

CONTEMPLATIVE RELATIONAL PSYCHOTHERAPY
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Overview

The relational approach in psychodynamic psychotherapy grew out of interpersonal psychoanalysis and object relations theory. It emphasizes that the psyche is by nature organized for relationship and has the history of our relationships with others embedded within its structure.

Informed by both Buddhist psychology and relational/psychodynamic models of the mind, contemplative relational therapy is grounded in experiential processes of meditative inquiry and disciplined self-reflection. It privileges the importance of subjective experience embedded in relationship as it engages the patient in a deep inquiry into how the mind consciously and unconsciously organizes experience. Thus, 'Contemplative relational psychotherapy' is both relational and psychodynamic, integrating psychoanalytic object relations and intersubjectivity theories with Buddhist psychology.

Contemplative psychotherapy posits that, given the right conditions, the mind seeks its own natural unifying clarity and compassion. The psychodynamic therapist's meditative awareness, along with empathic, holding, and containing functions, provides an intersubjective context in which this natural clarity of mind can emerge.

The Importance of Meditative Awareness in Psychodynamic Psychotherapy

Mindfulness, a Buddhist meditation practice, may be defined as "moment to moment awareness of present experience, with acceptance". The practice of being with moment-to-moment experience without judgment enhances awareness of the sensory, somatic, intuitive, and emotional background of experience. This meditative awareness is an integral component of the clinical stance of the contemplative relational psychotherapist.

Contemplative Relational Psychotherapy offers an original approach which goes beyond mindfulness as a clinical *technique* to understanding how mindfulness is relevant in the *process* of psychodynamic psychotherapy. The essential art of meditative experience relies on developing the capacity to pay attention and to tolerate ambiguous and unexpected phenomena. As we learn to pay attention, right now, right here, we are able to recognize nuances of our own experience, and, in turn, are increasingly able to recognize the nuanced communication of our patients. Mindfulness training develops what Freud called

“evenly hovering attention”. The ability to stay with the here-and-now is also the basis of what Bion termed “being without memory, desire and understanding”. Although the importance of these dimensions of clinical attentiveness is commonly recognized, mindfulness meditation provides a systematic method for cultivating these capacities. In our view, mindfulness is the foundation of clinical listening.

As contemplative relational therapists, our interest is in being fully present with our patients, not lost in thought and not caught up in theory. As we interact with our patients, our own meditative awareness enhances our capacity to remain alert to the patient’s representations of self and other (i.e., tracking the transference) as well as to the process occurring between our patients and ourselves (tracking the countertransference). This fosters our ability to help the patient move beyond unconscious relational stereotypes of self and other.

In our view the therapist’s meditative awareness enriches psychotherapy for both therapist and client. The contemplative stance helps foster the patient’s capacity to accept experience just as it is. This in turn relates to what has been termed ‘negative capability’: the capacity to tolerate uncertainty without prematurely seeking to resolve it. Can we hold a question without immediately searching for answers? Can we experience our emotions without the necessity of judging what is good and what is bad? Can we tolerate the experience of a problem without pressing to figure out how things are going to turn out? The patient’s first taste of this transformative view may be assimilated wordlessly from the attitudes and states of mind of the therapist. Meditative awareness communicated within the therapeutic dyad enhances the patient’s capacity to de-center from fixed views of self and other and to engage new ways of thinking, being, and functioning.

For the therapist, cultivation of mindful listening facilitates the free flow of clinical creativity and engages the wisdom of the heart. It fosters the ability to listen with “beginner’s mind” and enables the clinician to transcend fixed clinical models. Contemplative relational psychotherapy is a clinical approach which enables us to recognize and expand our awareness of the bi-personal (intersubjective) field in which therapist and client are always influencing each other.

Transcendent Attunement in Contemplative Relational Psychotherapy

This workshop focuses on what we call the listening stance of transcendent attunement, which is a therapeutic, experiential, intersubjective method that involves suspension of duality between the therapist and patient/client. Transcendent attunement is a mode of meditative reverie which invites a fluid shift to an atemporal mode of being/listening.

Based in Buddhist psychology, transcendent attunement also involves a radical shift in our view of who we think we are. In this view, we recognize that we not only develop in relationship, we are no other than relationship. On one level, we can appreciate the unity of our being-with-others, while simultaneously, at another level, we also see the uniqueness of who we are.

When we deconstruct the moments of experience and growth that lead to this form of contemplative listening, we find four interwoven clinical capacities:

1. mental flexibility: eg. willingness to relinquish fixed models
2. the capacity to suspend grasping at knowing
3. receptiveness to one's natural intuitive capacities
4. willingness and ability to respond to momentary shifts in oneself and the other, both conscious and unconscious.

The clinical capacities of transcendent attunement exist as a dynamic potential, awaiting the conditions which allow them to come forth in embodied aliveness.