

The Essence of Presence

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Being present in the moment is one of the key elements in existential-humanistic psychotherapy. Bugental (1999) proposed that switching the focus to the living, in-the-moment experiencing of the client can give great power to stimulate significant life changes.

The article *Unearthing the Moment* (Bugental & Heery, 1999), describes how working with a client in the present moment can have an impact on the client's capacity for living. The article also inspired the name for a training in humanistic-existential psychotherapy in which being present in the moment is constantly reminded.

The previous raises up questions that will be addressed in this paper, such as: what exactly is to be fully present in the moment? How can full presence be achieved? Why is that full presence so rewarding?

Presence, as defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary (2011), is the condition of being present. Present is defined as now existing or in progress and as being in view or at hand. Following the lines of the stated definition, to be fully present is to be completely available at the time in progress.

Availability, or better yet, emotional availability is an essential factor for healthy development in children as informed by attachment theory. The higher emotional availability a parent has with a child, the more secure attachment the child will develop. So perhaps one of the most common projections a client has on a therapist is that of a parent and by having a therapist present himself as completely emotionally available to

the client, the therapist is helping the client develop a more secure attachment, regardless of the matters discussed.

Discussing issues is one of the things that happen in therapy. In that regards communication is the most essential element, substantiating the fact that health care is a social affair, simply because it is administered in relationships and communication is the vehicle. Relationships are even more relevant in the field of mental health where the alliance is a basic component in the treatment.

There are numerous studies showing how the quality of the therapist – client relationship is a strong indicator of the treatment outcome (Horvath & Bedi, 2002; Martin, Garske, & Davis, 2000 in Johansson & Jansson, 2010). There are also several studies addressing the issue of how to improve the therapeutic relationship (Priebe & McCabe, 2008), most of them based on different skills and techniques, however the quality of presence has not been as extensively researched. It would be fascinating to study the quality of presence in the interest of being able to determine how to better achieve a full presence, and even to clearly define what is to be fully present.

Based on empirical knowledge, full presence can be experienced by anyone at certain times. It may be possible to learn from such particular moments and draw the experiential learning to embody that quality of full presence at a desired time.

The clearest examples of being fully present involve a physical condition. For example, few things make people so entirely aware of the present moment as when a basic need is strongly present. An example of this would be being hungry.

There is a Yiddish proverb that says “when the belly is empty, so is the brain”. Yiddish language has a humorous way of stating an obvious truth, how can anyone think

of something else while hungry? When a basic need calls, the entire system is focused on one thing. In other words, when the body needs to satiate a basic need the mind cannot be easily distracted and will not wander about past or future events, random ideas or other desires that would arise in a normal state. That example portrays the highest quality of being fully present and in the moment.

There are other examples of external situations that bring people into a state of full presence such as having sudden physical pain or being tired. There are also intellectual-psychological events that will bring someone to be fully present, for instance having a strong reaction to what someone is saying will bring out someone's full attention. Any other thought or memory would be set aside and the focus would be entirely on the matter mentioned and the reaction present.

The common denominator in all the previous examples is a quality of being absolutely focused and open to something. In the previous examples, the quality was prompted by an external agent, the challenge would be to be able to reach the same quality of the same degree without any external influence.

There are traditions that train how to be fully present. Such is the case of Kung Fu, where the first training is a physical practice of techniques that gradually evolve into self-defense exercises and then to sparring, where the quality of being fully aware and present is absolutely required to not get hit. The next step is to learn meditation, which is a skill of a higher degree because there is no external influence drawing the person's attention while still striving to be aware and present.

Moving from physical exercises to meditation in the Kung Fu training, reflect the possibility of embodying a quality learned with external aids and then taking those

supports away. The possibility described is similar to learning how to ride a bicycle with training wheels and then taking the training wheels off. However, it is also describing a piece pertaining to the quality of presence and that is that there are external and internal components to the quality.

For a person to be fully present, there has to be an integration of the internal and external aspects pertaining to presence. The external factors are clear and objective, the physical orientation, sensory direction, awareness and reaction to the situation define the degree of external presence. The internal aspects are more subjective, attention, focus, not being distracted by ideas, thoughts or imagination.

The last part defining presence is that it does not require a relationship to exist. A person can be fully present and living the moment while being in relationship with others, as well as when alone. In fact it is easier learned without others distracting, but it becomes a useful tool when brought into a relationship, especially in therapy.

Presence is a concept that appears to be easy to define, but encompasses many dimensions, some of which are many times disregarded. The power presence holds is in respect to those capacities, some of which have been attempted to identify and describe in the present paper.

Deep meaningful relationships are a basic need of human nature. One of the elements that can help in establishing or improving such relationships is being fully present and in the moment when in relationship to someone. The value of being fully present in the moment while in therapy is the same as when not in therapy, after all, a therapist and a client are just people, and therapy is nothing less, but a relationship.

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