

FOSTERING CLIENT INSIGHT

Mark J. Miller

Louisiana Tech University

Hillary arrived pretty much on time, as usual, for our ten o'clock session. But this time, the session began differently. Hillary was not motivated nor inclined ("I'm not in the mood") to converse about her still-unresolved conflict. I did not interpret such a disinclination as a form of resistance, denial, or even as a possible indication of therapeutic progress. I simply honored her request and allowed her to talk about *anything* she so desired. Hillary skidded from topic to topic, from weather forecasts to Super Bowl forecasts, television to theology, clothes to cats. As I sat there listening intently, responding as best I could (I hope empathically), and attending fully to her, it dawned on me afterward that Hillary was, in a real sense, free associating.

Free association is one of the primary methods psychoanalysts use to promote the recovery of unconscious conflicts. Freud often used an open-ended, gentle guided discovery technique called free association. The important goal of free association is to make the unconscious material conscious and thereby promote understanding and insight (Arlow, 1979). Using free association, clients are encouraged to express thoughts and feelings without editing or censoring; that is, to say whatever comes to their minds regardless of how embarrassing, painful or seemingly trivial (Atkinson, Atkinson, Smith, & Ben, 1993; Crooks & Stein, 1991). To maximize the therapeutic effectiveness of free association, clients are often asked to lie down on a "comfortable" couch and encouraged to "relax" within the presence of a non-judgmental therapist. Although Hillary was not lying down, she nonetheless felt comfortable, relaxed and, as she later stated, accepted by me without conditions.

After nearly 45 minutes of free association, something quite unanticipated happened. Hillary paused, glanced up at me, eyes aglow, and in an audible exhale said, "Hey, I think I finally know why I get so anxious over the holiday season. It all has to do with some things that happened to me a few years back involving two very important people, especially my...!" It was only during our terminating session a month later that Hillary helped me make sense of this "turning-point" session (her words).

A believer in the psychologically powerful benefits of meditation/relaxation, Hillary said to me, "The turning point came for me during that one session when I didn't feel like talking about my situation and you let me talk about anything I wanted to without analyzing it or rejecting me. The more I talked the more relaxed I got and it sort of put me into a meditative state like the kind I get into when I do my relaxation thing." In classic psychoanalysis, interpretation could have been applied to Hillary's material to facilitate her understanding of the influence of unconscious motives of her present behavior. Ultimately believing in the philosophy that it is the client who is the therapist (c.f. Bohart & Tallman, 1996). I did not overly analyze nor interpret Hillary's disclosures.

Free association as a way to induce meditation and possible insight! Perhaps. For example, Delmonte (1989, 1990) suggests that mindfulness meditation is similar to free association in that it enhances insight, and promotes the integration of the perceptual, cognitive, and behavioral aspects of human functioning. Mindfulness meditation, being opposite of the mechanism of repression, facilitates the emergence of unconscious (subverbal) material and allows for its integration at a higher (more cognitive) level of awareness.

Meditation, on the other hand, is defined as a family of mental exercises in which a conscious attempt is made to attend in a “nonanalytical” way (Weiten, 1992). A state of meditation/relaxation can often be induced by sitting in a comfortable position, being relatively free of worry, and maintaining a passive attitude. By permitting relaxation to occur at its own pace, “other thoughts” are expected to emerge (Benson, Kotch, Crassweller, & Greenwood, 1977).

Perhaps as Hillary rambled in an apparently nondirectional carefree manner, “other thoughts” (i.e., hidden material) were indeed dislodged from within and emerged into her awareness. Perhaps the suddenness and newness of Hillary’s self-actualizing insight might have been stalled had she felt pressured to talk about her presenting problem during that pivotal session or had some type of psychoanalytic interpretation been attempted.

As always, I seem to learn most about the intricacies of the counseling process from my clients; they are the experts. By respecting my clients’ requests, never forcing an issue, maintaining an open, honest, caring, and accepting position, I have learned, through Hillary, that perhaps sometimes when clients “just go on and on” (e.g., free associate in a sense), they do become more relaxed which may, in turn, promote insight. Clearly, therapy is self-help; that is, it is the client who uses the experience with the counselor and/or other resources (i.e. meditation) as material to be a counselor for self thereby actively engaging in self-exploration (Bohart & Tallman, 1996). Finally, for a review of the literature on the use of meditation in therapy, interested readers are encouraged to read Bogart (1991).

REFERENCES

- Arlow, J.A. (1979). Psychoanalysis. In R. Corsini (Ed.), *Current psychotherapies* (2nd ed.) (pg. 1-43). Itasca, IL:F.E. Peacock.
- Atkinson, R. L., Atkinson, R. C., Smith, E. E., & Ben, D. J. (1993). *Introduction to psychology* (11th ed.). New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Benson, H., Kotch, J. B., Crassweller, K. D., & Greenwood, M. M.(1977). Historical and clinical considerations of the relaxation response. *American Scientist*, 65, 441-443.
- Bogart, G. (1991) The use of meditation in psychotherapy: A review of the literature. *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, 45, 383-412.
- Bohart, A.C., & Tallman, K. (1996). The active client: Therapy as self-help. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 36, 7-30.
- Crooks, R. L. & Stein, J. (1991). *Psychology: Science, behavior, and life* (2nd ed.). Chicago: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.
- Delmonte, M. M. (1989). Meditation, the unconscious, and psychosomatic disorder. *International Journal of Psychosomatics*, 36, 45-52.
- Delmonte, M. M. (1990). Meditation and change: Mindfulness versus repression. *Australian Journal of Clinical Hypnotherapy and Hypnosis*, 11, 57-63.
- Weiten, W. (1992). *Psychology: themes and variations* (2nd ed.). Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.

Policy Statement

The Person-Centered Journal is sponsored by the Association for Development of the Person-Centered Approach (ADPCA). The publication is intended to promote and disseminate scholarly thinking about person-centered principles, practices, and philosophy.

All materials contained in The Person-Centered Journal are the property of the ADPCA, which grants reproduction permission to libraries, researchers, and teachers to copy all or part of the materials in this issue for scholarly purposes with the stipulation that no fee for profit be charged to the consumer for the use or possession of such copies.