

**BOOK REVIEW:**

**THE THREE CONDITIONS**

**ACROSS A COGNITIVE DIVIDE**

*Talking to Alzheimer's*

Claudia Strauss

Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, Inc.

\$ 12.95

ISBN: 1572242701

168 pages. Soft cover

*Talking to Alzheimer's* is a guidebook about how to connect to someone with dementia. Written plainly, the book is designed for family and friends, but has much to offer volunteers and professionals as well. I found this short (161 page) book easy to read, and also organized to be used as a reference for handling problems at specific stages of decline associated with Alzheimer's disease.

The first chapter deals with an essential topic that I review with all my geropsychology trainees – emotional communication and memory are preserved far longer and better than linguistic speech and memory. Visitors of Alzheimer's patients are encouraged to use intonation and facial expressions to communicate. They are cautioned that long after the patient forgets what was said or done, she will remember having a pleasant or unpleasant feeling. Visitors are encouraged to prepare for a visit by putting themselves in a calm and pleasant mood, so that these feelings can be communicated honestly.

A later chapter deals with touch. Readers are taught how to communicate affection, safety and trust without threatening a frail and confused older person. Strauss describes cues the visitor can read to determine how the desire to touch is perceived, and when touching is unwelcome.

Dealing with confusion, unrealistic demands and delusions can be quite taxing for seasoned therapists, let alone friendly visitors. Strauss encourages the visitor to be a good listener. "Listening without judging gives dignity," (p. 21).

Visiting someone with dementia sometimes requires more active leadership than one would provide in a normal Client-Centered encounter. Some dementia patients are unable to initiate conversation, but do well if given suggestions. Strauss suggests invitations to act with a sincere opportunity to refuse, as in "I'd love to hear a story from when you were little. Do you feel like telling one now?" (p. 39.) The suggestion to reminisce encourages an activity that is likely to be preserved (long-term recall) and pleasant, and avoids the need to talk about recent events (which may be impossible for the Alzheimer's patient).

Claudia Strauss describes the assisted living environment with metaphors that encourage the visitor to become a constructive agent in that complex system. "The hallway along which your loved one lives is his neighborhood.... If you walk together, make a point of stopping where someone else is standing or sitting and making the introductions yourself." (p. 49.) "When family members approach staff members, they need to think of the many demands placed on *them*, and the pain they must feel knowing that they, too, are helpless to stop the progress of the disease." (p. 52.)

Ending a visit with a demented person can be awkward and unpleasant. Sometimes having to stop a good thing can be so painful for the patient that the visitor becomes reluctant to return. Strauss discusses feelings of betrayal that patients often experience and the ways visitors often react. Many suggestions are offered about how to deal with the perception that we have played a role in what amounts to imprisonment for some patients – whether this is true or not. People with dementia experience grief, jealousy and romance. *Talking to Alzheimer's* offers suggestions on how to help the patient deal with each of these human problems. "An ear is worth a thousand tongues," begins Chapter 3.

This book offers suggestions for activities that healthy and demented people can enjoy together that do not rely on new learning. There is a section on taking care of yourself and another on successful ways to structure the frequency and length of visits. There is also a very sensitive section on how to explain what is happening to children and how to help them to be with a demented relative. The book ends with a list of resources for more information and support.

Even with nearly two decades of experience in geropsychology, I found things to learn in this book. I also found better ways of expressing things I have long known, that will make me a better therapist and teacher. While this book is not restricted to applications of the Person-Centered Approach, I highly recommend it to anyone in the Person-Centered community who wants to communicate with an Alzheimer's patient as well as therapists working with caregivers.

**Reference**

Strauss, C. J. (2002). *Talking to Alzheimer's*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, Inc.

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