



MEANINGFUL LIVING PSYCHOLOGY, LIFE COACHING & TRAINING

Meaningful Living Newsletter

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The psychological shift that comes from knowing

By Karina Stell

I've had an extremely frustrating couple of years. Wandering around like a beggar with a tin cup, hoping someone will drop in a coin. The coin I sought so desperately was attention, connection with where I was, caring and a glimmer of understanding of what it might be like to be me by the many doctors who sought an answer to my constant pleas.

My circumstances whilst probably different from most who read this, still led me to think of the many clients we see who ask us 'why'. Why do they feel as they do? Why is it so painful? On reflection, I acknowledge that these feelings of not knowing however different in etiology, are really all the same in their discomfort and sometimes despairing 'lost-ness'.

Not knowing 'why' we suffer is often unbearable, and can resemble a type of madness when not met with compassion and understanding. In the frustration I express in the opening paragraph of this piece, I'm not suggesting for a minute that it helps to struggle with the discomfort of not knowing. What I am saying is that it's hard. And when a person is in that place, they want acknowledgment that it's hard!

Unlike what I expect from doctors treating my body, therapists are not in the business of giving answers, but rather in helping our clients find them. So it can be even more painful at times I suppose, when clients suspect we hold the answers but won't share them.

The truth is, unlike medical interventions where the problems in bodies are mostly overt in some physical way or another, the human psyche is so much more shielded from those seeking to understand. Coupled with the very artful way we all build structures around our internal pain to cope, to hide, to just manage life, a therapist who really cares about their client, has to watch and dig and discover little nuggets of gold along the journey with their client.

When my doctor finally dropped that long awaited coin in my tin cup recently, I cried. There was an answer. I had been understood, validated and shown what had physically failed me all this time and sent me on my search for answers. For me there is no

physical healing as whatever inside me that is broken, is still broken. However, psychologically what has changed is that I've been held and understood and told why. And that shifts the spirit. That brings a peace, a calmness that allows the opening to accept.

The lesson I have learnt in this painful, lonely journey, is that I connect with the sorrow of my clients - the frustration and at times I imagine anger at not understanding why life is such a struggle. I want to say I hear you, I understand and I hope my experience with something similar, helps you feel a little less lonely.

In the time I sit with you, I hope you'll trust me to know how hard it is and that on our journey together, we will work hard find that little secret that unravels the knowing.

"By Doubting, we come at the Truth"

Marcus Tullius Cicero

Whom is the 'ouch' for? Part 1 - By Michael Cohn



I was out at dinner with friends a week or so ago, and I happened to sit next to a psychologist. During the course of the evening, many topics came up for discussion and at one point, the entire table discussed the question of intimacy and authenticity in life and in relationships. The psychologist then mentioned that she gets all her intimacy from her clients, with whom she obviously was deeply connected.

She made clear that all her clients and indeed her practice, provide all the intimate engagement in her life and that she found those moments of intimacy sufficient for her life.

I remember feeling an 'ouch' as she spoke. I was somewhat taken aback at her remarks and felt troubled on several levels.

- Was the 'ouch' for her – my recognising her loneliness?
- Was it for her clients – their needs perhaps not sufficiently separated or boundaried from hers and therefore conceivably inadequately seen or 'got'?
- Was it for myself – did my own loneliness get triggered?
- Was it for my own clients – are their needs sometimes subservient to mine?

I spent some time reflecting upon the above and what crystallised was this most striking place of unease for me, which lay in the question of exactly whose needs the intimacy of the clinical setting was satisfying? And, of course, there is a huge body of research on altruism and pathological altruism, which has attempted to delineate these concepts.

I wondered how much of her claimed satisfaction with such clinical intimacy – all from clients – masked her own lack of intimacy in her life in general, her emptiness sublimated in her caring for clients, thereby affording her vicarious intimacy. And whether all of this was mindfully within her consciousness as she practiced her profession?

Pondering on whether or not to engage her more directly on these questions, I decided to just share my own clinical experience, and I offered that when I am in the room with someone, I remain mindful (as much as I am able) of where I am in relation to my client and mindful (as much as I am able) of whose needs are served with each interaction or 'intervention'. Can I be aware enough in the session to be mindfully attentive that I keep my own needs more or less in abeyance as the 50 minutes' progresses?

I mentioned these points above notwithstanding the fact that I am long past the theoretical aspects of therapist feelings in the room. Way back in my training, I was introduced to countertransference and its various iterations, from contaminant, to a benign phenomenon to be used by the therapist in understanding the client more, to contemporary psychology, where clinicians typically make a distinction between helpful and unhelpful countertransference.

For those readers who don't know what transference and countertransference is, here is a quick primer.

