

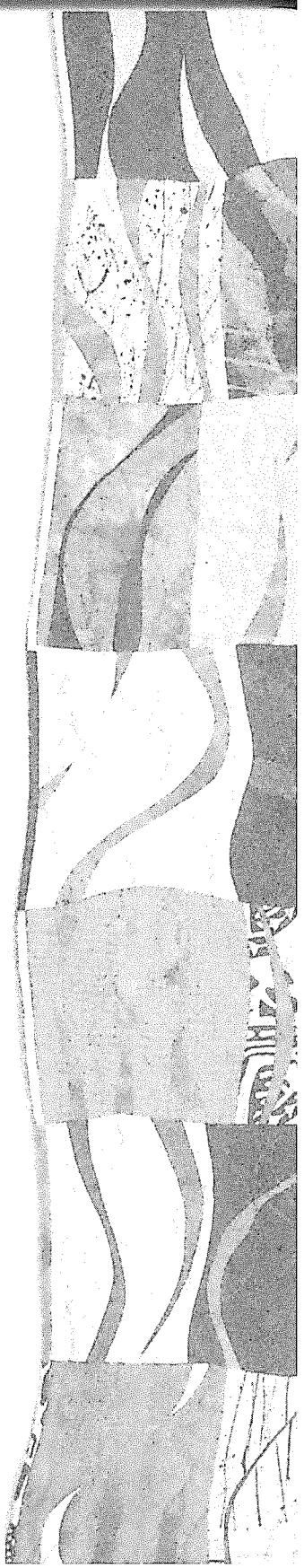
INTEGRATIVE MULTITHEORETICAL PSYCHOTHERAPY

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Chapter 6

Experiential-Humanistic Psychotherapy: Exploring Feelings and Personal Experiences

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INTRODUCTION TO EXPERIENTIAL-HUMANISTIC PSYCHOTHERAPY

Historical Context

Humanistic and existential approaches to psychotherapy gained prominence during the middle of the twentieth century and came to be known as the “third force,” emerging after psychoanalysis and behaviorism. Bugental and McBeath (1995) suggested that the rise of existential-humanistic approaches was related to increased acceptance of psychotherapy after World War II, movement away from a medical model, and the influence of existential thought. *Person-Centered Therapy* and *Gestalt Therapy* became the most influential models of psychotherapy identified with humanistic psychology and philosophy because of their emphasis on human experience and growth (Maslow, 1968). Carl Rogers’s *Person-Centered Therapy* stressed the importance of unconditional positive regard, congruence, and empathy (Rogers, 1951; Raskin & Rogers, 2000). Fritz Perls’s *Gestalt Therapy* emphasized contact with the environment, directed attention, integration of selves, here-and-now awareness, and experimentation (Perls, Hefferline & Goodman, 1951; Perls, 1969). Existential psychotherapy developed alongside humanistic psychotherapy and shared a common emphasis on direct phenomenological experience. Existential psychotherapy focused on the development of authenticity; awareness of freedom and responsibility; and facing ultimate concerns like death, isolation, and meaninglessness (May, 1961; Bugental, 1965; Frankl, 1969; Yalom, 1985). These phenomenological approaches have evolved into more contemporary models of experiential psychotherapy (Gendlin, 1973; Mahrer, 1986) including *Emotion-Focused Therapy*

(Greenberg, 2002). An emphasis on phenomenology has been described in the following way:

Central to the practice of humanistic, existential, and experiential therapies is a view of the client as an expert on his or her own experience. Within the phenomenological perspective, clients are viewed as having privileged access to their unique experiences. Client processes of discovery and choice are therefore emphasized over the taking of an interpretive or advisory focus. (Elliott & Greenberg, 1995, p. 123)

This common focus on direct human experience is one of the central ideas that unites experiential, humanistic, and existential approaches and serves as a unifying concept for the theories and strategies described in this chapter.

Experiential Adaptation

Chapter Three suggested that the purpose of psychotherapy is to facilitate adaptation and that different theoretical approaches emphasize different forms of adaptation. In this context, experiential psychotherapy focuses on promoting adaptive feelings that aid survival and help people adjust to the circumstances they encounter. Leslie Greenberg has made an important contribution to experiential psychotherapy by highlighting the importance of distinguishing among varieties of emotional expression and promoting the discovery of adaptive feelings. Greenberg (2002) suggested that “a key feature of healthy core emotions is that they inform and organize people for adaptive action” (p. 137). Feelings also aid adaptation by monitoring the state of a relationship, signaling emotional states to others, facilitating the construction of meaning, and helping people learn. For example, sadness can be an adaptive response to leaving or losing a loved one. Adaptive sadness motivates people to seek social support and to do something to change distressing circumstances. In contrast, maladaptive feelings do not aid survival and are not healthy responses to the environment. Maladaptive emotional responses are often learned in situations in which adaptive feelings are blocked, but, once learned, these maladaptive feelings can become habitual patterns (Greenberg, 2002). Therefore, experiential strategies can be used in psychotherapy to help people explore their feelings and to respond to circumstances with adaptive emotions. It should be remembered that feelings do not exist in isolation and that adaptive feelings are likely to correspond with functional thoughts and effective actions.

Experiential Conceptualization

Focusing on Feelings

Chapter Three suggested that an experiential conceptualization should be formulated when feelings become a focal dimension in psychotherapy.

An experiential conceptualization focuses on feelings and their role in human functioning. If you decide clients' primary concerns are related to their feelings, it may be appropriate to look more closely at specific emotions. Greenberg and Paivio (1997) described a method of emotional conceptualization that involves identifying specific feelings and understanding the purpose they serve for an individual. Most feelings can be classified as one of five basic emotions: (1) Anger, (2) Sadness or Distress, (3) Fear or Anxiety, (4) Shame, or (5) Pleasant Emotions (like happiness and love). An experiential conceptualization involves identifying the specific feelings a client is experiencing and determining whether they represent primary, secondary, or instrumental emotions.

Primary Emotions

Primary emotions are fundamental emotional responses representing initial reactions to a new situation or event and can be adaptive or maladaptive. Primary emotions are seen as adaptive when they play a positive role in adjusting to the environment. For example, fear in response to real danger is seen as adaptive in the same way that anger is an appropriate response to violation and sadness is an adaptation to loss. Psychotherapy can be used to encourage the emergence and awareness of adaptive primary emotions so they can be owned, expressed, and can fulfill their adaptive function. Primary emotions also can be maladaptive, such as feeling afraid of objects or events that are not really dangerous (phobic responses). Maladaptive primary emotions are learned responses and often take the form of fear or shame (Greenberg & Paivio, 1997). After identifying clients' primary emotions, a psychotherapist can begin to see if these feelings serve an adaptive or maladaptive function.

Secondary Emotions

Secondary emotions are reactions to primary emotions or to cognitions. A secondary emotional reaction to a more primary emotion might involve expressing socially acceptable feelings when a person is not comfortable with their initial emotional reactions. For example, men sometimes express anger when they are afraid. In this case, fear may be the primary feeling that results in an expression of secondary anger. Conversely, women are more likely to express secondary sadness in response to primary anger. The shift from a primary to secondary emotion often occurs outside of awareness. People may not feel some primary emotional responses until these are explored, often with the help of a counselor. Secondary emotions also include feelings generated by thoughts, such as feeling depressed when thinking about failure (Greenberg & Paivio, 1997).

Instrumental Emotions

Instrumental emotions are feelings expressed or experienced because of their potential impact on others. People often learn to feel in ways that benefit their

social interactions. For example, if expressions of anger are met with rejection and feelings of sadness result in comfort, an individual may learn to feel sad when the primary emotion is actually anger (Greenberg & Paivio, 1997).

Secondary or instrumental emotions often block awareness of primary emotions. In order to distinguish between these different types of emotional responses, you will need to explore the feelings that clients are currently experiencing. Primary emotions resonate deeply with clients' stories and are congruent with facial expressions and other physical cues. In contrast, secondary or instrumental emotions may seem inconsistent with body language or may represent unusual responses to certain situations. For example, if a client is reporting feelings of relief and satisfaction through clenched teeth, you may want to look for primary emotions that are hidden from immediate awareness. When surface feelings are explored in psychotherapy, deeper primary emotions often emerge. For example, after expressing strong feelings of anger about a recent loss, a client may begin to cry. This may suggest that there are primary feelings of sadness underneath secondary or instrumental anger.

