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Welcome to 40 Years in Therapy: What Have I learned? Why We Do What We Do & What To Do About It

I always said that helping others was not overly complicated. Not nuclear fusion. To give back, I would like to share with others whether you are a clinician, spouse, partner, parent, supervisor, CEO, teenager, or regional manager of the universe, what I have found to be helpful in helping people be better with themselves and others. I have found that most of us, to be the best we can be with ourselves and others, need three things.

First, we need a way to understand ourselves and others that's practical, observable and measurable. Why we do and feel the way we do? There are many theories in psychology, but I have found that cognitive behavioral theory seems to make the most sense. Simply stated, feelings and behaviors are side effects of how we see the world (perceptions). Change those perceptions, and your feelings and behavior will change.

Second, we need to communicate and listen better. We are not born communicators, and we tend to hear what we want to hear! Most couples that come for counseling cite communication as a major problem. Think about it. If we had a way to express ourselves clearly, and truly listen to others, most of our relationship issues would be solved. The positive and assertive communication techniques I have found and explain in this book, will take your communication skills to another level.

Third, we need different ways to solve problems that enhances our relationships with others. Along with cognitive behavioral theory, effective and assertive communication, I have found mediation techniques that can make even hostile relationships better and good relationships great.

In addition to the three major components of this book, I have added my observations about what people, families and organizations go through in order to change. Lastly, I will share with you

my “Stay or Go” stress model that can be used to, as what Kenny Rogers sang about “Know when to hold ‘em and know when to fold ‘em.”

Here is a sample of Chapter One:

Understanding Human Behavior Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Model

In any human interaction, it is helpful to have some way of understanding ourselves and the behavior, thinking, and feelings of others to comprehend how we are relating to each other. Many of us make assumptions about why people behave the way they do, but few truly strive to understand. What defines an individual, a family, culture, religion, corporation or society? Moreover, without a framework for understanding, we lack an effective strategy to understand, grow, influence or change.

The main idea behind Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is that the thoughts and beliefs of individuals, families, work groups and societies affect how they operate in very powerful ways. Mistaken beliefs and negative thinking can both contribute to and maintain negative behavioral patterns, interactions, and even mental illness (Sexton, 2003). CBT works to change negative thought patterns into reality based ones that result in positive, constructive behavior changes.

Our belief systems/perceptions/self-talk drive our behavior. If I believe that I am getting put down by a sarcastic comment from you, even if you didn't intend it to be so, I may feel angry; and my resulting behavior might be either a verbal attack, ignoring you or walking out of a meeting. The belief system/perception/self-talk causes my behavior. If you don't understand my belief system at that point, you might be totally shocked by my behavior.

So it is clear we need to look at our own perceptions, as well as those of others, to understand why we feel and behave the way we do. Perception is the engine that drives the train. Feelings and subsequent behavior are the caboose. They are side effects or by-products of our perceptions. If you had pneumonia and were coughing, I could give you cough syrup and you would cough less. But the disease or pathology would be left untreated. We need to deal with perceptions and not feelings if we want to change behaviors. This is not to say that feelings are not important. Although feelings should be acknowledged, it is in the perceptions where a person has the greatest chance of influencing behavior.

Where do perceptions come from? Perceptions are made up of values, morals, past learning, gender, ethnicity, education, traumatic events, other life events, parental messages, current events and our life experiences. They are the lenses through which we see the world. Sometimes the lenses are distorted. If they are, we see the world in a distorted fashion. Everything is filtered through the belief system, our perceptions or what we tell ourselves (self-

talk). This is how we evaluate the events in our lives. If our lenses (perceptions/self-talk) are skewed even 10 degrees right or left of center (reality), then our feelings and behavior will be equally skewed 10 degrees right or left of center (reality). And if the perceptions are grossly inaccurate, the resulting feelings and behaviors will be grossly inaccurate, as well. While there are many ways we can see reality in a distorted fashion, there seem to be four primary critical perception errors that can negatively impact our feelings, behaviors and our interactions with others.

