

Tools for Transformation: In search of an ideal skillset of Psychotherapies

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'It is easier to cook a new dish, than to correct a dish gone wrong'. Psychotherapists are in the job of getting and correcting dishes gone wrong. Hence, a really good skill set is required to enable and empower clients, be it for remedy of psychological and psychosomatic disorders, or for capacity enhancement.

The ideal skill set of psychotherapies; to be effective, must possess the following characteristics:-

- a) It must affect all parts of the brain (the left and the right brain, the deeper parts - limbic/emotional system, HPA axis and the autonomic nervous systems) as well as all divisions of our Mind (Conscious, Critical and Unconscious mind), so that all our faculties act synergistically, without conflicting and infighting.
- b) It should affect all three domains of the psyche; viz. cognition (thought), affect (feelings) and conation (behavior)
- c) Since the therapist remains the most important variable in psychotherapy, psychotherapies should be structured enough to allow practitioners to consistently deliver good quality and be comparable enough for research or empirical comparisons
- d) There should be quality training available, which is both structured and scalable upwards towards better and better quality
- e) Last but not the least; results should be scientifically or empirically tested, so that their practice is an evidence based practice

Are there tools for transformation that fulfill all these criteria to significant extents? Fortunately, the answer is 'Yes'.

In order of chronological appearance on the horizon of psychology, this set of psychotherapies would have - Hypnotherapy, BT (Behavioral Therapy), CBT (Cognitive Behavioral Therapy), NLP (Neurolinguistic Programming) and Bio/Neurofeedback.

Acting alone, none of them is a panacea that can cure all psychological problems, but assuming the client's willingness and consent to change; these therapies; acting in combination as brief therapies, can certainly produce transformation in a limited time.

I would like to briefly define each of them, and then walk the reader through some examples of real cases, to show benefits from different kinds of Psychotherapies.

Hypnotherapy

Hypnosis is recognized by WHO, British Medical Association and American Medical Association as well as utilized extensively in sports for individuals, teams and organizations. Clinical evidence of its efficacy has been available since the time of Mesmer and King Louis XVI (1784) through investigation by scientific committees, empirical evidence and anecdotal case reports. Scientific evidence through clinical and molecular research; though still evolving; has established that “hypnotic alteration of perception is more than mere compliance with suggestion, but rather it involves alteration in sensory experience”, they also consistently show it is better than imagination and autogenic training (e.g. for pain control).

Among the changes that have been well researched and documented are- Physiological (biofeedback) changes [e.g. changes in galvanic skin response, temperature, and heart rate variability etc, even suggestion mediated rapid vasodilatation in Raynaud’s disease] Immunological changes [e.g. increase in CD3,CD8, NK cell count with decrease of HSV episodes in patients with recurrent genital herpes simplex (RGHSV)], Neurotransmitter changes [dopamine and HVA levels reflecting activation of basal ganglia and frontal cortex, increase in endorphins], EEG changes [alpha laterality favoring left hemisphere and right frontal theta in the hypnotizable], Event-Related Potentials changes [p300 changes on visual evoked potentials related to attentional processes], Brain imaging changes [global increase in cerebral perfusion (RCBF)on pet scans, local increase in RCBF in anterior cingulate gyrus during hallucination induction in hypnosis]

Hypnotherapy combines a State (Trance) of various depths that increases acceptance of Suggestions (Ideas for change). It is also an extraordinary tool for analysis, capable of uncovering and discovering repressed issues of the past. It offers self-understanding, self-awareness and ability to work at unconscious levels, sometimes in ways that pleasantly surprises the client and the therapist, both.

A boy of 11years with Enuresis, on whom BT had been tried without success, was told by a hypnotherapist to repeat a simple suggestion 21 times before sleeping 'I pass urine only in the bathroom'. Over 2months, his bed wetting gradually decreased and stopped, and then he stopped repeating the suggestion. He is maintaining well since last 3years. This can be attributed to the suggestion part of Hypnosis

A 21year old girl presented with lymphoma like enlargement of lymph nodes in the body, bleeding into lungs, stopping of menses, anaemia and recurrent bouts of fever. She was referred by a Pranic healing therapist, saying that 'her body was not accepting healing'. Indirect Hypnosis session was done, and she was taught to induce Catalepsy (stage 2 of trance) and practice it. No medicines were given. With 5sessions by therapist and practice of Catalepsy - the fever stopped, her menses resumed, anaemia resolved and lymph nodes went back to their original size. She is maintaining well since last 2years. This can be attributed more to the state of hypnosis - the induction of Catalepsy (indicative of level two of depth of trance)

A psychology student of 22 was brought by her mother, for treatment of her asthma, which was triggered by smell of diesel, industrial gases and similar smells. On regressing her to find the cause, she spontaneously repressed to a past life, 40years back, when she was a girl of 10 in Bihar. She was playing hide & seek with her elder brother, in an abandoned mine next to her village, and she got lost in the maze of pathways. It got dark and she could not find a way out. Her strongest memory was the methane like smell surrounding her, and she started to choke. She could be found only in the morning, was taken to a hospital, but she could not be saved. She experienced strong choking during the session, which was a physiological abreaction, in addition to a psychological ventilation of feelings from the past. Suggestions were given for the past to be let go of, and for the body's response to gases to become Congruent to this life, rather than reacting in the way of the earlier life. She showed improvement over the next few weeks, and her asthma is no longer provoked by gaseous smells.

