

Psychotherapy Guidebook



SELF THERAPY

Muriel Schiffman

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Muriel Schiffman

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Self Therapy

Muriel Schiffman

DEFINITION

Self Therapy consists of five concrete structured techniques, any one of which enables a person to experience a hidden (unconscious) emotion by exploring, on a feeling level, the apparent (defensive) emotion that covers (represses) it.

HISTORY

Thirty years ago I (Muriel Schiffman) renewed a relationship with my mother from whom I had been alienated since childhood, and inadvertently stumbled on the basis of Self Therapy. During a series of monthly visits that flooded me with long-hidden, painful emotions, I lost forever a long-time recurrent depression.

In the ensuing years I explored the value of experiencing hidden feelings in the relief of painful and/or inappropriate emotions and found myself changing self-defeating behavior and outgrowing various problems: a peptic ulcer symptom, several phobias, etc. Later, Gestalt self therapy was an

outgrowth and modification of my work with Frederick Perls.

I have been teaching Self Therapy through lectures, workshops, and books for the past twenty years. Follow-up studies indicate that people can learn to use and profit from Self Therapy, some with and others without professional help.

TECHNIQUE

There are five paths to a hidden feeling:

- 1) thinking it through,
- 2) talking it out with a good listener,
- 3) writing,
- 4) a “back door” to the unconscious, and
- 5) Gestalt self therapy.

1 & 2. Thinking it through and Talking it out.

- a) Recognize an inappropriate or too painful reaction (hating a loved one, obsessive thinking, depression, anxiety, etc.);
- b) feel the apparent emotion;
- c) ask, “What else did I feel just before b?”;

d) ask, “What does this remind me of?” This should arouse a new feeling, different from the one with which you began. This hidden feeling should last only a brief time and the apparent emotion disappears;

e) look for the pattern: in such situations you usually cover up this hidden feeling with that apparent emotion.

3. Writing. While experiencing an inappropriate and/or painful emotion describe it, and signs of physical tension, in longhand. Write questions and answers: “What happened just now? What might I have been afraid to feel? What does this remind me of?” until you evoke a new feeling. You are not looking for an explanation of your irrational reaction; merely trying to experience a new emotion. Try different ideas on for size, dropping any one that does not provoke a new feeling.

4. A “back door” to the unconscious. Notice any strong emotion evoked by an aesthetic experience (drama, music, literature, ballet, natural beauty, etc.). Try to stay with that feeling and ask yourself, “What does this remind me of?”

5. Gestalt self therapy. There are three different techniques for Gestalt self therapy:

a) imaginary encounter with a person who has aroused an inappropriate or painful reaction,

b) exploring a known inner conflict, and

c) exploring a recurrent or disturbing dream.

d) Dramatize an imaginary encounter with a person in your present life toward whom you have an inappropriate and/or painful reaction. Enact both roles, beginning with the reality situation. Then exaggerate each role until you can feel an intense emotion. Now ask yourself, "Who did this to whom?" and play an imaginary scene from your past. Use your body: hit or cuddle a pillow, break a carton, stand tall or crouch low. Caricature each side until you provoke a new (hidden) feeling.

1) Now play the other person of the original encounter sympathetically. Try to understand how he feels. Ask yourself, "When have I felt this way myself?" This person to whom you overreact represents (unconsciously) not only someone from your past but also a part of yourself.

2) Notice how you react to certain situations and/or people in a stereotyped, irrational way, alternating between two opposite attitudes: rage versus pity, helplessness versus control, love versus hate, rebellion versus dependence, etc. Dramatize a scene involving some present-life problem and/or person, enacting alternately each of two opposing emotions. Exaggerate each side, going back to the past, if possible, until you can experience intensely the irrationality of both sides.

- 3) To explore a recurrent or disturbing dream, play every role in the dream. When it comes alive, dramatize some scene in your present or past of which this emotion reminds you. Each role represents an aspect of yourself. Have an encounter between two irrational parts of yourself represented in the dream.

In “real” life we are able to experience only one side at a time of inner conflict, so we act out in self-defeating ways. Each time we live out one side we frustrate the other side. We live on an emotional seesaw. But each time we practice Gestalt self therapy and experience both sides of the conflict we are free to make some rational compromise in solving the immediate problem, some decision that avoids tormenting either side. With continued work in this area the conflict gradually diminishes, the differences grow less extreme. Eventually the two sides tend to merge into a more rational middle ground.

APPLICATIONS

Experiment with all five Self Therapy techniques to find which best suits your temperament. Those who crave privacy prefer thinking it through and writing. Some want a good listener and will do well by talking it out. Others need dramatization to come alive and they choose Gestalt. For people with too much resistance to begin exploring their own problems, the “back door” usually works.

Self Therapy is a tool for coping with daily problems, a technique for avoiding self-defeating behavior and a relief from intense emotional pain. These short-term goals apply especially to the first four techniques: thinking, talking, writing, and the “back door.” These four methods can be used only when the apparent emotion is still intense. They are best for everyday living.

Gestalt self therapy is the only technique that can begin in “cold blood,” after the apparent emotion has cooled off. Dramatization brings it to life once more.

Gestalt self therapy, exploring inner conflicts, is essential for the long-term goals of Self Therapy: to see reality without distortion, to fulfill one’s true potential, to become more like the kind of person one wants to be.