Table 6.1 provides a summary of this method of distinguishing between different types of emotional experiences. Examples of questions that can be used to explore feelings and formulate an experiential conceptualization are

TABLE 6.1 Distinguishing Between Different Types of Emotional Experiences

<i>Primary emotions are sometimes experienced within an individual's awareness</i>	
<i>Adaptive Primary Emotions</i>	<i>Maladaptive Primary Emotions</i>
Fundamental states with clear adaptive value.	Learned dysfunctional emotional responses.
<i>Examples:</i>	<i>Examples:</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sadness in response to loss. • Anger in response to violation. • Fear in response to threat. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fear in response to something that is not dangerous. • Shame in response to self-expression.
<i>Primary emotions are sometimes hidden outside of an individual's awareness When primary feelings are hidden, secondary and instrumental emotions sometimes emerge</i>	
<i>Secondary Emotions</i>	<i>Instrumental Emotions</i>
Emotional reactions to a more primary emotion or cognition.	Expressing a feeling in order to have an effect on others.
<i>Examples:</i>	<i>Examples:</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expressing anger when afraid. • Feeling depressed when thinking about failure. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expressing sadness to receive comfort. • Expressing anger to intimidate someone.

TABLE 6.2 Questions for an Experiential Conceptualization

Identifying Feelings

- What feelings related to this concern have you been experiencing?
- Do you ever feel sad, afraid, angry, or ashamed in this situation?

Primary, Secondary & Instrumental Emotions

- Do these feelings help you resolve things, or do they make things worse?
- Are there other emotions you might be feeling at a deeper level?
- Are there feelings you express in order to get a reaction from someone?
- Which emotions are you likely to express, and which do you tend to hide?

Proportional Responses

- Are there times when your feelings seem too intense for the current situation?
 - Do you ever feel like your emotions are restricted or muffled or you can't express what you are really feeling?
-

provided in Table 6.2. Because some emotional reactions may be outside of awareness, direct questions may not be sufficient to identify and understand feelings. To assess these emotional states, psychotherapists frequently use five different sources of information: (1) empathic attunement, (2) nonverbal cues, (3) knowledge of universal human responses, (4) knowledge of a client's own emotional makeup and personal history, and (5) personality styles and disorders (Greenberg & Paivio 1997).

Proportional Responses

Adaptive feelings are proportional emotional responses to current situations. In colloquial language, this means that it is helpful to feel the right emotion and that this feeling is experienced at an appropriate *volume*. There is a well-documented curvilinear relationship between stress and performance that suggests that moderate levels of stress are related to optimal performance. For example, if an athlete feels no pressure before the big game, she may not perform as well as if she has a moderate level of arousal and is excited about the game. On the other hand, if the same athlete is experiencing a great deal of anxiety and stress about the game, this may interfere with her ability to play her best. The same curvilinear relationship may apply to feelings as well. In a dangerous situation, moderate amounts of fear may be most adaptive. For example, if someone walking along the edge of a steep cliff does not experience sufficient fear, he may be careless and slip and fall. On the other hand, if the same person is so afraid of falling that he feels paralyzed, he may not be able

to move to a safer position, and his fear may increase his chance of injury. Therefore, when formulating an experiential conceptualization, it is important to assess the intensity of feelings to see if clients' emotions represent proportional responses to their situations.

Case Examples of Experiential Conceptualization

Experiential Conceptualization of Depression

When Claire began working with Dr. P., her depression was related to feelings of hopelessness and despair. Claire told Dr. P. that she rarely cried but often felt numb and paralyzed. Dr. P. wondered if secondary feelings of despair and hopelessness were blocking adaptive feelings of sadness and grief.

- **Secondary Emotion:** As Dr. P. listened to Claire describe her feelings, she hypothesized that the feelings of despair were a secondary reaction and were related to thoughts like "I can't go on without her." Feeling helpless was paralyzing Claire and was interfering with healthy grief that although painful, would help Claire move on to more adaptive feelings, thoughts, and actions. Her despair was also related to ineffective actions like socially isolating herself from her sisters, who could serve as a source of support and could help her process her feelings because of their shared loss.
- **Adaptive Primary Emotion:** Dr. P. hypothesized that sadness and grief were the adaptive primary feelings that Claire was avoiding. In order to allow these natural feelings to emerge, Dr. P. encouraged Claire to talk about what she missed about her mother and made it safe for her to cry. When Claire stopped blocking her sadness and became more comfortable with tears, Dr. P. encouraged her to talk about her feelings with her sisters with whom she shared a common experience of grief. Although Claire initially thought of crying as "giving into depression," she gradually realized that feeling sad about her mother's death was a healthy part of grieving. As Claire allowed herself to feel sad, she felt less numb and, over time, her symptoms of depression decreased.

Experiential Conceptualization of Anxiety

Ben's anxiety was closely related to his fear of being rejected by his family if they found out he was gay. As Dr. P. listened to Ben describe his fear, she hypothesized that this was a maladaptive primary emotion and that it might be more adaptive for Ben to feel sad about the loss of closeness to his family.

- **Maladaptive Primary Emotion:** In social situations with his family, Ben had learned to be afraid of closeness that might lead to the discovery that he was gay. Ben had a realistic fear that his family might be uncomfortable if they discovered his sexual orientation. However,

the anxiety and fear he experienced on a daily basis were a disproportional response to the situation. These feelings distorted the way he interacted with others and made him act distant and aloof. Dr. P. started to work with Ben's emotions by encouraging him to pay more attention to what he was feeling. Once he became more aware of his fear, Dr. P. helped him see how it was distorting his actions and helped him evaluate whether his fears were a response to real or imagined danger. As Ben explored his fear, deeper feelings of sadness emerged.

- **Adaptive Primary Emotion:** After exploring his fear of rejection, Ben began to become more aware of feeling sad about no longer feeling close to his family. Dr. P. helped him explore the hurt feelings related to losing a special relationship with his mother when he decided not to become a priest. Once Ben became aware of sad feelings, he and Dr. P. discussed ways to feel closer to his family and to consider revealing his sexual orientation. Dr. P. highlighted the dynamic interplay between fear—that pulled him away from his family—and the sadness—that drew him back toward them. Once Ben was aware of both feelings, he was better prepared to find safe ways to feel close.

EXPERIENTIAL STRATEGIES

The strategies described in this chapter are drawn from *Emotion-Focused Therapy* (Greenberg & Paivio, 1997; Greenberg, 2002), *Gestalt Therapy* (Perls, Hefferline & Goodman, 1951; Perls, 1969; Polster & Polster, 1973; Yontef, 1993), humanistic psychology (Maslow, 1968), *Person-Centered Therapy* (Rogers, 1951, 1957; Raskin & Rogers, 2000), existential psychotherapy (Bugental, 1965; Frankl, 1969; Yalom, 1985), and experiential psychotherapy (Gendlin, 1973, 1978; Mahrer, 1986). The twelve experiential strategies described here are meant to provide a representative, but not exhaustive, catalog of skills that can be used to explore feelings and personal experiences, encourage growth, and face existential concerns. The description of each strategy will include a theoretical context, strategy marker, suggestions for use, expected consequence, and a case example. The strategies described in this chapter are summarized in Table 6.3. These experiential-humanistic strategies are demonstrated in a training video (Brooks-Harris & Oliveira-Berry, 2002) distributed by Microtraining Associates (www.emicrotraining.com).

Identifying Feelings

Strategy EXP-1. Identifying specific feelings and distinguishing them from thoughts and physical sensations

TABLE 6.3 Experiential Strategies for Psychotherapy

EXP-1	Identifying Feelings
EXP-2	Clarifying the Impact of Feelings
EXP-3	Encouraging Expression of Feelings
EXP-4	Fostering Self-Actualization
EXP-5	Communicating Empathy and Positive Regard
EXP-6	Supporting Authenticity
EXP-7	Integrating Parts of Self
EXP-8	Focusing Attention
EXP-9	Fostering Here-and-Now Awareness
EXP-10	Creating Experiments
EXP-11	Accepting Freedom and Responsibility
EXP-12	Recognizing Existential Limitations

Theoretical Context

Traditional humanistic approaches to psychotherapy were known for their appreciation of the importance of feelings. For example, *Gestalt Therapy* described the unifying or organizing tendency of emotions and the way that they provide crucial information about human needs and sensibilities (Perls, Hefferline & Goodman, 1951). *Person-Centered Therapy* saw emotions as facilitating goal-directed behavior (Rogers, 1951). Contemporary approaches to experiential psychotherapy continue to focus on the organizing and motivational role of feelings. In particular, Greenberg's *Emotion-Focused Therapy* (Greenberg & Paivio, 1997; Greenberg, 2002) has highlighted the importance of exploring emotional reactions and their central role in the construction of meaning:

Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) does not concentrate on exploring the automatic thought that supposedly preceded the reaction, but rather focuses on exploring the bodily felt sense and action tendency forming the response. Focusing on the emotion-generating processes and unpacking the complex tacit meanings and network of associations helps get at the feeling and the need or goal prompting the reaction. Semantic representations such as thoughts often are the product of complex emotional and cognitive activity rather than the basis of it. Thus, what needs to be explored are the bodily experience, situational cues, memories, needs, goals, expectations, and the person's sense of efficacy that lead to the thoughts, rather than the

Greenberg (2002) suggested that emotional exploration in psychotherapy involves promoting an awareness of emotions, facilitating the acceptance of emotional experience, and helping clients put emotions into words. Strategy EXP-1 focuses on identifying specific feelings and translating them into words. "Once people know, for example, that they are feeling sad, they can reflect on what they are sad about, what this sad feeling means to them, and what they should do" (Greenberg, 2002, p. 89).

