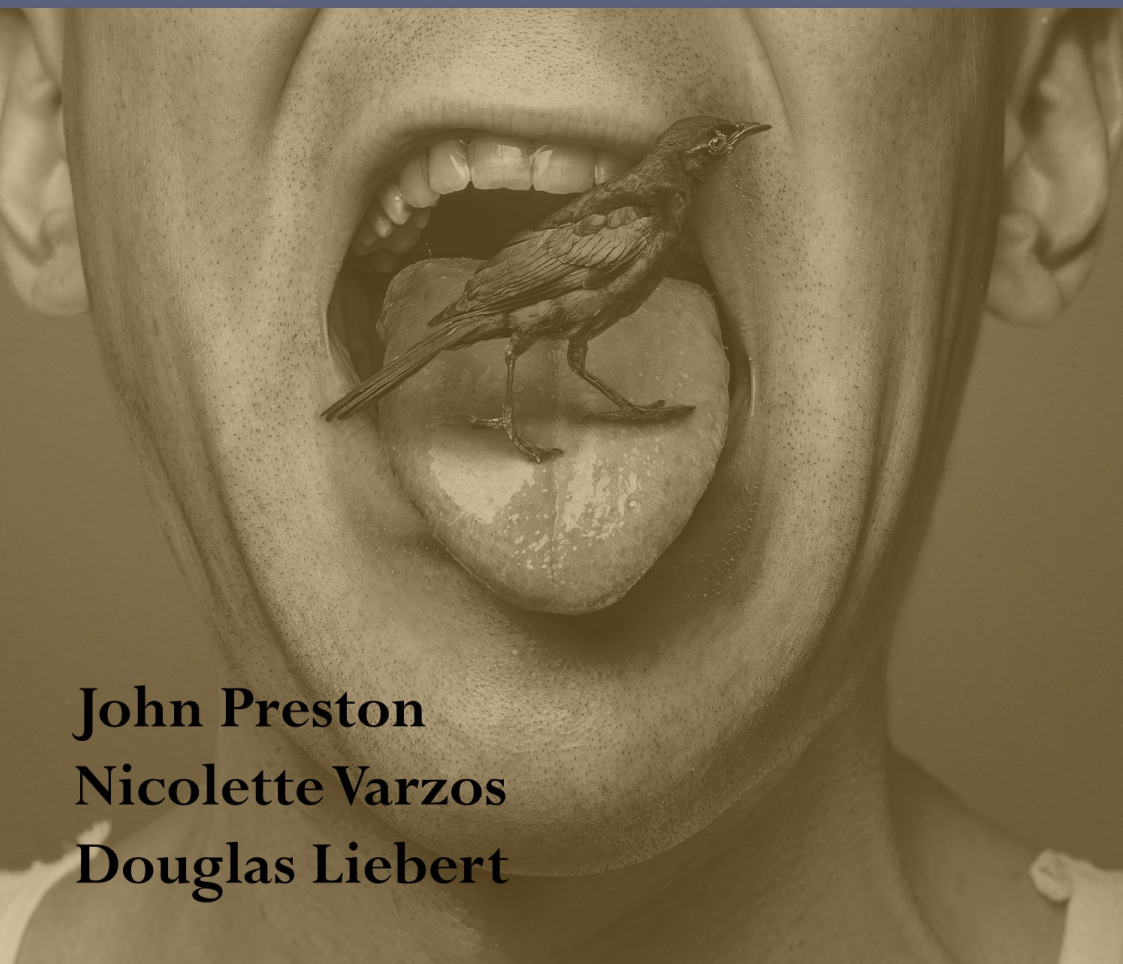


Make Every Session Count: How Does Therapy Help?

From Talk That Hurts to Talk That Heals



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From Talk That Hurts to Talk That Heals

HOW CAN TALKING help?

Good question. You may be thinking, "I've already talked about this problem a lot...What good will it do to go in and talk to a shrink about it?" or "I've talked this to death...I don't see how talking about it again will help me."

Let's be clear, *some types of talking aren't helpful* and, in fact, some kinds of talking about emotionally difficult issues can increase your despair and may make matters worse! So to begin our understanding of how talk therapy works and how it can help, let's consider three types of talking: talk that hurts, talk that hides, and—in the next chapter—talk that heals.

Talk That Hurts

It's worth repeating: some kinds of talking, about emotionally difficult issues, can increase despair and just make matters worse! Three very common kinds of talking that often occur during stressful times virtually guarantee you'll suffer even more. Talk like this (whether it's actually spoken aloud or just "self-talk" in your head) works like a pain amplifier, turning up the volume on the intensity of emotional pain.