PERCEPTION ERROR #1: POLARIZATION

The first of these errors is called polarization. This is the tendency to view reality in polar opposites (sometimes referred to as “either-or thinking”). Some examples of the polarized thinking include:

Good	→	Bad
Victim	→	Empowered
Generous	→	Selfish
Up	→	Down
Right	→	Wrong
For Us	→	Against Us
Elated	→	Depressed
Productive	→	Useless
Together	→	Separate
Wonderful	→	Horrible

PERCEPTION ERROR #2: AWFULIZING

This brings me to the second critical error: awfulizing, or the skewing of emotions that labeling causes. When we “awfulize” to extremes, feelings and behaviors again will follow. Have you ever said to yourself, “This is the worst possible thing that could have happened to me. It’s horrible!” Or “Why did this happen to me? What did I do to deserve this?” If we talk to ourselves like this, labeling events as awful, horrible, terrible or catastrophic, how do we expect to feel? Perky? It isn’t going to happen. You are going to feel awful, horrible, terrible and catastrophic and will behave accordingly. And you will be miserable to be around.

PERCEPTION ERROR #3: SELF-DEPRECIATION

The third critical error is self-depreciation. If our self-esteem were measured like oil in our cars, many of us would be a quart or two low (some people wouldn’t even register on the dipstick.) This low self-esteem can be turned inward. This type of self-talk sounds like:

“How can I be so stupid?”

“I really am a screw-up.”

“What did I ever do to deserve this?”

PERCEPTION ERROR #4 OVERGENERALIZATION

Ellis, in his landmark publication, “Guide to Rational Living,” and Dr. Burns, author of “Feeling Good”, both describe a perception error of overgeneralization. This occurs when we use such labels as always, never, can’t, have to, ought to, must and should.

Feelings and behaviors are clues to you as you interact with others. If you or someone else is way up and down emotionally, you can predict that the thinking is polarizing. If you or someone seems to be angry and irritable, it might be awfulizing. Likewise, if you or someone seems apathetic, unmotivated or avoidant, perceptions could be self-depreciating or over-generalizing.

Norm's Nuggets

These “nuggets” are therapy techniques, analogies, metaphors, sayings, quotes from others, common sense pieces, problem solving and communication tips that I have found helpful in my work. I would like to share them with you. In this chapter I have included the following nuggets:

NORM'S NUGGETS

At the end of each chapter I have included nuggets as described above. Here is a sample. This is what one book reviewer wrote about my nuggets:

I loved the “nuggets,” specific little gems of advice that will stick with me. I thought (as you will) “now I am going to remember to use that...”

Dr. Francesca Giordano
Program Director, Clinical Professor
The Counseling Program
The Family Institute at Northwestern University

Problem or Not...?

Too many couples, families, work groups spend too much time arguing about whether something is a problem or not. Well, in an on-going relationship, if one party or group feels something is a problem, it is! Then we can move on to problem solving rather than arguing. If your 5 year old thinks there is a ghost in the closet, you can spend all night explaining that there is no such thing as ghosts, or you can open up the window and shoo the ghost out. Problem solved!

Best gift for children especially in a divorce

In a healthy relationship parents show love and respect to the other parent. Parents model how men and women in a healthy relationship are treated. In a relationship that is transitioning away from a two parent household, it is especially important to model social maturity. What you say about the other parent, you say about the child. When your children are grown up, what do you want them to say about how you handled the divorce? (see letter in Introduction)

Either you manage it or it manages you.

All of us have something we have to deal with that is not going away. Whether it's a physical issue, addiction, life experience, family dysfunction, a medical condition or whatever. There is no getting around, over or under it. If you can't cure it, you need to manage it. Or, it manages you. You may not control something happening, but you can control the impact it has on you. Is it devastating or annoying? Don't give it any more power than it already has.

Did the alligator come in the front door or back door? Time for alligator removal.

Depending on the severity of the symptoms, sometimes we need to do symptom reduction before we look for causation. At times, I tell clients it doesn't make any difference if the alligator came in the front door or the back door. It's alligator removal time. Later we can go back and figure out how the alligator got there in the first place.

Confrontation is the best way to nurture an ongoing relationship

Using positive confrontation, we confront perceptions, not feelings and behavior. By doing so, we do not allow other people's feelings and behavior to adversely affect us. If we care enough about others, we need to be able to tell them how they impact us and others around them. If we don't tell them, we enable them to continue to behave in ways that may not be in their best interests. If done appropriately, confrontation strengthens relationships.

Enough now, buy the book!

Peace,

Norm