Strategy Marker

If clients enter psychotherapy with limited awareness of emotional experience, it may be helpful to attend to and identify specific feelings. If clients feel vaguely uneasy or upset, it may be useful to identify whether they feel angry, sad, afraid, or ashamed. If clients are experiencing disturbing thoughts or uncomfortable physical sensations, it may be useful to identify the related feelings.

Suggestions for Use

When exploring feelings, it is important to make a distinction between emotions and thoughts. "I feel like my brother is a jerk" is not a feeling; it is a thought. Further exploration of this thought may illuminate important emotions like "I'm angry at my brother." Feelings also may be related to particular physical sensations but it is important to identify which emotions are associated with specific physical cues. For example, a question like "Are the butterflies in your stomach an indication of excitement or fear?" can help identify which feelings are related to particular sensations.

Expected Consequence

When clients come to recognize their feelings as distinct from thoughts and physical sensations, awareness will be increased and subsequent emotional work can be more focused and effective. After a specific feeling has been identified and owned, the meaning and adaptive value can be explored and an expressive action can be chosen.

Case Example

Dr. P. could tell that Ben was upset and emotionally uncomfortable as he described moving back in with his parents. It was hard for Ben to detect the specific emotions that he was experiencing. Dr. P. wanted to focus on feelings more closely to see if Ben could identify or describe specific emotions.

Dr. P: You seem pretty uncomfortable as you talk about living with your parents.

Ben: It's really a drag having to move back home after college. It's so stifling.

Dr. P: Stifling?

Ben: I guess I was used to a lot more freedom in college.

Dr. P: What kind of freedom do you miss the most?

Ben: The freedom to be who I really am.

Dr. P: Your voice trembled a bit just then. What are you feeling right now?

Ben: I guess I have a secret that I don't want them to find out about.

Dr. P: And how do you feel inside?

Ben: Like I have to hide.

Dr. P: Is there a specific emotion that is making you want to hide?

Ben: I guess I feel scared. Scared that they'll find out some things about me that they won't like.

Dr. P: What is the fear like for you?

Ben: Like I always have to be on guard. Like I can't ever relax.

Dr. P: Now that you've said that you're scared, does the emotion feel any different?

Ben: I guess it's not as looming. It's a little more concrete. Maybe the fear isn't as dark and hidden.

Dr. P: Perhaps shedding some light on your fear will make it more manageable.

Ben: At least now I know what I'm dealing with.

Dr. P: I think that naming this uncomfortable feeling is a very important first step.

Ben: Yeah, I guess so.

Clarifying the Impact of Feelings

Strategy EXP-2. Clarifying the impact of feelings on thoughts, actions, and other dimensions of human functioning

Theoretical Context

Humanistic approaches to psychotherapy have long recognized the way that feelings impact thoughts, actions, and other dimensions of human functioning. For example, *Gestalt Therapy* described emotions as playing an important role in cognition by summarizing our experience into a coherent whole:

The emotions are means of cognition. Far from being obstacles to thought, they are unique deliveries of the state of the organism/environment field and have no substitute; they are the way we become aware of the appropriateness of our concerns: the way the

could be found in (Berke, Hofferding, & Goodman, 1951)

The way feelings support positive actions was highlighted in *Person-Centered Therapy*. Rogers (1951) pointed out that emotions facilitate goal-directed behavior and described how the intensity of feelings indicates the importance of a specific behavior for survival or growth. Contemporary experiential approaches to psychotherapy continue to recognize the way that feelings can enhance decision making and prepare people for action (Greenberg, 2002). Therefore, it is important to help clients understand how their feelings impact thoughts, actions, and other dimensions of functioning.

Strategy Marker

If clients are unaware of how their feelings are affecting other areas of their lives, it may be useful to clarify the impact of feelings. Many clients enter psychotherapy without clear awareness of the effect of their own emotions. Psychotherapy can be a place to look at feelings and to appreciate the central role they play in human functioning.

Suggestions for Use

Conducting a brief survey of the way a particular feeling impacts other dimensions of life helps illuminate the way emotions impact thoughts, feelings, and relationships. Once you and your client have an appreciation of these multidimensional interactions, you may be better prepared to proceed. The key here is to recognize feelings as a vital part of human experience rather than viewing emotions merely as byproducts that result from thoughts or actions.

Expected Consequence

When clients come to understand the impact of feelings on other areas of life, they will have a clearer understanding of how they think and act, and the kind of relationships they have. By looking closely at feelings, clients will have access to a more integrated life based on adaptive emotional experience.

Case Example

Claire had been experiencing feelings of despair and hopelessness since her mother's death. Dr. P. wanted to assess how these feelings were impacting other areas of her life.

Dr. P.: Your feelings seem pretty overwhelming.

Claire: Everything just seems so dark and bleak.

Dr. P.: What should we call this overwhelming, dark feeling?

Claire: It feels like I'll never get out of it.

Dr. P.: Does it feel hopeless?

Claire: Yes. I feel hopeless.

Dr. P.: When you are feeling hopeless, how do you think this impacts your thinking?

Claire: I keep thinking that I can't go on without my mother.

Dr. P: That you can't go on. When you feel hopeless and think that you can't go on, how does that impact your actions?

Claire: I don't do much at all. It's like I'm paralyzed and can't do anything to get myself going.

Dr. P: When you're feeling hopeless and acting paralyzed, how does this impact your relationships with others?

Claire: I've been pretty isolated. My sisters call me, but I usually don't talk much on the phone, and I turn down their invitations to do things.

Dr. P: Okay. Let me see if I have a good sense of what's going on. When you feel hopeless, you tend to think that you can't go on, and you act paralyzed and socially isolate yourself.

Claire: That's my sad little life in a nutshell right now. Do you think you can help me?

Dr. P: I think that becoming aware of how your feelings are impacting you will help us identify some helpful changes that you might be able to work toward.

Encouraging Expression of Feelings

Strategy EXP-3. Encouraging awareness and expression of feelings in order to embrace adaptive emotions and let go of maladaptive feelings

Theoretical Context

Traditional humanistic approaches to psychotherapy recognized the positive adaptive value of many emotional experiences. For example, *Gestalt Therapy* described the way that feelings synthesize and organize human experience:

The aim in gestalt therapy is . . . to make room for feelings and to use them as a means of integrating the various details of their lives. In order to accomplish this, we call attention to feelings . . . focusing on what has been discovered and staying with it until the organic expression emerges . . . into the cycle of awareness and expression. (Polster & Polster, 1973, p. 223-224)

More recently, *Emotion-Focused Therapy* has described ways for psychotherapists to distinguish between adaptive and maladaptive emotions. When a particular feeling represents a positive adaptation to the environment, it is important to facilitate exploration: "The natural process of feeling can be depicted as a set of phases, those of emergence, awareness, owning,

expressive action, and completion, followed again by the emergence of new feelings, thereby beginning the cycle again" (Greenberg & Paivio, 1997, p. 27). When a particular feeling is not adaptive, emotional exploration can allow the maladaptive emotion to be released or discarded and for more adaptive feelings to emerge.

Strategy Marker

When clients are unaware of their own feelings, or ignore and suppress them, you should encourage awareness and expression. If it is not clear whether particular feelings are adaptive or not, it may be helpful to explore them in greater depth. If clients experience negative emotions that interfere with functioning, it may be useful to express these feelings in psychotherapy in order to diminish their impact. If a feeling is adaptive, exploration should support expressive action.

Suggestions for Use

As you are exploring feelings and trying to understand whether they serve an adaptive purpose, it may be helpful to provide an explanation of this view of emotions so that clients can understand the purpose of your questions. Initially, it may be strange for clients to think that feelings like anger or sadness may serve an adaptive purpose. By providing a rationale for your experiential approach, you will be supporting collaboration.