Neuro Linguistic Programme (NLP)

NLP originated from the study of how great therapists did their 'magic' (Virginia Satir, Fritz Perls, Milton Erickson), and their therapy approaches were modeled to get good results. Use of Presuppositions, Predicates and Modelling help develop rapport, an 'Unconditional positive regard' and build a positive ground to achieving a win-win state of 'I'm OK, You're OK'. Linguistic processes of Meta and Inverse Meta model, Milton Model and Indirect Hypnotic language patterns help take a person from Vague negative to Specific negatives that can be solved, and from 'I Can't to I Can'. Subconscious, unconscious and right brain work through submodalities induces a progressively deepening trance and goes towards the root of the problem in a way that is unexpected enough to keep the conscious mind at bay. It offers faster and speedier recovery, enhancement in communication and influence, and a new empowering approach to people, whereby one can see people with an unconditional positive regard

Hypnotherapy and NLP also have their strength in insight generation, as well as good acceptance, since the insight comes from within, hence it is not resisted.

A 55year old lady was brought by her son (a hypnotherapy practitioner) with Rapid cycling Bipolar disorder (more than 5episodes of mania or depression per year), which was not becoming stabilized on Psychiatric medicines. Hypnotherapy sessions had been tried, but her attention span was short, and she could not go into a trance. CBT had failed as her therapist felt her lacking in the psychological sophistication required for psychological work. NLP (Submodality/ Representational system work) was done on a single day in 4 sessions of 3-5minutes each, and she was asked to practice. There was a significant improvement in her condition, and number of episodes went down to 1 per year, and the dose of medicines was also decreased

An arts student of 23years had a phobia of cats, with no recollection of how it started. A VAK dissociation was attempted with her, during which she spontaneously regressed to an age of 1 year, when while she was sleeping in her crib, a cat had come in through the window, and was looking at her from very close. She woke up and was terrified to see this huge weird creature with big eyes so close to her face, and let out a shriek. She was relieved to see that nothing bad happened – the cat actually got afraid and ran away. The session took about fifteen minutes, and the client has been free of her fear since.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

BT works on the tenet 'Behaviour is shaped by it's Consequences'. Do's and don't may not work to alter behaviour, especially with children and those with impaired intellect. It can; however; be altered by working on the consequences. By making the consequences pleasurable (such as giving attention, social or material rewards) or painful (ignoring, withdrawing pleasure, giving punishment), behaviour can be altered. It helps increase desirable behaviours and decrease undesirable behaviours.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy is based on the Aron Beck's work, and the tenet that thoughts generate emotions and from there flows behaviour. It is not the events outside us, but our interpretation inside us, that produces negative emotions of sadness, fear, anxiety and anger. The root is thought, so a person is made aware of his dysfunctional thoughts (Negative Automatic Thoughts, Beliefs, Assumptions and his Cognitive Distortions) and is helped to challenge them and compare fears with reality, hence restructuring thoughts positively.

Comparison of CBT to medicines shows mixed results, but follow-up analyses after medication discontinuation clearly favor CBT. A major strength of CBT is that it is one of the most structured therapies amongst all. It offers freedom from our negative thoughts, and capability to question our judgmental and distorted thinking, with a promise of letting go of unnecessary and arbitrary beliefs and assumptions, and move towards an 'emptiness of the mind'

Biofeedback and Neurofeedback are the latest additions to this skill set. Psychological and psycho-physiological changes inside the body have physiological correlates that can be picked from the surface of the body – like skin conductance (low when we are stressed, high when we are relaxed), muscle tension, heart rate variability etc. Bio/Neurofeedback instruments pick up these signals and link them to audio-visual feedback, that can be analyzed by therapists, as well as the client becomes aware of them and can then learn and train himself to control them, thereby controlling the autonomic nervous system. It offers a promise of bringing the 'involuntary' autonomic system under 'voluntary' control, for better health, stress-management and control of psychosomatic illnesses. It has been used since long in scientific and psychological research (Carl Jung did his sentence completion test using Biofeedback). Currently, with sophistication in computers and biomedical instruments, it offers objectivity and in-depth, medical grade psychophysiological research to the entire field of psychotherapy.

A 29 year young executive working in a high pressure job presented with Panic and avoidance of going to job. Hypnotherapy sessions failed as he would not go into a deep trance. NLP Submodality work was tried but he said he was unable to make significant changes. CBT was minimally effective. Biofeedback was tried and he practiced it, with significant improvement, although with recurrences.

A 12year old child with ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder - without Hyperactivity) was brought by parents. Parents did not want to give medicines. Behavioral therapy, Occupational therapy, and regular sessions with special educator were ongoing for 1year, but the improvement was minimal. Neurofeedback was started - within 5 sessions there was a change in Attention, as well as several behaviors that were labelled as 'laziness'. In 20 sessions, there has been significant improvement; and BT is ongoing.

The skill set of psychotherapies mentioned here have extensive scientific or empirical evidence behind them. What is needed now, is better availability of quality trainings. Well-being will be achieved more through the mind than the brain. These psychotherapies are emerging with more and more clarity, as effective 'mind body tools'. It is now up to us to use them, and to use them to positively transform ourselves.

