

## RE-EVALUATION COUNSELLING

### John Heron

Re-evaluation Counselling is a method of personal development originated in the 1950s by Harvey Jackins in Seattle, U.S.A. Jackins was a mathematics graduate who early in his career became active in the field of labour organisation in the northwest States. He found his way into counselling almost by accident. He received into his home a friend who had just had an acute 'nervous breakdown'. Jackins reluctantly learned to tolerate and accept the man's persistent sobbing over several days, and was impressed by the dramatic behavioural change that resulted. He and another friend experimented with the implications of this connection on themselves. In consequence he entered counselling on a full-time basis, co-counselling with colleagues and doing one-way professional counselling with regular clients. He decided to build up theory and practice so far as possible independently of existing systems of therapy and counselling. The result is an approach to personal growth that has several distinctive features, which overlap only in some respects with other methods.

The fundamental method used in RC is co-counselling, in which two people take it in turns to counsel each other. In a typical co-counselling session, for the first hour A is counsellor and B is client, and for the second hour A is client and B is counsellor. This peer relationship is crucial. RC is organised as communities of people who co-counsel regularly together on a one-to-one basis, and the primary role for each person is that of client - in which role all members are on an equal footing. The RC Communities authorise some of their members to teach RC and to act as area organisers, but these roles are entirely secondary to the client role.

The theory of RC is as follows. It postulates that human beings have as their inherent potential a great amount of flexible intelligence, that is, the capacity to respond to each different situation in the environment with a fresh, new and accurate response, a great capacity for love and co-operation with other persons, and a great capacity for zest and enjoyment of life, for responding with excitement to the challenge of the environment.

Disfunctions and distortions of behaviour are regarded not as some inherent warp in human nature but as the consequence of experiences of emotional or physical hurt, especially emotional hurt - such interpersonal experiences as separations, loss, rejection, threat, frustration, mockery and lack of response. An experience of hurt, it is held, freezes human intelligence, leading to a literal and indiscriminating intake of information during the experience, and a response that is not flexible and adaptive but takes the form of a rigid, compulsive and maladaptive pattern of feeling and behaviour. Many such hurt experiences, if their effects are not dissolved and discharged, result in a web of rigidities that occlude inherent potential. Such rigidities are called *patterns*. Patterns range from the fixed, persistent smile that asserts 'I have no problems' to the sustained anxiety of self-disparaging pessimism. Some are intermittent - that is, they are triggered off now and then by particular situations, such as a periodic maladaptive

reaction to authority figures. Some are chronic; they are continuous rigid attitudes of mind that operate all the time, in such a way that mistakenly the person tends to identify his own nature with them - for example, an unremitting feeling of worthlessness.

The person, with his or her inherent positive potential, is clearly distinguished from the pattern, which is regarded as a parasite upon the person. Patterns are dissolved by a complex emotional and physiological process called *discharge* (similar to abreaction or catharsis) which is dependably indicated by tears, sobbing, trembling, perspiration, laughter, angry shouting, angry movements, reluctant but non-repetitive talk, eager talk, yawning and stretching. Discharge is the process of becoming unhurt, of releasing the stored distress of a hurt experience. Typically discharge requires the sustained supportive free attention of another human being. Hence in co-counselling the one who is client is seeking discharge, with the help of the counsellor. Successful discharge occurs when (a) the client has enough free attention, that is, attention that is not engulfed by the distress patterns within, and (b) this free attention is equally divided between the supportive presence of the counsellor and the distress on which discharge is being sought. A person who has no free attention is shut down; he is swamped or lost in his distress and will not be able to discharge it.

The client can gain free attention by being encouraged to become aware of what is going on at the present moment: he may describe the counsellor or the room where he is working or see how many details of his present environment he can be aware of at once. A reservoir of free attention for working at deeper levels can be built up by a spectrum of remembering that moves from light to heavier demands on the client's capacity for sustaining a balance of attention between the present and the past: (1) a quick random review of pleasant memories; (2) a quick random remembering of minor upsets; (3) chronological scanning of memories that fall under a specific category of incident, first of a positive kind, then of a distressful and negative kind; (4) a sustained review of one particular distressful incident. The client works with distress that is available, with 'what is on top', broaching his defences gradually. In this way, the client engages in a relatively undisruptive process, dealing progressively with material that he can effectively handle.

The patterns that result from the cumulative undischarged distress of large numbers of people becomes institutionalised in rigid and emotionally closed social structures and their norms. Parents, themselves socialised by norms that inhibited the discharge of their own early and subsequent distress, impose similar norms on their children. The parent cannot tolerate in his child a discharge process that is under chronic inhibition in himself. The suppression of discharge is at first externally imposed, but this suppression eventually becomes fully internalised by the child as a device for maintaining social acceptance. To interrupt and suppress the discharge process in another human being is to invalidate his humanity. Once internalised the interruption and suppression is established as an internal norm of self-deprecation maintaining pattern behaviour. Discharge is achieved by overcoming the subtle inhibiting controls of self-disparagement.