Expected Consequence

If awareness and expression of feelings are encouraged, it is anticipated that clients will gain insight from their emotional experience. For example, if a particular feeling represents an adaptive emotion, its exploration may lead to the discovery of important action potentials that support motivation for positive changes. When maladaptive feelings are expressed in psychotherapy, the result is often a sense of relief and the discovery of more adaptive emotional responses that may be hidden below the surface.

Case Example

Dr. P. wanted to explore the feeling of fear that Ben had shared with her and to understand the adaptive purpose it might serve. Dr. P. wanted to be careful to respect Ben's secret and not to press for premature disclosure.

Dr. P: Tell me more about your fear.

Ben: I'm scared that my parents will find out about how I've changed.

Dr. P: You're scared they may find out?

Ben: I'm afraid they'll be disappointed. I'm afraid they won't like me anymore.

Dr. P: You're scared they may be disappointed in you.

Ben: Sometimes I think I shouldn't give a damn what they think.

Dr. P: It's okay to be afraid of damaging your relationship with your parents. Most of us want our parents to like us and to approve of who we are.

Ben: Really? You don't think it's stupid for me to be scared?

Dr. P: Your fear is there to protect you from something dangerous.

Ben: So, my fear might actually be helpful?

Dr. P: Fear is helpful if it encourages you to be careful in a slippery place. It may get in the way if you are paralyzed with fear or if you try to ignore it.

Ben: Living at home right now sure feels like a slippery place. One false move and I'm over the edge.

Dr. P: Then it will be important for us to explore your feelings of fear and make sure they serve a useful purpose. If they don't, we may need to explore different emotions that may serve you better.

Fostering Self-Actualization

Strategy EXP-4. Celebrating the desire for growth and fostering self-actualization as an innate human need

Theoretical Context

Humanistic and experiential psychotherapy developed around the assumption that humans have an innate desire to grow, develop, and improve themselves. This is how Abraham Maslow described the human desire to grow:

A reasonable, theoretical, and empirical case has been made for the presence within the human being of a tendency toward, or a need for growing in a direction that can be summarized in general self-actualization, or psychological health, and specifically as growth toward each and all of the sub-aspects of self actualization, i.e., he has within him a pressure toward unity of personality, toward spontaneous expressiveness, toward full individuality and identity, toward seeing truth rather than being blind, toward being creative, toward being good, and a lot else. (Maslow, 1968, p. 155)

If humans have an innate desire to grow, then dysfunctional behavior often occurs when one's innate potential for growth is blocked or thwarted. Psychotherapy can be an important tool for people who are trying to rediscover and enact their innate potential for self-actualization. The discovery and pursuit of personal dreams and aspirations can be an instrumental force for change.

Strategy Marker

Celebrating the desire for growth and self-actualization is especially important early in psychotherapy when clients may feel discouraged because they haven't been able to solve their own problems. Celebrating a client's desire for self-actualization is useful when a client is discouraged and feels no change is possible.

Suggestions for Use

One way to encourage growth is to move from abstract ideas like actualization toward more concrete goals and plans. Growth is a process of movement, and when movement begins, it can often perpetuate itself. By encouraging clients to move toward their aspirations by setting specific goals and making consistent advances, they may be able to combat paralysis with progress. When setting these sorts of goals, it is important to be realistic but also to foster a sense of hope. In this way, you are supporting an experiential tendency toward growth with a behavioral emphasis on action. An integrative psychotherapist can support growth in one dimension through change in another.

Expected Consequence

When you celebrate clients' desire to grow, the intended outcome is renewed vigor for life and motivation for growth, thereby supporting and facilitating the process of self-actualization. Clients may also feel encouraged and validated when they come to realize that they already have within themselves innate potential for positive growth and self-actualization.

Case Example

Dr. P. realized that as the primary caretaker for her aging mother, Claire had suppressed many of her own dreams and goals. Although her mother's death had been traumatic for Claire, Dr. P. wondered if it also might provide an opportunity for Claire to grow and to discover parts of herself that were overlooked during her mother's life.

Claire: For a while, I was pretty consumed with the funeral and settling the estate and then, after that I just fell into a slump and feel terrible most of the time.

Dr. P.: I know this has been a very difficult time for you. I'm wondering if we might spend a little time today looking at your future.

Claire: I haven't really given much consideration to my future for a long time.

Dr. P.: Is there anything that you've wanted to do that you weren't able to do because of your mother?

Claire: Lots of things. I guess I've wanted to travel but couldn't because of Mother.

Dr. P: Where would you like to go?

Claire: I've always wanted to visit Japan. Both of my parents were born there but, for some reason, they never wanted to return. I think they were trying so hard to raise us as Americans that they never wanted to look back.

Dr. P: What would it be like to plan a trip to Japan?

Claire: It sounds wonderful but also frightening. My stomach filled with butterflies just now as you mentioned the possibility.

Dr. P: Are the butterflies a sign of fear or excitement?

Claire: Fear mostly. Maybe a little bit of excitement.

Dr. P: I think it is a little frightening to let yourself dream your own dreams.

Claire: It's been a long time. I'm not sure I'm ready for my own dreams.

Dr. P: You may not be ready yet, but we can talk about ways to prepare for adapting to your new life and fulfilling some of the goals that you may have set aside.

Communicating Empathy and Positive Regard

Strategy EXP-5. Communicating empathy and unconditional positive regard in a congruent manner that encourages growth

Theoretical Context

Person-Centered Therapy was organized around the assumption that there are three conditions that are necessary and sufficient for constructive personality change to occur in psychotherapy:

1. The therapist is congruent with, or integrated in, the relationship.
2. The therapist experiences unconditional positive regard for the client.
3. The therapist experiences an empathic understanding of the client's internal frame of reference and endeavors to communicate this experience to the client. (Rogers, 1957, p. 96)

If these three conditions persist over time and the therapist is able to communicate empathy and unconditional positive regard to the client, then Rogers believed that positive change would naturally occur. Although these three conditions have been found to have a strong positive impact on

psychotherapy, few contemporary therapists believe that they are sufficient for most clients. Roger's facilitative conditions now are more likely to be seen in the context of building rapport and creating a therapeutic alliance. When a counselor communicates unconditional positive regard, congruence, and empathy, through suspension of judgment and creation of a warm, genuine relationship, an environment that encourages growth will be established, and the client will be nurtured toward change.

Strategy Marker

Communicating unconditional positive regard, congruence, and empathy is useful when clients lack trust, are anxious about psychotherapy, appear fearful of being judged, or demonstrate a self-protective interpersonal style. These facilitative conditions are useful when trust and rapport need to be built within the therapeutic relationship.

Suggestions for Use

Clients often come to psychotherapy with a history of harsh judgment or personal rejection. By offering a supportive environment based on unconditional positive regard, clients can feel free to be themselves. An empathically attuned psychotherapist can be a crucial ally in the process of self-exploration. When you stay right with a client, he or she is more likely to venture into dark and scary places. The exploration of the unknown is often the key to letting go of past fears and moving toward the future in a more positive manner.

Expected Consequence

When you communicate unconditional positive regard, congruence, and empathy, the anticipated outcome is that clients will relax, drop their defenses, become less avoidant and more trusting, and will experience thoughts, actions, and feelings that allow them to become more transparent to themselves. Empathic attunement provides a sense of support and fosters greater personal exploration and discovery.

Case Example

Although Dr. P. wanted to be respectful of Ben's privacy, she also wanted to give him a chance to talk about his personal life in a safe place. Dr. P. had been cautious about not asking Ben too soon about what he was hiding from his parents. Now, however, she thought it was a good idea to address the secret more openly and give Ben permission either to share his secret or to keep it private.

Dr. P: You've talked about having a secret, and I want to be careful not to push you to tell me what you're hiding from your family. But, I also want to give you an opportunity to confide in me if you think it would help you.

Ben: I guess I want to tell you, but I'm not sure how you'll react.

Dr. P.: I won't give you any guarantees, but I can assure you that lots of people have told me different types of secrets.

Ben: You probably know already. You seem like you're pretty sharp.

Dr. P.: Thanks for the compliment. I have some hunches what might be going on, but I think it might be helpful for you to tell me in your own words.

Ben: I guess you're right. [pause] I think I might like guys more than girls.

Dr. P.: That's a hard secret to hold inside.

Ben: Yes it is. Hard to hold it in and hard to let it out.

Dr. P.: What is it like telling me?

Ben: Not as bad as I thought it might be. I'm still afraid you're going to reject me or tell me there's something wrong with me.

Dr. P.: I'm not going to reject you, Ben. I'm not going to tell you that there's anything wrong with you. I want to support you just the way you are; no matter what.

Ben: Really?

Dr. P.: Yes, really. [pause] How does it feel for me to offer you support?

