How to Use Psychotherapy on, for, and by Oneself

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One version of the question that John Norcross and Robert Brown are asking is What do psychotherapists do for their own self-care, perhaps to help replenish themselves, perhaps to feel better? Here is my short answer: I have experiential sessions on, for, and by myself. Here is a longer answer: Every 2 weeks or so, I spend about 1½-2 hr going through an experiential session by myself in order to undergo a deep-seated change toward becoming the person I am capable of becoming and in order to be free of the painful scene that was front and center for me in this session. Here is my concluding invitation: If you want to feel better, and if you want to accomplish some of the wonderful things that psychotherapy can help bring about, then have regular psychotherapy sessions, preferably experiential sessions, on, for, and by yourself.

What Personal Life Circumstances Invited Me to Search for Some Way of Undergoing Self-Care?

When I started graduate school, I also started having almost daily on-the-couch sessions with a kindly old fellow. Five years later, I think I was pretty much the same person, but I came to rely on those sessions to keep me from becoming completely unraveled.

When I graduated from the doctoral program and also from my almost daily sessions, my job took me to another part of the country. That was when my life crumbled, I unraveled, and, of course, I had to find a replacement for my kindly old therapist who was so far away.

Because I was living in a city with a psychoanalytic institute, that was the natural place to beseech someone to let me be their patient for the next 5-10 years or so. The culmination of a burst of refusals was the still-vivid advice of the high priest of the institute: “There comes a time when a person just has to face life like an adult, rather than diving back on the couch whenever things get a little rough.”

The sanctuary doors were closed. Both my life and I were crumbling. Until I could find some couch to dive onto, what could I do, by myself and like an adult, to prevent a complete unraveling? My search was on.

What Can A Practitioner Do to Have Deep-Seated Sessions by Oneself?

The Initial Search

Looking back now, I could have turned to other psychotherapies and psychotherapists. However, I did not. Instead, I desperately wanted some way of delving into the deep-seated, intrapsychic stuff and some way of doing all this by myself. I tried two ways.

First, I engaged in self-analysis like Freud did. It only took a few sessions to be convinced that did not work for me. However, I had spent years learning how to interpret my dreams, and there were even some writings on this, I thought. It took a few more trials to learn that it was too easy to do this nonproductively. With reluctance, I gave up on psychoanalytic dream self-interpretation.

For reasons that were exceedingly sensible at the time, I turned to meditation. For nearly a year, I dutifully studied with a master, came to accept that my fellow students progressed faster than I did, and had trouble accepting that such competitiveness was not quite what meditation is supposed to foster. Nevertheless, it was clear to me that I was not very skilled at meditation, and both I and my life were getting more miserable. Where could I turn?

I turned to the whole field of psychotherapy with a burning question: Can you offer me something I can do by myself so I can undergo truly deep-seated change toward becoming the kind of person
I am capable of becoming and so I can be free of the painful situations I face and the painful feelings in these situations? My unsuccessful search culminated in a somewhat unique American Psychological Association symposium in 1970 where I confessed I was still looking for some promising answer. Hobart Mowrer relied on his self-help group; Sidney Jourard took long rides in his sports car; and Frederick C. Thorne, the dean of eclectic therapy, was still trying to find the magic cocktail of eclectic methods to produce self-understanding. That was about the time when I decided to find my own answer.

How Can a Psychotherapy Be Created for One’s Own Self-Sessions?

During all these years, I was heavily involved with doing, teaching, and training psychotherapy in hospitals, clinics, universities, and private practice. Yet, my personal quest was to find something I could do for, by, and with myself. I had two laboratories: sessions by myself and sessions with the persons I worked with in psychotherapy. What I wanted to find or create was some way to help me undergo deep-seated change and to be free of the painful situations in my daily life, and yet it had to be a way that I could also use with the people I worked with in psychotherapy. Yes, the quest was admittedly personal.

I scoured the clinical literature for promising methods. Thankfully, I managed to assemble a large library of audiotapes of all kinds of psychotherapists doing all kinds of psychotherapy, and I scoured these audiotapes for promising methods. Very gradually, over about 3 or 4 decades, I managed to build a way of programming a session so that it might be possible to undergo deep-seated changes. What is more, this gradually developing psychotherapy was also useful for sessions with the persons I worked with in psychotherapy.

I called this way of having a session “experiential psychotherapy,” (Maher, 1996) although, in some ways, this psychotherapy may not have been a psychotherapy: (a) The working methods were carried out by the person herself or himself, rather than being applied to the client by the therapist as interventions; (b) the therapist is much more of a teacher or guide and someone who accompanies the person on the journey of change; (c) there is virtually no place for the usual therapist-client relationship in which each is mainly attentive to the other; (d) each session is like its own minitherapy, with its own beginning and its own aim of accomplishing a wholesale qualitative change; and (e) especially if the client is inclined to become proficient with the in-session methods, the client is free to have sessions by, for, and with oneself for the rest of his or her life.

What Do I Do in an Experiential Session on, for, and by Myself?

I go into my soundproof office, with at least a couple of hours reserved for the session. I recline in a big, comfortable chair, rest my feet on a large footstool, and close my eyes for the whole session. I already know the steps to go through, and the methods for achieving each step.

The session starts by finding a scene in which the feeling in me is powerful. This scene is usually recent but it may be from some time ago. It is usually from my daily life but it may be from a dream (Maher, 1989). The feeling may be just wonderful or absolutely awful but it must be powerful. This session yielded a compellingly powerful recent scene when the wife of a best friend from long ago telephones me from another country and tells me that Sam had died. The feeling was so instantly powerful that my whole body shook and the room swirled around me.