The effects of discharge are the dissolution of the rigid pattern and the liberation of frozen intelligence. There is a release of rational capacity and a capacity for caring for and reaching out to others. To the extent that patterns are dissolved, the potentialities of the person, hitherto occluded, are set free. No past or present culturally defined

limit of human flourishing is accepted; it is assumed that human beings can flower to an extent that is far beyond anything currently obtaining. Whatever other recovery procedures may also be relevant it is held that discharge in the presence of another supportive human being is indispensable. It is important to note that this does not exclude other aspects of the development of human potential, such as diet, body movement, organisational development and transpersonal techniques.

Re-evaluation follows discharge. As discharge on some distressful incident proceeds, the literal intake of information associated with that incident is dissolved; freed intelligence sets to work upon it so that it undergoes recentring or restructuring, with fresh recall and with new insights and connections being made. The incident, in short, is re-evaluated. This is a spontaneous process released by discharge, and it has important implications for co-counselling method.

The client is self-directing in his session; he decides what to work on, when and how to work on it. The counsellor is a necessary helper, but he does not direct or control the session, manipulating the client in an authoritative manner. Since the client is not always fully or sufficiently aware of the patterns that inhibit discharge, he has a contract with the counsellor that the latter will intervene when the client seems to be blocking or to have lost his way. However these interventions take the form of suggestions as to what the client might do or say in order to facilitate discharge; they do not take the form of interpretations, analyses, criticisms, advice or moral exhortations. The counsellor never makes any overt diagnosis of and to the client; he makes a tentative guess in his mind and converts this into a practical suggestion for action. But the client is always free to reject this suggestion and to proceed in ways that he judges to be more fruitful. The client, facilitated and helped in this way, will move towards discharge as a consequence of which he will discover his own diagnoses, interpretations and insights.

The basic tool of the counsellor is the supportive and expectant free attention which he directs towards the client. There are also a range of techniques to assist discharge which the client can use in a self-directing manner, and which can form the basis of the counsellor's suggestions. *Literal description*: The client keeps close to the perceptual details and changing emotional tone of an event on which he is seeking discharge, and avoids analysing, categorising and theorising about it. *Repetition*: the client repeats words or phrases the first utterance of which gave a hint of hidden distress; in another sense of repetition, he may go over an event many times to release all the stored tension. *Free Association*: the client verbalises any thought, image or feeling that is evoked by repetition. *Role Play*: the client may play himself in an earlier situation, expressing now what was deeply felt but not done or said at the time; the counsellor may play someone in a counterpartal role. *Acting Into*: the client goes through the motions of an anger or a fear discharge in order to facilitate the emergence of the real discharge. These are some simple techniques; there are many others.

One of the most basic is *contradiction*. The client contradicts or is invited to contradict any statement he has made or any feeling he has that negatively qualifies his own worth. He adopts a fully self-appreciative manner even though he may be feeling the opposite. An unqualified statement of self-appreciation is called a *positive direction* and it includes the appropriate tone of voice, facial expression and gesture. The use of a positive direction has two effects: it liberates attention from identification

with the inner distress; and it helps break up the inhibiting controls that self-deprecation imposes on the discharge process.

Contradiction is an aspect of *validation* - which is the central principle running through all co-counselling techniques. Validation is the consistent affirmation of the worth of the person as distinct from the patterns that are parasitic upon the person. The client seeks the reversal of patterns and the overcoming of inhibiting controls of self-disparagement, by validating himself through the use of positive directions and by validating others. The counsellor validates the client by giving him free attention, by suggesting positive directions to him where appropriate, by verbally affirming his worth, and by fully respecting his autonomy by refraining from interpretation, advice and interruption. This consistent use of validation seeks to undo the after-effects of the chronic experiences of invalidation to which the client has been subjected since his earliest years, and so to facilitate discharge.

For details of training courses, national and international workshops, literature, write to: Re-evaluation Counselling Communities, 40 Denzil Road, Guildford, Surrey. Tel: Guildford 68764

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## **GROWTH CENTRES: CALENDAR OF WEEKEND EVENTS**

### **MANCHESTER ENCOUNTER CENTRE**

April 20-22: Encounter for Couples, Timothy St. Ather and Geraldine Kilbride; 30-1: Encounter Marathon, Denny Yuson.

### **LONDON GROWTH CENTRE**

April 6-8: Organisation Development, David Francis; 13-25: Gestalt and Bio-energy, Eve Godfrey; 20-22: Phoenix and Synanon Encounter, Denny Yuson; 27-29: Sexuality Weekend, Jenner Hoidale.

### **KALEIDOSCOPE**

30-1: Encounter Workshop, Mike Barnett; May 13-15: Peeling the Layers of the Onion, Jacob Stattman.

### **CENTRE FOR GROUP WORK AND SENSITIVITY TRAINING**

April 6-8: 'Love and Hate'; 19: 4-day communal holiday in the country; May 11: On-going Weekend.

### **QUAESITOR**

April 6-8: Peeling the Ego Body, Simone Surpin; 6-8: Turning In, Ananda Teertha; 6-8: Encounter for Women, Pat Crossman; 13-15: 48-hour Encounter Marathon,