Ben: Kinda weird. I guess I always think that anyone who's not gay won't be able to accept me. I think only other people with the same problem can relate.

Dr. P.: Do you get the feeling that I'm relating to you now?

Ben: Yes. I do.

Supporting Authenticity

Strategy EXP-6. Supporting the discovery and expression of a client's personal sense of authenticity

Theoretical Context

Existential and humanistic psychotherapy are associated with the personal search for what is true and essential about one's self. James Bugental (1965) identified the search for authenticity as a central role for psychotherapy and defined it in this way:

Authenticity is a term used to characterize a way of being in the world in which one's being is in harmony with the being of the world itself. To say it differently, we are authentic to that degree to

which we are at one with the whole being (world); we are inauthentic to the extent that we are in conflict with the givenness of being. Clearly, I am here seeking to characterize an ideal or ultimate condition of authenticity with the recognition that we are always somewhat less than fully authentic. (p. 33)

Alvin Mahrer (1986) described the authentic self that is often hidden as one's "deeper potential" and suggested that "psychotherapeutic change occurs through therapeutic experiencing of the radical disengagementment of the I-ness from the operating domain, and the wholesale being of the deeper potential" (p. 178). In other words, change can occur when one stops acting like a person with problems and starts being a new person who represents a more authentic expression of one's inner potential.

Many clients enter psychotherapy without a clear sense of their identity or the kind of person they want to become. Individuals may have learned to hide authentic parts of themselves from disapproving others. Psychotherapy can be a place of rediscovery in which clients can rediscover who they really are. Individuals can learn to express actions that are congruent with their inner thoughts and feelings. Because the expression of one's authentic self may be difficult at first and may bring about unexpected interpersonal reactions, psychotherapy can be a supportive environment in which to understand and adapt to the new authentic self.

Strategy Marker

When clients are living in a manner that is incongruent with their true self, it is appropriate to support the discovery and expression of a personal sense of authenticity. If clients are hiding behind protective personas or facades, it is helpful to provide an environment in which authenticity can be safely explored.

Suggestions for Use

Because clients may be accustomed to hiding authentic parts of themselves from others, psychotherapy can be a safe place to experiment with self-exploration. When authentic parts of self are seen or shared for the first time, it is important for psychotherapists to honor this process and to protect the vulnerable process of self-discovery. Telling secrets or claiming hidden parts of oneself for the first time may be a concrete first step toward authenticity. Once clients have become comfortable with a hidden aspect of themselves in psychotherapy, it is important to find ways to begin to express oneself in a new way outside of the therapist's office.

Expected Consequence

When a psychotherapist supports personal authenticity, then clients will be able to function in ways that are more consistent with their true selves.

The expression of authenticity within psychotherapy is good preparation for congruent expressions of self in other environments.

Case Example

Claire was hesitant to express any resentment about caring for her mother because she thought that to do so would be disrespectful. At the same time, many of the things that Claire said seemed to be inauthentic. Dr. P. thought Claire seemed to be reading a script of the things a dutiful daughter should think and feel. Dr. P. wanted to start an exploration of Claire apart from the family role she had been playing.

Dr. P.: I notice that sometimes when you talk about caring for your mother all these years, you seem a little uncomfortable. Your face seems tight.

Claire: What do you mean?

Dr. P.: I wonder if you might have felt a little resentful at times about caring for your mother. I know that you loved your mother and wanted to support her, but I wonder if there's another part of you that may have wanted things to be a little different.

Claire: Sure, there's a part of me that would have enjoyed a different life, but I was always careful not to express any disappointment to my mother or anyone else in the family.

Dr. P.: What would it be like to express a little bit of that in here with me?

Claire: I'm not sure what purpose it would serve. Wouldn't it just be giving in to a weak and bitter side of myself?

Dr. P.: I was just thinking it might be helpful to practice looking at what's going on inside your self, rather than focusing on what others might want to see.

Claire: Okay. I'm willing to give it a try. How do I start?

Dr. P.: We'll start with something small. Could you try saying something like "Sometimes I wish my life could have been a bit different?"

Claire: Sometimes I wish my life could have been different.

Dr. P.: Keep going if you'd like.

Claire: Sometimes I wish I had more help from my sisters. [pause] Sometimes I wish that my mother wouldn't complain so much about her pain.

Dr. P.: That's good. Do you want to say something about you and not just about your family? How would you have liked for your life to be different?

Claire: I wish I could have had my own family. [pause] I wish I could have been a mother and not just an auntie. [tears]

Dr. P.: How does it feel to say that?

Claire: It feels strange. I've always known it was true, but I never felt like I was allowed to say it out loud.

Dr. P.: Is it okay that you said it to me here today?

Claire: It's okay as long as you promise not to tell anyone else.

Dr. P.: I promise. I've noticed that your face doesn't look as tight. You look sad but also a little relieved. How do you feel?

Claire: It feels good to say that and to let it out after all these years of keeping my secret wishes hidden inside.

Integrating Parts of Self

Strategy EXP-7. Identifying, connecting, and integrating different parts of self

Theoretical Context

Gestalt Therapy is often concerned with identifying opposing forces within oneself, attending to these divergent forces, and working toward a sense of unification (Perls, Hefferline & Goodman, 1951). Erving Polster and Miriam Polster (1973) described the goal of this type of work as *maintaining contactful integration*:

Any complex organism will order its forces so as to function with economy, organizing its diverse resources into the smoothest, most graceful and most efficient combination possible at that given moment. To be tender, compulsive, daring, ruthless and affable are a combination of characteristics not likely to be experienced as compatible unless a person can rediscover his range and reorganize these personal characteristics into a new composition. To achieve compatibility where society insists none exists, and where prior experience has failed to find any, requires considerable skill—to say nothing of durability and creativity in maintaining contactful integration among painfully antagonistic characteristics. (p. 64)

Mahrer (1986) described this process of connecting different parts of oneself as the “integrative experiential relationship with deeper potential.” He referred specifically to the relationship between one’s “operating domain” on the surface and the “deeper potential” for what someone can become. “Psychotherapeutic change occurs through therapeutic experiencing of the

integratively encountering relationship between the patient and the deeper potential” (Mahrer, 1986, p. 107).

In the course of human development, people often develop different parts of themselves to adapt to distinct situations. Eric Berne (1964) described these different parts of self as “ego states” that often resemble the feelings and actions of a parent, adult, or child. He suggested that “an ego state may be described phenomenologically as a coherent system of feelings, and operationally as a set of coherent behavior patterns” (Berne, 1964, p. 23). Sometimes these different selves or ego states become rigidly fragmented rather than fitting together in an adaptive whole. Psychotherapy can provide an opportunity to identify and explore these different aspects of oneself. The goal is usually to create contact between these different selves so that they can begin to be integrated and work together. For example, a client may have a strong side that is expressed at her job and a needy side that is expressed in intimate relationships. Creating dialogue between these strong and needy selves may allow the client to be less intimidating to her coworkers and to be more supportive in her relationships. Someone else might have a scared persona on the outside that hinders him from enacting his creative inner potential. Becoming aware of this creative potential may allow it to emerge and grow.

Strategy Marker

If clients are unaware of different parts of themselves that are competing or conflicting with each other, or merely disconnected, it is useful to identify those parts and introduce them to one another so that they may begin to complement each other and find a coherent way to coexist. When clients display distinct patterns of behavior in different situations or cannot sustain a commitment to a single goal or direction, it may suggest the need for exploration and integration of distinct aspects of self.

Suggestions for Use

Naming different sides of oneself and exploring them independently may be the first step toward contact. Differentiation is often the precursor to integration. Identifying and integrating different parts of the self is a strategy that can be enacted at different levels of complexity. Sometimes it is appropriate to explore this idea informally in conversation. If this type of conversation seems helpful, you may want to elaborate it in the form of a two-chair dialogue in which a client sits in different chairs to express different parts of self. “The basic assumption in this intervention is that having the person engage in a dialogue between opposing sides of the self will help bring these sides into creative contact with each other to develop an integrative solution” (Greenberg, Rice & Elliot, 1993, p. 191). A structured conversation *between* two parts of oneself often allows greater differentiation and expression than

an informal conversation *about* two parts of oneself. If you choose to use a two-chair dialogue, it may be helpful to ask questions like “What do these two parts want from one another?” and “What do they need to say to one another before they can work together?” and “How can they help each other?”

Expected Consequence

When different parts of clients’ selves are identified, connected, and have begun to be integrated, the result will be more awareness and consonant states of being as well as more harmonious life experiences. Contact and integration are expected to result in a wider range of behavioral options and clearer expressions of self.