The first hurtful style is *making extremely derogatory and critical comments about yourself*. We spoke about this in chapter 7 as a source of unnecessary pain.

A second form of hurtful talk is *jumping to inaccurate or unrealistic conclusions*. Such conclusions may suggest extreme calamities ("I'm falling apart...I am *completely* out of control!") or all-or-none statements ("Absolutely nothing I do is right!"). You may be making some poor decisions or mistakes, but you're certainly not 100 percent wrong about everything. This kind of talk just intensifies your idea that you are helpless and powerless—it's like throwing gasoline on your "distress fire."

The third common self-disturbing talk is *making extremely negative predictions*. For example, concluding that the very worst possible outcome *absolutely* will happen ("I'll never get over the sadness of this divorce!" or "I'll

never find someone to love").

When these types of talking dominate, then in a real sense, talking does not help (we will share with you ways to actively change these kinds of negative selftalk in Chapters 12 and 17).

Talk that Hides

Many kinds of talk also take people far away from their honest inner emotions. Language can help us avoid or distort the truth. Let's look at several examples.

Quick Closure

"Yes, I know it's bad, but I'll get over it...Did you see the NBA playoff game last night?"

Minimizing

"Oh, it's not that bad."

"Other people have gone through worse things, I shouldn't complain."

"I feel sad, but I'm okay. I can handle it."

Injunctions

"I need to be strong."

"I shouldn't cry."

"I can't get so emotional...I've got to get myself under control."

Outright Denial

"I'm not upset. I'm...(sob)...okay."

In each of these statements, the words (or inner thoughts) direct your focus away from inner emotions or awareness of painful realities. This process can be temporarily helpful, especially when you're feeling overwhelmed. These natural human maneuvers are designed to protect us from too much pain. But this defensive stance can backfire and result in excessive blocking of honest emotions. Healing is stopped in its tracks.

So how can talking help you heal?

Sometimes it seems we talk ourselves into emotional difficulty. Can we also talk ourselves out of it?

Only if we're really careful about how we talk ...

Talk that Heals

Talking out loud about important thoughts, feelings, and experiences can be one of the most effective and rapid ways to get clear about your emotions—unless of course it's the sort of talk we discussed in the previous chapter. If talking is done in a safe and supportive relationship with a therapist, the chances are excellent that it can lead to healing.

An emotional crisis can bring on lots of vague, ill-defined, disturbing emotions and sensations. It's easy to feel confused and unclear during these times. You may notice an intense uneasiness or tension in your body, a lump in your throat or tightness in your stomach. The confusing mix of emotions may only intensify anxiety, uncertainty, and helplessness.

If you're able to talk with an understanding person about your thoughts, feelings, and experiences, life often starts to make sense, bit by bit. You make connections between events and your feelings. It's as if you're shining a light into a dark cellar, gradually seeing clearly what's inside.

Most people don't like feeling uncertain and confused. As we gain clarity and understanding, we feel a greater sense of mastery and control. Talking—describing your emotions—often makes vague feelings concrete, and can help you understand them better.

Shawna's situation offers an example. She feels distant and alone in her marriage, as Tim has become increasingly preoccupied with work. The intimacy in their relationship has evaporated, causing her to feel sad and lonely. Here's a sample dialogue from one of her therapy sessions:

Shawna: Today at work for no reason, I started crying. It was crazy. Nothing bad happened. What's wrong with me?

T: Well, let's look at what was happening today. What went on in the office?

Shawna: Nothing really.

T: Well, maybe it will help if we go over it together. Tell me about today.

Shawna: I was at work. My girlfriend, Diane, was talking about her love relationship and how it wasn't working out. She's talked about it before, but all of a sudden for no reason, I just started feeling terrible. I felt like I was going to cry...I'm not at all interested in her love life...

T: You were starting to cry?

Shawna: Yeah. (She looks sad.)

T: I wonder if there was something about your conversation with her that struck a chord within you... Tell me what comes to your mind.

Shawna: Well, I guess I thought, "Yeah, I know how you feel... Things never work out for me either. I'm married and I'm unhappy." (She starts to cry.)

T: That hurts...Do your tears make sense?

Shawna: Yes

In a brief interchange about the events of the day, the meaning and source of Shawna's pain became clear to her. This is not a fancy psychotherapeutic technique nor is it magical. People help other people do this sort of thing all the time: one person listens and encourages another person to talk. Many therapists take this approach: "Let's see what's happened...I bet we can make sense of this." By asking questions, by listening and encouraging discussion, the therapist helps the client become aware of the personal meaning of events and emotions.

