

Psychotherapy Guidebook

EXAGGERATION THERAPY

Gerard van den Aardweg

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Gerard van den Aardweg

e-Book 2016 International Psychotherapy Institute

From *The Psychotherapy Guidebook* edited by Richie Herink and Paul R. Herink

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Exaggeration Therapy

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DEFINITION

Exaggeration Therapy (synonymous with “anti-complaining therapy”) borrowed its name from the fundamental technique used in this therapy: the exaggeration technique, which is a verbal technique consisting of the humoristic aggravation of neurotic feelings of self-pity, and of neurotic complaining behavior, by the invention of increasingly dramatic stories until the client starts smiling or laughing.

Exaggeration Therapy as a whole comprises two central elements: 1) self-observation by the client of his neurotic, infantile complaining behavior and of the self-pity in his neurotic, displeasurable feelings and thoughts and 2) application of the exaggeration technique, telling and imagining lamentable scenes about these perceived complaints in order to destroy them by the humor response. It is an interplay between recognition of infantile complaining and combating it with humor techniques: the latter constitutes the principal therapeutic factor. Exaggeration mobilizes the curative power of humor responses.

To understand why and when exaggeration techniques are used, it is necessary to become familiar with the basic principle of anti-complaining therapy, namely that of compulsive infantile complaining as the propelling force of neurotic disturbances. Neurotics appear to harbor the feelings of a chronically “complaining or self-pitying child” who creates symptoms (negative feelings or thoughts, worries, fears, inferiority feelings, depressions, physical pains, as well as frustrating situations, etc.) in order to lament about them. In Exaggeration Therapy, this pathogenous force of compulsive complaining is thoroughly analyzed and then attacked by its emotional antipode, the laughing response.

HISTORY

The mechanisms of compulsive infantile complaining and their treatment with exaggeration techniques were described by Dutch psychoanalyst Johan Leonard Arndt (1892–1965) in a series of publications since 1950. At present, it is practiced and elaborated on by Dutch and Brazilian psychologists, in private practice and in penitentiary institutions. Much experience has been acquired, notably with the treatment of homosexuals and neurotic delinquents.

TECHNIQUE

Exaggeration Therapy proceeds through the following phases:

1. A theoretical study by the client of the autonomous “inner self-pitying child” and of the laws and ways of its functioning. The idea is that self-pity or self-dramatization is an instinctive reaction in childhood or adolescence to feelings and perceptions of being rejected, inferior, or not loved. It has a healing effect, since tears of self-pity and lamentations are recuperative reactions that bring relief. However, when present during a longer period of time, self-pity easily creates a dependency, so that the infantile mind will come to seek it for its own sake, gradually becoming obsessed by a need for drama in order to indulge in narcissistic feelings of “poor me.”
2. Analysis of the specific “complaining child” within the client, of the “child’s” principal theme of complaining. For example, “I am a poor, ugly one,” “I am a poor, neglected one,” “a poor weakling,” “a poor failure,” “a lonely one without a home,” or “a poor, unjustly treated one.”
3. Daily self-observation. The client screens his thoughts and emotions in all kinds of situations, trying to detect infantile complaints. In principle, any unpleasurable feeling may contain infantile self-pity. Self-observation leads to formulations of the contents of complaints, such as, “I am so lonely — poor me,” “I feel so tired — poor me,” “I shall be the victim of something — poor me,” and so on.
4. These verbalized complaints are the objects of the exaggeration

technique. The client imagines his “self-pitying child of the past” as if this were standing before him, bearing the complaint just formulated. Then he talks to this child, exaggerating his suffering, making such an absurd tragedy of it that he stirs some humor reaction. For instance, to the child who complains, “Nobody loves me,” he may say: “Poor little one, half crippled, blind, clothed in rags, everybody spits at you when you are walking down the street. The dogs bark at you, groups of boys taunt you and throw rotten eggs. When you knock on the door of your house, your cruel father (friend, wife...) beats you with an enormous stick...”

Exaggeration of the concrete complaint has to be continued until it provokes a liberating smile. It has to be applied many times a day, immediately upon the perception of some impulse of complaining. The therapist guides and encourages the process, but the work itself has to be done by the client. He will build his repertory of exaggerations, dependent on his stereotype complaints and his particular sense of humor. He has to overcome often strong resistances to recognition of his complaining and self-pity as well as to subjecting these feelings to this form of humor. However, if he comes to apply the method, he will gradually free himself from his “complaining sickness” and experience feelings of increasing happiness and emotional satisfaction. A drastic personality change may be achieved when the emotional immaturity inherent to the “complaining child” dies away, which indicates how infantile complaining pervades most sectors of the

neurotic's mental life and behavior.

There are common elements with other therapies. As in Transactional Analysis, the client in Exaggeration Therapy is taught to analyze his "inner child," the difference being that he has to recognize — and exaggerate — the complaining behavior at the root of his infantile impulses. Alfred Adler's "inferiority complex" is incorporated in the concept of compulsive complaining; "I am only..." is a way of complaining, "poor me." Exaggeration resembles implosion (Thomas G. Stampfl) and paradoxical intention (Victor Frankl), but with some important differences: a) it is not so much the neurotic symptoms in themselves that are exaggerated (anxieties, worries, etc.) as the complaining behavior underlying them. Because of this, "exaggeration" is also called "hyperdramatization" b) all negative emotions and thoughts are exaggerated, and not just fears and anxieties c) the client applies the technique himself in his daily life, and d) exaggeration is humorous, its purpose being to provoke laughing.

APPLICATIONS

Exaggeration Therapy is used with those neurotics who suffer from the infantile complaining compulsion: obsessive-compulsive neurotics, anxiety neurotics, depressive neurotics, persons with inferiority complexes, hypochondriacs, homosexuals and delinquents. These neurotics are

characterized by specific “principal complaints.”