Case Example

Dr. P. had begun to notice that Ben described himself in two different ways that seemed almost incompatible. When he was with his family, he displayed one side of himself, and when he was with his gay friends from college, he showed different aspects of his personality. Dr. P. wanted to explore these two selves and encourage contact and integration.

Dr. P.: When you describe the way you act with your family and the way you act with your friends from college, it sounds like two different people.

Ben: Yeah. I know what you mean. I’m pretty outgoing and dramatic with my friends, but I play a more subdued and private role when I’m with my family.

Dr. P.: I’d like to look at these two selves and see how they get along with each other.

Ben: That sounds a little funny. I’m not sure that they’ve even met one another. I’m not sure they’d like each other.

Dr. P.: I wonder if that causes any problems. Two selves sharing the same body but not even knowing or liking each other.

Ben: It’s a little strange at times.

Dr. P.: Do you have names for these two parts?

Ben: No, but the outgoing part is pretty flamboyant especially when I go to gay bars with my friends.

Dr. P.: Is “Flamboyant Ben” a good name for this side of your self?

Ben: Sure. I like the sound of that. Flamboyant Ben!

Dr. P.: How about the side you show your family?

Ben: My mom still calls me Benito sometimes, especially when she’s speaking Spanish. So, maybe, “Good Little Benito.”

Dr. P.: So we have Good Little Benito and Flamboyant Ben. I want to see if we can see each of them as different personal strengths. What is the best part of Good Little Benito?

Ben: He's very loyal. He likes his family. He tries to get along.

Dr. P.: And what's the best part of Flamboyant Ben?

Ben: He's a lot of fun. He's outspoken, and he's not afraid to speak up for what he believes.

Dr. P.: Both of these parts of you sound positive. It sounds like they have a lot to offer one another if they can work together.

Ben: I guess so. I've always wanted to keep them apart from one another.

Dr. P.: Well, maybe we should encourage them to get to know one another and see if they can work out a partnership. After all, they both live in the same body.

Ben: It would be nice if they could get along.

Focusing Attention

Strategy EXP-8. Focusing attention to increase awareness of feelings, thoughts, actions, or physical sensations

Theoretical Context

Many humanistic and experiential approaches have recognized the value of focusing attention to increase awareness. Polster (1995) pointed out that in *Gestalt Therapy* the “refocus of attention from the context of a person’s life to focal experience was a momentous methodological innovation” (p. 71). Profound attention was seen as “a key factor in creating openness to new experience” (Polster, 1995, p. 71). Similarly, Mahrer’s (1986) structured method of experiential psychotherapy begins by encouraging a client to enter “into the experiential process by letting attention go to a meaningful center, one which is accompanied with at least moderate bodily sensations” (p. 3). Eugene Gendlin (1978) made *focusing* the key element of his experiential method of awareness:

Focusing . . . is a process in which you make contact with a special kind of internal bodily awareness. I call this awareness a *felt sense*. A felt sense is usually not just there, it must form. You have to know how to let it form by attending inside your body. When it comes, it is at first *unclear*, fuzzy. By certain steps it can come into focus and also change. A felt sense is the body’s sense of a particular problem

or situation. A felt sense is not an emotion. . . . It is a body sense of meaning. (Gendlin, 1978, p. 10)

Gendlin's (1978) method of focusing includes six distinct movements: (1) clearing a space, (2) felt sense of the problem, (3) finding a handle, (4) resonating handle and felt sense, (5) asking, and (6) receiving. At times a psychotherapist may want to use this formal technique whereas, at other times, a more abbreviated form of focusing attention may be sufficient to encourage awareness. For example, when a psychotherapist makes an observation about the way a client clenches his fists and tightens his jaw when he talks about his sister, this may result in greater awareness of feelings of anger and a desire to create distance in the relationship.

Strategy Marker

If clients are out of tune with feelings, thoughts, actions, or bodily sensations, it is useful to focus attention on these experiences. When clients are ignoring or suppressing important experiences, you may want to focus attention on the neglected areas. Actions that are incongruent with words may suggest the need for focused attention.

Suggestions for Use

Focusing attention on bodily sensations that might indicate certain feelings or that might be sending certain messages involves movement in two directions. First, there is movement toward the body that involves letting go of the verbal world to focus on the subtle language of the body. Once someone can feel something going on in the body, there is a movement back toward language in order to describe or express the experience. Gendlin (1978) calls the movement toward the body the *unclear felt sense* and the verbal description a *handle*. When facilitating awareness with clients it is important to focus on both the nonverbal movement toward bodily attention and, then, the movement back toward verbal expression.

Expected Consequence

When clients become more aware of their feelings, thoughts, actions, or sensations, they will have more insight into challenges they may be having. This awareness provides greater understanding of self and supports more integrated and adaptive responses. Increased self-awareness can help clients gain important information about themselves that can result in increased coping skills, self-control, and mastery.

Case Example

Dr. P. noticed that whenever Claire talked about her family responsibilities she would tighten her face, hold her lips together, and sometimes grasp the arms of her chair. Dr. P. wanted to bring this to Claire's attention in order to foster

awareness. Dr. P. hoped that this type of awareness would lead to verbal expressions of an unclear felt sense.

Dr. P.: Last week I mentioned that sometimes your face tightens when you talk about your mother. I'm noticing that again today.

Claire: Really?

Dr. P.: I notice that your lips are pursed together. What are you feeling right now?

Claire: A little tense.

Dr. P.: Let's focus for a moment on that tension as a signal from your body. Focus on what your body might be saying to you. What do you notice?

Claire: I feel the tightness in my lips like you said, but I also notice that I'm squeezing the arms of the chair with my hands, so there's a lot of tension there as well.

Dr. P.: As you're feeling this tension in your face and hands, can you give words to what your body is trying to say?

Claire: Hold back. [pause] Hold it in.

Dr. P.: Hold it in?

Claire: Yes, I think my body is telling me to hold in what I'm feeling or what I'm tempted to say.

Dr. P.: How much effort does it take to hold it in?

Claire: Lots.

Dr. P.: So, there's some tension between two forces, one part wants to let something out and the other part wants to hold it in. And you can feel that tension in your body.

Claire: That's exactly what it feels like.

Dr. P.: How long do you think you've been feeling this way?

Claire: It's funny that I wasn't aware of it before, but now that I can feel it, I can tell that I've been feeling this way for a long time. Probably since my mother got sick all those years ago.

Dr. P.: That's a long time to be feeling this type of tension.

Fostering Here-and-Now Awareness

Strategy EXP-9. Fostering here-and-now awareness in order to promote discovery and growth

Theoretical Context

Gestalt Therapy replaced the psychodynamic emphasis on the past with a focus on present, here-and-now experience. Instead of asking questions like “Why did you do that?” or “What happened then?” Gestalt encouraged the use of here-and-now questions like “What are you doing (or aware of) right now?” “How are you doing it?” and “What are you aware of?” (Yontef, 1993). This is how Perls, Hefferline & Goodman (1951) described here-and-now awareness:

Whatever is actual is, as regards time, always in the present.
 Whatever happened in the past *was* actual then, just as whatever occurs in the future *will be* actual at that time, but what *is* actual—and thus *all* that you can be aware of—must be in the present.
 Hence the stress, if we wish to develop the feeling of actuality, on words such as “now” and “at this moment.” Likewise, what is actual for *you* must be where you are. Hence the stress on words like “here.” (p. 32)

One cannot change the past or the future. All change occurs in the present. This insight suggests that psychotherapy should promote awareness of here-and-now experience rather than always speculating about why things happened then and there. Immediate awareness of thoughts, feelings, actions, and sensations can provide vital insight, direction, and motivation. Helping clients live in the here-and-now will allow them to make better choices by integrating their experience more fully.

Strategy Marker

When a client is overly concerned with the past or the future, it is important to foster here-and-now awareness so that change can occur in the present. When a client cannot attend to their own immediate experience, they are unlikely to make real changes. Either feeling stuck in the past or constantly fantasizing about the future indicate the need for here-and-now exploration.

Suggestions for Use

Here-and-now awareness sometimes brings the therapeutic relationship into central focus. When you encourage a client to disclose what is going on in the here-and-now, it may encourage exploration about thoughts and feelings about you as a therapist or you as a person. When you encourage here-and-now disclosure on the part of the client, it may be appropriate for you to respond with similar here-and-now communication. Communicating a connection with the client that occurs when there is authentic here-and-now contact is often a way to build trust and to understand how a client relates to others as well. Once there is awareness of the present moment,

clients can choose with more certainty where they should go next. A common *Gestalt Therapy* question is "Given what you're aware of *right now*, what would be the next natural step?" One here-and-now moment unfolds into the next.

