

About Holistic Psychotherapy

My degree is an M.A. in Counseling Psychology, with a specialization in Transpersonal Psychology. I call myself a holistic psychotherapist. Many people have asked me what transpersonal psychology is, and what “holistic psychotherapy” means.

Transpersonal psychology is the fourth major wave of psychology. First came psychoanalysis, developed by Freud. In a nutshell, psychoanalysts (and psychodynamic therapists after them) believe a person’s difficulties with life and relationships stem from problematic relationships in their families of origin. The course of therapy involves a deep delving into the family of origin to uncover these problematic relationships and patterns. These therapies are sometimes called “uncovering therapies” as a result of this process.

The second wave of psychology, a backlash against the Freudian view, was behavioral psychology, which put forth the proposition that all our behavior is the result of learning and conditioning. If we are rewarded for certain behaviors as children, and punished for other actions, we will learn to behave accordingly. What was once learned can be unlearned and new behaviors learned in its place, according to behavioral theory, and this is the way therapists can effect change in their clients. This behavioral backlash took place at a time when U.S. culture was particularly in love with science as providing all the answers. Behavioral theory was popular at this time because behavior can be observed and measured using the scientific method. Cognitive behavioral therapy is an offshoot of strict behavioral theory, in that it does take into account unconscious motivation. Behavioral theory ignores unconscious motivation as irrelevant (and some might say non-existent) because it cannot be observed and measured scientifically.

The third wave of psychology, a backlash against the seemingly inhuman, scientific view of behavioral theory, is humanistic psychology in all its various forms. Humanistic psychology was part of the 1960’s backlash against the scientific revolution of the 1950’s. An example of humanistic therapy is Carl Rogers’ client-centered therapy, which maintains that the client-therapist relationship itself is what helps clients heal. Rather than focusing exclusively on the family of origin or on behavior, humanistic psychologists tend to focus on the here-and-now experience of the client-therapist relationship.

An extension of humanistic psychology, transpersonal psychology is not a methodology, or a technique, but an entirely new philosophy of psychology. It can be best understood as eastern philosophy meets western psychology. One of the criticisms of western psychology is that the therapy takes place in a vacuum, the individual person sitting with the individual therapist, focusing on the individual. In fact, there are far more than two people sitting in that room – both the client’s and therapist’s families of origin are there, and all significant relationships in their lives. Cultural influences such as racism, sexism, national origin, religion, etc. have powerfully impacted both client and therapist, and are in the room.

All these factors are in the room, yet western psychology follows a western medical model – focus on one aspect of the person, call that a specialization, and don’t deal with the whole person. Hence, western psychologists focus on the mind of the individual, and don’t see the person as an integral part of a whole. The person is part of a relationship, a family, a community, a world, and none of these is separable. Further, the mind is housed in a body, which is also an inseparable relationship. Yet western psychology focuses on the mind to the near-exclusion of the body, as western

medical doctors focus on the body to the near-exclusion of the mind.

The systemic view of mind-body wholeness is part of eastern philosophy, and is the basis for transpersonal psychology. It is also what makes transpersonal psychology a holistic form of therapy – seeing the individual as an integral part of a larger whole, and seeing the individual as a psycho-emotional-spiritual-physical being. There is no such thing as a mind separate from its body, and a holistic therapist recognizes this. Feelings and emotions are body processes, and thus the phrase “it’s all in your mind” makes no sense to a holistic practitioner. What’s in your mind is in your body, because they are one and the same thing.

In addition, transpersonal theory takes the view that the need to believe in something larger than our Selves is an innate human need. Part of what it means to be human is to ask questions such as “Who am I? Why was I born? What is my place in the grand scheme of things? What happens after I die? Who was I before I was born?” Spirituality is the process of asking and answering such questions to one’s personal satisfaction. Religion is the codification of a set of answers into a cohesive package that groups of people can subscribe to.

Spirituality may provide the answers at the individual level, but the purpose of religion is to provide a communal spirituality that can also fulfill the human need to socialize with others. At its best, religion can fulfill the deep human needs for both spirituality and community. This is the appeal religion holds for many people. However, too often, human ego demeans the religious experience, as church leaders succumb to the all-too-human tendencies of being petty, infighting for control, and losing sight of their own spirituality. This can cause many people to have a cynical view of churches and religion in general and to throw out spirituality along with religion. In addition, conservative religions often reject parishioners who identify as gay,

lesbian, bisexual or trans, sometimes leading such people to reject religion and spirituality altogether. A transpersonal psychologist, then, will explore whether a client’s feelings of emptiness, isolation and depression may have a component of spiritual crisis.

If the client was raised in a rigid religion and now finds no meaning in that religion, it is often the case that the client has rejected spirituality in general and now has no answers to those fundamental questions about the meaning of life. The transpersonal therapist is not going to proselytize or advocate for a particular religion or spiritual practice, but may gently try to help the client explore what spirituality means to them. Viewing spirituality as a basic human need, the therapist would try to help the client find meaning in life again, a life philosophy that makes sense to the client, whether the term spirituality or religion is ever mentioned or not.

I use the term “holistic psychotherapist” because I do see individuals (and couples) in a room and talk with them, but recognize the inseparability of mind-body-spirit. I would rather use the term “holistic therapist,” but I don’t want to confuse people. There are many holistic body-oriented therapies available in Portland – acupuncture, naturopathy, massage. The use of the term “holistic therapist” here in Portland might lead people to believe I am a body worker, when in fact I’m trained in psychotherapy. While not ideal, the ethical guidelines of the psychotherapy profession are such that even if they had the training, a therapist couldn’t be a body worker with a client they are also seeing as a psychotherapist. Hence it is difficult in this culture to be what I would consider a truly holistic healer, one who does not separate mind from body work.