Locking in this scene of powerful feeling, I entered wholly into the scene so that I was fully there, hearing her voice, and having this same powerful feeling. Inside this frozen scene, I actively searched for the precise instant when the powerful feeling peaked. It was the precise moment when her voice said, “And I know that Sam would want me to let you know...”

This moment of peak powerful feeling was precious because it provided a window into my deeper insides. By freezing and dilating this moment, by fully living and being in this moment, I received, sensed, was touched by, and felt something from deep inside me, some inner, hidden, sealed-off experience. In this shift, I was compelled by her calm, serene, caring voice, and I sensed a deeper experience of being a peaceful baby, safely rocked and cradled, nurtured and cared for. The discovery and the receiving of this deeper potential for experiencing was the end of the first step in the session.

In the second step, I use ways of allowing myself to welcome this sealed-off deeper potential for experiencing, to appreciate it, to let it stay around, to accept and love a particular kind of experiencing that is simply not a part of who and what I am in my everyday living. However, now,
by using the right methods, I have at least come to welcome and accept a potential for experiencing that had been so deep inside me.

The third step is an opportunity to disengage from—to let go of—the person I am and to plunge headlong into the radical shift of being this deeper potential. First, I find scenes and situations from my past and then I become this radically new person in these scenes and situations. The third step is achieved when I am experiencing being a peaceful baby, nurtured and cared for, and I am being this altogether new person (a) wholly and completely, with full intensity and saturation; (b) in past scenes and situations that are allowed to be exceedingly free of the constraints of reality; and (c) with feelings that are simply wonderful, joyous, and exuberant. It is playful, unrealistic fun, but I am fully being the new person who has the alive, deeper potential for experiencing.

The final step begins when I remain being this whole new person; only now the scenes and situations are within the context of tomorrow, the next few days or so. Continuing the context of outrageous unreality, full-blown silliness, and whimsy, I undergo this newfound experiencing in outrageously inappropriate forthcoming scenes and situations with outrageously inappropriate people such as my neighbor, the woman at the bank, the waitress at the restaurant, and the dean at my university.

The final step ends when the context is now, with all the constraints of sheer reality. I search the next few days for when, where, and how to continue being this qualitatively new person, undergoing a wonderful experiencing of being a peaceful baby, safely rocked and cradled, nurtured and cared for, only within a context of actual reality. How about here? No. What about there? No. How about with Dina? Yes! So, I rehearse being this whole new person with Dina, refining and rehearsing until it seems so fitting and it survives the objections from other parts of who I am. The session culminates in a solid commitment to be this whole new person with Dina and an open readiness to be this way in any scene or situation that presents itself. The session is over. Things have changed, both inside and outside.

Both inside and outside, changes are even more solidly carried forward when I am this whole new person with Dina in ways that are fitting and right for both of us. Now, the session is really finished.

If You Trust What You Do With Clients, Why Not Do It With Yourself? If You Trust What You Do With Yourself, Why Not Do It With Clients?

Picture me with a colleague and asking her what kinds of things she truly trusts in her work with clients. The first thing she says that she trusts is a good working therapist-client relationship. All right, anything else? Yes. She trusts digging out the client's problematic, self-defeating thoughts and replacing them with better ones. She also trusts certain behavioral programs for certain kinds of problems. And, every so often, she trusts the two-chair technique.

Here is where I make a valiant effort to ask my question with dispassionate, intellectual neutrality, and inevitably fail: “Ha! I gotcha! If you trust using these methods with your clients, why not use them with yourself?” After the usual pause, we typically get lost in a jungle of diversionary maneuvers; however, the question will not go away. She, like most of my colleagues, almost never is eyeball-to-eyeball with that question: “You know, I don’t think I ever thought about it,” she may say. I do know. Most psychotherapists rarely face the question of using at least some of the methods they trust using with clients, on, for, and by themselves. The very idea is somewhat novel. In a way, it seems innocently sensible and reasonable. However, if that is true, then the question just seems to grow in stature and in demanding an answer. Think about it.

Now, picture me talking, again earnestly, with another colleague. Like many practitioners, he does things by himself, things he trusts to help replenish himself, to help him feel better, to help solve personal problems (Mahrer, 1997; Norcross & Aboyoun, 1994; Norcross, Prochaska, & DiClemente, 1986). Some of my colleagues have personal diaries, some trust heartfelt prayer, some study their dreams, some take time to be alone in a cabin. The colleague I am talking to tells me that he relies on daily meditation. Picture that I am truly sincere in asking my friend, “You sound like you really trust daily meditation, and that it helps. Then, do you tell your clients to do meditation?” My friend waits a bit, like the question has more to it. When he decides the question is still there, waiting, he recites newly minted explanations for something he had never before had to explain, such as why he relies on one method for himself and yet relies on altogether different methods for his clients.

I find that there is almost always a huge hiatus between what most psychotherapists rely on and trust in their own personal lives and what they rely on and trust in their professional work with clients. It seems sensible that if therapists truly have faith in some of the methods they use in their
professional work, they would use these methods on and for themselves in their personal lives. It seems sensible that if practitioners have faith in particular ways of helping to make themselves feel better, they would use the methods in their professional work.

I follow this advice to such an extreme that the methods I use by myself are the methods I use with my patients, and the methods I use with patients are the methods I use by myself. Going a giant step further, I am increasingly excited about showing practitioners and interested others how to have experiential sessions on, for, and by themselves.

If there is a conclusion, it is simply an invitation to use psychotherapy on, for, and by oneself. If having one's own experiential sessions is appealing, then, please, do try it out. If some other way is personally appealing, follow that other way. However, please do consider using what we do know about psychotherapy on, for, and by yourself.

References


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