Expected Consequence

If you foster here-and-now awareness with clients, the anticipated result is personal discovery and increased capacity for change. If clients can learn to pay attention to their own immediate experience, they are more likely to be able to respond to their own needs in an adaptive manner.

Case Example

Dr. P. noticed that sometimes Ben's mood would change suddenly and that he would stop talking in his normal, animated way and begin to look withdrawn and apprehensive. This often occurred when Ben was talking about his attraction toward other men. Dr. P. wanted to understand what was happening right at the point in time when Ben seemed to interrupt himself.

Dr. P.: I noticed your mood changed just now. What are you aware of right now, right here, with me?

Ben: I feel a bit apprehensive.

Dr. P.: Apprehensive?

Ben: Like I said too much.

Dr. P.: What did you say that seemed like it was too much?

Ben: I guess I got worried that maybe I let my guard down.

Dr. P.: Do you want to let your guard down with me?

Ben: Yes, but I'm scared.

Dr. P.: What are you scared of?

Ben: I'm scared that maybe I said something you wouldn't like. That maybe I was being too open for you. Too gay for you.

Dr. P.: Now that you're aware of this apprehension that is impacting how we're relating, what would you like to do about it?

Ben: I don't know. I guess I want to know if I'm freaking you out; talking about guys I think are hot and all of that. Am I making you uncomfortable?

Dr. P.: Do you think I'm uncomfortable?

Ben: No.

Dr. P.: You haven't said anything today that I haven't heard before, and I think it's a good sign when you are able to open up and be

yourself in here with me. Actually, it makes me feel closer to you. I'm connecting with the real you when you let your guard down.

Ben: And you're okay with that? With the real me? Even with the gay part of me?

Dr. P.: Yes, I'm okay with that. I like the real Ben. I like the gay part of you because I enjoy being with the person you really are.

Creating Experiments

Strategy EXP-10. Creating in-session experiments to facilitate discovery and change

Theoretical Context

Gestalt Therapy emphasized the importance of active experimentation. In fact, Gary Yontef (1993) suggested that "virtually all activity in Gestalt therapy consists of experiments in directed awareness" (p. 60). The purpose of experimentation is to enhance awareness and discover parts of the self that have been disowned or alienated. Here is how Perls (1969) described the role of a psychotherapist in the process of experimentation:

Our view of the therapist is that he is similar to what the chemist calls a catalyst, an ingredient which precipitates a reaction which might not otherwise occur. It does not prescribe the form of the reaction, which depends upon the intrinsic reactive properties of the materials present, nor does it enter as a part into whatever compound it helps to form. What it does is to start a process, and there are some processes which, when once started, are self-maintaining or autocatalytic. This we hold to be the case in therapy. (p. 15)

Because insight and behavior change do not always flow naturally from conventional conversations, it may be helpful in psychotherapy to suggest behavior that is outside the normal range. Asking a client to express feelings with dramatic inflection or to exaggerate physical gestures may result in greater emotional awareness. Allowing a client to express unspoken thoughts or to use "inappropriate" language may promote acceptance of disowned emotions or feelings. Asking a client to physically act out their situation in a symbolic manner or engage in unconventional actions may allow a client to experience or express unexplored aspects of self.

Strategy Marker

When spoken therapy is not enough to affect maximal progress and change, it may be helpful to employ in-session experiments. Experimentation can be

used when clients are stuck or when they feel disconnected from emotions or direct experience.

Suggestions for Use

Experimentation frequently involves encouraging clients to exaggerate their behavior or to act in ways that are forbidden. Sometimes the rules that you are encouraging clients to break are rules they learned in society or in their families. At other times, the prohibitions on certain behaviors are self-imposed. Experimentation usually starts inside the psychotherapy session but may proceed to real-life experiments. A client who has always been shy may start by talking more loudly with you before trying to do so with her family or friends. The same client may try wearing different clothes that may attract more attention to herself as she experiments with new ways of expressing herself.

Expected Consequence

When a therapist encourages clients to try out new actions or express feelings through experimentation, it is anticipated that clients will discover hidden aspects of experience and change will be more likely to occur. Experimentation often results in direct experiential learning and increased self-awareness.

Case Example

Dr. P. has noticed that Claire tries never to complain about the burden that she experienced caring for her sick and dying mother. Dr. P. wanted to use an experiment to allow her to break some of the rules that she adapted to cope with her situation.

Dr. P.: I notice that you're very careful never to complain about how difficult it was to care for your mother.

Claire: I don't think that would have been right.

Dr. P.: It may not have seemed appropriate while she was still alive, certainly not to her face. What would it be like to let yourself complain a little bit today? Just to see if there are any complaints stored up inside you.

Claire: I think it would be difficult. I've been trying not to complain for so long.

Dr. P.: Let's think of this as a little experiment. I'm not suggesting this as an appropriate conversation with your sisters or anything like that. I just want you to experiment with a different type of behavior in here for a few minutes.

Claire: Okay, how do I start?

Dr. P: Why not start with something general like “I wish you weren’t so sick, Mom. It’s really a burden.”

Claire: I wish you weren’t sick. It’s a burden sometimes.

Dr. P: Good start. Try it a little whinier, “I wish you weren’t soooo sick alllll the time. It’s really a BIG burden.”

Claire: I wish you weren’t soooo sick. It’s really a BIG burden.

Dr. P: Keep going with your own words.

Claire: Sometimes I wish I didn’t have to care for you. I love you, but I wish I could do my own things sometimes.

Dr. P: Tell her what you’d like to do.

Claire: I’d like to go to the movies with my friends on Friday nights rather than staying home with you.

Dr. P: What else do you wish that you couldn’t have said in real life?

Claire: I wish my sisters would help out more rather than relying on me all the time.

Dr. P: Your voice sounds really strong. You started out whiny but you sound different now. How do you feel?

Claire: I feel mad. I’m feeling angry that my sisters didn’t do any of the work once Mom got sick.

Dr. P: Do you want to say that more directly? If you could freely express that feeling directly to your sisters, what would you say?

Claire: I’m mad at you for not helping more with Mom. Why didn’t you help me?

Dr. P: Your voice weakened again. Can you say it more strongly?

Claire: I really needed your help! Mom really needed your help, and you let us down. You let me down, and I’m mad about that!

Dr. P: Good. How did it feel to say that?

Claire: It felt good, but I also got afraid that they’d find out what I had said somehow. I didn’t realize how angry I was.

Dr. P: I want us to explore your angry feelings in more detail, but let’s do that in here for now. You don’t have to talk to your sisters about this and certainly not any time soon.

Claire: Okay. I can express my anger in here, but I’m not sure if I will ever be able to do so outside of this room.

Dr. P: That’s okay. I’m glad that it feels safe in here. You don’t ever have to go beyond that if you don’t want to.

Accepting Freedom and Responsibility

Strategy EXP-11. Promoting an acceptance of freedom and responsibility that leads to mature decision making

Theoretical Context

Existential psychotherapy stressed the value of human freedom but pointed out that responsibility comes with freedom. Viktor Frankl (1969) described the relationship between freedom and responsibility in this way:

How fine it would be to synthesize . . . tasks with freedom. Freedom then could fully develop. It really is a negative concept which requires a positive complement. And the positive complement is responsibility. Responsibility has two intentional referents. It refers to a meaning for whose fulfillments we are responsible, and also to a being before whom we are responsible. Therefore the sound spirit of democracy is but one-sidedly conceived of if understood as freedom without responsibility. (p.48-49)

Clients who seek psychotherapy often feel trapped or helpless, unable to make desired changes. A psychotherapist can help clients become aware of freedom they have and the active choices they have made that have resulted in particular consequences. With recognition of freedom comes the responsibility to make active choices. Once people acknowledge the choices they make, they can begin to accept the consequences. If clients in psychotherapy begin to accept responsibility for their choices, then positive change is more likely to occur.

Strategy Marker

When a client conforms excessively to social standards, looks only to others for guidance and authority, or loses sight of abilities within themselves, a psychotherapist can emphasize the need to recognize freedom. If clients embrace freedom without recognition of consequences, it is important to foster responsibility.

Suggestions for Use

Encouraging clients to make decisions based on acceptance of responsibility often involves using language to describe things in a different way. Clients have the choice of describing themselves as passive victims in life or as active agents participating in life. When clients describe the choices they are making, it promotes a sense of agency and helps them see themselves as free beings, capable of change. Even when clients decide not to do something or not to make a decision, this can be cast as an active choice. When someone

chooses not to do something now, it acknowledges the possibility that they have the freedom to do something different in the future. For example, a client may conclude that “I’m choosing to stay in a bad job now but once I’ve saved up more money, I’ll look for something else.”

