

Experiential Therapy/Counselling

Experiential therapy/counselling (ETC) uses phenomenological methods to approach experience directly rather than studying generalizations about behavior. The basic issue is: what is this before me (or in me)?; and, how do I experience what is before me (or in me)?

ETC does require concepts but the concepts are used more as 'pointers' toward directly felt meanings (experiencing) than as 'explanations' of experiencing. For example when a client states that he is 'nervous' he is using this word to point toward bodily-felt meanings such as stomach 'knots', 'shaking' of hands, 'tightness' of throat, etc. ETC tries to lead the client from the word (such as nervous or anxious) to the directly felt experiencing of tightness, shakiness, knottedness, etc. rather than using the terms as explanations such as "the reason I am shaking is that I am nervous".

ETC tries to help the client to move forward in his experiencing to clearer and more visible meanings. ETC assists clients to describe rather than explain what they are experiencing (feelings, thoughts, sensations, memories and imaginings) and, when the focus is on behavior, to describe what is happening rather than to explain what is happening.

Concepts have meaning only in terms of descriptive detail. Phenomenologically the 'meaning' of a concept is precisely what it points to. The meaning of concepts does not derive from theoretical and logical interconnection. We get more meaning when we differentiate more details and explicate these details in understandable terms. By grasping further details of descriptive life, a client moves forward in his life.

ETC does not ignore the importance of conceptualizing; rather it is a process following experiential detail. To be more precise ETC use a three step model: experiencing → into explication (statements which communicate experiential details) → into conceptualizing. The ETC model also is circular. As one brings experiencing into light and thinks about what has been explicated more experiential detail begins to emerge. Thus in ETC one is forever zig-zagging back and forth between descriptive detail, conceptualization and descriptive detail.

Another way of saying this is to say that understanding is never complete or final. Understanding may deepen, and become richer through experiential

detail but it is not experientially accurate to speak of final or complete understanding of phenomena.

In ETC the two essential therapeutic dimensions are the relationship process and the felt-meaning process. The therapeutic relationship is constructed of concrete experiencing of the therapist by the client, and of the client by the therapist. Both really live there, in that relationship. The relationship between them is the reality they share. Since it is a therapeutic relationship, the counsellor/therapist must take the lead in constructing and maintaining the relationship. He must never forget that it is the client who has requested help in moving forward. The counsellor/therapist is responsible for making the interaction of the relationship more alive, more positive, more free and life-worthy. Sometimes this making positive is explicit and clear in experiential detail, other times there is little visibility, little 'bringing out' the process of forward movement. The faith of the ETC therapist is that if two people struggle together, search for honesty and clarity, aim to reduce confusion, helplessness, discouragement and move forward, then the moving forward occurs even if not visibly so, nor in any necessarily final way.

From the ETC perspective it isn't so much that interaction affects the individual and then makes him different; in the unfolding of the interaction he is already different.

A client once said "when I come here (to therapy) I find hope, I want to live". This is what experiencing in relationship does! This 'making positive' and 'moving forward' is not always clearly definable, the 'whys' often remain mysterious. Yet through experiencing, the positive being of the person is extended forward. The making real of the person's positive being occurs through (not as a result of) concrete relating, in the response and welcome recognition of every shade of feeling, in the careful translation of felt-meaning into visibility, in the kind of on-going person-process made by such responding. A responded-to person is always being invited to be more alive and more real in whatever tasks and struggles are being confronted. In ETC one is always intending to 'matter' to another, to relate responsibly and connectedly. The experiential relationship is two humans concretely and responsively working through personal meanings. The health or illness of the client is not determined by this or that content, but by the type of living process one is engaged in.