
The Beacon

Guiding You through the Process of Change

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To Change or Not to Change

What constitutes progress and change in psychotherapy? If you've ever been in psychotherapy for an extended period of time, this is something you have probably pondered. Different theoretical orientations answer this question differently. In psychodynamic psychotherapy, originally conceived of by Freud, change develops out of insight. Insight is not a single "aha" moment that suddenly leads to a new outlook on life. Rather, it is an arduous, deeply involved process that takes place in the context of a consistent, trusting, therapeutic relationship.

Generally speaking, insight and change occur over time through a process of making the unconscious conscious. Freud defined three levels of consciousness: conscious, preconscious and unconscious. The conscious mind contains mental activity (e.g., thoughts, feelings, memories, knowledge, and perception) that one is aware of from moment to moment in waking life. The preconscious contains mental contents that can be brought to consciousness through focused attention and introspection. The unconscious mind contains the vast majority of mental activity which exists outside of awareness, and is expressed in the curious phenomenon of dreams and a vast array of seemingly meaningless or trivial behaviors (e.g., bungled actions, slips of the tongue). Insight is achieved when connections are made among these levels of consciousness, between past and present, or between inner conflicts and observable symptoms. Although one's conscious ideas, feelings and reactions to the occurrences in daily life (external reality) are important, it is the pursuit and examination of the preconscious and unconscious parts of the mind, or one's inner world, that constitute the real work and joy of psychodynamic psychotherapy. To achieve this type of insight and change requires strong motivation

and a sense of personal responsibility for one's happiness. One must have the ability to introspect and talk freely (free associate) about one's inner world, and a genuine curiosity about how one came to be who she/he is.

Effective psychotherapy is not about leaving sessions feeling "better" (although that is nice) or in possession of some new strategy or plan to instantly change one's life. Rather, enduring change typically takes place incrementally, as intellectual understanding enables one to attain greater access to one's inner, emotional life. The opportunity to develop a new perspective ultimately results in making better decisions that can have a profound impact on one's life and well-being. For instance, a chronically depressed person may notice that while she still has sad days on occasion, she no longer feels controlled by negative moods, can sleep better, can concentrate on a book or enjoy her children more. She may finally have the confidence to pursue a career interest that has been on hold. A highly anxious person, with frequent panic attacks, may notice that while he still has worries, he no longer panics "out of the blue" or ruminates about terrible things happening to him or his family. He can stop at one drink and does not need to reach for a pack of cigarettes to calm his nerves. He may become less socially avoidant and open himself up to new relationships. When these different types of experiencing oneself and the world take hold, there is no question that enduring psychological change has occurred.

Reference: Freud, Sigmund. (1957). A General Selection from The Works Of Sigmund Freud. New York: Doubleday.

By Jill Shalan, Ph.D.

Beacon Behavioral Services, LLC. (860) 676-9350 x54

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Beacon Behavioral Services, LLC
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Avon

40 Dale Road
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34 Jerome Avenue
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Glastonbury, CT 06033
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Visit us on the Internet at:

www.beaconbehavioral.com
email@beaconbehavioral.com

Beacon Behavioral Services, LLC
40 Dale Road, Suite 201
Avon, CT 06001