

Tom Sargent

Hooray for Steve Murgatroyd, or Distress Distorts

I could start off this article with distress over the fact the Steve's name is more prominent than mine at the top of the page, and that it always happens that way, etc. But that will put me in distress and the article won't be worth reading. Because distress distorts my perception of reality and spoils my thinking process.

Distress distorts. Hardly a profound observation. But one with far reaching implications. Steve's letter in the March issue of *Self and Society* observes correctly that most encounter and therapy groups begin with distress and often leave members confused and more distressed. Ours do not do that.

Witnesses at a bad traffic accident, participants in a heavy family argument, all know that distress distorts what I see and how I think. It is of course contradictory to initiate any sessions designed to promote thinking or accurate awareness with distress. In fact, we always exclude this.

Take the cultural and assumptive counseling contract. It is that a person in distress, and not OK, goes to an OK expert to put things together again. The focus is on the problem, and the distress gets greater and the distortion increases. Decisions and solutions from this contract are not ones that we would choose from intelligence. That approach just does not work.

Some desperate people discovered a way out about two generations ago. Spouses married to alcoholics, they had a history marked with tragic decisions made in distress. In the fellowship of Al-Anon, allied with Alcoholics Anonymous, these spouses of alcoholics found that the A.A. approach to alcoholism, a slow and easy one day at a time, was helpful in decision making, too. Now, in Al-Anon, it is clear that decisions made in distress are only accidentally useful. Instead, members are urged to develop a sense of self and of clarity before they make any life decisions. As a result, life affirming decisions are made in the clarity of a sense of self and with some distance from the distress of interpersonal battles.

Steve is accurate in his description of the strong culture which surrounds encounter groups. He misses one emotional reason for the initial distress and the later pleasure—it heightens the pleasure which comes at the end of hard and distasteful work. It is like hitting yourself over the head with a hammer—it feels so good when you stop. And, in America, it is important to get your pleasure only after hard work so you can enjoy it without guilt.

For persons at certain stages in personal growth, encounter is useful. At our center (Change Agents) we don't do it any more, but keep referral sources available. Instead we have a process taken from Al-Anon and modified to be easily related to other life situations. We do not allow confrontation. We teach our clients methods of moving the positions of pleasure and security, and that from such positions the problem areas and sources of distress are easily perceived. With the resulting clarity the mind easily finds life affirming solutions.

We use News and Goods from Re-evaluation Counselling. We use 'How I am different' and 'How I am special' and 'I like how I feel ---- when I ----', my own inventions. We use exploring limits from Al-Anon. In heavy distress we use mind exercises from T.A. and gestalt, such as counting to 100 by thirteen and spelling names backwards. The process is simple and clients usually know it after two or three hours of individual or group counseling.

The way we approach it is simple. We usually start with news and goods unless there is too much distress, then the thinking techniques are necessary. We move quickly to labeling feelings ('good' is illegal—it must be a label such as 'excited'). We lead to a sense of what makes me special and what differences I have to offer to others. The specific feeling to a situation. It is our experience that people using it find that they are spending more time in those situations which produce the pleasant feelings.

In the meantime, of course, the client is saying 'What the hell is going on? I came here to deal with my PROBLEM'. We are explicit about our contract. We will not deal with problems or distress except from a position of clarity. When talking out a problem raises distress we are willing to spend considerable time in and with the distress, but we do not attempt to identify anything about the distress except from clarity. We find that this works well and that the client quickly learns the skills and uses them in other areas of life.

So, Steve, you are right. Encounter and therapy have a heavy culture of raising distress. We don't. We laugh a lot and work hard. You will find a great deal of laughing at A.A. and Al-Anon among those who have developed a 'recovered' life style. It works. It works quickly and permanently.

But maybe I should suffer more for it.

Tom Sargent is a humanistic counselor and a member of a group of counselors called Change Agents in Hartford, Connecticut, U.S.A. They specialize in peer counseling and in training counselors.