Expected Consequence

When acceptance of freedom and responsibility is promoted, clients may come to recognize that they have the will and power to make meaningful, mature decisions about the direction and quality of their own lives. Active decision making is the anticipated result of experiencing freedom and responsibility.

Case Example

Ben has frequently told Dr. P. that he can’t tell his family that he is gay because they might be disappointed or reject him. Dr. P. wanted to stress that he has the freedom to make a choice despite his awareness of possible negative consequences.

Dr. P.: When you say you can’t tell your parents that you’re gay, what do you mean?

Ben: I’ve told you before that they won’t be able to handle it. They would probably kick me out of the house.

Dr. P.: So, you could tell them, but it would have negative consequences.

Ben: Yes, very negative consequences.

Dr. P.: How about now? Are there negative consequences if you don’t tell them?

Ben: Of course there are. We’ve been talking about that a lot.

Dr. P.: So, both choices have negative consequences. Right?

Ben: Right!

Dr. P.: And you have the freedom to make either choice: to tell them and experience one set of negative consequences or not to tell them and experience another set of consequences.

Ben: I guess it doesn’t feel much like freedom. It seems like being between a rock and a hard place.

Dr. P.: You feel the burden of wanting to make the right decision. That’s the responsibility that comes with human freedom. You can do whatever you want to do, and you want to choose wisely because you have to live with the results of your actions.

Ben: I guess that’s why I feel so stuck. I’m not ready for the responsibility of telling my family. I’m not ready to deal with the fallout. I guess that’s why I haven’t told them yet.

Dr. P: When you say it that way, it sounds different than saying, "I can't tell them." Does it feel any different?

Ben: Yeah, I guess it does. I could tell them, but I choose not to right now.

Recognizing Existential Limitations

Strategy EXP-12. Facilitating recognition of existential limitations like death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness

Theoretical Context

Existential psychotherapy emphasizes the importance of facing life's ultimate concerns and understanding their personal meaning. Irvin Yalom (1985) described this focus in the following way:

The existential approach posits that the human being's paramount struggle is with the givens, the ultimate concerns, of existence; death, isolation, freedom, and meaninglessness. Anxiety issues from basic conflicts in each of these realms; we wish to continue to be and yet are aware of inevitable death; we crave ground and structure and yet must confront groundlessness; each of us desires contact, protection, to be part of a larger whole yet experiences the unbridgeable gap between self and others; we are meaning-seeking creatures thrown into a world that has no meaning. (p. 95)

Existential limitations like death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness are rarely acknowledged in day-to-day life. Some events, like the death of a loved one, may bring these issues into clearer focus. However, these realities of existence may impact individuals on an ongoing basis without conscious awareness. Psychotherapy can allow an individual to explore and understand the limits of human existence and the individual meaning that is constructed to cope with these limitations.

Strategy Marker

If a client displays restricted growth and experience through overfocusing on everyday concerns or under attention to deeper levels of being, it may be useful to facilitate recognition of existential limitations like freedom, isolation, meaninglessness, and death. If clients are facing events that bring ultimate concerns into conscious awareness, these concerns should become part of a psychotherapist's exploration.

Suggestions for Use

When you work with clients as they face existential limitations, it is important to spend time on both sides of the existential divide. People must often spend

sufficient time facing the darkness before they can emerge into the light on the other side. By helping clients face death, they will be encouraged to embrace life. By exploring meaninglessness, clients may construct or discover personal meaning. When you support clients through a time of isolation, they may realize the importance of connectedness that will provide motivation to reach out to others. When clients come to accept their personal freedom, they may take responsibility and move toward more mature decisions.

Expected Consequence

When clients come to recognize existential limitations that impact thoughts, actions, and feelings, it is predicted that everyday concerns and anxiety will be lightened by their comparison with the inevitable and ultimate concerns of existence. It is also hoped that the clients will begin to think deeply about their existential situation and the fact that they exist.

Case Example

Claire was strongly affected by watching her mother die. Dr. P. wanted to explore how that experience may have impacted Claire's thoughts and feelings about her own death.

Dr. P.: You've been sad and lonely since your mother's death. Do you ever think about your own death in the future?

Claire: I never felt anything about my own death. I was always focused on the fact that my mother was dying. Now that my mother and father are both gone, my own death seems closer. There isn't any buffer between me and death.

Dr. P.: What is it like for you to consider your own death?

Claire: It's scary. When I was younger, I thought I would have unlimited time to do all that I wanted to do.

Dr. P.: And now?

Claire: I'm past the halfway point. There is more of my life behind me than there is ahead of me. I just turned fifty, and I don't suppose I'll live to be one hundred. No one else in my family has.

Dr. P.: How does this feel?

Claire: Scary and disappointing. I'm disappointed that I won't get to do everything I had hoped. I won't get to fulfill all my dreams.

Dr. P.: When you're aware of this disappointment, how does it impact you?

Claire: Part of me wants to focus on the negative and bemoan the losses.

Dr. P.: And the other part?

Claire: The other part wants to get me off my duff and accomplish some of the things I had hoped for.

Dr. P: You've talked about wanting to travel. What else do you hope to accomplish?

Claire: I've always wanted to learn how to paint. I was pretty good in high school art classes but never followed through with it. I love going to art museums and would like to take the next step.

Dr. P: How are traveling and painting related to thinking about death?

Claire: When I think about death, I guess I'm faced with a choice between fear and motivation. Instead of passively waiting to get older, I guess I can use it as motivation to make every day count.

Dr. P: So, thinking about death can provide positive motivation to make changes?

Claire: Yes! Surprisingly, it can.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter introduced a method of experiential conceptualization that focused on identifying specific feelings, like anger, sadness, or fear. The distinction was made between primary, secondary, and instrumental emotions. Primary emotions represent the initial response at the deepest level, but these feelings are not always acknowledged or expressed. Secondary emotions represent a response to a primary emotion or to cognitive judgments, such as feeling guilty in response to anger or because someone thinks that others will disapprove. Instrumental emotions are experienced or expressed to attain a social goal, such as sympathy. An experiential conceptualization also involves seeing whether clients' feelings serve an adaptive or maladaptive purpose in their lives. As a result of formulating an experiential conceptualization, a psychotherapist can generate ideas about primary adaptive emotions that may help clients respond and adapt to the world around them.

Twelve experiential-humanistic strategies were described that can be used in psychotherapy to foster experiential adaptation by encouraging the exploration and expression of feelings and other fundamental human experiences. *Emotion-Focused Therapy* was identified as the theoretical context for the first three strategies. (EXP-1) *Identifying Feelings* allows a counselor to clarify what emotions clients are experiencing in order to prepare for emotion-focused interventions. (EXP-2) *Clarifying the Impact of Feelings* looks at the way clients' emotions are impacting their thoughts, actions, and other dimensions of functioning. (EXP-3) *Encouraging Expression of*

Feelings allows adaptive emotions to emerge and for maladaptive feelings to be released.

The next three strategies were drawn from humanistic approaches to psychotherapy including *Person-Centered Therapy*. (EXP-4) *Fostering Self-Actualization* involves helping clients reach their human potential by overcoming internal and external barriers. (EXP-5) *Communicating Empathy and Positive Regard* fosters a safe therapeutic relationship, particularly when clients are feeling vulnerable. (EXP-6) *Supporting Authenticity* allows clients to identify who they really want to be and find ways to enact these genuine selves in effective ways.

Four experiential-humanistic strategies were drawn from *Gestalt Therapy* and other approaches that try to create vivid in-session experiences to foster change. (EXP-7) *Integrating Parts of Self* helps clients realize and reconcile different aspects of their personalities that may be in conflict. (EXP-8) *Focusing Attention* allows clients to identify, appreciate, and understand feelings and other personal experiences in a deep way that supports experiential adaptation. (EXP-9) *Fostering Here-and-Now Awareness* helps clients attend to the present, realizing that change cannot occur in the past or future. (EXP-10) *Creating Experiments* allows clients to try out new thoughts, actions, and feelings in a safe environment and to express themselves in new ways.

Existential forms of psychotherapy were the source for the last two skills. (EXP-11) *Accepting Freedom and Responsibility* allows clients to recognize the active choices they have and to be accountable for what they choose. (EXP-12) *Recognizing Existential Limitations* encourages clients to become aware of the ultimate realities in life, including death and isolation, when constructing personal meaning. These experiential-humanistic strategies can be used with other skills from other theories in order to attend to the interaction between feelings and other dimensions of functioning. Together these ideas remind us that psychotherapy should always stay close to the phenomenological experience of our clients and encourage the discovery of meaning.