

Essay: Toward A Meaning Centered Cognitive Therapy

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An ancient parable attributed to Aesop tells of a wager between the sun and the wind to determine which was stronger. A hapless passerby was to be the object of the dispute: whichever of them could make him remove his cloak was to be the winner. The wind began and blew harder and harder. Though flapping in the breeze, the cloak was not blown away as the traveler clutched it ever more tightly around himself. At last, the wind gave up. Then the sun came out and brightly warmed the traveler who immediately removed his cloak. This story demonstrates the relationship between cognitive psychotherapy, such as formulated by Albert Ellis, and the meaning-centered therapy of Viktor Frankl. Frankl considered most psychotherapy to be dehumanizing; the client was at the mercy of drives, conditioning, or biology. Frankl's therapy was an attempt to rehumanize psychotherapy. I propose that cognitive therapy may be rehumanized by explaining Frankl's meaning-centered therapy (Logotherapy) in the language of Ellis' Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy (REBT).¹

The Rational Approach to Psychotherapy

Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy was developed by Albert Ellis beginning in 1955. The basic premise underlying REBT is that an emotional consequence is the result of both an environmental event as well as a personal belief about that event. Strong, unpleasant emotions such as depression, rage and terror are supported by beliefs that do not accurately reflect reality. These are defined as "irrational beliefs." REBT teaches a person to ask herself a series of questions that serve to identify the irrational beliefs and to replace them with "rational beliefs" that more accurately reflect reality. Thus, depression, rage and terror can be transformed into ordinary sadness, frustration and apprehension. While these feelings may be unpleasant, they are normal and tolerable parts of life unlike their exaggerated, irrational counterparts.

¹ The author understands that this is a reduction of logotherapy. Logotherapy and REBT are based on different understandings of the nature of being human. The thoughts expressed here attempt to demonstrate one way that dissimilar theories can be combined in practice with no attempt made to reduce or limit the ontologies of either approach.

An example of REBT comes from my own early practice: The client was a man in his late 40's whose grown son had been killed in an automobile accident. He had struggled with depression for a number of years before seeking psychotherapy. His symptoms had been maintained by the irrational belief that he had been a "bad father." The man had been an authoritarian parent who was becoming less rigid as he grew older. He harbored excessive guilt regarding his previous behaviors. After several sessions of REBT, the man came to the rational belief that he had made some mistakes as a father and had also done some good as a father. In this regard, he came to believe that he was no better or worse than any other father who had ever lived. He realized all are human and imperfect. He was then able to grieve for his son without being impaired by excessive guilt.

Although the evidence of its effectiveness is clear, REBT has been criticized by clients and therapists alike as too artificial and rote. Reason without meaning, it seems, is not enough for many people seeking help from a therapist. Ellis recognized this problem and offered the following advice: "*Make yourself a good, happy life by giving yourself something to live for*" (Ellis, 1988). Elsewhere, he identified this as a "vital absorbing interest" and contrasted it with Viktor Frankl's search for meaning, which, Ellis argued, lies outside the bounds of a scientific approach (Ellis, 1994).

The Meaning Centered Approach to Psychotherapy

Viktor Frankl began developing Logotherapy as early as 1926. Frankl's first manuscript on Logotherapy was presumed destroyed by the Nazis when Frankl was confined to a concentration camp in 1942. Frankl's determination to rewrite the manuscript helped sustain him during his internment. The first written outline of Logotherapy was published in German in 1946 under the title *Aerztliche Seelsorge (Medical Ministry)*.

Frankl asserts that the "will to meaning" is the basic source of motivation for human beings. He distinguishes between ultimate meaning and the meaning of the moment. Ultimate meaning refers to the purpose of creation and to the individual's place in it. This is often unknown or unknowable and is frequently defined by religious faith. In

contrast, the meaning of the moment is the purpose of an individual's life right now. The meaning of the moment can be discovered through three value positions – the creative, the experiential and the attitudinal. The creative value focuses on the meaning of work to be done and tasks to be accomplished. The experiential value focuses on the meaning of natural or artistic beauty, or of human love and devotion. The attitudinal value focuses on the ability to choose one's stance toward unavoidable suffering and to discern its meaning.