If the therapist had said, "I'm sure it was nothing," or "Well, you're over it now," or "It was probably just PMS," the process would have been quickly ended. Shawna would be just as much in the dark as before the session.

Shawna had initially tried to close the door by answering "Nothing really," to the therapist's inquiry, "Can you tell me what went on in the office?" The therapist nudged it open again, and she started to talk.

This is not just talking or "chitchat." The goal is speaking out loud with another toward understanding, discovering true feelings, and finding out what's really important. In this case, Shawna's sadness and confusion were replaced with greater understanding. As she became more aware of her own emotional turmoil, her feelings of sadness became an important issue for her to explore.

The talking helped Shawna open emotional doors, get in touch with her true feelings, understand herself better, view reality clearly. Her choices and actions won't always turn out right, but they'll be more in sync with her genuine needs, beliefs, and values. This gives her the best shot at emotional health.

More Ways Talk Can Help

In times of emotional distress, you may take things personally, quickly arrive at broad conclusions, and fail to notice important details. This can lead to lots of errors.

Let's listen to Mitch, a twenty-one-year-old college student, in conversation with his therapist:

Mitch: I was talking with my mother on the phone last night, trying to tell her about breaking up with Shelley. By the time I got off the phone, I felt terrible. I don't know, I just have a hard time getting along with my mom. Other people seem to have a good connection with their parents. What's wrong with me?

Let's take a closer look for a moment. Mitch is upset, and the conversation with his mother left him feeling worse. Part of the upset is from the recent breakup of a romance, part of it is from his disappointment about the phone conversation, but most of it comes from his belief about himself ("What is wrong with me?").

Mitch's therapist asked him to tell the story again, but to give more specifics. Mitch responded, "There's not much more to say. I felt lousy after the call, and that's that."

Mitch is doing what many of us do: he comes up with a fairly brief version of an event (a version that may neglect or ignore important elements). Let's see how the therapist helps Mitch to talk about this event in a different way.

T: It sounds as though you felt really disappointed after talking with your mom.

Mitch: Right.

T: I'd like to ask you to tell me about it again, but this time, slow down...take your time. Share with me some more details. Okay?

Mitch: ...Uh, okay...(long pause). I said to her that Shelley had just told me she'd gone out with another guy...and it just tore me up to hear that.

T: What did your mom say to you then?

Mitch: (pauses)...She said "Well, son, these things happen. You'll get over it." And then she sorta changed the subject.

T: Well, how was that for you to hear?

Mitch: I guess she's right . . .

T: Well, maybe, but I want to ask you, at that moment when she said "these things happen," how did you feel?...What did you notice in that moment?

Mitch: (pauses)...I felt real let down, real sad.

T: Why do you think?...What was it in her words that might have touched on a feeling with you?

Mitch: I was calling to get support...I wanted her to know how upset and sad I've been ...

T: You wanted her to be there for you.

Mitch: Yeah...and this has happened before with her. She just doesn't listen. Oh, she says she cares, but sometimes I wonder.

T: You were reaching out to her and telling her about your feelings...and she didn't really hear you?

Mitch: Not at all. . . She was acting like it was no big deal . . . but it is a big deal! This is probably the worst time of my life and she doesn't get it!

T: You said at the end of the phone call you thought, "What's wrong with me?" What are you thinking right now?

Mitch: I don't think there's anything actually wrong with me, I think I was mostly upset because she didn't seem to hear me... or to care.

What's really going on here in this two-minute dialogue? Initially, Mitch thought the problem was *him*. He had a negative view of himself: "Something's wrong with me." He's lost Shelley, he isn't communicating with his mother, and he's down on himself. The therapist's encouragement helped Mitch to slow down and talk about the events as they unfolded, and to notice how he felt. In Mitch's conversation with his therapist he was able to increase his awareness, pay attention to, notice, and acknowledge his emotional reactions. And he explored the *personal meaning* of the event—what losing Shelley *meant* to him.

As Mitch became clearer about what actually happened during the conversation with his mother, and how he really felt, he changed his view of himself. This is a very important change. His self-perception shifted from "There must be something wrong with me" to "I was sad, I was reaching out. It's understandable for someone at a time like this to look for support. It's not so much that there is something wrong with me. It's that my mother was unable or

unwilling to really hear my pain."

Mitch has a lot of sadness and grief. He doesn't need to increase his distress by making unrealistic negative assumptions about himself. Unlike talking with his mother, talking with his therapist helped turn around his attitude toward himself.

Talking like this—exploring events realistically, clarifying feelings, gaining understanding—is a powerful way to change your view of a situation and can significantly reduce unnecessary pain. This is talk that heals, and paves the way for positive attitudes and actions in your life.