When I, a male therapist of 69 years of age am sitting with a client whose father is of similar age, it is highly likely that the client might 'transfer' onto me various aspects of her own father, especially those aspects with which she may be burdened. Thus, she may experience me as domineering if her father was domineering, despite my being open and accepting. As a therapist, I will pick up her projections onto me and this will guide me in how I respond to her. Transference can take many forms – domineering, 'angry' person - as well as idealizing me. There are myriad transferences.

Countertransference is the opposite reactive response – from the unaware therapist. Thus if my client responds to me as if I am a domineering person (client's transference resulting from his dominating father), and I get angry with him for this response, I am then caught up in the countertransference and my response back to him will be

tainted by virtue of my being caught up in countertransference and not being able to maintain equanimity and not being able to hold the contained space in the room. I may then experience my client much as his father experienced him, reactively, and the whole cycle gets repeated in therapy with no chance of any movement for the client (or me).

And countertransference can also take a myriad of forms too. Thus, my client may idealise me and if I am not aware of this transference, I may bask in the glory of being so idealised, enjoying the feelings of being so ‘amazing’, and the client is again unseen in his deepest way, as I unreflectingly ignore what his idealization might mean.

Thus, it is one thing for a clinician to say that they know all about countertransference and that they watch out for it in session. It is quite another to maintain a sufficiently mindful and curious approach in session to have a chance to actually viscerally recognise the meta-process. Therapists’ internal

monitor is crucial to the process and a Mindful therapeutic stance is vital too. And, despite all these cautions, therapists are always subject to their own blind spots at various time. Getting back to the interaction I had had with the psychologist in question, when I had offered that I try to remain mindful (as much as I am able) of where I am in relation to my client and mindful (as much as I am able) of whose needs are served with each interaction or ‘intervention’. And getting back to my question of: ‘Can I be aware enough in the session to be mindfully attentive that I keep my own needs more or less in abeyance as the 50 minutes progresses?’, her response was taut and doctrinaire.

She said to me: “If you have these thoughts, you need to take them to supervision!”

How did I feel on hearing her words?

Wait for part 2 next month!

Questions I’ve been asked

By Jonathan Back



Q. Why is anger important?



A. Depending on our families of origin, we grow up with many conflicting messages and experiences of anger. It is a feeling that we typically aren’t sure what to do with, and often gets treated like an emotional hot potato.

On one hand it might get pushed away and therefore conflicts go unresolved or unspoken about. Some family messages or religious doctrines can even preach sentiments like, ‘Good people are slow to anger’ or ‘Just turn the other cheek’. When these sort of messages are internalised, it can leave us feeling conflicted when we feel angry, because of a belief that what we are feeling is ‘unacceptable’. Hence the need to even ask the question, ‘why is anger important?’....

On the other end of the spectrum is explosive rage, aggression and violence. People growing up with these experiences often remember ‘anger’ as being the cause of much suffering and unpleasantness, and therefore something to be avoided at all costs.

Anger is a primary universal feeling, and at the core **its function is to protect us**. It lets us know that something is not right, or that a boundary has been crossed. It is also common to feel angry when there is confusion in communication or attempts by others to manipulate reality.

The trouble is that in general, we aren’t taught how to

express anger in a healthy or useful way, and so it gets pushed underground. This causes resentment in relationships and conflicts to go unregistered. Anger then ends up coming out sideways by either random explosions, passive compliance or conflict avoidance. Unexpressed anger becomes an emotional pot of soup that simmers away, and there is a tremendous energetic price to pay from avoiding it – it is exhausting holding all that energy at bay.

Next newsletter, I will talk a little more about how to

recognise when we are angry.

You can submit questions to Jonathan via
Jonathan@meaningful-living.com.au

BACK IS REALLY BACK!



Our wonderful Jonathan Back who joined this newsletter a while ago, answering the questions he receives from some of you, is visiting Sydney from Germany! Both Michael and I are so warmed and happy to have him home, if only for a short while. Jonathan trained with Michael and I trained with both Jonathan and Michael, so we are truly a closely knit group. We hope as he moves around the rooms from time to time, you may have a chance for him to poke his head in to say hi. He's a gem and we'd love those of you who haven't met him to have a chance to say hello before he has to return to Germany! Wonderful to have you here Jono!!

Last month's puzzle solution:

You ask either guard this question: "If I ask the other guard which is the door to freedom, which would he say?"

If the guard you ask is the liar, he will say the wrong door.

If the guard you ask is the truth-teller, He will say the wrong door.

Therefore, whichever door is chosen, go through the other door.

Welcome to this month's puzzle!

How do you write 23 using only the number 2?

34 using only the number 3?

56 using only the number 5?

100 using only the number 9?

Good Luck!