Take, for example, a case offered by Frankl: The client was a rabbi who was grieving for the death of his children and had fallen into a state of depression. One may imagine that Ellis would have challenged the rabbi to uncover his irrational thoughts, such as, "I have failed as a father because I was unable to protect my children," similar to the example above. Rational thoughts would then be developed, such as, "I did everything humanly possible to protect my children." Current research would support the idea that this therapy would have reduced the rabbi's symptoms of depression. Frankl's approach, however, was to help the rabbi discover the meaning of his children's death. The rabbi believed that he would never see his children in heaven. They were young innocents when they died, while he was a grown man who had committed many sins. During therapy with Frankl, the rabbi came to believe that the meaning of his suffering was to thereafter live in such a way so that he would be able to see his children again in heaven. This approach not only relieved the rabbi's depression, but also allowed the rabbi to interpret his period of suffering as a meaningful and life-changing experience.

Frankl goes on to explain that learning to discover the meaning of the moment can eventually lead to insight into ultimate meaning. Using the analogy of a motion picture, he points out that the meaning of the story may not become clear until the final scene. This does not, however, preclude the ability to understand the meaning of each individual scene. Likewise, a lifetime of discovery of meaningful moments may lead to the discovery of the ultimate meaning of a life. In meaning-centered therapy, one can learn to hear the whispers of God in everyday choices and actions.

Toward a Meaning Centered Cognitive Therapy

The approaches of both Ellis and Frankl rely on replacing detrimental beliefs with beneficial ones. Ellis accomplishes this through reason alone. Detrimental cognitions are irrational beliefs that are replaced with rational beliefs. For Frankl, therapy is a process of discovering meaning. One way this is accomplished is by choosing beneficial attitudes. Attitudes are defined as consistent beliefs. Beneficial attitudes, in the language of REBT, could be considered “meaningful beliefs” while detrimental attitudes might be considered “meaningless or nihilistic beliefs.”

The similarity and the contrast between Ellis and Frankl thus become clear. Ellis defines beneficial cognitions based on reason. Frankl defines beneficial cognitions based on meaning. Like the wind in Aesop’s fable, REBT focuses on blowing off the coat of the detrimental cognitions. It teaches the client to identify and dispute the irrational beliefs. Rational beliefs are defined in terms of the irrational beliefs that they dispute. In this sense, REBT is a negative therapy – a therapy that removes detrimental cognitions. Logotherapy, like Aesop’s sun, enlightens the client, allowing her to discover meaningful beliefs. As this is achieved, nihilistic beliefs simply fall away. Logotherapy is thus a positive therapy – a therapy that nurtures beneficial cognitions.

Consider the benefits to psychotherapy if cognitions can be thought of in terms of both reason and meaning:

<u>Cognitions</u>	Irrational	Rational
<i>Nihilistic</i>	<u>nihilistic and irrational</u> <i>“My life is not worth living.”</i> This would be an expression of what Frankl has called the “existential	<u>nihilistic and rational</u> <i>“My life has become meaningless because of my disability and I choose to die.”</i> Logotherapy teaches that

	vacuum,” or sense of inner emptiness common in today’s world. Beliefs that fall into this category would be expected to respond well to Logotherapy.	life is meaningful under any and all circumstances. A person with this belief would be challenged to discover meaning in new ways.
<i>Meaningful</i>	<p><u>meaningful and irrational</u> <i>“If I die, my children will be better off.”</i></p> <p>Here, the client expresses a meaning value – the welfare of her children. The irrationality of the belief could be successfully challenged by REBT.</p>	<p><u>meaningful and rational</u> <i>“I have a reason to live.”</i></p> <p>Beliefs that are both meaningful and rational are likely to lead to what Frankl calls “self-transcendence.” This is the ability to discover something or someone to live for, a cause to serve, people to love. The concept of self-transcendence explains why Ellis’ vital absorbing interest is beneficial.</p>

Since supplementing REBT with Logotherapy, I have found that clients report greater benefits. One example of this is a 40-year-old woman who suffered from depression for many years. She felt burdened by the need to care for her aging mother and angry at her sister who had died before helping with that duty. She had tried many therapists and physicians with limited results. As part of her therapy, she identified and disputed several irrational beliefs such as “My sister should not have died so young” and “It is not fair that my sister has left me alone with this responsibility.” She also developed

meaningful beliefs. She came to view the caretaking of her mother as a loving service rather than as a burden. Referring to a combined Logotherapy and REBT session, she was overheard to remark, “nothing has ever made as much sense.”

Conclusion

The approach described in this essay understands Frankl’s attitudes as cognitions similar to Ellis’ rational beliefs. Logotherapy may then be viewed as a process of discovering and developing meaningful cognitions. When cognitive therapy is used as a tool to foster beliefs that are both rational and meaningful, clients are more likely to develop self-transcendence and Frankl’s goal of rehumanizing psychotherapy is achieved.

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