogenic effects of scientific medicine and are turning in large numbers to alternative forms of healing that have been around for thousands of years. Herbal medicine is one such form of healing that adopts a holistic approach to healing the mind, body and spirit. The herbalist does not just prescribe herbs. The herbalist also supports the healing of the mind. It is for this reason that the herbalist needs to have skills in developing and maintaining an effective therapeutic relationship.

Norcross (2010) surveyed mental health professionals who underwent their own personal psychotherapy and found that 80% of them attributed success in therapy to the relationship. This is supported by evidence from Barry et al., 2010 that regardless of the school of therapy, it is the therapeutic relationship between the client and therapist that matters most, when evaluating the success or failure of therapy. The therapeutic relationship is the corner stone.

Developing a good therapeutic relationship

Once people feel safe in a therapeutic relationship, change will more than likely take place. The herbalist is attending to change in the client, not doing the change. The purpose is to build a trusting, supportive, therapeutic alliance that is respectful. The idea is to empower people not to take over their healing process. It is important to allow clients to retain their own power. Remember that there is a big difference between what you think the clients' needs are and what we think they might need.

The qualities of a good therapeutic relationship include: attunement, boundaries, active listening, coherence, containment, trust, respect, genuineness, empathy, and responding to client concerns.

Attunement

Attunement goes beyond empathy. It is a process of communion and unity of interpersonal contact. It is a two-part process that begins with empathy—being sensitive to and identifying with the other person's sensations, needs or feelings; and includes the communication of that sensitivity to the other person.

Attunement is communicated by what is said as well as by the therapist's facial or body movements that signal to the client that his or her affect and needs are perceived, are significant and make an impact on the therapist. It is facilitated by the therapist's capacity to anticipate and observe the effects of his or her behavior on the client and to de-centre from his or her own experience to focus extensively on the client's process. Yet, effective attunement also requires that the therapist simultaneously remains aware of the boundary between client and therapist as well as his or her own internal processes.

Boundaries

Boundaries are intended to set limits and clearly define a safe, therapeutic connection between the therapist and the client. They exist to protect the client. Therapeutic relationships that lead to abuse, sexual relations, or romantic encounters are never appropriate and are prohibited. Verbal and non-verbal behaviors that are never appropriate include: sarcasm,

retaliation, intimidation, teasing, cultural slurs and inappropriate tones of voice that express impatience or exasperation.

There are many different types of boundaries. The physical boundary being the most obvious one not only refers to the actual space between the therapist and the client but it also refers to the physical space, the room where the treatment takes place. The energy of the room is also important and so it is important to have cleansing rituals e.g., burning incense or using crystals.

Personal boundaries refer to the emotional space that exists between the therapist and the client. It is important not to become overly friendly or personal with clients. In general it is better not to disclose personal information about your self to your clients.

Self-awareness

Self-awareness is the ability to reflect on one's subjective thoughts, feelings and actions. Self-awareness supports the therapist to recognize that their own experience is shaped by nationality, race, culture, health, socio-economic conditions, gender, education, early childhood experience and development. To develop and maintain self-awareness, therapists should have regular supervision with a senior herbalist or join a network of herbalists to get regular support and feedback. Without self-awareness we risk making mistakes and damaging the therapeutic relationship.

Attending and listening

Active listening is a specific communication skill, based on the work of psychologist Carl Rogers, which involves giving free and undivided attention to the speaker. Most of us think we are good listeners, yet we engage in judging, criticizing, diagnosing, ordering, threatening, moralizing, excessive questioning and advising. These are the roadblocks that active listening seeks to overcome.

In some ways, active listening is characterized more by what is not done, than what is done. Therapeutic listening goes beyond, simply listening to what the person is saying, but seeks to hear what the person is saying at a deeper level. To be a good listener implies that we have a strong sense of self and can separate our own issues, fears and biases from those of the patient. The tone of voice should be varied and responsive. In active listening it is important to paraphrase what the person is saying.

Coherence

Coherence forms part of a good therapeutic relationship. Coherence happens when the therapist is in tune with the patient, where they are at and what they need and the patient feels that you are present to them. The more coherent you are the more available you are to the client.

Empathy

Empathy involves the therapist being able to attend to the subjective experience of the client and validate that his/her understanding is an accurate reflection of the client's experience. Its different from sympathy in that the therapist tries to experience what it is like to be in the shoes of the

other person. Empathy allows us to develop a deeper connection with the client, as they trust us more and allow us closer at an emotional level. When the therapist makes this connection with the client, healing happens. The client feels valued and respected and begins to imagine change occurring.

Containment

Sometimes a client can be overwhelmed by what is going on for them at any one time. It is important that the herbal therapist is able to receive and understand communication from the client without becoming disempowered in the process.

Common mistakes that damage the therapeutic relationship include:

1. Judging and evaluating
2. Moralizing, preaching and patronizing
3. Labeling and diagnosing
4. Interrogating
5. Inappropriately self-disclosing
6. Putting on a professional façade
7. Encouraging dependence

Conclusion

“I’m not trying to make him happy, I’m trying to treat his depression’ said Frazer, after his client had gone out for some beers the night before with his Father, Martin. Martin said his client just needed to enjoy himself”

Sometimes having a beer with a friend can be as therapeutic as going to see a psychiatrist. Friendship is therapeutic. But more often than not we need to leave our friends and go and see a professional. In the case of herbal medicine, the herbalist is a therapist. Though not a psychotherapist, they can facilitate healing in the mind, as well as the body and soul. What is important is to acknowledge the boundaries that exist between different relationships including personal, work, family and professional. The new herbalist can be daunted by the challenge of being a therapist of sorts, but with time and practice, reflection and supervision, they will grow in confidence and offer their treatments in a safe therapeutic environment and in partnership with their patients help to bring about healing and better health.

Bibliography

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